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Reputational risk

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Reputational risk

NTU gave me a personal tutorial in how the system works.

Much of what I've learnt about the way the political system works came from directly observing it as a journalist at *The Straits Times* in the 1990s. When I moved to academia, I thought my close encounters with power were over. Fate had other plans. It enrolled me in an intense period of experiential learning that enriched my understanding of how institutions are micromanaged by and for the People's Action Party government. The module didn't come cheap: it cost me my job and forced me to pursue my academic career outside Singapore.

Class began in 2009. I was nearing the end of my second three-year contract at Nanyang Technological University, and my school had put me up for promotion and tenure (P&T), a rigorous exercise that involves multiple levels of internal and external review of a candidate's research, teaching and service. Word came down that I'd made it. Then, the president of the university, Su Guaning, invited me to his office. There, he confirmed that I had indeed met all the academic requirements for P&T—but he said he was not able to approve my tenure.

He expressed puzzlement over why the government was upset with me, and seemed genuinely sorry that this had happened. He said he wanted me to stay at NTU and asked for time to work things out. In the meantime, since the government had not said anything about promotion, he was endorsing the “P” half of the P&T recommendation: I would be promoted from assistant to associate professor. This was not an insignificant gesture: it signalled publicly what he assured me privately, that I’d met the requirements for tenure (since NTU has no separate criteria for tenure as opposed to promotion).

At the meeting, Su also asked me to write up my vision for journalism education in Singapore. I was then heading the journalism department. I told him that if anyone was unhappy about this, I would gladly give up my administrative role and go back to being a regular faculty member; I didn’t see why I should be denied tenure instead. In any case, I didn’t find his request onerous since it was a subject I cared about. I submitted a paper on journalism education a few months later. In a show of solidarity, the other faculty on my school’s management committee endorsed it. There was no response to it from the university, which reinforced my hunch that its intended audience lay miles away from NTU’s Administration Building.

In early 2010, there was still no sign of movement. Su had suggested I reach out to the government myself, so I decided to write directly to the prime minister for clarification. I asked him if the government’s objection was specific to my role in journalism education, or if it would apply to any institution of higher learning in Singapore, which would mean having to leave the country if I wanted to pursue my career. I felt this wasn’t too much to ask: information to help me plan my future. The prime minister’s office replied promptly that Education Minister Ng Eng Hen would look into the matter.

A couple of months later, I was summoned to a meeting with Su and the provost, Bertil Andersson. Also present but keeping scrupulously silent was the education ministry’s permanent

secretary. I was told she was there in her capacity as a member of the NTU board of trustees. The university heads informed me they had met with Ng to discuss my case. They then declared that they needed to clarify that the decision on my tenure was taken not by the government but by NTU's academic affairs committee, comprising the university president and trustees. This did not contradict what the president had told me at our first meeting: the fact that the formal decision was made internally didn't mean it wasn't influenced by non-academic criteria. Normally, the academic affairs committee endorses all decisions of the promotion and tenure review committee, which is chaired by the provost. Andersson confirmed that his committee had declared me a "clear" case for P&T.

Su informed me that the thumbs down from the president and trustees was based on the judgement that I posed a "reputational risk" to the university. I asked who exactly felt I might have a negative effect on NTU's reputation and why. He would only say that this was "a perception".

I did not say much at the meeting, as it was clear that it was not a negotiation. I let them fill the silences with statements that I found mainly funny—both funny-haha and funny-peculiar. Like the one about how even Andersson's homeland of Sweden doesn't have total academic freedom: the country banned research that could be used for developing nuclear weapons. (So now I was being likened to a nuclear threat.) I clarified I'd never questioned my treatment on the grounds of academic freedom, but simply because any worker should be treated fairly by his employer, and not subject to assessment criteria that had never been mentioned before. This argument was met with shrugs.

Thus, I remained in limbo. Another year passed, and Andersson became the new president. Into my third and final contract, the new provost Freddy Boey informed the school that the only way to resolve my situation was to go through the P&T process again. Although the university was going back on a promise Su had made, that I would not have to reapply, I had to assume it was acting on

good faith. But this time, I was rejected at the lower level, of the provost's committee. Somehow, the same body that had given me a clear endorsement in 2009 had raised the bar so much that I was no longer good enough, despite the fact that my research output had increased and I'd won a university teaching award since then. Not one annual performance review had suggested I was falling behind.

When the university asked me to reapply, I thought it really wanted to use the opportunity to right a wrong. I only realised how naïve I was when I discovered later that my tenure application packet was altered without my knowledge. I had appended to my cover letter a six-page background paper setting out factually what university officials had told me about my first P&T exercise. I explained it was essential to include this for the benefit of committee members who were not aware of what had happened. Without that knowledge, they would wrongly assume they were reviewing a repeat case previously rejected by reviewers; they might therefore be inclined to judge my dossier more harshly.

