

Part 3: The Challenges of Growing Civil Society

Is Civil Society Always Good?

- NGOs generally serve public interest by providing necessary public services, checking state power, and protecting minority interests
- But violent, disruptive, undemocratic or uncivil pursuit of self-interest can lead to conflict with other NGOs and the state, impeding governance – e.g. eco-terrorism and industrial (vs. consumer) lobby groups

Introduction to AWARE

- Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) founded in 1985 during graduate mother eugenics debate
- Membership mainly professional women
- Focuses on advancing women's rights
- Mixed results, with some success in changing legislation on domestic abuse and foreign spouses
- More independent from govt. (self-funded), willing to take issues to public, and aggressive, but has avoided direct confrontation with the govt.

In 1984, the Graduate Mothers' Scheme gave children of graduate mothers priority admission to schools. Women who were better-educated - defined as those with at least five O-level passes - could also get generous tax benefits if they had children, with tax breaks of 5, 10 and 15 per cent of earned income respectively for the first, second and third child.

All these policies were to encourage better-educated married women to have more children.

Other women, however, were paid to Stop At Two or even at one. Women below 30 who agreed to sterilisation after the first or second child could get a cash grant of \$10,000 - provided both the parents did not have any O-level passes, and earned less than \$1,500 a month together. If she went on to have another child, she would have to repay the \$10,000 cash grant with 10 per cent compound interest a year. ...

The scheme to give children of graduate mothers priority in school admission was reversed in 1985. Some of the measures to discourage less-educated women from having babies were gradually rolled back as well.

- The Straits Times, 24 Mar 2015

Chronology of Key Events

- Jan-Mar 2009: Sudden and unprecedented spike in AWARE membership
- Sat Mar 28: Unusually large turnout during the AWARE AGM (about 3 times bigger than normal, almost 80% new members); newcomers defeat existing AWARE members to win 9 of 12 positions on the executive committee
- Wed Apr 8: Claire Nazar resigns as president, stating differences in decision to remove key sub-committee members and her disapproval of their “stormtrooper” tactics

Cyberspace abuzz over Aware

Tan Dawn Wei

The Helen Reddy hit song I Am Woman has these lines: "I am woman, hear me roar/ In numbers too big to ignore."

Well, that seems to describe what happened at Aware, Singapore's leading women's advocacy group, in a recent leadership coup at its annual general meeting (AGM).

The Straits Times reported last Friday that nine of the 12 executive committee spots went to newcomers, thanks to the unexpected turnout of more than 100 people, many of them new members.

Cyberspace is now abuzz, with many netizens surprised and worried over the event, which took place on March 28.

After all, Aware – the Association of Women for Action and Research – is iconic. The 24-year-old non-profit body has earned respect for promoting gender equality without having to shout it out.

The surprise is over the way the election coup seemed to have been orchestrated. The worry is over the direction it will now take.

Netizens are asking the same questions as Aware's stalwarts: Who are these new committee members, most of whom signed up only in the past three months? What is their agenda? Why Aware?

One common thread running through the online discussions was the concern that the new leaders may burnish a conservative stamp, in contradiction to Aware's all-inclusive philosophy.

Outspoken activist Leona Lo, 34, wrote on her blog: "I would like to call for greater transparency vis-a-vis the

new committee members' social backgrounds and beliefs."

She wanted them to state their motive and address what seemed to be an "orchestration" to secure positions.

The new leaders have kept mum about who they are and what they stand for. Declining to speak to the press, they said a press statement would be issued "in a few days".

A check showed that some of the newcomers and their supporters at the

AGM have previously written to The Straits Times Forum Page separately, speaking against homosexuality.

One Aware founding member and former vice-president, Ms Margaret Thomas, 56, said the fact that the new leadership's motives are unclear is worrying.

"What I would like to see is Aware's name and activities continue in the way it has been for the last 24 years. If people feel things should be done a different way, go form your own group," she said.

Some others among the old guard were tight-lipped when contacted by The Sunday Times.

Aware's membership stands at over 300, with men making up 10 per cent.

Mr Dan Tan, 39, a technology company director, is an Aware associate member.

Noting that most of the new committee members have no track record with the group, he said, "even if one keeps an open mind about a change in the organisation's culture, one cannot help but be concerned about the competency and experience of these unknown faces in running Aware".

