

Growing a LGBTIQ Movement in Activism-Averse Singapore

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The crowd was already pumped when Pink Dot's spokesperson, Paerin Choa, took over the microphone. The sun had set over an afternoon of enthusiastic pink-clad picnicking. Performers—from popular local rappers and indie bands to glamorous drag queens—had built the atmosphere up to one of euphoria and excitement. The climax of Singapore's annual LGBT rights rally—the formation of a huge pink “dot”, to be photographed from a height—was about to begin.

But first, Choa had a message to convey. Something was different from the rallies of previous years. On that June evening in 2019, Pink Dot—a fixture in Singapore's civil society calendar known for its family-friendly branding and soft-touch activism—had acquired a harder, angrier edge.

Choa began by addressing the comments made by Singapore's prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, just days before. The premier had [claimed](#) that, while the government has consistently refused to repeal a statute that outlaws sexual intercourse between men, the country's LGBT community hasn't been “inhibited” from living.

“Prime Minister Lee [Hsien Loong], because of Section 377A, we are made invisible,” Choa yelled, referring to the law that effectively criminalises gay men.

“Because of Section 377A, we continue to be marginalised and we lead incomplete lives. Because of Section 377A, we deal with discrimination every day.”

He took a deep breath as the crowd roared its approval. “Please, Prime Minister Lee, lead us. Prime Minister Lee, tear down this law!”

He began to chant, and the thousands crammed into the park followed his example. “Tear. Down. This. Law! Tear. Down. This. Law!”

A decade ago, this would have been unthinkable. Over the course of 11 years, Pink Dot has become Singapore's most successful civil society effort in terms of consistent turnout. Its evolution from an earnest, fluffy gathering to an explicit protest can be said to reflect shifts in the country's political climate. Yet its failure to get rid of a controversial law also highlights the limits of grassroots activism in a city-state with an authoritarian streak.

In this two-part series, we trace the history of Pink Dot, the questions its successes and failures throw up about advocacy and activist strategies in a difficult political landscape, and the limitations of Singapore's civil society activities.

One activist's beginnings

Choa hadn't always been a slogan-chanting protest organiser. Sitting down to an interview with *New*

Naratif, he describes his former self as a “gay party boy”—someone who’d enthusiastically attend parties catering to gay men, but who hadn’t been particularly politically aware, much less involved in anything that could have been described as activism. Today, away from the rally stage, he’s a corporate lawyer, working out of a stylish private members’ club not far from Singapore’s Central Business District.

The catalyst for Choa’s transformation came through a series of events that rocked the city’s tiny civil society in 2009. That year, a group of conservative Christian women, uncomfortable with the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE)’s stance on LGBT issues, organised to take over leadership of the gender equality organisation. Registering as new members of the NGO, they attended its annual general meeting and proceeded to nominate, then vote, their own candidates into the committee.

Nine out of 12 seats on AWARE’s executive committee were won by these new members. This “new guard” accused AWARE of promoting lesbianism and homosexuality, making it clear that there were going to be changes under their watch. It later emerged that they’d been guided by Dr Thio Su Mien, a co-founder of TSMP Law Corporation—where, at that time, Choa was embarking on his legal career.

“The AWARE saga, it affected me in a way that I never was affected before,” he recalls. “It was very offensive, it was very close to home in a way, because literally it was, like, building this in my own backyard.”

In May 2009, the “old guard” of AWARE—former leaders of the organisation—called an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) to try to wrest control back. That period of controversy threw up discussions of religion and secularism, activism, LGBT rights, and civil society governance. The dramatic seven-hour EGM, which ended in triumph for the “old guard”, has since been referenced by numerous members of Singaporean civil society as a moment of political awakening.

“Never before had a single event ushered so many issues into the public sphere for such a rare display of political pluralism so often cloaked by the aegis of a one-party state,” wrote sociologist Terence Chong in the introduction of the book [*The AWARE Saga: Civil Society and Public Morality*](#) in Singapore (published in 2011).

Choa hadn’t been immune to this groundswell of empowerment: he remembers calling up many of the women he’d attended law school with, urging them to become AWARE members so they could vote in the EGM. But he didn’t stop there. This newfound motivation also brought to mind another opportunity: an idea he’d previously been approached with. An idea called “Pink Dot”.

