

## **Gestural Politics in Singapore Society**

In Terence Lee's book "Gestural Politics: Civil Society in 'New' Singapore", he describes gestural politics as the shallow use of symbolic actions or gestures by the Singapore government to convey a sense of progressiveness and liberalism to society (Lee, 2005). This idea of gestural politics was witnessed in a recent youth dialogue session organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and attended by Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong. During the session, Mr Wong emphasised how he envisions Singapore as a politically diverse and inclusive society supported by the Forward Singapore national conversation initiative, and how such political diversity was a matter for Singaporeans to decide at every election (Zalizan, 2022). This gesture had the effect of making the government appear open, progressive, and democratic to fellow citizens, and at the same time, empowering young Singaporeans to feel involved and engaged in deciding the country's political future. However, such a gesture should not always be taken at face value especially when it comes to sensitive topics such as political diversity, because the government has strict "out of bounds markers" (OB markers) which tend to restrict civil society's actions when it becomes too liberal (Lee, 2005). These OB markers refer to rules and regulations that set limits on the extent to which certain topics may be permissible for public discussion. One such OB marker is the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulations Act (POFMA) law (Singapore Statutes Online, 2019) which allows the ruling party to issue corrections for false statements. When POFMA is used during elections, critics view it as an attempt to suppress diverse political voices and hinder legitimate political debates (George, 2020), stifling political diversity. From this youth dialogue session, the use of gestural politics helps the government appear progressive and liberal to both its citizens and the world, while maintaining political power and control over society through OB markers (Lee, 2005). Hence, it is likely that gestural politics will continue to be a recurring feature in state-society relations in Singapore as it helps the government to stay in power and govern effectively by shaping public opinions in nation building and maintaining political control while promoting progressive initiatives.

Gestural politics play a crucial role in shaping public opinions in nation building. As a multiracial society, racial harmony in Singapore is important for social stability and national progress (Sinha, 2005). The government's progressive and inclusive gestures to promote peaceful coexistence between different racial groups help create a positive image for themselves, thereby gaining the trust and support of society for its policies. For example, gestures such as the celebration of Racial Harmony Day in schools and public institutions, the organization of various interracial activities, and the participation in different racial festivals give society the impression that the government is committed to promoting racial harmony and inclusivity, and have citizens feel a sense of inclusiveness and belonging. However, it should be noted that such shallow use of gestures may not solve the larger problem of "everyday racism". "Everyday racism" involves cumulative racist practices that are often hard to pinpoint but is felt and experienced persistently (Velayutham, 2017), and authorities tend to dismiss such racist incidents as one-off events rather than recognise a deeper dissatisfaction and racism in the population (Velayutham, 2017). In addition to promoting racial harmony, progressive and inclusive gestures have also been used to promote a sense of national identity and pride through iconic gestures such as singing the national anthem in schools, commemorating National Service milestones, and celebrating the country's achievements at the annual National Day Parade which can foster a sense of belonging and loyalty to the nation among citizens. This can create an image that the government is dutiful and honorable to the country, which in turn translates into greater political support for the ruling party's policies as they are trusted by society to be beneficial for the country. Furthermore, progressive and inclusive gestures also serve as a signal of the government's commitment to addressing socio-economic inequality in the country. For instance, when the government first gestured the "make every school is a good school" initiative (Wong, 2022), it was very popular among society as it appeared hopeful and catchy. It helped shape public opinion that the government was dedicated to promoting quality education opportunities for all students regardless of socio-economic backgrounds. Even though socio-economic inequality is a complex issue, this gesture gave society a positive impression of how the government was handling it. As such,

gestural politics plays a significant role in shaping public opinion on progressive and inclusive nation building ideals such as racial harmony, national identity, and socio-economic equality. When citizens see and feel that the government cares and is putting in effort to make a difference to issues concerning them, they tend to feel heard and would want to support such policies by the government as it lines with their values. However, while symbolic gestures may resonate with citizens and create a positive image for the ruling party, they alone may not be sufficient to address deep and inherently complex social issues such as “everyday racism” and socio-economic inequality. Overpromising and underdelivering not only invites the danger of populism but also raises unreasonable expectations of the government. Nevertheless, gestural politics remain a vital tool for shaping public opinions in nation building that is likely to be recurrent in nature.

Besides playing a crucial role in shaping public opinions in nation building, gestural politics is also a means for maintaining political control while promoting progressive initiatives. Although progressive initiatives tend to resonate with citizens and empower them to make individual contributions, their actions may not always align with the broader societal or government interests, so having OB markers in place to regulate them is vital. The government actively promotes "public consultation" to obtain public input on issues that affect them, while also bringing in OB markers to ensure that certain sensitive topics that could harm the image of politicians are not discussed publicly. For example, when political commentator Catherine Lim wrote a critique of former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's governance style published in the Straits Times newspaper, Goh criticized her and suggested that she join a political party and contest in elections if she wanted to criticize politicians and political parties (Chua, 1994). Similarly, as the government promotes the concept of "active citizenship" to encourage citizens to advocate for social and political issues that matter to them, OB markers can help limit such acts to only those aligned with the government's objectives for society. For example, in 2000, the gay and lesbian community's application for a permit to hold a public forum titled "Gays and Lesbians within Singapore 21" to raise awareness of issues facing them was

rejected by the Police Public Entertainment Licensing Unit on the basis that Singaporeans were largely conservative, and Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code was in place (Lee, 2002). The same can be said for the government's promotion of an "open and inclusive" society in an attempt to create a more welcoming and accepting environment for diverse individuals. The need for OB markers here will help to ensure that society is stable, and the government is respected despite society being diverse and having dissent. For example, the Public Order Act and Vandalism Act has been used on civil activist Jolovan Wham for organizing an unauthorized public assembly to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Operation Spectrum and attaching protest messages to MRT train panels (CNA, 2021). As a result, the use of gestural politics in Singapore helps to manage the inherent state-society tension between the government's desire for political stability and legitimacy, and civil society's wish to express their views and concerns and push for change in areas that matter to them. The use of OB markers set boundaries on sensitive and difficult issues to protect the broader interests of both society and government while progressive and liberal gestures signal to society that the government is listening and attempting to address their concerns and issues. Despite the lack of following through certain progressive gestures, gestural politics is likely to be recurrent in nature as it is largely effective in helping the government maintain political control while promoting progressive initiatives.

Over the decades, Singapore's government has effectively utilized gestural politics to navigate the complex landscape of state-society relations. However, without concrete actions to back up certain bold and progressive gestures in ways certain segments of society can accept and want to see, there is a risk these gestures may be perceived as superficial and insincere, eroding the government's legitimacy. Despite this risk, gestural politics is likely to be a recurring feature in state-society relations in Singapore. By using gestural politics to both shape public opinion in nation building as well as maintain political control while promoting progressive initiatives, the government can remain in power and govern effectively in a diverse society. (1473 words)

## References

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