

Why we covered Aware saga the

ST's editor answers critics of this newspaper's reporting of events



By HAN FOOK KWANG EDITOR

I HAD been reluctant to write this piece defending The Straits Times' coverage of the Aware saga. Some of my colleagues had wanted the paper to put out its side of the story in the face of criticisms over how we covered the saga. But I wasn't keen to make the paper the focus of this long-running debate, for I've always felt that newspapers shouldn't be active players in the stories they cover. Our job is to report accurately and fairly what is happening and to make sense of it for our readers so they can draw their own conclusions. However, critics have assailed us over these very issues, and I have little choice now but to set out the facts concerning our coverage after two MPs spoke about it in Parliament this week.

On Tuesday, Nominated Member of Parliament Thio Li-ann said that reporting on the saga had been biased and lacked a diversity of views. She did not name The Straits Times but everyone listening to her would have concluded that she was referring to this newspaper.

Were we biased and one-sided in our coverage? This is best answered by detailing how we covered the story.

Many have forgotten how this story began. Aware held its annual general meeting (AGM) on March 28, and for almost three weeks few knew that the group's leadership had changed in a dramatic fashion that day. The old guard team who were tossed out did not announce it. The new president, Mrs Claire Nazar, and her team were silent. It was only on April 6 that The Straits Times was tipped off that something unusual had happened at Aware and we began work on the story. Our first report did not appear until April 10, because for most of that week we had tried hard to confirm with both

sides - the old guard and the new - what had happened.

Founder members and old guard leaders of Aware spoke to us. They confirmed that the election had taken place legitimately and according to Aware rules, which allowed brand new members to seek leadership positions right away. They were distraught, not at seeing their preferred list of candidates lose the election, but at the manner in which the new team moved in. Their account was that the majority of the 102 people who attended the AGM comprised new members who had joined in recent months. Most were unknown, and most stayed silent during the AGM. When it was clear that the new members were contesting executive council positions with the intention of taking over the organisation, older members tried to ask them who they were but received few clear answers.

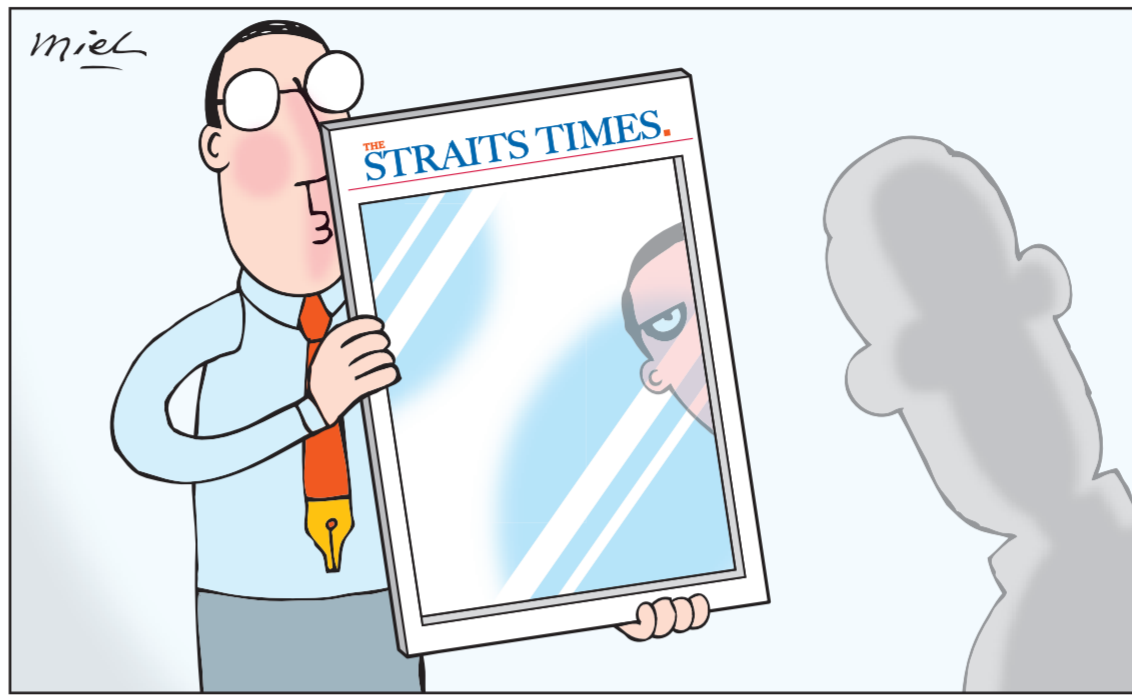
We were faced with a curious situation. Here was a new team of women who had contested and taken over Aware. Yet, three weeks after they had taken charge of this well-known group, they remained unwilling to explain who they were, why they had acted and what they intended to do with Aware. These are basic questions that any group which takes over a society, grassroots organisation, union, clan or country club should expect to be asked if it pulls off as successful a leadership grab as this appeared to be.