Former committee member and Buddhist youth leader Yap Ching Wi, 39, too, said she was troubled by the manner in which the new committee came

into power, describing it as what "seemed a hostile takeover".

But graduate student Mathia Lee, 28, a member who said she attended the AGM, defended, in her blog, the new faces.

She said those voted in were "genuinely and very significantly better than some of those who were

not voted in".

And, even as the shock and awe are being absorbed, some members hope to see some good emerging.

"I believe that many people who identify with Aware's broad objectives and who admire the hard work and dedication of its members have now been reminded of the need to stay engaged.

"This development may prove to be a positive one in the end," said Mr Tan.

Preserving Aware's values
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MS MARGARET THOMAS, former vice-president of Aware

Chronology of Key Events

- Tue Apr 14: AWARE old guard leads 160 members in calling for an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM)
- Wed Apr 15: New Exco appoints DBS executive, Josie Lau, as new AWARE President; DBS issues a statement saying it does not support her taking up the post
- Fri Apr 17: Josie Lau issues statement questioning motives of the old guard in calling for an EGM and asks if they harbour another agenda; Old guard issues statement to say its motives and objectives have been fully visible the past 25 years

Chronology of Key Events

- Sun Apr 19: Josie Lau refuses to be interviewed on TV together with Dana Lam, ex-President; she and Maureen Ong are subsequently interviewed on Talking Point (without Ms. Lam presence at the same interview)
- Tue Apr 21: Campaign site launched – www.we-are-aware.sg/

Chronology of Key Events

- Thu Apr 23: Introducing Dr Thio Su Mien, as their “feminist mentor”, new Exco claims AWARE has become single purpose organisation overly concerned with promoting lesbianism, and criticises AWARE’s sexuality education programme in schools for regarding homosexuality as a neutral word.

Chronology of Key Events

- Thu Apr 23 cont'd:
 - New Exco intentionally excludes current Honorary Treasurer Chew I-Jin (elected by old guards) from their news conference
 - Current president Josie Lau claims she received death threats
 - New Exco changes locks at the office despite vote of no-confidence and upcoming EGM
 - Centre's manager, Schutz Lee, is fired without reason



Chronology of Key Events

- Fri Apr 24: The Old Guards holds a news conference addressing New Exco's claims: the issue is not about whether the organisation has strayed from its original aims, but more about ensuring that there is space for diversity of views in society
- Sun Apr 26: Minister (MCYS) Dr Vivian Balakrishnan speaks to press



CHANNEL NEWSASIA



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26 Apr

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Business:

IMF

Chronology of Key Events

- Wed Apr 29: MOE esponds to Dr Thio's claims about AWARE's sexuality education programme, saying the schools that engaged AWARE found the content and messages of the sessions conducted appropriate for their students
- Thu Apr 30: police turn down application to hold EGM at Singapore Expo citing law and order concerns

Aware moves to Suntec after police veto Expo venue

BY WONG KIM HOH
SENIOR WRITER

THE police have stepped in to stop the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) from holding its extraordinary general meeting at the Singapore Expo in Changi on Saturday.

So the meeting, shaping up to be a clash between supporters of the former and new leaders of the women's group, will now be held at Suntec City's Exhibition Hall 402 instead.

It was the second change of venue announced by Aware in two days, and the latest twist in a month-long series of events since a group of newcomers grabbed the leadership.

The change also came amid a growing online buzz that Aware's meeting would coincide with a large Christian conference at the Singapore Expo.

The police said last night that it advised Singapore Expo not to allow Aware's application to hold its meeting there. A spokesman said: "The police have taken this step because of the strong possibility that a coming together of members and supporters of the opposing camps at the same venue may result in law and order problems."

"There have been reports of death threats, intimidation and harassment over the last two weeks. There are also reports that both groups are mobilising their supporters for the meeting."

The police said the Expo management

"The police have taken this step because of the strong

possibility that a coming together of members and supporters of the opposing camps at the same venue may result in law and order problems. There have been reports of death threats, intimidation and harassment over the last two weeks. There are also reports that both groups are mobilising their supporters for the meetings," says police spokesman Inspector Mohamed Hamizyam.

was understood to have offered Aware another venue – at the Changi Exhibition Centre – but Aware announced last night that it will go to Suntec City.

Aware spokesman Lois Ng, a member

Resolve dispute within group's context

"They have an organisation, own mandate, own Constitution. They need to resolve it in that context."

