



**Many surprised it is stirring to life and serving its purpose, after ho-hum existence since it was set up in 2000**

The buzz being generated at Speakers' Corner is cheering to both political analysts and social activists.

Several of them, interviewed by The Sunday Times, said they were "heartened" by the tempo of activities and public interest at the spot in Hong Lim Park since outdoor demonstrations were allowed there two months ago.

Most admitted to being surprised by the transformation of the spot from its earlier ho-hum existence.

Calling the turn of events "unprecedented", Mr Choo Zheng Xi, editor-in-chief of socio-political blog The Online Citizen, said many sceptics have been proven wrong.

"It has exceeded my expectations with the broad range of issues covered," he said.

National University of Singapore political science analyst Bilveer Singh agreed: "I don't think even the Government anticipated this. This shows that Singaporeans are not fearful and they are not politically apathetic."

Others like activist and blogger Alex Au, however, felt it was still early days.

"I'm heartened that some sections (of the public) have found use for it, but one swallow does not make a summer," he said.

As of last Friday, there were 63 applications to use the park since rules were liberalised on Sept 1, said the Na-

#### Space put to good use

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#### But will tempo be sustained?

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tional Parks Board (NParks), which manages the venue.

Of these, 40 were registered as speeches, 12 as demonstrations and seven as public performances.

Four could not be easily classified.

One application – from real estate agent Thamilselvan Karuppayya, 40, who wanted to talk about the use of Tamil in public signs – was rejected by the police.

The largest number of applications made by a single individual or organisation is 12.

NParks did not identify this person or organisation but former NTUC Income chief executive officer Tan Kin Lian is believed to hold this "record". He has already organised four rallies there on the "mis-selling" issue, drawing more than 500 investors each time.

Analysts agreed that the hot-button issue of structured financial products has helped to raise the profile of Speakers' Corner.

Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan said the saga, complete with anguished stories, struck a "responsive chord" with the people.

The different elements – such as investors who saw their savings wiped out and big banks which saw their reputation take a fall – made for a potent combination, he said.

Professor Singh noted: "For Singaporeans, the hot-button issues are not democracy or human rights but the bread-and-butter issues."

While most said the current tempo will encourage more people to use the platform, some wondered if the buzz will be sustained once the "hot issues" subside.

Professor Tan, for one, is not sure if another topic will captivate Singaporeans the way the mis-selling saga did.

"We're not a very expressive people when it comes to voicing unhappiness towards business and government," he noted.

But Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said: "It's not that during the last recession, nobody felt anything. But now there is a place to assemble publicly."

Speakers' Corner was set up in 2000. Since then, there have been 2,144 registrations and 508 occasions of people speaking there.

Before the new rules kicked in, no public demonstrations were permitted there. But Singapore citizens could speak freely there without having to apply for a Public Entertainment Licence.

Some observers maintained that even with the new rules, Speakers' Corner has its limits.

Mr Au, the blogger, said: "By itself, Speakers' Corner does not have the potential. It requires a medium to take the protesters' message to the general public. What if there was a total media blackout?"

Nanyang Technological University final-year student Scott Teng, who led a demonstration there against the censorship of the university's media, said: "Speakers' Corner alone is not going to be very effective. It's just a safety valve."

Social activists interviewed maintained that public demonstrations should not be confined to the park but extended to all public spaces.

The Online Citizen's Mr Choo said the past two months have proven that Singaporeans can voice their unhappiness without disorder or sparking chaos.

Prof Singh hopes this will continue.

"My hope is that irresponsible elements do not use the park. All you need is someone who plays dangerous politics at Speakers' Corner and the Government may restrict it. Then we'll all lose in the end."