

## **NMP candidates attacked online**

### **Three, including lawyer Siew, accused of pushing gay agenda**

***Sue-Ann Chia***

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LAWYER Siew Kum Hong is at the centre of an online storm over his application to be a Nominated MP for a second term.

Two opposing groups are slugging it out over his suitability for the position, mainly on the online portal of Reach, the Government's feedback platform.

When contacted, Mr Siew, 34, said he was 'upset' by the attacks: 'There's a lot of misrepresentation and falsehood.'

Opponents of his bid have attacked him on two fronts.

The first is his involvement in the recent leadership tussle at the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware).

The second is his petition to Parliament in 2007 to repeal the Penal Code's Section 377A, which makes it illegal for men to have sex with men.

In the case of Aware, Mr Siew had backed the long-time members who were ousted in March.

At Aware's extraordinary general meeting on May 2, which ended with the long-time members wresting back power, he was described as their 'legal adviser'.

Many of his detractors are accusing him of taking sides when they said he should have stayed neutral. Some, pointing to his Section 377A petition, also felt he was promoting a homosexual lifestyle.

But the attacks, which began on May 8, have in the past two days prompted a wave of counter-attacks by netizens voicing support for Mr Siew.

The furore has drawn about 340 comments since May 1, when Reach sought views from the public on what they desire in the new line-up of NMPs.

NMPs were introduced in 1991 to provide for alternative views in Parliament. A maximum of nine candidates can be nominated by the public and invited groups.

The NMPs serve for up to 2 1/2 years and the new term starts in July.

Applications closed on Monday.

Mr Siew said he began reading the comments only on Wednesday night, although he had seen postings on other online forums.

'It is regrettable that it has gotten to this. I did not anticipate it,' he said.

Most of his online attackers did so anonymously. They charged that his 'pro-gay' stance and his taking sides in the Aware dispute polarised society, signalling that he was not in touch with the majority of Singaporeans who are 'conservative'.

In rebutting them, Mr Siew said he participated in Aware in his personal capacity and not as an NMP.

He stressed that he neither supports nor condemns homosexuals: 'I'm against discrimination of homosexuals.'

He also said to reduce his re-nomination to just the point that he is pro-homosexual is a misrepresentation of facts.

'Engage me on the substance of my speeches and the many issues I've raised,' he said.

Most of his netizen supporters say he has proven to be 'impartial' and 'articulate', and 'his views reflect secular society'.

They also praised him for raising 'uncomfortable' issues.

While Mr Siew is bearing the brunt of the online attacks, two other NMP hopefuls from the arts scene are also being discredited by netizens.

They are theatre director Beatrice Chia-Richmond, 34, and artistic director Loretta Chen, 32.

Both are said to be pushing the homosexual agenda with their plays, and Ms Chen was also said to be openly a lesbian.

However, the deluge of anti-Mr Siew comments has led some netizens to speculate that it was an organised attempt to try and make the online views appear as being representative of the majority.

In online jargon, this is known as 'astroturfing' - creation of a fake grassroots movement.

Some have also alluded that certain groups were behind the move, given the references to Aware and homosexuality.

Internet specialist Tan Tarn How from the Institute of Policy Studies believes the conservative cyber critics are not just out to attack Mr Siew. It is more an attempt to 'get their voice heard' on issues like homosexuality, he said.

Their voices are likely to grow louder, he added.

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**Reach's Amy Khor:**

**Strong interest sparks discussion**

'Sometimes, when a particular issue is reported extensively in the mainstream media, such as in this instance, it will translate to discussion and feedback on the Reach website. Hence, for netizens to post their comments and feedback on this issue is not entirely surprising.

'On a positive note, the interest and discussion show Singaporeans are not an apathetic lot and will come forward to share their views and feedback when they feel strongly about an issue, and we are heartened. As with every issue, there will always be diverse views, so it's not surprising to see different views being expressed on this issue. Similarly, we also see diverse views expressed on other issues on the Reach website.'

**Reach chairman Amy Khor on not being surprised that netizens used the portal to lobby for and against Mr Siew Kum Hong**

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**Checks on inflammatory postings**

'Reach's website administrator keeps track of postings. We have terms of conditions of use where we reserve the right to delete postings that are sensitive or offensive, not unlike other online platforms. However, we need to balance that...by not over-regulating. As long as a view is constructive, we need to give it due attention.

'To encourage more to participate and engage us, Reach does not require users to register in order to post comments. Any member of the public can post his comments using his display name, although he is also required to provide his e-mail address.'

**Dr Khor, on the checks in place to ensure postings are not inflammatory or defamatory**