

Heng Swee Keat's appointment as next DPM sends 'clear signal' of succession: Analysts

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The move to name Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat as the next - and only - Deputy Prime Minister is a "clear signal" by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) that he is set to become the country's next prime minister, according to political watchers.

Former Member of Parliament (MP) Inderjit Singh said in an email to CNA on Tuesday (Apr 23) that the announcement of Mr Heng's upcoming role was important as it gave a clear signal to Singaporeans and the rest of the world that there are no surprises in terms of leadership succession.

"This is the signature of Singapore politics, where we prepare early and have very little uncertainty on the future leaders," Mr Inderjit said.

Mr Heng will be promoted to Deputy Prime Minister on May 1. He will also remain Finance Minister and continue chairing the Future Economy Council and National Research Foundation, the Prime Minister's Office announced on Tuesday.

Current Deputy Prime Ministers Teo Chee Hean and Tharman Shanmugaratnam will relinquish their roles but remain in the Cabinet as Senior Ministers.

Mr Teo will continue as Coordinating Minister for National Security, while Mr Tharman will be redesignated as Coordinating Minister for Social Policies and continue to advise the Prime Minister on economic policies.

Mr Inderjit's observations were reiterated by another political watcher Gillian Koh, who said that the latest appointment means "it's patently clear that (Mr Heng) is on track to becoming our next Prime Minister".

"With the appointment of just one Deputy Prime Minister, what is being signalled is that there is a clear pecking order, and there should be no confusion, there should be no sort of questions raised as to whether the previous group of contenders for the premiership post will be given more duties, more responsibilities, such that they are still in the running for the position," Dr Koh said.

Perhaps the only surprise in this latest round of reshuffle is that Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing was not appointed as the second Deputy Prime Minister, said former Nominated MP Calvin Cheng in an email to CNA.

Mr Cheng said Mr Heng's appointment as Deputy Prime Minister was widely expected and there was "nothing surprising".

Singapore typically has two Deputy Prime Ministers supporting the Prime Minister.

There were three other times when there was only one Deputy Prime Minister. From 1973 to 1980, when Dr Goh Keng Swee was DPM, from 1993 to 1995 when Mr Lee Hsien Loong held the post and from 1959 to 1968, when Mr Toh Chin Chye became the country's first Deputy Prime Minister.

NEW LEADERS NEED TO SHOW THEY CAN LEAD

Being the only Deputy Prime Minister will give Mr Heng the opportunity to show his capabilities, which in turn will allow the public to judge him on his ability to lead Singapore, said Mr Inderjit.

“It is very important that Mr Heng shows his capability by leading some significant policies and initiative,” he said.

“The fourth-generation (4G) team and Mr Heng need to show that they understand what needs to be done and, more importantly, can implement changes so that Singaporeans and investors can have greater confidence that Singapore is in good hands.”

It was only last November that Mr Heng was appointed the PAP’s first assistant secretary-general and emerged the frontrunner to succeed Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

It was widely considered that the other potential candidates for that position included Mr Chan and Education Minister Ong Ye Kung.

SMU law professor and political commentator Eugene Tan said on CNA’s news programme Singapore Tonight that one of Mr Heng’s main challenges now would be to ensure the 4G leadership continue to grow as a team, even as each individual acquires more experience and expertise in the different areas of government.

Assoc Prof Tan added: “The other important challenge for Mr Heng would be, how do you get the 4G leadership to become more visible for Singaporeans to appreciate who they are, what do they stand for and what sort of leadership styles they would take.”

He expects this group of leaders to have a higher profile come May 1, continuing in the vein of Budget 2019 when many of the younger ministers helmed the Committee of Supply debates.

“It’s really important because succession is so important to Singapore’s success and they have got to make it work,” he said.

SENIOR MINISTERS STILL HAVE KEY ROLES

Yet, while the thrust of the reshuffle was to position the next generation of Singapore leaders for the future, it remains important that senior figures are there to support them.

Mr Inderjit said until the 4G leaders can show they can lead on their own, the risk of retiring the two Deputy Prime Ministers should not be taken.

“Unfortunately, the 4G team has not had a long enough runway of performance for people to be confident they can completely take over immediately,” he said.

As such, he hoped that at least Mr Teo or Mr Tharman will continue in their Senior Minister role for the next term of Government.

There is another benefit for having the two senior politicians around, SMU’s Assoc Prof Tan pointed out.

“The PAP Government is deep in election mode,” he said. “So you want these two gentlemen with deep amounts of experience and expertise, and recognisable to the Singaporean public to assure people there is sufficient experience and expertise within the Government.”

He expects Mr Teo and Mr Tharman to take on a more mentoring role as Senior Ministers, yet still oversee and play coordinating roles in terms of security, economy and social policies.

“The main thing is to assure (the) different stakeholders that things are going along very smoothly and that succession is according to plan,” Assoc Prof Tan said.