

Editorial

Intervention – Extending hospitality, offshoring
protest – When the International Monetary
Fund and World Bank came to Singapore

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Geographical research has highlighted the emergence of network spatialities of counter-global politics (e.g. Featherstone, 2003) for which conferences and meetings of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) can afford important ‘convergence space’ (Routledge, 2003). This intervention offers a more conventional, situated political geography of what transpired when the IMF and WB Boards of Governors’ annual meetings were held in Singapore in September 2006. For much of the international press, what was most noteworthy about the meetings was criticism of Singapore’s ‘authoritarian’ restrictions on activists by the President of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz. In what follows, I detail the events that prompted this unexpected source of public criticism before considering two further dimensions of the IMF/WB meetings which did not feature prominently in international media coverage.

Four million smiles and some discontentment

Delegates arriving in Singapore for the IMF/WB meetings were greeted by ‘Four Million Smiles’. The ‘Singapore 2006’ web site had enabled Singapore identity card holders to upload

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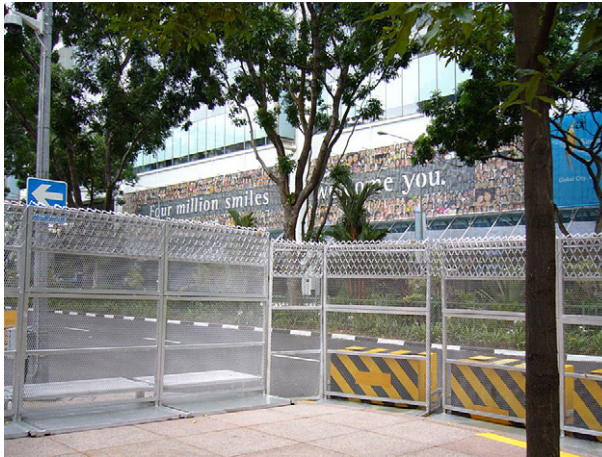


Fig. 1. The enforcement of hospitality at the Suntec Singapore International Convention and Exhibition Centre.

smiling pictures of themselves to a national digital mural (<http://www.smiles2006.com/module/mural>) with the chance of also featuring in official banners for the IMF/WB meetings (see Fig. 1). Some 23,000 people attended the events at the Suntec Singapore International Convention and Exhibition Centre and, as one article in *The Straits Times* (ST) noted, many of them were 'no ordinary tourists' (16 September): 'To varying degrees, most of the visitors in town...are influential opinion-makers or people whose views will spread widely'. As such, the Four Million Smiles campaign not only provided ordinary Singaporeans with a chance to 'welcome the world' (as the web site slogan put it), but also gave them a stake in fostering a suitably hospitable image of Singapore for VIP viewers.

As with other venues for recent gatherings of international financial organizations, the Singapore story was not one of smiles and hospitality alone. Months before the staging of the IMF/WB meetings, a group of activists sent an open letter to Singapore Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, expressing unhappiness about restrictions on outdoor protests and demonstrations. When the Singapore government refused to remove such restrictions, organizers of the International People's Forum – an international group of networks, movements, campaigns and non-government organizations opposed to the neoliberal policies of the IMF and WB – decided to move their event to the neighbouring Indonesian island of Batam. Then, in the lead up to the meetings in Singapore itself, the Singapore Police Force blacklisted 28 (later said to be 27) international civil society activists who had previously been accredited by the IMF/World Bank to attend the meetings. These actions prompted criticism by none other than the President of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz. The event organizers responded with a statement stressing 'the prevailing international security environment' and that the blacklist included people previously involved in 'violent activities at international meetings in Seattle, Cancun and Genoa' (in ST, 15 September). A decision to webcast the Singapore meeting to overseas civil society groups, and even subsequent removal of the ban on most of the 27 barred activists, was not enough to shift international eyes back to all those smiling faces. As ST's Li Xueying admitted, 'even the most hopeful civil servant could not fail to notice that the world's media was more interested in the blacklisting of 27 foreign activists'.

The restrictions on civil society activities in Singapore meant bad press for both the Singapore government and their VIP guests. Opposition politician, Singapore Democratic Party

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