

Singapore's 'foreign interference' law will weaken people power

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There are already signs the law will be used to divide civil society and cast a dark shadow over internationalism.

When the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill, or Fica, was tabled in Singapore's Parliament on September 13, local activists were watching closely. We were anxious that it would – like laws that came before it – grant the state excessive powers that further threaten our civil liberties and suffocate what little space is left for critical political engagement in Singapore. Our fears were not unfounded – Fica allows the government to police, prohibit or criminalise almost all communication and collaboration with non-Singaporeans on social and political issues.

The most severe penalties under Fica are a fine of up to 100,000 Singapore dollars (\$74,000) and/or imprisonment for up to 14 years. This makes it more potent in chilling political activism than other laws that have been used to persecute dissidents in recent years.

Co-hosting an event on climate change with a permanent resident, international students participating in a campus LGBTQ group, a media outlet hiring non-Singaporean writers, an NGO accepting grant money from an INGO – any of these actions could get individuals and organisations into trouble under this law, which was passed on October 4 by a Parliament dominated by the ruling People's Action Party.

While efforts by malicious actors to destabilise any society are legitimate concerns, there is a long history of authoritarian regimes using the pretext of nefarious foreign intervention to restrict democratic freedoms or accuse those who challenge their power of being a foreign proxy.

Concepts like “national security”, “threat to public order”, “public interest” and “hostile foreign intervention” are often invoked in Singapore to justify the expansion of state control. We are led to believe that we cannot navigate these serious and complicated matters, and only a government with unfettered power can save us from ourselves.

But under freer conditions, compromised public officials and hostile attempts to manipulate a polity have often been identified and exposed by regular people like hackers, whistleblowers and investigative journalists.

Over the past few years, Singapore has been tightening restrictions on non-Singaporean participation in progressive social movements. Amendments to the Public Order Act in 2016 meant that Pink Dot, Singapore's annual Pride rally, was banned from receiving sponsorships from foreign-registered companies or having foreigners attend the event.

To comply with the new laws, Pink Dot set up barricades at the park where the event takes place, and required participants to produce their government-issued identity cards at police checkpoints.

In a country where more than 1.5 million people of the 5.5 million population are non-residents, what does it mean to keep immigrants behind barricades, literally and metaphorically? They share in this society too – they shape its strengths, problems and idiosyncrasies, and are intimately affected by its political conditions. In a society rife with racism and intensifying xenophobia, Fica is one more tool that can atomise our communities and undermine people power.

In my life and work as a community organiser over the last 10 years in Singapore, I have been nourished immensely by non-Singaporeans. When I started out as a baby activist, it was Indian and Canadian feminists who introduced me to anti-violence work. Malaysian human rights lawyers have fought alongside us against the death penalty in Singapore. Migrant workers in Singapore have continually put their bodies on the line for labour rights which benefit us all.

Why should these acts of cooperation between equals be maligned as “foreign interference”? In working with collaborators, Singaporeans can think for ourselves – we are not their stooges simply because we have close ties.

Fica would have us believe that our interests are defined primarily by which country we are a citizen of, but working-class communities around the world – the vast majority of people – have interconnected struggles, and we are much more powerful when we stand with each other. This power is what Fica targets.

Singapore’s working class has a rich history of internationalism that Fica insults by distorting what kinds of foreign influence are truly problematic. The Singapore government and Singaporean capitalists are the biggest investors in Myanmar’s military, selling weapons to them, doing business with them and providing training to military officers over many years. But if the people of Myanmar living in Singapore – whose communities are devastated by the military coup – participate in a local solidarity campaign, under Fica, this could be labelled “foreign influence”.

In 2018, the government began talking about foreign interference. Around that time, PAP politicians and pro-PAP websites started spuriously accusing some activists and media outfits of being traitors who represent foreign interests, for expressing solidarity or affection for neighbouring countries, or taking grant money from Open Society Foundations. This is when it became clear that any law on foreign interference might be used to crack down on dissent and transnational solidarity.

Many of Fica’s provisions sidestep the courts and directly empower the government – in particular, the minister for home affairs – to take action against citizens. They do not need to have any evidence of foreign interference to issue directives to remove content or compel someone to publish a government message. They can act on suspicion alone. Ignoring these directives is an arrestable and non-bailable offence.

The minister for home affairs can also make it illegal for online media platforms to ask for or receive funding or revenue, effectively shutting them down. Any individual or entity who is engaged in activities the government deems “political” can be designated “politically significant”. Once designated, they are subject to close monitoring and restrictions on their activities.

Tarnishing reputations through smear campaigns is a tactic the government often uses against critics, and once this law comes into effect, anyone can be accused of being a foreign agent and then subject to far more state control and shaming.

Many fear that Fica will deepen rifts within activist spaces. It may encourage some groups to self-police so that they do not get designated or issued directives. This would weaken possibilities for truly effective action. Meanwhile, those who get targeted by Fica may become more isolated because

peers do not want to be marked as guilty by association or have their work compromised because, for example, the designated person is directed to hand over materials regarding a project that both parties are working on.

Fica puts activists navigating a political climate already fraught with fear in an impossible position where they have to calculate every step. Even then, they can never really know when they will come under fire because there is so much inconsistency and opaqueness in the government's use of its ever-expanding tools of repression.

One of the reasons Fica is so threatening to civil society work in Singapore is that local resources free of the government's control are extremely scarce. Whether it is funding, information, infrastructure or community spaces, almost every resource is monopolised by the government.

As a result, pro-democracy activists who challenge the PAP's authoritarian rule are cut off from most forms of support. Many people in Singapore, even if they support these efforts in spirit, are afraid to donate to them because they worry that an all-seeing government will find out (and now with Fica, they definitely can) and punish them. Under these circumstances, access to support from progressive spaces outside Singapore is crucial.

When Fica was first introduced, there were shockwaves across civil society, but we rallied. Artists, journalists, lawyers, academics, opposition parties and students quickly organised themselves. We planned meetings and townhalls to unpack the bill and strategise around responses. Independent journalists wrote explainers and summaries of the bill so more people could understand what was going on. Human rights lawyers ran workshops to explain the ramifications of the bill for civil society groups. A working group was formed to lobby members of parliament and start a public petition, which 7,000 people signed in just over a week. Thirty-nine civil society groups put out a joint statement against the bill.

The bill was always going to pass, but registering our resistance to the tyranny of "rule by law" matters. If in the coming months and years, the government exercises some restraint in how Fica is used, it will be because the people fought for it.

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