

## BOOK REVIEW: GOVERNANCE, POLITICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A SINGAPORE STUDY

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### BOOK DETAILS

Francesch-Huidobro, M. 2008. *Governance, Politics and the Environment: A Singapore Study*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. xxi + 395 pp. ISBN 978-981-230-831-3 (soft cover); ISBN 978-981-230-832-0 (hard cover); ISBN 978-981-230-833-7 (PDF). Price: S\$59.90 (soft cover); S\$79.90 (hard cover); S\$100.00 (PDF).

### REVIEW

Maria Francesch-Huidobro is a specialist in comparative environmental policy and governance, and comparative politics. She is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Sciences, The University of Hong Kong.

The book is timely, as environmental governance has taken centre stage at many national, regional and global levels. The recent UNITAR-Yale University Conference on Environmental Governance and Democracy Institutions, Public Participation and Environmental Sustainability, held at the University of Yale from 10–11 May 2008 was one of the recent conferences which focused on environmental governance.

Intrigued by the interplay of the Singapore government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and civil society within the environmental sector during the period of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's term of office—which she observed was more consultative than that of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's, she chose three case studies as her analysis in what she termed “disciplined governance” in relations between the state and NGOs/civil society in Singapore. This term describes an approach that is “sometimes consultative, but strategically contained and certainly not fully participatory....”.

Her attempts at analysis proceeded from what she considered the “liberalizing process of an illiberally democratic system”. The concept “illiberal democracy” had been championed in *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (Zakaria, 2003) (not cited in the book) where it was noted that too much democracy and democratic means of governance have been detrimental to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as in the case of the United States. In its entry in Wikipedia, Singapore is considered a classic example of illiberal democracy.

The author chose three main case studies for her analysis in what she termed “disciplined governance” in relations between state and NGO/civil society. Her analysis proceeded from what she considered the “liberalizing process of an illiberally democratic system.”

The first case study was the Sungei Buloh natural wetland site, that had been zoned for agro-tech development. The Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) initiated for its conservation. It persuaded the government that by preserving it as a wetland it could be combined with that of a tourist attraction showing new agro-technology. With its well-researched scientific study on this site, it had the “power of persuasion” backed by Tommy Koh, who was, and still is, the Society's Patron, to persuade the government to maintain it as a wetland. The author also pointed out other factors such as the global environmental trends in conservation that eventually led to the government decision not to convert it into an agro-agricultural plot. The period covered by the author's research was from the Goh Chok Tong period from 1990 to 2004. The government's consideration of Sungei Buloh covered the period from 1986 to 1989—it predated the Goh period, and was the tail end of the Lee Kuan Yew era. It was strange that the author did not mention whether Lee might have had some influence in the decision, considering he was a man who is passionate about greening Singapore and developing the Garden City, as noted in at least two books, *Lee Kuan Yew: the Man and His Ideas* by Han et al. (1998), and Lee's own memoirs, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (Lee, 2000). It was also a period after years of struggle for economic survival. Singapore succeeded and it was then focusing on the quality of life, which brings with it an enjoyment of nature. The time was also ripe for developing an environmental policy, which integrated

environment and development—in the case of Sungei Buloh, nature conservation, and the socio-economic needs of Singapore, consonant with the concept of sustainable development as outlined in the Brundtland Report of 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Countries were still grappling with this concept and were still in their embryonic stage. While the Sungei Buloh case was a triumph for nature lovers, it was not to be taken as a precedent of automatic policy on the part of the government to conserve all nature areas in Singapore, as the Lower Peirce Reservoir case demonstrated—more advocacy and determination was in store for NSS (see below). This despite the fact that in Singapore's Report to the Rio Summit in 1992 stated that Singapore would set aside 5% of its land for nature conservation, and this was incorporated in *The Singapore Green Plan—Action Programmes 1993* (Ministry of the Environment, 1993).

On hindsight, it was a correct decision to conserve Sungei Buloh. In 2003, it was designated an “ASEAN Heritage Park” under the ASEAN Declaration on Heritage Parks (ADHP) 2003 (ASEAN, 2003a). The ADHP is part of the global efforts set out by the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) 2002 to reduce the current rate of loss of biodiversity by 2010 (World Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002). It aims to maintain ecological processes and life support systems, preserve genetic diversity, and “preserve scenic, cultural, educational, research, recreational and tourism value.” ASEAN as a governmental organisation, is committed to the WSSD. Moreover, Singapore ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1995 and is under an obligation to pursue in situ conservation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007).

While the success of Sungei Buloh was considered by the author as being brought about by the “Power of Persuasion”, she classified her second case study, the Peirce Reservoir, as a case demonstrating the “Power of Protestation?” Was the Peirce Reservoir more contentious than Sungei Buloh that required a more rigorous approach amounting to “protestation”? There were a number of factors that made it more contentious. The Reservoir is in a catchment area and the government wanted to construct a golf course. It said that it had conducted an environmental impact assessment (EIA) but as there is no EIA legislation, the report was not made public. The case highlighted for the first time, the disadvantage of not having an EIA legislation. The NSS then conducted its own EIA with a team of experts including the then President of NSS, Wee Yeow Chin, a highly respected botanist at the National University of Singapore. The NSS report showed that there would be a great loss of biodiversity. As the government seemed adamant, it was not an easy task for NSS. Wee Yeow Chin organised a signature campaign in Jun.1992 with 17,000 people signing the petition opposing the development. Mounting such a campaign was a very bold move during that period as the voice of NGOs and civil societies was very weak, if almost non-existent. There was much media coverage and public support for the NSS case.

