

## **More taking on Govt in court, former A-G observes Woon urges activists to adopt 'give and take' approach**

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***The Straits Times***, 12 November 2013

Law professor Walter Woon yesterday said that the number of challenges to the Government in the courts has gone up, and that anecdotally, he would say there have been more such challenges in the last five years than over the previous decades.

The former attorney-general, who now teaches at the National University of Singapore, was speaking in his personal capacity at the Institute of Policy Studies conference on civil society.

Prof Woon said that while the diffidence that Singaporeans have in challenging the Government has not disappeared completely, it has diminished since the 2011 General Election.

He cited four recent cases. Two were constitutional challenges against Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises gay sex, while the third was from a Hougang resident regarding the Prime Minister's discretion in calling a by-election.

The fourth was by Reform Party chief Kenneth Jeyaretnam, who sought to block a US\$4 billion (S\$5 billion) loan from the Singapore Government to the International Monetary Fund.

Prof Woon predicted more jostling for public space among interest groups and fewer inhibitions in taking on the Government as society becomes more diverse.

He and several veteran civil society leaders, fellow speakers at the conference, urged activists to "stay at the table" instead of taking a more combative, "my way or the highway" approach.

He also said it seemed to him that the younger ministers "have a stronger sense of fairness than what we have seen before".

But he emphasised that activists must refrain from the "brat response to say this is what I want and I'm not leaving till you change it". He stressed that "there has to be compromise for all of us to live here altogether".

Nominated Member of Parliament and green champion Faizah Jamal said that maintaining civil relations with policymakers pays off.

When the Land Transport Authority wanted to engage with green activists on the Cross-Island MRT Line that could cut into the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, it turned first to the people who spearheaded a campaign to save the Lower Peirce Reservoir from becoming a golf course in the early 1990s, she said. "They are thinking, these are not troublemakers, they will have something to say."

Mr Alvin Tan, founder and artistic director of The Necessary Stage, urged activists to remember that corporations and the Government can change - albeit slowly. Over the years, The

Necessary Stage went from having its plays censored to being consulted and having some of its suggestions become policy.