

# Cabinet reshuffle: Race for Prime Minister post remains open, say analysts

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The race remains open for the three ministers who are in the running to be Singapore's next Prime Minister, and their performance in new appointments after a Cabinet reshuffle on Friday (Apr 23) will bear watching, political observers told CNA.

On Friday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong appointed seven ministers to new ministries in an extensive Cabinet reshuffle, which came only nine months after the Cabinet was formed.

This was triggered in part by [Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's decision](#) to step aside as "first among equals" of the fourth generation or 4G leaders in the People's Action Party (PAP), and to step down as Finance Minister.

Two ministers' moves in particular, raised eyebrows among observers as their portfolios are changing less than a year from when they were appointed last July after the General Election.

Mr Lawrence Wong, currently the Education Minister, has been promoted from Second Finance Minister to Finance Minister, while Mr Ong Ye Kung will be relinquishing the transport portfolio to become Health Minister.

Both will be co-chairs of the COVID-19 multi-ministry taskforce. Meanwhile, Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister for Trade and Industry, is moving to the Ministry of Education.

All three are seen as contenders for the post of Prime Minister.

*"FACE OF SINGAPORE'S PANDEMIC RESPONSE"*

Mr Wong's promotion to Finance Minister "reinforces the notion that he is a serious candidate for premiership", said Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies.

In particular, moving him from the Education Ministry after so short a time is "significant", said National University of Singapore Associate Professor of Sociology Tan Ern Ser.

"It suggests to me that he is on a trajectory likely to lead to a higher appointment. Moreover, he will be the incumbent co-chair for handling the COVID-19 situation," he said.

As observers have noted before, Mr Wong's handling of the COVID-19 crisis has raised his profile and won him plaudits. He will now be joined by Mr Ong, whose move from the Transport Ministry also came sooner than expected.

Mr Ong and Mr Wong are "now placed on equal footing as co-chairmen of Singapore's multi-ministry taskforce on COVID-19", Dr Koh noted.

This shows that the PAP leadership wants to present to Singapore and the world how both ministers can work together, "where their skills and abilities might differ but also complement each other", she added.

Singapore Management University Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan said that both ministers will be the face of Singapore's pandemic response going forward.

"That would put them very much in the public eye and how they work together and profile the 4G leadership is of utmost importance. They must inspire trust and confidence in Singaporeans in the 4G leadership," he said.

#### *A "CURIOUS" MOVE*

On Mr Chan's appointment to the Ministry of Education, Dr Koh said the move was "curious".

The Education Ministry is an "internally oriented ministry" compared to the Ministry of Trade and Industry, where he has demonstrated Singapore's "commitment to regional multilateralism through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership", she explained.

"(The new appointment) will give him the opportunity to strengthen his political capital locally. It is a ministry which has in the past years announced extremely important reforms and is now in the mode of implementing those reforms," she said.

"We know he is the poster boy for meritocracy so as a narrative, it is helpful for him to helm this ministry."

Ms Nydia Ngiow, senior director at consultancy BowerGroupAsia Singapore felt that while education is a heavyweight portfolio and the appointment suggests that Mr Chan remains a key contender for the 4G leadership, leaving the trade and industry portfolio means that he will not be featuring prominently in the Government's efforts on COVID-19.

"Despite Mr Chan having obtained the most ministerial experience among the three - as well as his appointment as second assistant-secretary general of the PAP which underscores his seniority in terms of party ranking - the fact that he has not emerged as a clear frontrunner underscores the lack of sufficient support within the PAP," she said.

Besides the major appointments, Assoc Prof Tan said that the new assignments handed to Mr Edwin Tong and Dr Tan See Leng shouldn't be missed.

Dr Tan, who will be Manpower Minister from May 15, will be handling the "Achilles' heel" in Singapore's COVID-19 response - the migrant worker dormitories, said Dr Koh.

Ms Ngiow said that he is one of the "fastest-rising politicians" in recent history: "He has risen faster than Mr Chan Chun Sing, who took two years to become a full minister at a ministry, but trails Mr Heng Swee Keat who was appointed Education Minister right after the 2011 General Elections."

Mr Tong will stay on Culture, Community and Youth Minister but will replace Mr Chan as deputy chair of the People's Association. This will give him "more exposure to the ground as a younger 4G leader", said Dr Koh.

#### *FIELD STILL OPEN*

Dr Koh said that while there has been a "consequential reshuffle", the matter of Singapore's next leader is still undecided.

"In terms of power and the accession of the 4G, it is still a bit of a 'trying out' and 'testing out' phase," she said. "But with each post, each minister is learning something and building up his or her political capital."

Assoc Prof Tan felt that the new appointments for the three ministers are "not so much about testing them but sharpening their policy nous, (and) broadening their policy perspectives and exposure".

"The narrative of the 4G leadership as a team where their collective experience, expertise, and capabilities being harnessed is reinforced," he said.

"The frontrunners remain Ministers Chan, Ong, and Wong. PM (Lee) was careful not to give anything away and instead steered the focus on the theme of business as usual to ensure Singapore emerges stronger in this crisis of a generation."

Dr Koh agreed that there was continuity amid the major overhaul of the Cabinet.

"What is also important to note is that the key front- or external-facing ministries – Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and Industry - are helmed by senior and seasoned hands. And at the junior levels, there are the changing of posts but not much more significant moves," she said.