The controversy was to be discussed over television but this was cancelled. Subsequently, the government suspended the construction this golf course, until this day. The success may also have been owed to the timing of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held from 3 to 14 Jun.1992 in Rio de Janeiro. It was chaired by Tommy Koh, the Patron of NSS. The Peirce case was a cause célèbre for environmental governance. The author concluded that this case “reflects one of the dimensions of ‘disciplined governance’.” She said that although “the proposal to construct a golf course in a nature reserve was made without consultation, once in the public realm, the government proved to be receptive to opposition; that is the power of protestation.” To the reviewer, the case demonstrated not so much the “Power of Protestation” **as such**, but rather that the NSS report was based on sound scientific findings. The timing was also right with then the ongoing UNCED in Rio.

The third case study was the Indonesian fires (“Haze”), which the author classified as the “Power of Circumvention” since the issue was “entrusted to them (civil society) by the government.” One of the reasons given by her was that as a matter of political expediency, a bilateral approach to the issue between Indonesia and Singapore would have been “politically undesirable.” This classification is rather curious. She overlooked the fact that on 13 Jan.2003 Singapore ratified the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution 2002. Parties that have ratified the Agreement are under an obligation to cooperate in developing and implementing measures to prevent and monitor transboundary pollution. Although there have been difficulties in bilateral relations with Indonesia to implement this Agreement, it cannot be considered “politically undesirable.” The author's period of research ended in 2004—the two countries have since made some significant breakthroughs as seen in the Master Plan of 2007 for the Muaro Jambi Regency covering 35 fire-prone districts in Kalimantan (Goh, 2007). The government has cooperated with civil society and relevant stakeholders in Singapore and Indonesia. The approach is not so much a “disciplined governance” as the author put it, but rather one of partnership and cooperation.

The author will be heartened to know that the Singapore government has been inviting NGOs and civil society to sit in some of its “green” committees. The latest is an announcement in *The Straits Times*, on 28 Jul.2008: “Wanted: Public's idea for a green Singapore: Feedback from the ground to shape 10-year program” (Tan, 2008) from the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development whose website is at: <http://app.mewr.gov.sg/web/Contents/ContentsSSS.aspx?ContId=1034>. This feedback exercise promises to be a bottom-up approach at the initial stage of formulation of the program.

In future, if the government is to be in partnership with civil society, capacity building across its spectrum of stakeholders must be strengthened. Promoting environmental education and public awareness are crucial and the call is made in Agenda 21 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005), and the ASEAN Environmental Education Action Plan, 2000–2005 (ASEAN, 2003b).

Singapore has earned accolades for her environmental governance in water and transportation. It has also been highly commended for the development of the “Garden City” and is now developing a “Garden within a City”. To what extent have NGOs and the civil society in Singapore played a role in environmental governance in these areas? The author’s period of research ends in 2004. She recognised the limitations of her study in measuring NGOs in environmental policy and governance. She concluded, “Singapore is at a junction of reform efforts.” Even if one were to conclude that NGOs and civil society have not as yet made significant contributions, for example, in water, transportation and developing the garden city, and that it has been a top-down approach, what do these accolades testify? Have NGOs and civil society made much difference to Singapore’s environmental governance? There is, of course, room for improvement. It is also important to have the civil society and other stakeholders claim ownership to make for effective implementation and an all embracing governance. For example, the NGOs and civil society in Singapore perceive that nature conservation should be given more attention and consideration by the government. The government itself has become more aware of the importance of nature conservation and biodiversity in the ecosystem in ensuring environmental sustainability, including their impact on climate change and health. The future seems promising for these groups to have a stronger voice as Singapore is becoming more confident and not so politically fragile. Also, Sungei Buloh and Peirce Reservoir have proven to be success stories.

The author is to be congratulated for having undertaken this enormous and valiant task of making this comprehensive study which is well-documented and thought-provoking. She even included a list of major environmental laws in Singapore, though not the subject of her study. Singapore statutes can now be found at Singapore Statutes Online (<http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>) for primary legislation, from the search engine, LAWNET ([http://www.lawnet.com.sg/lnrweb/c/portal/layout?p\\_l\\_id=1](http://www.lawnet.com.sg/lnrweb/c/portal/layout?p_l_id=1)) and from government websites such as the National Environment Agency (<http://app2.nea.gov.sg/index.aspx>) for relevant subsidiary legislation. The unofficial source she obtained for her list of environmental laws should have been updated from these two official sources as the unofficial source prepared some years ago has, for various legitimate reasons, not been updated. Fortunately, this did not affect her research as she did not rely on most of them and those she relied on were repealed but re-enacted. Hence, the outdated source did not detract from her analysis.

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