

## **What does the COVID-19 pandemic mean for PinkDot Singapore?**

**Lynn Ng Yu Ling (June 23)**

As one of Singapore's most prominent LGBTQ social movements, PinkDot Singapore has grown exponentially over the years. At the inaugural 2009 event, 2500 participants showed up. In 2011 this had multiplied to cross by 10,000 people. By 2014 a turnout of 26,000 people had overflowed the confines of Hong Lim Park, also the state-sanctioned Speakers' Corner. Since 2015 turnouts have increased to 28,000 people. In 2019 [PinkDot 11](#) released a video to mark the movement's tenth anniversary. The video charted PinkDot's humble beginnings and the persistent efforts of local activists in garnering wider support from community members, making international headlines and inspiring secondary movements in other cities worldwide. As COVID-19 takes away the sheer power of a steady crowd. The movement has drawn public attention to inter-relational work at the community level.



*PinkDot SG 2009*



*PinkDot SG 2011*

### **A sense of solidarity beyond nationalized identitarian politics**

In recent years PinkDot has faced obstacles in expanding movement inclusivity with the 2016 amendments to the Public Order Act.

“It is with profound regret for us, the organisers of PinkDot 2017, to announce that as per recent changes to the Public Order Act rules on general assembly, only Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents are permitted to assemble at the Speakers’ Corner.” (PinkDot SG, 2017).

The revised legislations implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) were under the premise that foreign entities should not interfere with domestic issues, especially socio-politically controversial and sensitive ones (Tan, 2016). Until 2016 PinkDot supporters without citizenship or Permanent Residency (PR) were allowed in the assembly square to observe the PinkDot formation, but could not be involved in holding up placards which would count as active participation. The latest modifications meant that the law no longer distinguished between observers and participants, instead considered all supporters present to be part of a cause-related assembly. The presence of any foreigners was deemed as unlawful participation, and could result in the legal prosecution of both event organizers and participants (Ng, 2018).



*PinkDot SG 2014*

Being blackmailed into choosing between complying with the rules or not having the movement at all, for the first time ever PinkDot organizers made the painful decision to barricade the Speakers' Corner and conduct identity checks at the entrance, which quadrupled the event's operation costs. Furthermore, as per the revisions foreign entities whose shareholder board did not comprise Singaporean citizens as a majority were required to apply for sponsor permits (Han, 2018). Out of the thirteen multinational conglomerate sponsors, the ten applicants were rejected. Thankfully, organizers scrambled to put together well over 100 local sponsors whose combined contributions of more than \$250 000 skyrocketed past the initial fundraising target (Jerusalem, 2018). The impromptu responses to alleviate the ban on non-citizen presence went further than the event itself. In a harrowing span of time, informal networks were mobilized that drew numerous fringe events to include supporters who could not physically be in the rally. These developments led to the PinkFest, a series of twenty casual gatherings held over the prior two weekends. Events were hosted not by Speakers' Corner organizers but by individual volunteers in venues outside Hong Lim Park, so they did not fall under the same regulations (Aw, 2018). These get-togethers enabled many migrant laborers and Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) to be involved in carnival-style hangouts and picnic gatherings among others. Organizers themed the event of that year as "Against All Odds" (PinkDot SG, 2017).



### *PinkDot SG 2017*

PinkDot has been carving significant inroads in collaborating with migrant worker collectives as a way to articulate its broader conceptualization of queerness. The movement proclaims in loudly subtle ways that heteronormativity is not simply an identitarian issue but a developmental one. Crucially, the state makes strange both co-national LGBTQs and non-national migrant workers who are denied a position in the vision of reproductive futurism, which must be upheld by the ‘basic building block’ of a “proper family nucleus”: one man, one woman, and their offspring or dependents (Oswin, 2014: 421). This recognition is also an attempt to move PinkDot beyond simply advocating for LGBTQ equality in a nationalized sense, which in Singapore usually means acknowledging non-normative sexualities for their economic contributions, i.e. ‘pink dollars’. The almost one million work permit holders who form the backbone of social reproductive labor for this highly successful developmental state must be put at the centre – is argued by the PinkDot activists. The growing number of grassroots initiatives in support of PinkDot testify to an increasing awareness that LGBTQ and migrant worker equality cannot be reduced to judgements of economic disposability at the expense of the humanitarian side of the equation. PinkDot and broader queer activism cannot reduce rights campaigns to issues of domestic economic contributions, for these are about looking at those beside us as *rightful claimants* to the privileges citizens enjoy, i.e. as equal human beings with full status.