I submitted my packet to the school office, which was supposed to relay it to the school-level committee, then the school chair, and so on up the hierarchy. Only later did I find out that my background paper was removed upon submission. It never even reached the bottom rung, the school-level review committee. This was extraordinary. The proper way to express doubt about anything a candidate submits—for example, if one feels the candidate has padded his CV—is to write this feedback into the assessment report. For an administrator to remove part of the employee's submission is to deny his right to be heard. Furthermore, it doesn't respect the P&T system's principle of peer review, which is meant to give reviewers the opportunity to make up their own minds about whatever is submitted.

These were the circumstances in which I was denied tenure a second time. Reaching my three-contract limit at NTU, I got a customary one-year extension and was then shown the door in early 2014. Even at that point, I did not want to publicise what I knew. I was happy to move on. NTU had been careful not to comment too

specifically on my case, allowing me to reciprocate with discretion. But seven months after I left, Andersson slipped up and told a *Times Higher Education* reporter that the denial of tenure was “not political” but academic. This was an attack on my reputation, compelling me to come out with the above details in a late-2014 blog.

One question I’ve never been able to answer definitively, because it was never made clear to me, is why I was considered deserving of such special treatment. It couldn’t just have been about my critical writing or activism, because there are many academics who write more critically than I do. A couple, like my St Andrew’s classmate Paul Tambyah, have kept their university jobs even after becoming opposition candidates, perhaps because removing them would be too obvious an act of political persecution.

My best guess is that it had to do with my role in journalism education. Only this would explain Su’s request that I write him a paper on the topic. I was heading the only undergraduate journalism department in Singapore and was therefore in a position to influence future journalists. This theory is also supported by the fact that the only suggestion Andersson had for placating the government was that I move to the Rajaratnam School of International Studies, where I would not be teaching undergrads. As this would have taken me outside my field, I declined the offer.

I should say here that I’d always kept my non-mainstream political views separate from my administrative role. The main additions I introduced when I was running the journalism programme were an overseas reporting module, and specialised reporting courses in business and science. All were based on a pragmatic assessment of what would most help our undergrads in their future careers. All remained on the curriculum after I left.

However, this was a period when the government was paranoid about losing hold of the young. Lee Kuan Yew had even deigned to engage young voters, including several journalists, in a lengthy televised dialogue. The national media had a few vocal rookies who probably embodied the leadership’s worst fears. But they tended to

come from Oxbridge and Ivy League backgrounds, not NTU. The theory that I posed a danger as a journalism educator makes no sense. But then neither does any other theory that painted me as a threat to Singapore warranting intervention in my career.

This was one lesson from the whole affair: never underestimate petty, irrational factors in government decision-making. The Singapore government has a deserved reputation for technocratic competence in making big decisions, but that doesn't mean every little move is free of personal biases and unfounded assumptions. Unless it's something big like financial abuse, one can't really count on the system's internal checks to correct missteps. Nor can one depend on one's rights as a citizen, which in Singapore are circumscribed. There is thus little disincentive to ministers acting arbitrarily and out of sheer expediency.

Furthermore, ministers can count on non-government players to do their bidding. This is routine in government-media relations, but it was my experience at NTU that made me understand the problem at a more systemic level: in a soft-authoritarian society, politicians are able to outsource less savoury tasks to willing proxies. There's a simple principle in environmental protection called "polluter pays". Similarly, when politicians are made to pay a political price for their actions, they will be much more circumspect about what they do. But a government can stay an arm's length away from potentially costly actions by relying on other institution leaders—in universities, the media and so on—to carry out its wishes. The cost is thus borne by the implementing institution, and not the government.

My own case became a minor political scandal only because my bosses were frank with me about what had happened, probably out of inexperience and because the P&T process is too open to cover up. That's what made it exceptional—not necessarily the political factor as such. A more seasoned institution leader might have found ways to reassure the government and stay its hand, or quietly internalised the political signals and swung the axe without admitting any outside influence. If the NTU leadership had given

me some other reason why the university could not grant me tenure in 2009, I might never have been any the wiser.

It follows from this second point that the machinery of control would stall if institution leaders just said no, and were willing to pay the price. It took a visiting professor from far away to point this out to me. He said that if something like this had happened while he was heading a school, he would have felt compelled to resign his appointment and revert to being an ordinary faculty member. But then, he came from the West, where people have less to lose because academic positions are generally not as cushy as in Singapore. Another reason why some senior colleagues didn't want to create too much drama was that this would only confirm any government suspicions that the Wee Kim Wee School was full of radicals, and no good could come out of that. I shared this concern.

Therefore, a third lesson, and the most depressing, was that resistance is futile. When word got out in 2013 that I'd been denied tenure, it caused a kerfuffle. Petitions were launched by students and civil society. Some colleagues also spoke up. The story was reported in the international media, including in influential global higher education publications. I never expected any of this to make a difference to my fate, but I hoped that it would be the start of a conversation about the kind of universities we want and the governance systems that would get us there.

It was not to be. It became another demonstration of the resilience of Singapore's political model. Within a year of my departure from NTU, I was hearing from faculty members about how things had gotten worse. Throughout my ten years there, not once had anyone in the hierarchy warned me against writing or doing anything that might upset the government. But after my tenure case, junior faculty were being explicitly advised by their superiors to stay clear of controversy, just in case. I guess, like me, many professors who remained had learned their lessons too.