In the days before our first report appeared, our reporters tried hard to reach members of the new leadership. We were willing to report whatever they had to say, but our reporters were stonewalled by everyone they reached. Ms Jenica Chua confirmed she was in the committee but refused to speak. Repeated calls to Ms Josie Lau and Ms Lois Ng were not successful. Ms Lau's husband, Dr Alan Chin, had joined Aware as an affiliate member and had been present at the AGM, but he too would not speak to our reporter. Even the new president, Mrs Nazar, refused to say anything until the day she confirmed that she had resigned after just 11 days at the helm.

More than once, those approached in the new team asked for a set of questions to be sent to them in writing by e-mail. Our reporters obliged, only to receive no answers by e-mail and no face-to-face interview either.

After Ms Lau was appointed president,

PUNCHLINES



The Straits Times continued to hope that Aware's new leadership would see fit to open up about themselves and their plans. Attempts to reach individual exco members failed as everyone insisted that only the president was authorised to speak to the media. Yet Ms Lau did not make herself available either, despite numerous attempts to reach her by telephone, e-mail and text message. Instead, she chose to make her first public statements on a television current affairs programme. The Straits Times reported what she said there.

Those who accuse us of being one-sided in our reporting in the first two weeks after the story broke are right in a way. But it was not because we deliberately sought to shut out the views of the new group while providing the old guard space in this newspaper. The new leadership was often absent in our pages because they chose to remain silent, for reasons best known to themselves.

It was not until April 23 - almost a month after the Aware AGM - that Ms Lau and some members of her team finally decided to open up at a press conference. The Straits Times sent a team of re-

porters and covered it comprehensively with reports on Page 1 as well as in the inside pages.

Some have criticised our extensive coverage of this story and wondered why our reporting was so "breathless". There are many reasons. As this story played out, we witnessed some highly unusual twists. Aside from the leadership change, Aware's new president resigned within a fortnight. Her replacement, Ms Lau, was criticised publicly by her employer, DBS Bank, for taking office. The Straits Times was prepared to give the new team as much space as we had given the old group, and more if necessary, to answer all those questions which had been on everyone's mind: Who were they, why did they take over Aware in the manner they did, and what did they hope to achieve?

It was only at that April 23 press conference that senior lawyer Thio Su Mien revealed herself as the mentor of the women who had taken over Aware, and made several comments explaining why she felt Aware needed fixing. We reported that press conference extensively, and followed up by running extracts of what Dr Thio and others said, as well as their

answers to additional questions our journalists put to them. We had maintained throughout that The Straits Times was prepared to run what the new leadership said, and we did so, in the interests of providing balance in our coverage so readers could better judge the merits of the arguments.

Our readers are not always aware of the work journalists do behind the scenes to try to present reports that are factual and objective, or the lengths to which we go to persuade those who are unwilling to speak to engage with the media and open up. It was certainly not for lack of trying on our part that the views of the new team led by Ms Lau and her supporters did not appear more often in our pages, especially in the early stages.

Mr Sin Boon Ann, in his speech in Parliament on Wednesday, accused the press of "framing this episode as one that carries a religious undertone" and, in the process, polarising Singapore society. We should again let the facts speak for themselves. From the outset, we wanted to find out more about the new group, but because they were not willing to speak, we had to do our own research. Our checks showed one common link initially: several members of the new group had written letters to the press expressing concern about the perils of promoting a homosexual lifestyle in Singapore. We subsequently also found out that several of them belonged to the same Anglican Church of Our Saviour. We reported these factually.

Were we wrong to have highlighted those links? The April 23 press conference confirmed what The Straits Times had reported. Dr Thio, who also attends the same church, revealed that she began monitoring Aware's affairs about a year ago because she was disturbed by what

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way we did

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she saw as signs that it was promoting lesbianism and homosexuality. She then began urging women she knew - including many in her church circle - to challenge what she perceived to be Aware's attempts to redefine marriage and families.

What of the "religious undertones" which Mr Sin accused the press of promoting in its coverage? This is totally mistaken, and akin to shooting the messenger. In fact, the strongest expressions of concern over this were not made by the press, but by various other parties.

As Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng observed in an interview with this paper: "The Government was worried about the disquieting public perception that a group of conservative Christians, all attending the same church, which held strong views on homosexuality had moved in and taken over Aware because they disapproved of what Aware had been doing. This caused many qualms among non-Christians, and also among Christians who believed that this was an unwise move in a multiracial, multi-religious society. It was much more dangerous because now, religion was also getting involved, and it was no longer just the issue of homosexuality."

No higher authority in the Christian community than Anglican Archbishop John Chew of the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) issued a clear statement that the NCCS did not condone any church getting involved in the Aware dispute. Leaders of other religious faiths also put out statements to reinforce NCCS' message.