“I pooh-poohed the idea initially. Me being the shallow, gay party boy then, I was like, ‘Siao, ask me to go wear pink, who wears pink in the middle of the day, and form... what stupid idea is this?’” he says.

“But the whole AWARE thing got me so riled up that I not only decided to go for Pink Dot, I actually called and volunteered and I said, ‘I’ll do anything, anything you want me to do.’”

He was such an enthusiastic volunteer that year that he was not only asked to return in 2010, but was also offered a spot on the committee. He’s been an active member ever since.

“We couldn’t say that it was a protest”

Pink Dot is by no means the first instance of LGBT activism in Singapore, nor was it the only queer space in the country at its inception. But it was the first time people mobilised so publicly and openly

for the cause.

Thinking back on those early years, Choa says everyone had tread very carefully. “When I was being briefed in the first year as a volunteer and all, we were very careful that we couldn’t say that it was a protest,” he recalls. “We didn’t want to come across as angry. We didn’t want to alienate Singaporeans back then.”

They weren’t just being paranoid. While Singapore had an active and vibrant civil society in the 1950s and 1960s—including the leftist anti-colonial movement that swept the now-ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) into power—the Singapore of 2009 was not a city with a protest culture. (It still isn’t today.)

Demonstrations and other forms of direct action have been so demonised that people tend to see them as disruptive and generally undesirable, equating protests to riots. Speakers’ Corner was established in Hong Lim Park in 2000, allowing Singaporean citizens to give speeches without first having to apply for a licence; in 2008, the regulations were changed to allow demonstrations too. Public assemblies for a cause are outlawed everywhere else on the island, unless one obtains a permit from the police—unlikely for many civil society causes, particularly for contentious issues like LGBT rights. Under public order laws passed in 2009, even solo protests have been criminalised.

“Back then, even gay people didn’t want to go to Pink Dot... Being out in the open, without tickets, without doors, was very scary for a lot of people.”

Given how new and unfamiliar such an activity—an outdoor rally! about LGBT issues!—was to society, the Pink Dot team was well aware of the challenge that lay ahead. (The very convening of their group had in fact been a reaction to a gay activist declaring his intention to stage the country’s first Pride parade. Believing that this would not go down well with the protest-averse population, they’d quickly got together to organise something they thought would have a higher chance of success.)

“Back then, even gay people didn’t want to go to Pink Dot, because before Pink Dot, every gay event, every LGBT event, was a party held behind closed doors, or a ticketed event,” Choa explains. “And that was kind of a safe space, it was our space. Being out in the open, without tickets, without doors, was very scary for a lot of people.”

In fact, Choa says that earliest Pink Dot had been actively geared towards attracting participation from straight Singaporeans, so as to reassure nervous LGBT people that the act of attendance wouldn’t be a de facto public outing of their sexual orientation.

“I remember the day before the first Pink Dot, there was a strange SMS going around saying, ‘If you go to Pink Dot, you will be photographed, your photos will be splashed around newspapers, you might lose your job, your family might find out’,” Choa says.

“So I remember, even when I asked my friends to go for the first Pink Dot, it was like, ‘you know, you don’t have to be scared, it’s not necessary that you’re out, there are so many straight people going.’”

Trying not to be “anti-government”

Despite a [push for the repeal of Section 377A](#) via a parliamentary petition in 2007, that first Pink Dot—and the next three iterations, for that matter—made no mention of the law at all. Apart from addressing social anxieties about public demonstrations, there was also a political angle to Pink Dot’s early strategy.

“We wanted to make the messaging very family-friendly, very universal and not political at all,” Choa says. “We just didn’t want people to think that doing this is going against government, which people were scared to do at that point in time.”

While Singapore has free elections every five years, it’s still effectively a one-party state. The PAP has won a supermajority in Parliament in every election since coming to power in 1959. The party is dominant in multiple aspects of Singaporean life, spanning from control over what Singaporeans study in schools through to the public housing estates they live in and the mainstream news sources they consume.

In a context where the lines between political party, government, and state are blurred, divergence from the hegemonic establishment narrative can often be all it takes to be seen as “anti-government”. As the law academic Lynette Chua wrote in her 2014 book [*Mobilising Gay Singapore: Rights and Resistance in an Authoritarian State*](#): “In authoritarian Singapore, to speak out is to mount the first act of resistance, regardless of how it is carried out and what it concerns.”

