

Advocacy Groups vs Party Politics

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THE LINE between religion and civil society has been clearly drawn, if the saga of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) is anything to go by. Should the same be done between advocacy groups and political parties?

For instance, it is no secret that newly-elected Aware president Dana Lam participated in the Workers' Party (WP) YouthQuake forum last August, where she spoke on society's perception of women. She also authored a book on the 2006 General Elections, *Days of Being Wild: GE2006 Walking the Line with The Opposition*; and helped draft an open letter asking for a scholarship to be set up in the name of the late former WP chief J B Jeyaretnam.

But when contacted by Today, Ms Lam was emphatic: "I would never join a political party because I think that I'd like to be an independent voice, and speak objectively and not on the side of any party."

As for the women's advocacy group, Ms Lam sees no issue working with political parties provided the "collaborations must be to further the objectives of Aware" and not that "of any other group".

If both sides are on the "same page in terms of objectives and values the project is based on ... there is no reason why we cannot have projects with, say, the PAP women's wing, or WP women's wing if they have one," she said. But "I don't think we will go out and push their agenda, for example, join the PAP or WP or any party."

'We'll work together, if ... '

Other civil society organisations, including advocacy groups, concurred — tie-ups with political parties should not be ruled out, but the group's cause must come first and the agenda must be transparent.

Given its tie-ups with PUB and other government agencies, Waterways Watch chairman Eugene Heng had wondered if working with an opposition party would "be construed well by the people supporting us". But "we decided we should not turn (an opposition party) down" if approached, he said.

Heartware Network founder Raymond Huang had declined a proposed collaboration on self-esteem studies in schools, when he found out the other party was a relative of an opposition party figure.

"If you want to deal with us, all cards must be on the table," said Mr Huang, who had been a Young PAP volunteer but resigned after founding Heartware Network in 2000 as he felt the group "had to be a true-blue NGO".

Political parties Today approached expressed a similar willingness to work with civil society groups should their interests be aligned — though PAP youth wing chairman Teo Ser Luck

noted, should the NGO's leaders be affiliated with another political party, "sensitivities" would have to be worked out.

PAP women's wing vice-chairman Amy Khor said it does collaborate with NGOs, and is "open to working" with those whose leaders have different political affiliations — provided they promote the same cause and not some political agenda.

Chief of the WP youth wing Perry Tong said its YouthQuake forum invites members of the public to speak, including Young PAP members.

Still, to avoid "accusations of co-option" and for the benefit of both sides, Institute of South-east Asian Studies fellow Dr Terence Chong suggested NGOs and political parties should work on "short-medium term projects with clear objectives".

Should members declare affiliations?

Advocacy group members with political affiliations should declare them from the start, advised Dr Chong, as they are bound to be uncovered eventually.

Many groups see no need to insist that members do so, however — "so long as, when dealing with NGO matters, you park your party interests outside", said vice-president of Transient Workers Count Too Russell Heng. When one should declare one's affiliations is mostly "common-sense", he added, such as if one has been donating a lot of money to the group.

Action for Aids also does not require a declaration, though members must agree to a code of conduct. Executive director Lionel Lee pointed out that those out to harm the organisation may not reveal their true affiliations.

The Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics' (Home) constitution, however, states that political affiliations and trade union activity must be declared, and the group will decide whether to accept the person as a member.

This is because Home's work with migrant workers is a sensitive subject, said founder-president Bridget Lew, and "we would not want those on the executive committee to use our organisation for any political or trade union activity".

Senior researcher Gillian Koh agrees a declaration should be made if it is relevant to the group. "It ought not to be the case of pursuing everybody for every other affiliation they have, a witch-hunt," she cautioned. "That's just going to be much too onerous and far too much intrusion into privacy."