

James Gomez, *Self-censorship: Singapore's Shame*. (With a foreword by Philip Jeyaretnam.) Singapore: THINK Centre, 2000. xii+98 pp. ISBN 981-04-1739-X.

In this essay James Gomez argues that since the mid-1960s, political culture in Singapore has been characterized by self-censorship, which is a main obstruction to political development. I shall summarize his thesis extensively, although in a different order than he presents his argument himself. The present state leaders call for more innovative thinking in technology, business and science, but according to Gomez creativity in these fields cannot come without freedom in art and politics. The culture of self-censorship inhibits Singapore's future ambitions as a nation.

Gomez distinguishes between state censorship, self-censorship, and censorship by others. Political censorship is not, or is no longer, predominantly a state affair. Of 168 English language books banned in Singapore, only five have a political content and 90 per cent are prohibited because of overtly sexual content. The government has, however, taken extra-censorial punitive action against opponents. The latter have been sued for tax evasion and their names dragged through the mud.

The small number of books forbidden for political reasons is evidence of the efficacy of self-censorship. For instance, the executive committee of the National University of Singapore forbade the publication of a journal containing articles about civil society, culture and the arts in Singapore. Publishers refuse to accept certain manuscripts. Interested in trouble-free business, book distributors prefer not to disseminate sensitive books and journals to the bookshops.

Perhaps even more compelling than self-censorship is censorship by other citizens. If somebody is suspected of alternative political ideas, his or her colleagues, friends or family members mobilize one another and project a negative profile of the person articulating the deviant views. The expression of alternative views is considered unpatriotic, risky and dangerous for proximate people. The pressure to conform mounts inexorably.

Gomez identifies three major causes of the self-censorship in the current literature: ethnicity, economic interests and fear. The ethnic majority, Chinese, have supposedly a Confucian respect for authority, which renders the Western-style democracy something alien to their Asian values. The patron-client relationship between the PAP and the citizens, for instance in employment and housing, has created gratitude and loyalty on the side of the citizens. Fear is based on previous examples of punitive action against dissidents and rumours about the Internal Security Department (ISD) scanning of the Internet and monitoring elections. These three causes—ethnicity, economics and fear—do not explain why, for instance, Taiwan has a lively political debate and why expats in Singapore without economic patronage vis-à-vis the PAP keep silent. The self-censorship of foreign journalists, visiting academics and NGOs defeats the

purpose of bringing them to Singapore. Gomez then goes into the dynamics of self-censorship and the relation between political structure and behaviour as a fourth cause of the culture of censorship.

Gomez shows the dynamics of self-censorship and censorship by others by relating some of the cases mentioned above and others. He draws the conclusion that the hegemonic People's Action Party (PAP) speaks of critics as dishonourable and innately bad people, who do not have the interest of the citizenry at heart, but are hungry for publicity instead. The citizens accept that politics are the exclusive domain of the PAP. Any attempt to create political space causes great uneasiness among the population. Any criticism is considered negative and oppositional. There is no tolerance of opposing views and no respect for debate and difference of opinion.

A culture of self-censorship is by definition difficult to change. The best strategy to break through the deadlock is, Gomez believes, forming a vanguard of like-minded people. This core should promote political education, foster independent publications, monitor violation of political human rights, and explore Internet and non-national media as non-censored sources of news. Nowhere does Gomez promote any particular political standpoint. All he demands is free space to express alternative ideas and a popular respect for debate and difference of opinion.

It is easy to point out some flaws in Gomez's booklet and to quibble over methodology. I shall not. In writing this book Gomez has been subject to intimidation by the state and attempts at censorship by close relationships, as he has described himself. He earns praise for his courage in speaking out and his plea for a more open-minded Singaporean society deserves our support. That is why I have opted for an extensive account of his argument, in order to create something of the free space he is looking for.

Freek Colombijn
International Institute of Asian Studies
Leiden