



Should faith-driven groups take over secular organisations?

The showdown between the old and new guard at women's group Aware takes place today at Suntec City. Whatever the outcome, the saga is leaving an indelible mark on civil society as an instance in which a secular organisation found itself taken over by a group with a common religious background and purpose. Political correspondents **Aaron Low**, **Jeremy Au Yong** and **Zakir Hussain** analyse the issues.

THE battlelines have been drawn, wits sharpened and the arena prepared.

Today, more than 1,000 people are expected to converge at a Suntec City exhibition hall to fight for control of one of the most established civil society organisations here, the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware).

On one side are the ousted leaders of Aware, backed by former Nominated MP Braema Mathi and Constance Singam, who feel robbed of the work they have been doing for 20 years.

They were overthrown on March 28 by a group of relative unknowns who had executed a coup to snatch the leadership of Aware from under their noses.

This group of women had one thing in common: a spiritual mentor in the person of Dr Thio Su Mien, a born-again Christian, prominent corporate lawyer and first woman dean of the law faculty at the National University of Singapore 40 years ago.

All bound by a common stand against the practice of homosexuality, they accuse Aware of having veered towards the promotion of a gay and lesbian agenda in recent years, and declare they want nothing more than to "return Aware to its original purpose" of championing women's rights.

What appeared at first to be an internal squabble in a women's group has exploded into national consciousness, with a number of government leaders commenting on the issue.

Whatever the outcome today - resolution, compromise or just more fighting - the Aware saga has made a deep and lasting impact on civil society.

It has sent other groups scampering to barricade their constitutional backdoors, as Insight reported two weeks ago.

It is also shining a bright light on the role of religion in the public sphere. Spe-

cifically, should religious groups, or groups with religiously-motivated agendas, take over secular organisations?

Has the line between religion and secularism been blurred? Did the Aware coup set a dangerous precedent?

Religious group or concerned citizens?

GOING by emails to the media and public discussion, there is growing discomfort with the new leaders at Aware, particularly over suggestions that the group had been motivated by a religiously inspired ideology.

A common sentiment expressed is that it cannot be good for a multi-racial, multi-religious society like Singapore to have certain religious groups pushing so strongly in public space on certain issues.

And if indeed the takeover of Aware, a secular organisation, was motivated by religion, then it is a real concern, says Singapore Management University assistant law professor Eugene Tan.

"If they are, then we are witnessing an aggressive and insensitive form of proselytisation in which the secular domain is seen as an extension of the religious sphere," he says.

But the picture is not all that clear, say observers.

The links to religion are certainly present: Many of the new guard leaders worship at the same church, the Anglican Church of Our Saviour.

Their anti-homosexual stance, which they have made no secret of in recent days, is similar to their church's stand.

The church's Senior Pastor Derek Hong last week urged its members to support the new exco by signing up for membership at Aware so that they can vote for the new exco at the EGM today.

In a sermon he gave, Pastor Hong said homosexuality is a sin, according to the

Bible, like stealing or adultery, even though homosexuals themselves should be treated with love and kindness and helped to overcome their affliction.

"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," he said in his sermon.

However, while these links are clear, they do not by themselves prove that the new exco is or will be guided by a religious agenda. More concrete evidence is needed before that conclusion can be drawn.

Dr Thio on her part tells Insight that the actions of the new leaders were motivated by fear of what they believed to be happening in other countries, namely the destruction of the traditional notions of family and marriage.

In the United States and Europe, for instance, the homosexual lobby is engaging in a political campaign to, among other issues, decriminalise gay sex and establish same-sex marriages, she argued.

The new exco in Aware does not wish to have marriage redefined as "between two men or between two women or indeed between three women and three brothers or between a brother and a sister", says Dr Thio.

The 71-year-old who claims to be the "feminist mentor" of all working women in Singapore, not just the new exco in Aware, believes there is a "political homosexual movement which seeks to infiltrate into Singapore".

"It is a kind of neo-colonialism which we do not want, more so in our jubilee year of internal self-government," she says, referring to 2009 being the 50th anniversary of Singapore's self-government.

Catholic priest John-Paul Tan points out that there is a difference between a re-

ligious group and a group of individuals with similar religious views on issues.

Most of the members of the new Aware exco, headed by president Josie Lau, may belong to the same church, but it does not mean that as individual citizens - even if informed by the same beliefs - they cannot contribute to a discussion in civil society, he notes.

National University of Singapore sociologist Alexius Pereira agrees, noting that so far the new leaders appear simply to want to remove "homosexuality and gay issues from Aware".

But rather than execute a stealth operation to remove the old leaders, they should perhaps have aired their differences in public and held open debates on the issue, says Dr Pereira.

Tensions

WHETHER or not it was religiously motivated, the Aware takeover begs important questions about religion in the public sphere.

The involvement of Pastor Hong, who used his pulpit to urge church members to support the new exco, raised a number of eyebrows.

As one reader of this newspaper noted, "Can you imagine if another religious leader were to ask his members to vote for a certain MP because they are of the same religion?"

On Thursday, the National Council of Churches in Singapore came out to decry the involvement of churches in the Aware saga, even as it also staked a claim for individual Christians - "like all concerned citizens" - not to be precluded from involvement in public sphere discussions.

