

'Civil society and leadership fights'

Aaron Low and Jeremy Au Yong

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The sudden takeover of women's rights group Aware has placed the spotlight on civil society and the politics of these organisations. Political Correspondents Aaron Low and Jeremy Au Yong take a look at the questions the incident has raised and how it has impacted civil society.

MISS Candice Yao has always admired the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) for the work it has done to advance women's causes in Singapore. The 30-year-old media executive, however, never found enough time nor energy to participate in the organisation's activities.

But her inertia disappeared after reading this week about how the organisation's leadership changed hands suddenly.

'I think Aware has been doing good work, and I am concerned if it gets overrun by ladies who don't seem to really believe in its cause,' she says.

'I want to join, and I hope my vote can help change things.'

Indeed, the repercussions of the Aware annual general meeting on March 28 (see story The saga thus far...), during which a group of newcomers seized leadership in an exercise of organised electioneering, are being felt far and wide.

Shockwaves are being felt outside the organisation as civil society at large tries to grapple with what went on, and what implications may be in store.

What does the leadership change at Aware mean for civil society? Is it emblematic of an evolving pluralistic society? And what lessons can be drawn from the episode?

The fallout

IMMEDIATELY after news of the leadership change at Aware broke, the online community flew into a frenzy.

Many blogs started to speculate on the motives behind the takeover.

Some pointed to past newspaper letters written by some of the new exco members which argued against homosexuality and abortion, and suggested that the new Aware leaders were conservatives.

One letter that was targeted, for instance, was by Aware's new honorary secretary Jenica Chua, who said in a letter to The Straits Times Forum Page on Oct 17, 2007, that Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong had overstepped his non-partisan role and advanced the homosexual cause by tabling a petition in Parliament to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises homosexual sex between consenting men.

Older members of Aware were also keen to know if the newcomers shared Aware's vision and values, including an emphasis on equality for all regardless of race, religion or sexuality.

The group kept mum until this week, when it issued two separate statements.

The first affirmed their commitment to Aware's mission, while the second, by the new president Josie Lau, questioned why the group's motives were under such scrutiny given that they were 'pro-women, pro-family and pro-Singapore'.

However, some felt the statements skirted the key question: Why had they mounted a takeover of Aware?

Aware has been recognised as being led by 'liberals' who advocate equal treatment for women regardless of sexuality, even as it fought for non-discrimination against women and campaigned against sexist advertisements and domestic violence towards women.

To Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan, based on what is known of them so far, 'the new group might be described as 'conservatives' with an apparently strong anti-homosexual stance'.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), however, cautions against prejudging. She says: 'Ostensibly, the new committee members stood as individuals, rather than as a bloc, and therefore did not have to state a platform as such.'

Could not this group have set up a society of their own?

Not if the group wishes to achieve the same things as Aware does as declared in its mission statement, says Dr Koh.

Dr Tan says given that Aware has a reputation for being liberal, the new group perhaps felt they could achieve more by 'moderating' the organisation's erstwhile liberal accent.

'That, in itself, would be an important moral victory in their minds,' he says.

Whether such an objective is at the core of the power grab remains unclear.

Growing pluralism

WHAT the incident does show, however, is that civil society in Singapore is becoming even more pluralist.

Dr Terence Chong of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Iseas) says: 'It recalls the American culture wars in the 1980s when different spheres like arts, law, education and so on were sites of struggle between liberal progressives and traditional conservatives.'

However, 'instead of political ideology being the wedge, in this case, it is cultural and lifestyle values which are dividing Singaporeans'.

It also shows that Singaporeans are sensitive to cultural and so-called moral issues, and are 'more easily animated' by them compared with other issues, he adds.

Whatever the case, it will not be the first time such a tug-of war between conservatives and liberals has played out in the public gallery.

Back in 2005, conservatives made their voices heard in the media and in Parliament when they argued against casinos being built in Singapore.

As it is, politicking and power struggles are already common in many organisations - including condominium management committees, country clubs and sports associations (see story Leadership tussles).

In the case of the Singapore Swimming Club (SSC) for example, disagreements even led to a defamation suit.

Four members of the SSC sued the club's president, Mr Freddie Koh, alleging, among other things, that they had been misrepresented in the written minutes of a committee meeting.

Controversy has also swirled around the en-bloc sale committees at certain condominiums, thanks to the confluence of money and emotions found at the centre of selling one's home.

The tussle over the \$500 million Horizon Towers en-bloc sale reached epic proportions recently when the highest court of the land ruled in favour of the minority, who did not want to sell.

The IPS' Dr Koh says there is a constant process of learning and negotiation that takes place in civil society, so what happened in Aware recently is 'quite natural'.

Differences of opinion will occur; how these are resolved will show how mature society is, she notes.

This will be important not only for civil society, but for the larger community, as Singapore continues to mature as a democracy.

Dr Koh says: 'Civil society should uphold the virtues of transparency, accountability, democratic process and pluralism. So I would also hold the outcome of these developments (in Aware) by that measure.'

The old guard in Aware has called for an extraordinary general meeting, possibly to table a vote of no-confidence in the new faces.

This is part of the legitimate democratic process that is provided for in the organisation's Constitution, notes Dr Koh.

'I am confident that the members, both old and new at Aware, will indeed prove that they are able to self-regulate and self-manage in upholding those virtues,' she says.

Complacency, again

SEVERAL lessons can be drawn from the Aware incident, say observers.

First and quite simply, what happened at Aware can happen at other civil society groups, says Action for Aids president Roy Chan.

IPS's Dr Koh thinks the episode will prompt other groups to check their Constitutions to ensure there are more stringent criteria in place before people are allowed to run for office.

For many organisations, however, attracting members is a perennial problem, and newcomers tend to be welcomed with open arms.

Dr Russell Heng, an office bearer at foreign worker advocacy group Tansient Workers Count Too, notes: 'Getting membership isn't easy, so you try and be inclusive.'

An Insight check with other organisations showed that different groups had different safeguards, some more secure than others (see story How other groups build in safeguards).

To Mr Gerard Ee, who has sat on numerous boards and committees such as the Automobile Association of Singapore, the National Medical Ethics Committee and the National Kidney Foundation, there are positive effects from the fallout.

First, it is a reminder of the need for leadership renewal to make sure different members get to play a part.

It is also a reminder that leaders need to be in touch with their members. 'One has to assume nowadays that if members are not satisfied, they might do something,' he says.

To Dr Koh, the saga calls to mind 'that old buzzword', complacency, as Aware members themselves admitted.

Many failed to turn up for the AGM, and those who did failed to ask probing questions during the election process.

Ironically, before this episode took place, much of the debate about civil society in Singapore focused on whether it is even necessary.

With the Aware saga, that question is clearly outdated. Civil society is alive and well, and can organise effectively when so motivated. So the more pertinent question now is, what shape is best for Singapore?

That is another story for another day.