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SINGAPOREANS convened a sort of impromptu Racial Harmony/Disharmony Day on Monday, thanks to two events that dragged the topic into national consciousness.

The first involved the saga that many are now calling Amy-gate, which happened when a racist posting from then National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) executive Amy Cheong suddenly went viral.

The second was the decision by the Media Development Authority (MDA) to reclassify its rating for local film *Sex. Violence. Family Values*.

The move to replace its original Mature 18 rating with the Not Allowed For All Rating meant the movie by director Ken Kwek was effectively banned.

Racial sensitivity was the principal player in both these incidents, which took place just hours apart, yet those who took offence did so in markedly different ways.

It is thus unclear what approach to racial harmony society prefers. Is it one of minimal interference from authority figures, or one where a big brother is charged with keeping the peace?

In Ms Cheong's case, it was clearly the latter. Her swift downfall started with a ground reaction, but quickly escalated to the upper echelons of government.

On Sunday evening, annoyed by the noisy festivities at her void deck, Ms Cheong put up a short rant about Malay weddings, including in it some offensive slurs against the community.

Though she meant it only for her Facebook friends, her page was not private and screenshots of the post quickly made the rounds.

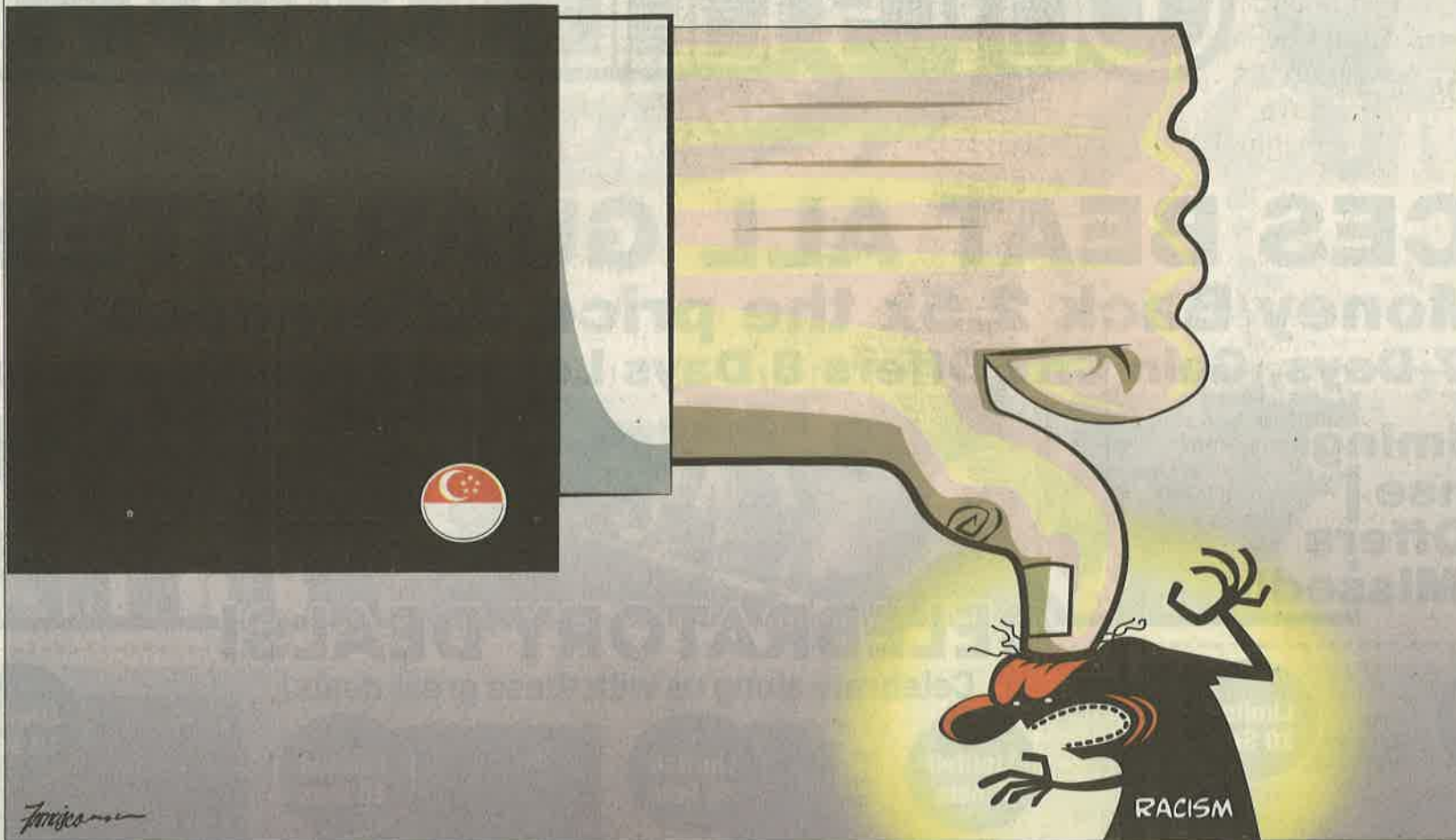
Everywhere it went, outrage followed.

