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Insight  
**Human rights: Why you need to know**

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More can be done here to educate public on the basic rights they have

LAST month, the Government announced a two-year, \$600 million plan to stave off retrenchments and help workers stay employable in the current recession.

The money will go towards doubling the number of training places here, and allowances for workers and jobless Singaporeans attending skills-upgrading courses.

This move gels with the essence of Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) - adopted by the United Nations General Assembly 60 years ago this week.

Article 22, in simplified form, says that the society in which you live should help you to develop and make the most of all the advantages - culture, work and social welfare - which are offered to you and all its other citizens.

Singapore fares well on this count, and on most of the 30 Articles of the UDHR, a document almost all countries have signed on to, but whose principles few manage to live up to.

Take Article 3, on the right to live, and in freedom and safety.

Or Article 7, that the law is the same for everyone and applied in the same way to all.

Everyone has the right to go to school, as Article 26 states.

So why is it that there are those here who see Singapore's adherence to human rights in a negative light?

One reason could be that many critics of Singapore - here and abroad - define human rights so narrowly that their popular characterisation overwhelms the understanding of what human rights should be.

An unlimited right to free expression without restraints, for example, is not in keeping with the UDHR, which balances the right with a focus on responsibilities as well.

A more plausible reason that human rights is viewed dismissively could be that few people know exactly what this concept is all about. The UDHR is not the last word on the concept, but it captures the notion of rights rather well.

Certainly, there are elements of the UDHR that stress individual rights, such as Article 19 which says that you have the right to think what you want and say what you like, and that nobody should forbid you from doing so.

But these are balanced by other parts, like Article 29, which talk of duties towards the community and of the law guaranteeing human rights while allowing everyone to respect others and to be respected.

There have been attempts by civil society groups to remedy the general lack of awareness of human rights here.

To mark the 60th anniversary of the UDHR, a group of individuals got together to spread word of the declaration and its 30 Articles to a wider audience through a campaign launched last week.

They aim to get Singaporeans to be more energised in talking about issues such as the right to adequate rest, to decent pay and to worship freely.

'There are still connotations that human rights are taboo, although many now realise that (these) are not just about socio-political rights, but also involve social, cultural and economic rights,' said lawyer Clara Feng, 25, who heads the two-week-long 'U60' campaign.

The campaign has published handy leaflets that capture all 30 Articles of the UDHR in plain language.

It has also put out exhibition panels on some of these Articles that will be on display at the Jurong Regional Library until Dec 22. The panels had previously been on display at the National Library in Victoria Street.

I hope these panels create a wider awareness of human rights here.

But the impact of civil society initiatives like the U60 effort is necessarily limited.

Maruah - the working committee for an Asean human rights mechanism - and a host of other groups also campaign for human rights on various fronts.

But where is the State in the rights dialogue?

The State is important because official responses on human rights throughout the years have dwelt on the need for responsibilities to balance rights.

No doubt the Government's previous reticence on the subject of human rights has given way to a cautious handshake, as Nominated MP and National University of Singapore law professor Thio Li-Ann sees it.

It has also taken seriously its obligations under international rights treaties that it has signed - the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, for instance.

And in what some like Professor Kevin Tan see as the clearest statement of its kind, Attorney-General Walter Woon made it plain this year that the Government was not against human rights.

Professor Woon had said: 'There is a misconception that Singapore officialdom is against human rights. What we are against is the assumption of some people that when they decide what are human rights, it is a decision for the rest of humanity.'

There is now wider recognition of the view that approaches to human rights must be contextualised to a society's cultural specificities.

But some countries also share a lot in common.

A recent global online dialogue by the World Federation of United Nations Associations revealed a prominent shift of focus towards the fundamental importance of economic, social and cultural rights - which, for decades, had been on the agenda of developing countries.

In this time of global financial turmoil, an emphasis on these rights - including employment rights - is timely.

Article 23 of the UDHR, for instance, talks of the right to work at a salary which allows you to support your family, and of workers' right to join forces to defend their interests, say, in a union.

Article 24 talks of the right to adequate rest, including paid days off - things protected in our Employment Act.

In Singapore, some companies have slashed jobs to cut costs in recent months, but others have consulted with unions and employees and pledged to retrench workers only as a last resort.

While that is, in part, a result of guidelines drawn up and agreed to by bosses, unions and the authorities here, it also reflects a recognition of the debilitating effect that retrenchments can have on individuals, their families and society at large.

In such an environment, it is equally important that workers - local and foreign - be more aware of the rights due to them, especially if unscrupulous employers look to cut corners in bad times.

Of course, education on human rights should also be a sustained effort that finds its way into the school curriculum and guidelines for employers.

From a young age, schoolchildren can be taught about universal rights that may not be imaginable elsewhere, but are very much a part of life here.

One significant right is that of an individual to be treated without discrimination on racial, religious or class lines. Such a right is often cited by people who feel discriminated against.

There could also be greater public education on human rights - starting with leaflets and posters in public places to advise workers and the general public of some of their basic rights should they lose their jobs in this crisis.

Civil society groups like the U60 and its backers have come some way. Perhaps it is time for other agencies to also do more on this front.

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