COVID-19 has more starkly brought to the fore the unfortunate reality of “two Singapores” - one for citizens, one for the transient labor force who perform the back-breaking labor shunned by locals (Han, 2020). PinkDot has been making incremental efforts to disrupt the citizen-noncitizen dichotomy at the centre of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), which is proving hard to sustain in the face of rising anti-immigrant backlash amidst this pandemic. Among numerous other smaller groups, the more prominent ones include conservative Christian factions like the Anglican Pentecostals headed by Dr Thio Su Mien, former Dean of Law at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Members make it a point to show up to every year’s PinkDot with a counter ‘[Wear White](#)’ campaign to announce their explicitly condemnatory stance on non-heteronormative family models (Luger, 2018). They are also known patrollers of the Speakers’ Corner who loiter around its premises, observe PinkDot’s activities and look out for the presence of non-

citizen/PR participants, basically salvaging for any sign of violation of public assembly rules that can be reported to state authorities. Other opposing groups include ‘LoveSingapore’ and the ‘Singapore for Singaporeans’ campaign against increasing immigration. Their most notable presence was in the 2013 occupation of Hong Lim Park following the White Paper on loosening immigration policies. As the number of COVID-19 cases in Singapore spikes unprecedentedly, public discourse on the part of citizen netizens on official forums and social media channels reveal that xenophobic prejudices are not uncommon, and indeed have obtained a certain degree of social legitimacy for many.

PinkDot is non-discriminatory and non-identitarian aspirations of solidarity have spread slowly, yet these types of relationship-building remain largely confined at the intra-network level of activists, allies and supporters. A broad swathe of ‘Not In My Backyard’ (NIMBY) advocates persist in airing racially motivated justifications. A Chinese forum letter received by Lianhe Zaobao, which has since been translated into English and put [online](#), endorses a ‘civilized citizen’ versus ‘uncivilized foreigner’ dichotomy. This author urged readers not to ascribe unnecessary blame on the Singapore government for the outbreaks in migrant worker dormitories. The author argues that local authorities have achieved satisfactory standards in providing decent living conditions. But migrant workers from “backward countries” who grew up in living environments rife with “bad personal hygiene habits” bring these with them wherever they go (Lee, 2020). Lianhe Zaobao’s Facebook page has garnered floods of supportive comments and voices echoing agreement. If PinkDot has in mind a politics of care that goes beyond identity debates, it is not enough if citizen supporters advocate LGBTQ equality yet endorse a ‘co-national only’ agenda. The nation-state’s developmental history of economic nationalism (Oswin, 2014), as an offshoot of the colonial *fait accompli* of modern state institutions bequeathed by the British at formal independence, is not interrogated for its *legal but unjust* employment relationships with the transient labor force.

“So when we look at the situation in Singapore, I think it is important to realise and recognise that we are dealing with two separate infections - there is one happening in the foreign worker dormitories, where the numbers are rising sharply, and there is another one in the general population where the numbers are more stable for now”.

(Lawrence Wong, Minister of National Development, 2020)

As media coverage of COVID-19 begins to envelop local news channels, traditional mainstream media blames migrant workers residing in dormitories account for an [overwhelming](#) proportion of new cases (Han, 2020). PinkDot 2020 sees this indefinite period of physical silence as a time to quietly endorse its broader agenda of migrant worker inclusivity. Ironically, being forced to migrate online presents some opportunities as activist pathways are altered. The Public Order Act is preoccupied with the use of public spaces, but does not refer to digital spaces and non-traditional media sources, which includes social media platforms (Chua, 2014). While PinkDot has long been aware of social media as indispensable to its emergence, given the impossibility of uttering explicit denunciations of the state regime in open spaces, the pertinence of this loophole has never been so poignant. Indeed, for its inaugural event eleven years ago, PinkDot planners found that “going on social media was our

only option” at promoting the event, for censorship regulations would never approve it on public media platforms (Wang, 2016: 9).

## **Silver linings in the clouds of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this loophole to the forefront yet again, as social media extends to activists a virtual space with far less iron-clad rules that dress the material world. PinkDot’s social media channels at the moment are advertising [fundraising campaigns](#) for LGBTQ members of the migrant worker community and calling out structural inequities of the nation-state. Most recently PinkDot promotes [Migrant Matters](#), a ground-up initiative which organizes COVID-19 collection drives to deliver care packages to twenty locations. The online promotion materials consistently hint at the unfair treatment levied onto “our migrant brothers”. PinkDot and its grassroots allies, regardless of the categories of human rights mobilization each organization uses, hope that these campaigns will [ignite conversations](#) that challenge the status-quo affairs regarding migrant justice as “we collectively contemplate and work towards the post-pandemic Singapore we want to see”. These are hardly calls that can be announced in the Speakers’ Corner in Hong Lim Park.

