

PAP assistant secretary-general appointment a precursor to becoming Singapore's next PM: Analysts

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The identity of Singapore's next prime minister could be clearer come the next People's Action Party (PAP) internal elections at the end of the year, with political watchers highlighting the position of the party's assistant secretary-general as a key one to monitor.

Earlier this week, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said that people should have a clearer idea next year of who the next prime minister will be, adding that some indication could come from the PAP's Central Executive Committee (CEC) election that is slated for later this year.

"Look out for the slate of candidates elected. Look at the positions they hold and that should give you an indication of where the transition process is and from there ..." he said.

Looking ahead to the CEC election, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Gillian Koh said that any of the front-runners earmarked to be the country's next leader will have to garner enough support among the PAP cadres to take one of the 14 spots in its CEC, as opposed to being co-opted into the decision-making body.

Three of the fourth-generation (4G) leaders – Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing, Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung and Minister for Finance Heng Swee Keat – are among those identified as potential successors of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong when he steps down.

Subsequently, when office-bearers are established, the front-runners or the potential prime minister "should at least be designated assistant secretary-general", given that the posts are currently occupied by deputy prime ministers Teo Chee Hean and Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Dr Koh told Channel NewsAsia in an email.

"The front-runners must certainly move into that position to be primed for leadership - both of the party and Government," she added.

Her observations were echoed by another political watcher, Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan, who said the impending PAP internal leadership changes should see the 4G leaders take on more of the roles vacated by retiring CEC members, in tandem with developments in the Cabinet.

"We shouldn't be surprised if the 4G leaders were to be appointed as the assistant secretary-general after the party conference at the end of this year," Associate Professor Tan said in an email.

The position of assistant secretary-general could be seen as a precursor for those being groomed for the top job. Mr Lee, for instance, took over the first assistant secretary-general position in 1992, when then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong took over the reins of leading the party.

That said, Assoc Prof Tan was of the view that each leadership renewal and transition is "unique".

“I think the two precedents have limited utility,” he said when asked if past CEC appointments could prove instructive.

Asked if Mr Heng needed to be given a higher-profile role within the CEC, given that he is currently a member while Mr Chan and Mr Ong are both organising secretaries, the political watcher said “we can expect (the Finance Minister) to be assigned significant roles within the Cabinet and the party”.

Both also expect current vice-chairman Yaacob Ibrahim and treasurer Lim Swee Say to be replaced, given that they had both stepped down from their Cabinet posts in the reshuffle earlier this year.

Beyond the PAP’s internal leadership election, Assoc Prof Tan also pointed to the next Cabinet reshuffle, “expected some time in the latter half of next year”, as another to watch.

“The next Cabinet reshuffle ... should give us a better indication of how the 4G leadership is shaping and who is likely to be primus inter pares (first among equals),” he said.

The political analyst added that things to look out for would be the appointment of one or two 4G leaders as deputy prime minister or, if this does not happen, the ministerial portfolio assigned to these front-runners would be significant too.

“Here, one would be looking at the scope of duties and how it broadens the range of assignments and exposure to new areas for a 4G minister,” Assoc Prof Tan said.

The most recent Cabinet reshuffle in April this year did not throw up new deputy prime ministers and, as such, the attention was on the portfolios the three front-runners took on.

Mr Chan, for one, stepped down from leading the National Trades Union Congress to take on the Trade and Industry portfolio, relinquishing his Minister in the Prime Minister's Office position in the process. He also took over responsibility for the Public Service from DPM Teo and continued as deputy chairman of People's Association.

As for Mr Ong, he took over the reins of the entire Education Ministry after his counterpart Mr Ng Chee Meng relinquished his appointment as Minister for Education (Schools) to lead the Labour Movement. He relinquished his appointment as Second Minister for Defence.

Meanwhile, Finance Minister Heng got his wish to remain in the same portfolio while taking from DPM Teo the responsibility for assisting Mr Lee with National Research Foundation matters.