People continue to believe that there is a religious agenda behind the takeover, even if it may not be the case, says sociologist Mathew Mathews.

"There seems to be discomfort that this is a group seemingly motivated by religious ideals. A Christian group that is perceived to be fundamentalists with very strong views," says Dr Mathews, a visiting fellow at the NUS sociology department.

Tension can arise not only between those on opposing sides of the gay issue, but also between Christians and other Singaporeans.

The takeover of Aware could set a dangerous precedent, a worrying prospect given the multi-religious and multi-racial society here.

Illustrating this point, Mr Kelvin Teo, a writer on the NUS students' online news portal, the Kent Ridge Common, gives a hypothetical example: "If a Buddhist organisation runs a sexuality programme that discusses the issues in the same way Aware did, would the Christian group feel threatened and take over that organisation like they did with Aware?"

"If there is such a takeover, there could be consequences as far as inter-religious relations are concerned. A controversial precedent, no?" the 28-year-old medical journal writer said.

This is a danger the Government has long been mindful of.

In 1990, the Government tabled the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill to regulate aggressive proselytisation and ban the mixing of religion and politics.

In arguing for the law, then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong laid out the Government's concerns: "We were not concerned with the rise of religious fervour per se, but worried that such a trend in a multi-religious, multi-racial society might lead to a clash between religions."

In other words, if pushed too hard, other religions might push back, with disastrous consequences.

It was precisely because of this that Mr Rustom Ghadiali, president of the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), felt "a little uncomfortable" about the Aware episode.

"I don't think religious groups should get involved. Today, (members of) one religion want to take over an organisation. Tomorrow, some other religion may feel that they want to get involved and also want to take over," he says. "This will affect our racial and religious harmony."

Even among Christians, some are discomfited.

A handful of self-declared "moderate" Christians have voiced their concerns online.

NUS assistant professor of literature Gwee Li Sui is one of them. In a note that has been circulating on Facebook, Dr Gwee, 39, says he is a "Bible-believing Christian for 25 years" who is "shocked, angered, and saddened by the takeover".

He urged Christian women who may have signed up to support the new exco to reconsider their decision.

By supporting the exco, he said, they

Debates should be open, honest and respectful

are supporting the “quasi-corporate act of infiltration, with related strategies of secrecy, disinformation, moral coercion, and fear-mongering”.

Some 400 people have written on Facebook in support of Dr Gwee’s note.

Speaking to Insight, Dr Gwee says he was motivated to speak out publicly because the incident is causing tension within the religion itself.

“The Christian majority has been silent too long: while many are concerned, because the main figures are Christians, nobody wants to be the one to get on a soapbox and say the truth,” he says.

Blurring the lines

FOR a country that believes in the strict separation of church and state in politics, the actions by the new leaders may also be ringing a discordant note.

The Government has made it clear that religion and politics cannot be mixed.

Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Vivian Balakrishnan had three pieces of advice for those in Aware, namely: Don’t let a single issue hijack the agenda; keep religion above the fray of petty politics; and form a rainbow coalition if you want to make meaningful change in Singapore.

Indeed, many see the incident as blurring the line between religion and politics. As Dr Mathews notes, there are people who see it as a move by a group of Christians to “moralise society according to their norms”.

“When it comes to issues of morality, when the church champions certain types of morality, people get uncomfortable,” he says.

Religions have been vocal on issues that they consider to be in the realm of morality.

In 2003, a group of Christians mounted an e-mail campaign when the Government said it was hiring gays to work in the public service.

Religious groups, including Christians, Muslims and Buddhists, also aired their objections to casinos when the issue was debated in 2004 and 2005.

Religious leaders stress that religions have a part to play in the public sphere, but must accord respect to all.

Father John-Paul says that if society wants its best for its citizens, it must cast its net wide to include as many opinions as possible, including those from different religions and value systems.

However, religion does not and should not impose its values on others, he says.

If this is not respected, then it “may result in religious conflict between religions or individuals”, says Venerable Seck Kwang Phing, secretary-general of the Singapore Buddhist Federation.

Drawing lessons for politics

IF THERE is a positive that can be drawn from this incident, it is that awareness of and participation in civil society have jumped a notch.

On the social networking site Facebook, for instance, several groups have formed around the issue.

Ms Claudia Tan, 31, learnt about the Aware incident through Facebook and has signed up as a member of Aware.

A Christian, she says she understands the new guard’s viewpoints but disagrees with its methods.

“I don’t like how they have done it, and I don’t agree with how they are portraying an aggressive side of the religion,” says Ms Tan. She will be siding with the old guard.

Going forward, SMU’s Dr Tan believes this episode is indicative of the growing complexity of the political landscape.

He says: “While racial, religious and linguistic identities are still pertinent, the contestation will shift towards more subtle forms of differences. It will centre around value systems, and how the support of or objection to such value systems will be fought over.”

Religion remains important and will continue to be powerful moral anchors for society here.

But as Singapore gets more diverse, debates over issues, including those of morality, will naturally get more complex and even uncomfortable.

But no matter how ugly the debates become, they should always be conducted with respect, and honest and open communication in the public space that is common to all, regardless of religion.

Will today’s Aware EGM live up to this?

aaronl@sph.com.sg

jeremyau@sph.com.sg

zakirh@sph.com.sg