

Singapore Names Wong Finance Minister in Cabinet Shake-Up

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Lawrence Wong was named Singapore's next finance minister in a cabinet reshuffle Friday, boosting his prominence as the city-state reboots its leadership transition plan.

The appointment of Wong, 48, follows Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's surprise announcement about two weeks ago that he's stepping aside as the designated successor to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong within the People's Action Party, which has led the country since independence. That forced changes to the long-telegraphed transition, leaving the party to seek a successor among its younger leaders before the next election due by 2025.

Since founding father Lee Kuan Yew relinquished power some three decades ago, Singapore's politics have been so well choreographed and predictable that they're often joked about as dull. Analysts have said they expect Singapore to remain politically stable amid the transition.

"The prime minister does not want to demonstrate disruptiveness in the political power structure," said Bilveer Singh, associate professor at the National University of Singapore's department of political science. With the pandemic and economic challenges, "I don't think he wants to exacerbate the situation, so within limits this is more continuity than change."

Though no clear successor to Lee was identified Friday, the finance minister selection could be a signal of who among the party's "fourth-generation" leaders ultimately might be positioned for the top job. Heng was named finance chief in 2015 and added the deputy prime minister role to his portfolio in 2019. Lee himself was also finance minister previously, though his predecessor Goh Chok Tong didn't hold that role.

"In terms of the importance of the post in government, certainly being a full finance minister from being second minister of finance is a promotion for Wong," said Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore. "It reinforces the notion that he is a serious candidate as Lee's successor."

Covid Leadership

Wong has seen his profile rise as co-chair of the government task force for fighting Covid-19, a position he'll continue holding. His role as second minister for finance also provided a smooth path to the ministry's top job.

"Lawrence has been assisting Swee Keat as Second Minister since 2016, so he has the experience, and is a natural fit for the job," Prime Minister Lee said at a briefing Friday.

Known for a no-nonsense speaking manner, Wong played a critical role in helping to bring the pandemic under control in Singapore, with measures such as mandatory mask-wearing and strict social gathering rules.

Before his appointment as minister of education after last year's election, he also oversaw a closely-watched property sector as minister for national development. Wong began his career as a civil servant, later serving as chief executive of the Energy Market Authority and as principal private secretary to Lee.

Local markets barely budged after the announcement Friday, a similar reaction to Heng's announcement earlier this month that he was stepping out of the running.

The Singapore dollar was little changed, trading up 0.2% to 1.3274 per U.S. dollar. The benchmark Straits Times Index pared earlier losses to also trade little changed.

Wong's appointment "should not have too much impact on financial markets," said Selena Ling, head of Treasury research and strategy at Oversea-Chinese Banking Corp. in Singapore. "He is after all already the second finance minister."

Here are other changes to the cabinet, with the appointments taking effect from May 15, according to a statement:

- Gan Kim Yong will be trade and industry minister
- Ong Ye Kung will be health minister
- S. Iswaran will be transport minister
- Chan Chun Sing will be education minister
- Josephine Teo will be communications and information minister, and continue as second minister for home affairs
- Tan See Leng will be manpower minister