

Taking stock of the President's first week

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As head of state, Madam Halimah's visits have been for causes she has long championed

On what was supposed to be the day Singaporeans went to the polls, our freshly minted first female head of state will be sharing a meal with youths at the Muhammadiyah Welfare Home today, before proceeding to a light-up event at Chinatown.

This follows a week where President Halimah Yacob visited a disability service centre, a hospital, a light-up event in Little India and a Catholic welfare home.

Her first week as Singapore's eighth head of state has been filled with events involving organisations representing a cross-section of society, events which The New Paper understands have all been handpicked by her.

The media has been hot on her trail and there have been daily reports chronicling Madam Halimah's busy schedule.

But not everyone is a fan.

Online, the President's movements have been met with some cynicism, alleging that she is "desperately trying to show that she is the people's President".

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tandisagreed with this, saying that Madam Halimah's packed first week was neither for show nor "beginner's enthusiasm".

He told TNP: "I don't see her enthusiasm as being strategic or temporary. What she has done so far is in keeping with who President Halimah is.

"These are causes that she has long identified with.

"Even when she was made Speaker, she crafted a role in supporting causes like the underprivileged, elderly and special needs.

"She blazed a trail by supporting these causes and organisations and continued to be an advisor to the trade unions, all in keeping with her style."

The consistency Prof Tan referred to was perhaps reflected most clearly in her visit to a senior activity centre run by Thye Hua Kwan (THK) Moral Charities on Thursday.

DROP-IN DISABILITY PROGRAMME

Four years ago, then-Minister of State for Social and Family Development Madam Halimah had floated an idea to THK to have eldercare centres double as a place where disabled people can take part in social and recreational programmes — allowing for more interaction between the two groups while giving caregivers a respite.

This drop-in disability programme is now offered at four of the 15 seniors activity centres run by THK and the one she visited in Tiong Bahru on Thursday is set to follow suit.

Every President shines the spotlight and a "special accent" on different social causes and so will President Halimah, said Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies.

"President Ong Teng Cheong put an accent on the arts; President S R Nathan put an accent on social work and welfare; and President Tony Tan put an accent on social enterprise," she said.

"In these early days, and also given President Halimah Yacob's personal journey, she would want to take the time to explore areas of social welfare she can help to shine the spotlight on."

Despite the critics, there is no denying the scenes of residents cheering for their new President as she carried out her visits, often erupting even before Madam Halimah's white car pulled up at the venue.

During her visit to the National University Hospital on Tuesday, Madam Halimah was only supposed to visit two patients in a geriatric ward, but she took the time to greet other patients and even staff members.

On Thursday, before stepping foot into the THK activity centre, the President spent some time going off-schedule, posing for photos with children from a kindergarten nearby, making sure to say hello to each one of the children as well as the teachers.

Her enthusiasm, said Prof Tan, speaks of the promise she made when she was sworn in, to be a unifying figure for Singaporeans.

"She is very comfortable with people from all walks of life, and you see her being genuine in bringing impactful attention to these causes which tend to be invisible in our society," he said.

When Madam Halimah marked the first day of her presidency with a visit to the Association for Persons with Special Needs (APSN), the association's vice-president Chan Chee Keong expressed his hope that she would speak to employers about the work that APSN does.

His hope may not be misplaced — Madam Halimah is known to have a hands-on, "activist" approach, said Prof Tan, who added that this could be beneficial for the presidency in the long run.

"I wouldn't be surprised as a result of her taking the lead, more people who are eligible will be encouraged to step forward, knowing more what the role can do," he said.

Madam Halimah doesn't look like she is about to slow down either.

According to the President's office, her schedule will be packed next week, too, with planned events involving Changi Airport, Jamiyah Singapore, Assisi Hospice and the Youth Corps.

In a break from her Presidential visits, Madam Halimah on Wednesday hosted lunch for two seniors who did not get to meet her on Nomination Day.

Such initiatives have become Madam Halimah's trademark personal touch, said Prof Tan.

He said: "The key thing is her reaching out.

"Looking at her track record, she will demonstrate that the presidency is a powerful, unifying institution, not limited to the confines of the Istana and definitely more than just about the custodial powers."