

MPs start to raise issues through new channels

REPORT: JUDITH TAN

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MEMBER of Parliament Hri Kumar Nair's blog asking for the grounds of decision in the Woffles Wu case to be made public and for more flexibility for judges in sentencing did more than just raise valid legal questions, political watchers say.

It also helped kickstart the Government's attempt to regain control over an issue that had become a talking point online and was fuelling the perception that the rich in Singapore could get off with a fine.

This was not just a legal issue, but one that could have some potentially serious political fallout if confidence in the justice system was undermined.

And it was interesting also because he used a blog, rather than wait for question time at the next Parliament sitting – the usual way for MPs to raise issues in the past.

Political observer Eugene Tan said: "The Woffles Wu case has generated significant public interest and strong reactions among ordinary Singaporeans, and a PAP MP jumping into the discussion is a sign of that."

The Singapore Management University law lecturer added: "It also serves to show that the PAP backbenchers are alive to the public debate."

In his blog posting two days after Dr Wu was sentenced, Mr Nair, an MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC, wrote that such offences are serious as "they seek to undermine the course of justice".

Mr Nair – who is a senior counsel and director at law firm Drew & Napier and who heads the Government Parliamentary Committees (GPC) for Home Affairs and Law – noted that others had been convicted of similar offences.

'Pertinent question'

Adjunct Professor Goh Nguen Wah from the Nanyang Centre For Public Administration at the Nanyang Technological University felt that Mr Nair had raised a pertinent question.

Said Prof Goh: "He was speaking on behalf of many people with similar doubts about the case."

"I am less concerned about whether Woffles Wu gets a 'lighter' sentence because he is rich."

"The issue here is whether Woffles Wu has been given an appropriate punishment for what he did."

Political observers said that post-GE2011, the public has a higher expectation of those voted into office.

Prof Tan said many expect to see the PAP MPs continually seeking clarifications and answers, if doubts and concerns persist.

"I see the PAP MPs responding to Singaporeans' desire and perhaps even pressure for them to question their own party, the Government," he said.

"There is an expectation that they demonstrate an independence of mind."

Mr Vikram Nair, an MP for Sembawang GRC, sees blogging as addressing broader issues to garner public feedback.

"I see it as having a different function as question time in Parliament," he told TNP.

"In general, blogs would unlikely raise discussions about specific issues and direct them at the ministers."

"But we can use it as an additional platform or channel to get discussions going with the general public."

He himself would not totally rule out blogging "if time permits".

"But it has its limitations – it doesn't touch every resident," he said.



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ASKING QUESTIONS: Mr Hri Kumar Nair, who heads the Government Parliamentary Committees for Home Affairs and Law.

"Personally, I prefer to reach out through dialogue sessions."

Socio-political blogger and former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong called taking discussions online via blogs and Facebook "a natural evolution in the political sphere, in response to these new platforms and changes in where and how voters are spending their time".

He felt the lag-time in Parliament causes discussions of topical issues after they have ceased to be current.

"(But) I don't think they (MPs) will move away from question time to blogging," he said.

"Instead, they will start doing more blogging while continuing to file questions in Parliament."

Several ministers have already gone online to raise policy issues through blogs and social media.

Prof Tan said that for a PAP backbencher, there are two audiences: the party or Government, and the Singapore population at large, in particular the MPs' own constituents.

"While directed at the powers, Mr Nair's blog, for instance, certainly has the effect of reaching a larger audience," he said.

"It also represents the PAP backbench having a say, an input on a topical issue which is potentially sensitive."

Added Mr Siew: "Topical and policy issues should be owned by all Singaporeans, and so discussion of such issues can and should take everywhere – in coffee shops, on blogs, on Facebook, in the mainstream media, and yes, in Parliament."

Prof Tan said that while a blog posting is a start, it will also raise expectations of whether the PAP MPs can do more beyond just raising questions.

He said: "Will they pursue the matter doggedly, or will it be just a one-off intervention?"