"The only concern, I think, which other people may have and which may get a lot of Singaporeans exercised about, is whether they have other agendas or other issues coming up, which I think caused other Singaporeans to sit up. Other than that, within the context of the

Constitution, I think it's for them to sort it out."

"It does affect the reputation of Aware a little bit, but I think they can overcome it. But they are just one player among many in civil society. And there are more pressing issues to work on."

Ms Ho Ching, chief executive of Temasek Holdings, commenting yesterday on the Aware dispute.

of the new leadership, said its event organiser, Ape Communications, had only said that there were problems with the booking. Aware only learnt yesterday afternoon that the venue had been withdrawn "for law and order reasons".

Aware had about 300 members when its March 28 annual general meeting saw a large group of new members showing up and electing a team of unknowns into power. A group of 160 members led by the former leaders has called for the EGM and hopes to table a vote of no confidence in the new committee.

The weeks since the AGM have seen the old and new leadership clashing repeatedly over the way the newcomers seized power, and charges by the new

team that Aware had been promoting lesbianism and homosexuality.

With both sides and their supporters rallying people to join the organisation and attend Saturday's meeting, Aware's membership is believed to have surged.

Yesterday the police revealed that they had learnt that former leaders of Aware had also wanted to book space for a meeting at the Singapore Expo on Saturday.

The police advised the venue's management to turn that down as well.

Former Aware vice-president Margaret Thomas confirmed that the old guard had applied to book three small conference rooms which could hold 500 people.

"We're anticipating many supporters and we wanted a place where we could di-

rect them to, no matter what the outcome. We understand that emotions could be raised and we wanted to help keep order," she said.

Meanwhile, The Straits Times learnt of other misgivings expressed over the Expo as a venue. Netizens and supporters of the old guard had pointed out that a two-day Christian conference, Transformation 2009, was also being held there.

They were concerned that people attending the conference would swamp the Aware meeting and outnumber supporters of the old guard hugely.

The Christian conference is being organised by LoveSingapore, an inter-church organisation founded by Pastor Lawrence Khong from the Faith Community Baptist Church.

Its committee members are pastors from different churches, including Pastor Derek Hong from the Church of Our Saviour in Margaret Drive, where several of Aware's leaders worship.

But Pastor Khong said yesterday that his conference had nothing to do with Aware or the ongoing dispute.

He described LoveSingapore as an "organisation of loosely tied churches of all denominations which share different opinions on different issues".

For now, Saturday's showdown is planned for Suntec's Exhibition Hall 402 which can accommodate 2,000 people.

The meeting is scheduled to run from 2pm to 5pm, with registration of participants starting at noon, Aware said.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY AMELIA TAN

Chronology of Key Events

- Fri May 1: ST reports that COOS pastor Derek Hong had encouraged his congregation in a sermon to support the new Exco; head of NCCS Dr John Chew issues public statement expressing disapproval; MOE says it is investigating AWARE's sexuality education programme after receiving complaints from parents



Pastor Hong says the Church Of Our Saviour is not anti-homosexual.
ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

Church as 'normal'

By NUR DIANAH SUHAIR

THE Anglican Church Of Our Saviour takes a stand against those who promote homosexuality as a "normal alternative lifestyle".

In a statement to the media yesterday, its Senior Pastor Hong said the acceptance of such practices goes against biblical teachings and erodes family values.

"Accepting homosexual practices and endorsing any educational programme that teaches children that such practices are

Online sites have been abuzz with news that a staff member of the church wrote an e-mail rallying people to attend Aware's extraordinary general meeting (EGM) tomorrow and to vote for the new exco.

In a weekend sermon posted on the church's website, Pastor Hong urged the women in his flock to "be engaged" and support Ms Lau and "her sisters" at Aware.

He said: "It's not a crusade against the people but there's a line that God has drawn for us, and we don't want our nation crossing that line."

After Aware changed the venue of its EGM from a Toa Payoh hall to the Singapore Expo earlier this week, rumours immediately began circulating that the change was made to coincide with a Christian conference also on at the Expo this weekend. Among the participants: the Church Of Our Saviour.

The church did not reply to Straits Times queries on these claims.