Being “anti-government”—or even the perception of it—comes with its own baggage. Activists, opposition politicians, and critics of the PAP and its government have faced repercussions ranging from [ruinous defamation suits](#) to [stints in prison](#) to [detention without trial](#). It’s not an experience many Singaporeans care to sample for themselves, which is why “politics”, or “being political”, is often viewed as a risky business to be avoided. If Pink Dot wanted ordinary citizens to participate in their inaugural rally, they would first have to convince Singaporeans that their activity was legitimate and safe.

Pragmatic resistance

In any case, Pink Dot’s goals were more open-ended back in 2009. “We never really saw ourselves as an advocacy group in the early years. We always saw ourselves as the interface between the mainstream Singapore and the LGBT community. When we first started doing things, what we wanted to change, really, was the narrative,” Choa says, pointing out that positive, or even neutral, representations of LGBT relationships are still censored from the local mainstream media. When queer Singaporeans aren’t even able to be present in local media narratives, it’s much more difficult to get people to accept their community as a part of society.

Pink Dot adopted what Lynette Chua describes as “pragmatic resistance”—a strategy of operating carefully within the boundaries of both the law and sociopolitical norms. The idea is to garner and preserve as much legitimacy as possible, while finding more subtle ways to push the limits.

It paid off. About 2,500 people showed up at that first Pink Dot—a significant number for Singapore. In her book, Chua analysed this first rally as a case of pragmatic resistance. Noting that the organisers were “meticulous about obeying the law”, she also pointed out that choices like creating photo-friendly formations allowed the group to stretch their reach beyond physical confines.

“By capturing the Pink Dot formations on photos and videos and using the Internet to distribute the images, activists creatively push through the physical constraints of the park and legal rules and nudge the political boundaries outward,” she wrote.

When is pragmatic resistance just self-policing?

Yet the choice to play strictly by the rules can have its own drawbacks, especially in a context where laws are overly broad or restrictive. Within some pockets of Singaporean civil society, Pink Dot has been criticised as being too conservative, its pragmatic resistance seen as a euphemism for playing respectability politics (where, instead of confronting injustice head-on, a marginalised group polices

its own members so they can appear more acceptable to the dominant group).

An example of an early Pink Dot decision that drew such criticism was their initial reluctance to include Project X, an advocacy group working for the rights of sex workers, within their line-up of local LGBT groups exhibiting in the park. Although not all sex workers identify as queer, a significant number of transgender Singaporeans are or have been sex workers because of social policies and attitudes that leave them more vulnerable to rejection and discrimination. The refusal to allow Project X a presence at Pink Dot came across to some as an attempt to cut off a less “socially acceptable” segment of the LGBT community.

Thinking back, Vanessa Ho, then-project coordinator of Project X, says she’d first brought up the idea of the organisation having a booth at Pink Dot when she bumped into Paerin Choa at a fundraiser. “So after I explained the situation of transgender sex workers very briefly, I think he had a knee-jerk reaction that was like, ‘oh, you know we got corporate founders to report back to, we want to brand ourselves as a family-friendly event, and even [Action for AIDS] cannot give out condoms during Pink Dot’,” she recalls.

When asked about this decision, Choa says it had more to do with a lack of clarity over how rules would be applied, and how he had interpreted these vague regulations. “In the law governing Hong Lim Park, you can’t have signs that are obscene or lewd or whatever,” he explains.

“I don’t know what ‘obscene’ or ‘lewd’ means, but in that first year there was a family-friendly thing, there was also this sign [at the entrance of the park, listing all the regulations] and we didn’t know what the police thought... There was a lot of second guessing. We knew that [the police were] there watching, but they left us pretty much alone. So we wanted to show in a way that you can silently fight and ask for rights in a very Singapore manner, that Singaporeans will come [attend].”

The organisers ultimately changed their mind and allowed Project X a booth that year. But Ho says that they’d also asked to see the flyers that she was planning on distributing beforehand: “[In] summary they said, ‘Can [distribute flyers], but you show it to us first.’ So censorship lah, right? You tell me that you’re not assimilationist, then you censor me for what? Their reason was that they didn’t want haters to come in, take photographs of my collaterals and be like, ‘oh Pink Dot is promoting promiscuity and immorality.’”

