

OPPOSITION PARTY'S IDEOLOGY QUESTIONED

Another PAP MP hits out at WP for sitting on the fence

Hri Kumar Nair cites party's response to debates over hijab issue, Ashley Madison website

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SINGAPORE – For the second time in four days, a People's Action Party (PAP) Member of Parliament (MP) has criticised the Workers' Party (WP) for not taking a concrete stand on contentious issues.

Citing the WP's response to debates over the hijab issue and extramarital dating website Ashley Madison, MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC Hri Kumar Nair questioned the WP's "ideology" in a strongly-worded Facebook post published on Saturday evening.

"On almost every contentious issue, where taking a position risks loss of support, the WP has either sat on the fence or has heavily qualified its position, while giving the impression that it has seriously considered the matter," said Mr Hri Kumar.

Noting that the "best way" to understand a party's true ideology is to look at its position on specific issues, particularly "contentious ones where there is a genuine diversity of views", Mr Hri Kumar said: "So what is the ideology of the main opposition party, the Workers' Party? What is its position on tough issues? The record is clear — it sits on the fence."

Mr Hri Kumar's comments follow Senior Minister of State (Law and Education) Indranee Rajah's charge against the WP last Wednesday for "(straddling) both sides of the fence" on the hijab issue and merely calling for public dialogue.

On the Ashley Madison issue, Mr Hri Kumar pointed to WP MP Pritam Singh's question in Parliament to show that the party also did not state its stand on the matter. Mr Singh had asked Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing: "In light of the community reaction to the Ashley Madison website in Singapore, what is the Government's approach in dealing with societal agents and forces that harm the institution of marriage?"

Mr Hri Kumar noted that, in previous Parliament sittings, the WP abstained on voting amendments to the Human Organ Transplant Act. WP Chairman Sylvia Lim also did not take a position in her speech on the recent Bill to renew the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act and the power to detain without trial. "But

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MP FOR BISHAN-TOA PAYOH GRC

when asked directly by Minister for the Prime Minister's Office S Iswaran, said she supported its renewal 'with a heavy heart'," said Mr Hri Kumar.

He further noted that the WP has not stated a position on issues where different groups have been "seemingly irreconcilable", such as the allocation of Certificates of Entitlement or allocation of Primary 1 places.

"Some might say this is a smart strategy — after all, why voluntarily give people reasons to oppose you?" he wrote. "Because there are larger issues at stake — our political development will stagnate if political parties avoid difficult issues."

When contacted, the WP said it would decide whether to respond.

Political analysts TODAY spoke to said the PAP's calls for the opposition to make clearer positions on contentious issues are likely strategic and come at a time close to the next General Election.

Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh said political parties have different strategies to express "what they stand for and convince their voters as to how to view them". The PAP has been "clear on its stance", while the WP has taken an "agnostic" position on the issue "until everybody has been heard", she said.

Noting that topics such as the hijab issue are "difficult", considering the PAP's firm stand of multi-culturalism, Dr Koh said perhaps the party hopes that Singaporeans will also "measure" other opposition parties in the same way — "that the public would also come to expect that other political parties in Singapore will take a clear stance on these issues".

Associate Professor Eugene Tan at the Singapore Management University School of Law and also a Nominated MP said the move is "tactical" at a time when Parliament is about midway through its current term.

"The PAP is also trying to get the WP to make clear its position on the hijab issue. It does not want to give the WP the luxury of shifting its stand without any political consequences.

"The spotlight and pressure currently is very much on the Government ... In many ways, there is very little cost to the WP making a general public statement on the issue without taking a definitive position," he said.