Despite the alarming surge of COVID-19 infections among dormitories, the number of discharged and recovered cases have outnumbered new cases consistently as the effectiveness of the dormitory taskforce has begun to show. As of [29 May 2020](#), Singapore has reported 33 622 cases out of which 18 294 have recovered. More than 15 000 are currently housed in isolation facilities. The death toll stands at 23 and consists of mainly elderly patients above the age of 65 who had succumbed to complications of the virus. At the current time of writing, Singapore’s healthcare and treatment facilities continue to operate with [spare capacity](#). Testing regimes in both the dormitory and non-dormitory population have continuously demonstrated a capacity well above [OECD averages](#), while hospitals still have [vacant](#) Intensive Care Unit (ICU) places reserved for the most critical cases. These are feats of exceptionality that point to the Singapore government’s extraordinary capacity for enforcing the rule of law, to the extent that there is the will to do so.

International observers including [WHO officers](#) have rightly pointed out that Singapore possesses the medical capacity to handle exponential surges. Yet the surge among migrant workers reminds us that we have a long way to go when it comes to recognizing them as not machines or robots but human beings with the same basic needs that we do. That Singapore displays a remarkably low death rate despite being the most infected Asian nation outside of China and India does not exempt us from the humanistic side of the equation. When asked by a nominated member of parliament whether the government would [apologise](#) to migrant workers, the minister of Manpower answered that she had come across “not one single migrant worker himself that has demanded an apology”.

Local sociologists like Daniel Goh (2019) have pointed out long ago that the asymmetrical power relationship between employers of work permit holders and employees means that often the latter does not find it in their interests to voice out concerns about working rights violations, that is if they were even made aware of them in the first place. The Employment Sponsorship system that governs the inflow of ‘unskilled’ workers effectively ties the residential conditions in the host destination to the generosity of the employer, who is able to repatriate workers anytime during

the duration of the contract. Given that most workers are indebted to placement agencies who charge hefty fees, while some have taken numerous loans from family and friends, demanding an apology from the state and the employers it protects is surely not in their favor as they risk unemployment which only exacerbates the situation of financial precarity for their own families.

PinkDot Singapore has had in mind for a long time the inequities in the work permit regime that have suddenly received attention from the Singaporean public, even if for mainly economic reasons. Some immigrant-heavy industries have asked the government to [reconsider](#) its plan of reducing imported labor flows, because Singapore's employment composition has taken on a certain irreversible degree of reliance on foreign labor to perform the manual aspects of value creation. Employers acknowledge the need for industrial restructuring by making "[3D](#)" ([dirty, dangerous, degrading](#)) sectors employable and attractive for local graduates, however this shift cannot happen overnight. Indeed, local taskforces are devoting an unprecedented amount of resources, time and effort into the migrant worker population which have until now been on the peripheries, out of sight and out of mind. The demand for safe social distancing has resulted in the crowding out of purpose-built dormitories, and the rehousing of workers into the heartlands of the city including hotel rooms, public housing blocks, empty carparks, [cruise ships](#) and Expo Halls with more to come. The suggestion of [offshore dormitories](#), as some online commentators have proposed, not only assumes that the interests of migrant workers and the general community can be separated, but also do not reflect well on the spirit of national treatment.

To a certain degree, PinkDot and its allies might be grateful that COVID-19 has forced these adjustments to migrant worker accommodation and brought them into the spotlight of heated debate. The challenge for community solidarity then is learning how to decouple the actions we take for migrant workers from questions of economic disposability, such that we learn to see these long-term adjustments not as a question of "For how long will this inconvenience us?"



*PinkDot SG 2019*

This year on 27 June, PinkDot 12 invites members of the community to light up in pink their homes and workplaces, as well as share pictures of small gatherings with close ones (PinkDot SG, 2020). Livestreams of performances and interactive discussions will be held in absence of the human PinkDot. For an indefinite period of time PinkDot and other social movements worldwide will not be able to enjoy the comfort of close physical proximity with familiar allies. But on an individual level, PinkDot and its allies will soldier on with the much needed community work behind the scenes that the preoccupation with organizing massive assemblies has not left much energy for. This includes starting difficult conversations with close acquaintances, community members and even within our households. In the words of one ambassador: “We are ready to start difficult conversations even with people who don’t agree with the values that we stand for. We need to keep sharing our stories and keep the conversation going!”



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### **About the author**

Lynn Ng Yu Ling is an international graduate student from Singapore doing a PhD in Political Science at the University of Victoria (UVic). Her main interests are around Migrant Domestic Worker (MDW) rights advocacy, but also how these cannot be separated from other movements that use different words for their activism.