Why did so many feel it necessary to speak out on the danger of mixing religion with politics in the Aware saga? It wasn't the press which gave them the idea.

Was it because of what Senior Pastor Derek Hong of the Church of Our Saviour was reported to have said from the pulpit, urging his flock to support the then new exco in Aware? He had 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." We leave it to readers to decide.

Far from The Straits Times raking the ground with an anti-religious agenda, we provided the available facts surrounding the makeup of the new group for readers to draw their own conclusions. Subsequent events showed that we were not barking up the wrong tree.

Mr Sin wondered if "the press would have been so quick on the take if it were women from another faith who took up the cause instead".

He ought to know better than to use the religion card in this fashion. If Mr Sin is accusing The Straits Times of being in favour of some religions against others - a very serious accusation against a newspaper with 1.4 million readers of every religious shade - he should substantiate his complaint.

I hope the facts I have set out above will help readers understand better our coverage of the Aware saga. Were we right in every aspect of our coverage? Of course not. Journalists are human, we make mistakes and we have our blind spots. Our record is that we are upfront about our errors and apologise for them promptly. Our internal processes, which involve several layers of editing and gate-keeping, ensure that individual reporters do not push their own agendas. We have also carried out our own internal review of our coverage and have found that we could have done better in several respects. For example, we should have pressed the old guard more on Aware's school sexuality programme and the appropriateness of some of its content.

But I stand by the professionalism of our reporters. The personal attacks against the integrity of our journalists sadden me because they show the vindictiveness of our critics and the length to which they are prepared to go to attack our professionalism. In fact, there appears to be an organised campaign to discredit the media, with mass e-mail being sent, including to Reach, the government feedback portal.

The Straits Times has no hidden agenda to push this line or that, or to favour one group against another. On this story, as with others, we were driven by our desire to provide as much information to our readers as possible, in as timely a manner. That remains our primary objective.

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Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan speaks to the media on Singapore's H1N1 cases during a door-stop interview at Parliament House. ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

Be prepared for H1N1 to spread, says Khaw

Infected patients doing well; scientific team assembled to monitor evolution of virus

By LEE HUI CHIEH & JUDITH TAN

NOW that the new flu strain has entered Singapore, it will spread, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan said yesterday.

After five weeks in the clear, the number of patients infected by the new Influenza A (H1N1) strain here jumped from one on Wednesday to four yesterday.

All the cases, however, are unconnected.

Said Mr Khaw: "If we can help it, we should try to contain it."

"But I am mentally prepared, knowing

the nature of influenza, that it's really very hard to contain. As you can see, all four cases slipped through the border because at the point when they crossed the temperature scanner, they did not have fever."

All four patients contracted the flu overseas.

So far, the Health Ministry's (MOH's) flu surveillance shows no sign that it is spreading within Singapore.

The ministry said yesterday that the patients had "relatively mild symptoms, are doing well and are expected to recover uneventfully".

The 31 people - including 13 Singaporeans - who were quarantined after being in close contact with them are also faring well.

Six of them had received their home quarantine orders yesterday.

Even if the virus begins circulating here, the flu pandemic alert level, which is currently at yellow, need not be raised,

and may be lowered, as long as the bug remains mild and does not kill significantly more people, Mr Khaw said.

"The key point is the nature of the virus. Is the virus lethal, or like ordinary influenza? The focus should no longer be on the numbers infected. To me, the numbers are academic," he added.

To monitor any development in the virus, a key team of scientists from the public health sector and the Genome Institute of Singapore (GIS) is being assembled.

Headed by MOH's director of medical services, Professor K. Satku, it will study viral samples from the four patients to see if they match those overseas, or whether they have mutated. It will then track these local viral samples over time for mutations.

Mr Khaw said that if at the end of this study "we can confirm that indeed, this H1N1 is behaving just like any other seasonal flu, then we can seriously consider lowering many of the control measures we have put in place, such as contact tracing and home quarantine orders."

The time for the study will depend on the number of patients here, he said. Once the team is confident that the virus is truly mild, the alert level could be lowered to green, he said.

The "trigger for alarm" to raise the alert level to orange should be only if the virus has mutated into a deadly form.

The scientific community here is excited at getting local samples of the new flu strain, said GIS executive director Edison Liu.

Two groups are working on the virus, he said.

One is a national team of scientists and clinicians led by Prof Satku and Professor John Wong, dean of the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

The other is a smaller group of scientists from the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star) working with counterparts in Mexico on sequencing the H1N1 virus.

Said Prof Liu: "We had been dealing with the older flu samples. With the current virus, we would have a better understanding of the changes of its genome here. The big concern is a dramatic change in its behaviour."

Working with biotechnology firm Roche NimbleGen, GIS scientists have developed a method which allows them to amplify the genomes of influenza A viruses and sequence them within a day.

This can help scientists diagnose any possible new variant and monitor for early signs of resistance to Tamiflu.

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