

Singapore patrol robots stoke fears of surveillance state

October 6 2021, by Catherine Lai



Armed with seven cameras, a Xavier robot in Singapore issues warnings to the public and detects 'undesirable social behaviour'

Singapore has trialled patrol robots that blast warnings at people engaging in "undesirable social behaviour", adding to an arsenal of

surveillance technology in the tightly controlled city-state that is fuelling privacy concerns.

From vast numbers of CCTV cameras to trials of lampposts kitted out with facial recognition tech, Singapore is seeing an explosion of tools to track its inhabitants.

Officials have long pushed a vision of a hyper-efficient, tech-driven "smart nation", but activists say privacy is being sacrificed and people have little control over what happens to their data.

Singapore is frequently criticised for curbing civil liberties and people are accustomed to tight controls, but there is still growing unease at intrusive tech.

The government's latest surveillance devices are robots on wheels, with seven cameras, that issue warnings to the public and detect "undesirable social behaviour".

This includes smoking in prohibited areas, improperly parking bicycles, and breaching coronavirus social-distancing rules.

During a recent patrol, one of the "Xavier" robots wove its way through a housing estate and stopped in front of a group of elderly residents watching a chess match.

"Please keep one-metre distancing, please keep to five persons per group," a robotic voice blared out, as a camera on top of the machine trained its gaze on them.



During a three-week trial in September, two robots were deployed to patrol a Singapore housing estate and shopping centre.

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"It reminds me of Robocop," said Frannie Teo, a 34-year-old research assistant, who was walking through the mall.

It brings to mind a "dystopian world of robots... I'm just a bit hesitant about that kind of concept", she added.

'No constraints'

Digital rights activist Lee Yi Ting said the devices were the latest way Singaporeans were being watched.

"It all contributes to the sense people... need to watch what they say and what they do in Singapore to a far greater extent than they would in other countries," she told AFP.

But the government defended its use of robots, saying they were not being used to identify or take action against offenders during the tech's trial, and were needed to address a labour crunch as the population ages.



Singapore is trialling robots that patrol the streets looking for people who are smoking in prohibited areas, improperly parking bicycles, or breaching Covid rules.

"The workforce is actually shrinking," said Ong Ka Hing, from the [government agency](#) that developed the Xavier robots, adding they could help reduce the number of officers needed for foot patrols.

The island of about 5.5 million people has 90,000 police cameras, a number set to double by 2030, and facial recognition tech—which helps authorities pick out faces in a crowd—may be installed on lampposts across the city.

There was a rare public backlash this year when authorities admitted coronavirus contact-tracing data collected by an official system had been accessed by police. The government later passed legislation to limit its use.

But critics say the city-state's laws generally put few limitations on government surveillance, and Singaporeans have little control over what happens to the data collected.

"There are no privacy law constraints on what the government can or cannot do," said Indulekshmi Rajeswari, a privacy lawyer from Singapore who is now based in Germany.

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