In less than 24 hours, the 37-year-old became the poster girl for online racism in Singapore.

Thousands condemned her online, prompting her employer to sack her. The Prime Minister and

Two racial incidents, two different reactions

Some want the authorities to act, others prefer less intervention



ters also weighed in.

A grassroots leader lodged a police report, saying the comment fostered enmity between the races, while many more left comments about it on the Singapore Police Force's Facebook page. Thousands "liked" a page titled "Fire Amy Cheong" or sent tweets tagged #racistamy.

The public response to the banning of *Sex. Violence. Family Values* was altogether different, with many questioning the authorities' decision to clamp down on the film.

The cause of the ban was re-

tors trade racial insults based on gross stereotypes.

The MDA said it yanked the film a few days before its release because "an overwhelming majority" of members of its Films Consultative Panel who watched the film "expressed that the film should not be allowed for public exhibition in view of its overt racial references, which are demeaning and offensive to Indians".

But for many netizens, that was not an acceptable explanation. The prevailing sentiment was that the Government should be less heavy-handed and should

satirical racial stereotyping in a mature, calm way.

This view was articulated by Arts Nominated MP Janice Koh in an online post.

She said: "In this instance, especially in a case where the MDA had previously deemed the film suitable for viewing, perhaps what is needed is some level of trust that our society is mature enough to watch the film and openly debate and discuss its merits or the issues... without having to constantly depend on the Government to play the 'parent' or 'gatekeeper' of our values and

While the two incidents are not completely comparable, it is striking that, on the one hand, some Singaporeans objected to the notion of a parent or gatekeeper, while on the other hand, numerous people called on the police and NTUC to act.

In the Amy Cheong case, the large numbers of people who read her racist post did not then proceed to have an open and mature debate about its relative merits. They wanted the authorities to act against the offender.

Such acceptance of official intervention prevailed when the

block access to an anti-Islam film here. Both the People's Action Party and Workers' Party praised the move.

But there are also Singaporeans who want to see less intervention and regard government involvement as steps backwards.

The fundamental disagreement between these different segments of society seems to be over society's readiness for a mature discussion about race.

Therein lies the dilemma for Singapore's leaders as they contemplate how to move forward on the race issue.

Government thinking thus far appears to be: Err on the side of caution and then attempt to close the gap by trying to convince one side that the other is right.

The notion that we can try the open approach and tighten up if things do not work out is unpalatable to anyone who has experienced the racial riots of the 1960s.

Yet the argument that we are persistently on the brink of another riot is also problematic in that it gets no traction from those who think the Government is overstating the threat for political purposes. Many in this camp will find it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a situation where a loose remark or a provocative film might provoke any sort of riot here.

Given how far apart different Singaporeans are on this issue, it is unlikely that the Government is going to make any drastic changes in the way it deals with racial episodes.

If we are to look for encouragement though, it is that Singaporeans have demonstrated once again that they are able to deal with a racial episode by stirring little more than an online frenzy. People who felt the need to throw the book at Ms Cheong probably did so not because they were so offended that they were contemplating doing something stupid themselves. They probably did so out of fear that if they did not send the signal, other Singaporeans less level-headed than themselves might cause trouble.

This is not a completely unfounded fear, given the ferocity of some statements online.

The way forward then may not be to keep urging the Government to trust Singaporeans more, but to see if, for a start, we can earn one another's trust.