

DPM Heng stepping aside a setback, but not a 'blow' to succession planning: Analysts

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Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's decision to step aside as Singapore's potential Prime Minister is a setback to succession planning, but depending on the leadership's next steps, the impact can be contained, analysts told CNA on Thursday (Apr 8).

"It's a setback but not a blow to the succession planning," said Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University.

"The 4G leadership succession has been structured as a team effort with focus on the collective strength of the 4G leaders."

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy research director at the Institute of Policy Studies said that while ministers have stood down in the past, it was never at such a high level. But she emphasised that there remains continuity in Singapore's political leadership.

"What is important to note is that it has been reiterated that PM Lee Hsien Loong will continue to stay on at the helm and Mr Heng will remain as Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies," she said.

The latest announcement does, however, raise questions about the People's Action Party's (PAP) ability to refresh its leadership, said Ms Nydia Ngiow, Senior Director at BowerGroupAsia Singapore, a strategic advisory consultancy.

The big question will be how quickly the 4G leadership will "pick itself up to come together and act decisively" in choosing Mr Lee's successor, she said.

If the 4G team can decide quickly, it will allow the new leader "a long enough pathway" to work with Mr Lee towards the next General Election, Ms Ngiow added.

Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser from the National University of Singapore's Department of Sociology said: "It does appear like a severe disruption to the process. However, if there is someone ready to take it from here, then the impact would be minimal or insignificant."

DID GE2020 RESULTS PLAY A PART?

When asked if Mr Heng's decision to step aside came as a surprise, Dr Koh said that it depends. There were questions raised among the general public whether there could be a change in succession plans after General Election 2020, she said.

“Of course, DPM Heng has said his decision is not linked to the GE but some Singaporeans were wondering if it might affect his standing,” she said.

“So, to that group of people, whatever the reasoning that is offered now to Mr Heng’s decision to step aside, this announcement is not a surprise.”

Although Mr Heng had on Thursday denied that the results of last year’s General Election had influenced his decision, Nanyang Technological University political observer Felix Tan said that could have played a role in his ceding the leadership.

“I think there’s still some noise on the ground about his performance during the election,” said Dr Tan.

The last elections saw Mr Heng move from Tampines Group Representation Constituency (GRC) - where he had been a Member of Parliament since 2011 - to East Coast GRC.

There, the PAP’s five-member team led by Mr Heng clinched about 53 per cent of the vote, narrowly winning against candidates from the Workers’ Party (WP).

Last year’s General Election saw the PAP’s vote share slip to 61.2 per cent, while the WP was able to win the newly-formed Sengkang GRC as well as hold on to Hougang SMC and Aljunied GRC - becoming the first opposition party to win two GRCs.

However Dr Mustafa Izzuddin, who is a senior international affairs analyst with management consultancy Solaris Strategies Singapore, said that the PAP might have fared much worse in East Coast without Mr Heng’s presence, adding that the Deputy Prime Minister helped turn the tide for the party.

In July last year, a few weeks after the elections, Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Balakrishnan had said that 4G ministers were in “complete unity” behind Mr Heng’s leadership.

This suggests that it was down to a personal decision on Mr Heng’s part and not an issue of him not having his party’s support, said Dr Tan.

WHO’S NEXT IN LINE?

Dr Mustafa noted that with Singapore keeping its COVID-19 situation under control and vaccinations being rolled out, it was an opportune time to revisit the idea of leadership succession as the country looked forward to its post-pandemic future.

Observers identified a handful of candidates for the top role.

NTU's Dr Tan, the co-author of a book analysing the results of the 2020 election, suggested Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing was the most "highly likely candidate" to replace Mr Heng.

Mr Chan had previously been tipped as one of the frontrunners to be the next Prime Minister.

"I think we can expect that Chan Chun Sing will rise much faster now," Dr Tan said.

At 51, Mr Chan is at the right age to assume leadership from Mr Heng, who will turn 60 soon, said Dr Mustafa.

"Basically, you need someone who is younger than Heng Swee Keat, but not too young where you do not have sufficient political experience," he said.

Dr Mustafa also pointed to Mr Chan's position in the PAP's hierarchy, noting his position as deputy to Mr Heng in his role as first assistant secretary-general in the party, as an indicator that he may be next in line for the role.

NTU's Dr Tan pointed to Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung, also 51, as a "very strong competitor" who has performed "pretty well".

SMU's Assoc Prof Tan also tipped Mr Chan and Mr Ong as contenders, along with Education Minister Lawrence Wong, 48.

"A dark horse is Desmond Lee," he said, referring to the 44-year-old National Development Minister.

Associate Professor Tan from NUS believes the "new frontrunner" is Mr Wong, whose profile has been raised since taking on the role of co-chair of the multi-ministry task force tackling the COVID-19 crisis.

CABINET RESHUFFLE

Mr Heng's announcement has thrown a spanner in the works for succession planning among 4G leaders, said Dr Tan, adding they are now essentially back to square one.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong may have to readjust, relook and reassess his team seriously, he said.

"The likelihood is that we will see a new Prime Minister only after the next election. Because if a new Prime Minister were to take over at this point in time, it's too short a runway for him - or her - to really perform and to garner enough support from the ground," said Dr Tan.

Dr Mustafa however disagreed, suggesting that the next Prime Minister could take the helm as soon as next year - the midway point between the last election and the next one.

The upcoming Cabinet reshuffle could produce a few surprises, said Dr Tan, pointing to the possibility of more first-time MPs taking on more senior roles.

Mr Lee had said that there will be a reshuffle in two weeks, and Mr Heng will be relinquishing his role as Finance Minister, while remaining the Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies.

IPS' Dr Koh said to look out for who will take over the Finance portfolio.

"The Ministry of Finance portfolio should go to a Prime Minister-in-waiting if the 4G wants to provide some forward momentum to the question," she said.

Ms Ngiow also said to look out for the Cabinet reshuffle as she threw another name into the ring: "For instance, if Tan Chuan Jin is moved from his Speaker position to head a ministry, that would be a clear sign that even he is in the mix to be considered as a potential PM."

Dr Koh added: "The key point is that the world and therefore Singapore is going through a period of radical uncertainty.

"Any leader and eventual new Prime Minister of the country needs to be not just close to the pulse of Singaporeans but have significant exposure and strong networks within the international community to know how to guide the country through the post-COVID new normal as it is the condition of global health and geopolitics that matters greatly."