

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.

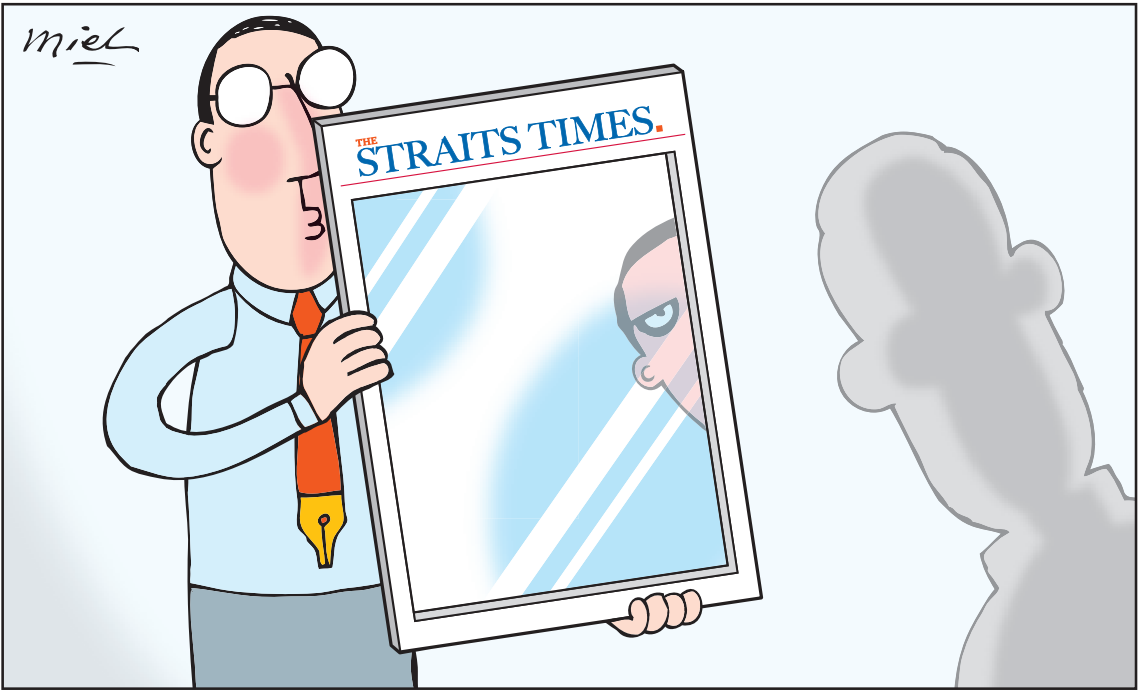
We were faced with a curious situation. Here was a new team of women who had contested and taken over Aware. Yet, three weeks after they had taken charge of this well-known group, they remained unwilling to explain who they were, why they had acted and what they intended to do with Aware. These are basic 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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"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.

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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

BY LEE HUI CHIEH
& JUDITH TAN

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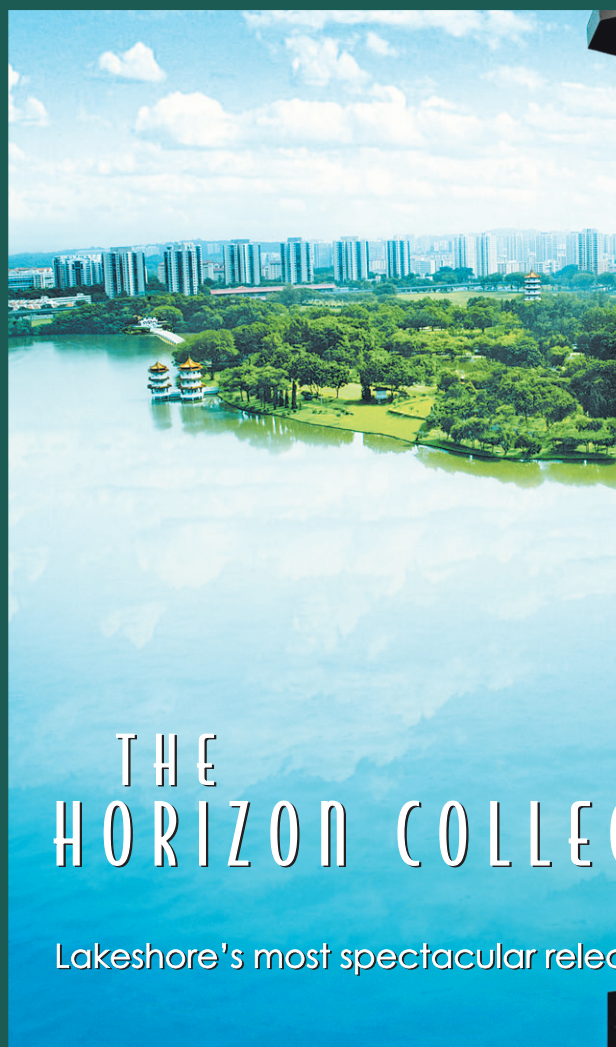
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