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mentor' Thio (top row, left) members of leadership of Anglican Church Of Our Saviour. (top row, Josie Lau; middle row, from left) Len Ong and Yvonne Chua; and bottom row, from left) Alice Wong, Yee and Ang.



saga so far

28: An executive committee of mostly new members met at Aware.

8: Just 11 days into her term, Mrs Claire Nazar was elected president.

4: A group of 160 members called for an extraordinary general meeting to table a vote of no confidence in the new exco.

5: DBS Bank's Josie Lau is elected president. DBS is her for ignoring its stance against holding office.

7: It is discovered that Ms Lau and her husband Alan Chin, new husband of Charlotte Wong, Irene Chua, Maureen Chua and Sally Ang all attend the Anglican Church Of Our Saviour in Margaret Drive.

18: Three-time Anglican Constance Singam is elected Aware's adviser.

23: Some of the new members hold a press conference and accuse former leaders of promoting lesbianism and homosexuality. Senior lawyer

Thio Su Mien reveals that she is the "feminist mentor" who encouraged the women to take over Aware. She attacks Aware's sexuality education programme for schools, saying it promotes homosexuality.

April 24: Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean urges the two sides to show respect and tolerance for each other's views.

April 26: Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan warns of the danger when religion enters "the fray of petty politics". She says the Government has no intention of intervening at the present time.

Saturday's EGM

AWARE'S EGM is on from 2pm to 5pm tomorrow at Suntec City's Exhibition Hall 402. Registration begins at noon. Police earlier stopped the meeting from being held at the Singapore Expo.

The Straits Times, 1 May 2009

Churches out of A

Umbrella Christian body concerned over religion being dragged into row

By ZAKIR HUSSAIN
& WONG KIM HOH

THE National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) has said it does not condone churches getting involved in recent matters related to the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware).

It also does not condone pulpits being used for the purpose, it said in a statement last night.

"We do not condone churches getting involved in this matter; neither do we condone pulpits being used for this purpose. Our member churches are not involved in the present saga.

"In fact, our heads of churches have very recently reiterated to their clergy the standing instruction on the proper use of the pulpit," it said.

The statement was issued by the cur-

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"In fact, our heads of churches have very recently reiterated to their clergy the standing instruction on the proper use of the pulpit," it said.

In his piece, Christians Against Aware Takeover, Dr Gwee – an assistant professor of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore – said Christians like him have been "shocked, angered, and saddened by the takeover and feel that their faith has been hijacked and their views ignored".

He said the new team, although well-meaning Christians, have no right to infiltrate "a secular organisation in order to be in a position to dictate their own values in its daily running".

"Just as we do not force the Christian faith down someone's throat against his or her will, we should not take over a non-religious organisation for the single purpose of making others unlike us believe as we believe."

Many other bloggers expressed the same sentiment.

In her blog Of Kids And Education, Ms Monica Lim, who runs a communications consultancy, said: "Here's what Josie Lau and company have done – spout moral superiority, seize control using surprise tactics, spread propaganda, claim martyrdom."

She added: "I do not want my children learning that as Christians, they have the right to impose their beliefs on others via underhanded tactics."

Ms Cheryl Tay, 21, who attends Cornerstone Community Church, said the behaviour of some of Aware's new exco members "just perpetuates the misconception that Christianity is right-wing, and intolerant of other people's beliefs".

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Chronology of Key Events

- Sat May 2: Extraordinary General Meeting takes place at Suntec City Hall 402, attended by nearly 3,000 members; dramatic proceedings result in vote of no-confidence passed 1,414 to 761, and new Exco steps down on advice of its lawyers
- Wed May 6: MOE suspends AWARE's sexuality education programme in schools

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Recorded by The Singapore Enquirer

The Challenges of Growing CS

31. Identify the **motivations** and **tactics** of the various actors in the AWARE saga.
32. Explain why the tactics of the “new guard” are considered by many to be **illegitimate**.
33. How do you think the “new guard” and their supporters could have **more appropriately** articulated their interests?
34. What does the government’s response in the AWARE saga tell us about what they see as the **boundaries for acceptable conduct** in political participation?

The Challenges of Growing CS

35. In your own words, describe the **challenges we face as a society** as active citizenship continues to be promoted, and civil society continues to grow.

Questions for Further Discussion

36. Do you think the Government should have played a more active role in the AWARE saga? Why or why not?
37. In your opinion, should civil society in Singapore be allowed to grow any further? Why or why not?