Censorship debate: don’t sweep politics under carpet

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THE most comprehensive review of censorship in a decade has the same approach to political censorship as its predecessor. The 1992 Tommy Koh Report, like the 1981 Jayakumar Report before it, has swept politics under the rug.

Professor Koh's Censorship Review Committee (CRC) grappled with such controversial topics as nudity, homosexuality, drugs and religion. But other than a call to lift a ban on communist publications that now have only largely historical value, the CRC kept mum about politics.

It should not be faulted for doing so, as shall be explained later. But as its report is discussed, Singaporeans should broaden the discussion on censorship. The country's media environment is cleaned up with political as well as moral filters - both need addressing.

But perhaps this is a misconception, and Singapore is an open society as far as political ideas are concerned? Information and Arts Minister George Yeo said as much in a recent interview on the press: If a Singaporean wants information or wants alternative views of whatever hue, it's there, available.

There’s no question of there being censorship here.

Is there political censorship in the Republic or is there not? Are the sceptics right, or is Brig-Gen Yeo?

It depends on what one means by censorship. If one is talking about civil servants scrutinising the final proofs of The Straits Times before it is printed or scanning scripts of SBC news bulletins before they are read on air, and then deleting items thought to be damaging to national security or critical of the Government then, no, there is no censorship in Singapore, as Brig-Gen Yeo says.

But if censorship is taken more generally to mean policies and practices of the state that restrict the communication process, and prevent people from sending or receiving information that they want, then there is political censorship.

There are, for example, laws that require communicators to obtain licences. That licensing of information-providers is a form of censorship was acknowledged implicitly by the CRC when it reviewed the licensing requirement for video businesses.

But it is not just video businesses that are controlled thus. The print and broadcast media are too.
Last year, when the Government wanted to act against a Singaporean women's magazine for an article critical of female People's Action Party MPs, it used the licensing weapon to suspend it.

What is more, it is not unreasonable for critics to assume that the absence of anti-establishment papers or broadcasters here is due partly to licensing laws.

But perhaps the main means by which information is withheld in every sphere of cultural and knowledge production in Singapore is self-censorship.

It is pervasive because of the perceived threat of a strong government reaction. Although concerned citizens and institutions may have something worthwhile to say, they are unsure of where the line of government tolerance is, so they play safe and self-censor.

How these forms of censorship affect the political and intellectual climate should be discussed. The fact that the CRC report does not is unfortunate.

There appears to be nothing in the committee's formal terms of reference to preclude it from reviewing political censorship. In fact, the committee even included a question on this in its public opinion survey, asking about books or films critical of the Government.

The findings were released -41 per cent said they should be banned completely, 29 per cent felt they should be freely circulated but do not appear to have been taken further.

None of this, however, is an indictment of the CRC. It is unlikely that any other group of Singaporeans would have done better.

That the committee confined itself largely to morality is understandable. For it was clear that the Government was seeking the advice of members of the public on censorship because it felt that morality is fundamentally about personal values and choices.

On the other hand, it has often stressed that political judgments are the exclusive prerogative and responsibility of elected representatives.

If indeed the committee sensed that advice on political censorship would not be welcome, it would have been foolhardy to try to give it. This would have risked the palatability of the whole report, including key proposals on moral censorship that the Government could be persuaded to accept.

The CRC, in short, appears to have exercised some judicious, and very Singaporean, self-censorship. It is up to others to extend the debate from the realm of morality to politics.

All the factors that led to a review of moral censorship apply equally to political censorship: rising education levels, the increasing exposure of Singaporeans to the values and practices of other countries and new technology that makes Singapore more porous to the world. This is by no means to argue for a lifting of all political censorship. The Government cites national security reasons for its controls on the media, including the maintenance of inter-racial and inter-religious harmony, of friendly regional relations and the integrity of government. From the survey findings cited earlier, it appears that many people appreciate these fundamental realities.
But are national security imperatives being invoked too readily? Is it becoming a crutch for bureaucratic expediency? An excuse to suppress all views that embarrass or inconvenience the Government? If so, what is the cost to healthy political debate? These and other questions need to be addressed.

The CRC sought a balance between maintaining a morally wholesome society and finding more scope for creativity. Singaporeans must ask themselves if a better balance can also be struck between political stability and healthy dissent. If Singapore is to mature as a polity, it is an issue that should not be consigned under the carpet indefinitely.