No change at NUS law faculty after all

Dean, who had said earlier he was stepping down, to serve another term

By Amelia Tan

The dean of the law faculty at the National University of Singapore (NUS), due to step down this year, will remain at the helm after all.

Professor Tan Cheng Han will be appointed to a fresh three-year term, NUS announced yesterday. This about-turn comes after he had bowed out last September as having brought up the names of two possible successors who could take over from him this May.

NUS said in a statement that it was “after much deliberation” that it had decided to choose Prof Tan over the two short-listed candidates, but declined to explain its decision, citing confidentiality.

Having served as law dean for nine years, Prof Tan is already the faculty’s longest-serving dean. He declined to comment on the extension of his watch.

No information was forthcoming from the candidates he named as his possible successors: NUS law professor Michael Hor said he is not at liberty to discuss the matter; Professor John Phillips, who is on the faculty of King’s College London, is on leave and uncontactable.

Prof Hor specialises in criminal law and has been with NUS for more than 20 years. Prof Phillips, who specialises in civil law, headed the law school at King’s College London from 2002 to 2005, and was law dean at the University of Western Australia in an interview with The Straits Times last year, Prof Tan had said that after stepping down at the close of his term this May, he was looking to continue teaching and to do research in his pet areas: family and company law.

His plans will have to be put on the back burner for a few more years. NUS deputy president and provost Tan Eng Chye described Prof Tan in the statement as a respected scholar and popular teacher.

“As a senior counsel, specialist judge and arbitrator, Cheng Han also has the professional respect of the wider legal community,” he said.

He is thus “the best person to lead the faculty of law for another three years, to cement its place as one of the great law schools of the world”, he added.

Prof Tan said he was happy to continue serving the university. He wrote in an e-mail that academics join universities to teach and do research, “but we also understand we will be called upon to serve our institutions in various capacities”.

He countered speculation that NUS was uncomfortable about having a foreign head the law faculty.

Prof Hor is a Malaysian and a permanent resident here, and Prof Phillips is a Briton. Had either been picked for the law dean’s job, he would have become the first foreigner to head the NUS law school in 41 years.

Prof Tan said foreigners had led the faculty before 1948. The first dean, for example, was a Briton, a Dr Lionel Aator Sherwood, who was appointed in 1896.

Since 1968, the post has been held by top legal minds such as Dr Thio Si-Mian, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh and Professor S. Jayakumar, who went on to hold Cabinet posts as law minister and home affairs minister. Prof Jayakumar is now Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security.

Prof Tan at the NUS law faculty’s Bukit Timah campus yesterday. He was due to step down in May after nine years as dean, and had plans to continue with teaching and research. After NUS’ announcement, he said he was happy to continue serving the university. ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

Prof Hor (above), a criminal law expert who has been with NUS for more than 20 years, was named as one of the two candidates to succeed Prof Tan. He is a Malaysian and a Singapore PR.

Prof Phillips (left), a civil law specialist at King’s College London, was named as the other candidate. The Briton has headed the law schools at King’s College as well as at the University of Western Australia.

PHOTOS: ST FILE COURTESY OF PROFESSOR JOHN PHILLIPS

Prof Tan said he had half a dozen to a dozen colleagues who could be excellent law deans, except that they did not want to be considered for the job because of research and teaching commitments.

Asked about his future plans as dean, he said the faculty was in talks to set up partnerships with overseas institutions and to set up two research centres; he also wants to grow the faculty’s endowment and hire more teaching staff.

He has been credited with giving the law school a global outlook with tie-ups to overseas institutions. For instance, selected NUS law students now attend classes at New York University (NYU) and graduate with law degrees from both schools, or with a first degree from NUS and a master’s from NYU.

Senior lawyer Thio said: “Prof Tan is a tough act to follow. Our loss is in the 2010s, and have these in over 500. It’s difficult to find all of this in one person.”

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