

NGOs have vital role in working with Govt, society

Ms Praveen Randhawa

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Mrs Constance Singam ("Don't dismiss civil society's contributions"; last Saturday) accurately quoted Law Minister K. Shanmugam as saying at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conference, held on Nov 11, that "Singapore cannot be governed without the active participation of people and civil society". (The full quote was: "Can the Government handle everything alone? No way. We prefer to tap into the enthusiasm of people. It is a simple fact that Singapore cannot be governed without the active participation of people and civil society.")

She then drew the inaccurate conclusion that the minister had implied that "civil society activism should focus on welfare and service provision".

The minister neither said nor implied that, nor does he believe that.

He made clear at the conference that a modern society like Singapore needs strong partnerships between the people, civil society and the Government. He also said he and his colleagues strongly believe that.

Mrs Singam also said the Government cannot deny the significant contributions made by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), Caritas and the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP).

We agree entirely with Mrs Singam that such NGOs have a very important role in working with the Government and society.

The Law Ministry, for example, has worked closely with Aware. To cite two recent examples: Last year, the ministry piloted legislation in Parliament (the Evidence Act) after discussions with Aware, and at the association's strong request. This year, it engaged Aware executive director Corinna Lim on harassment, an issue that the association has taken a clear position on.

In his concluding remarks at another recent IPS conference on the topic of harassment, the minister said he would give serious consideration to Ms Lim's views that there should be standalone legislation on harassment.

Likewise, the minister has also expressed his wish to work with Caritas. And the Government has given considerable financial and other support to AMP since its inception.

The Government has and will continue to engage civil society as an essential partner in dealing with the important issues that face Singapore.

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