Today, Project X runs a booth every year; people help themselves to fans and buttons and stickers, or write comments on boards expressing solidarity for sex workers’ rights. Their presence is now uncontroversial, and they fit right in alongside all the other LGBT or allied organisations.

It’s an example of the tightrope that Pink Dot has, from the very beginning, been trying to walk. It’s a complicated, tricky activity, requiring thought and balance.

“[Over the years, we realised that] the progressives are also on a spectrum; some will progress a lot faster. And some are still really very moderate. And at the same time [that] we want to keep those, we want to get more and more moderates and conservatives to come over,” Choa says, waving his hands in a gesture that brings to mind the idiom “herding cats”.

“So we’re also targeting the conservatives to come over, and keeping the moderates, and then we also realised that we’re slowly losing this far [progressive] end also.”

The need for more complexity and diversity

As people milled about Hong Lim Park on Pink Dot day in June 2019, volunteers for IndigNation—Singapore’s month-long LGBT Pride season, organised every August—approached

attendees near their booth. They had a question: “What issues does Pink Dot not address for you?”

“Our aim was not just to get people to talk about what issues they wanted Pink Dot to address but also issues that they felt the LGBTQ community as a whole did not talk enough about,” says Stephanie Chan, a volunteer with IndigNation.

“The aim was to find gaps and needs to spark discussions within the LGBTQ community and find out what people in the community wanted to talk [about], and eventually organise larger meetings and discussions around these issues.”

According to Chan, IndigNation received a “huge amount of responses”, with concerns ranging from accessibility for people with mental health issues or disabilities, to issues of racism, misogyny and ageism, to feedback about diversity and representation.

“One of the major criticisms against [Pink Dot] is that their committee is not diverse,” Ho says. “So I think over the past 10 years they have tried very hard to include, to have, diverse representation.”

But diversity isn’t just about ticking off the L, G, B, and T in the LGBT movement, nor is it only about racial and gender balance. The existence of intersectionality—which refers to the interconnectedness of identities and social categorisations—means that many aspects need to be considered simultaneously.

For Jolovan Wham, a gay activist who works on issues related to civil and political rights, such issues need to be addressed within the movement even as it tries to appeal to the wider population. “It has to be a mix of both [catering to straight and queer people]; changing the mindsets of those who are straight means engaging and featuring them in publicity materials but at the same time, it is important to centre the voices of those who are marginalised. Within the LGBTQ community, there’s also a lot of racism, sexism, classism and transphobia. These issues need to be part of the movement in order for it to be as inclusive as possible.”

Ho thinks that the issue of class is one that Pink Dot—a largely middle class movement—is struggling with. “The language of resistance they have will be very different from the language of resistance that transgender sex workers have, and [the workers’ language] is still not the ‘respectable’ way, right? So they can keep saying, ‘these transgender people don’t want to step forward and be part of the committee’, but I’m like, ‘they don’t see a point to be part of your community and they don’t feel an affinity with your community because you have no intention of switching up the way you talk and being in the spaces that they are in.’”

“[We have] different ways of doing things, and [we’ll] see who can get to the finish line first, right? All of us have the eye on the finish line.”

Despite critiques of Pink Dot’s approaches, activists like Ho, Chan, and Wham all attend Pink Dot regularly.

“I personally do not feel like Pink Dot’s messaging represents my own community, identity or point of view. At the first few Pink Dots I attended, this was disappointing to me,” Chan tells *New Naratif*. But she also says that she eventually “came to understand where Pink Dot was coming from and why they had the messaging that they had and how it was a part of their larger goal.”

“Now I still attend Pink Dot anyway because I can and because, as a queer person who is able to access Pink Dot, I think it is important to show up and support it, because I do believe in their long-term goals.”

“I will not sit out [of Pink Dot]; I will just be really uncomfortable and I will deal with my own discomfort in my own ways and do my own thing,” Ho says. “[We have] different ways of doing things, and [we’ll] see who can get to the finish line first, right? All of us have the eye on the finish line. We don’t know which is the answer right now... maybe it’s them, maybe it’s us, maybe it’s a combination, who knows? And yah lor, we just have to jiayou [cheer on, or express support] for each other.”

In Part Two, we follow Pink Dot’s evolution into a more explicit protest movement, and examine the limits of such activism in a city-state where political power is extremely concentrated.

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