

PM succession still a three-horse race, say analysts after PAP CEC election

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There are still three front-runners to become Singapore's next Prime Minister, political analysts said on Sunday (Nov 11), following the People's Action Party (PAP) Central Executive Committee (CEC) election.

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat and Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing - widely regarded as potential successors to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong - were all voted into the CEC, the party's highest decision-making body, on Sunday.

Observers highlighted in particular the vote cast for Mr Ong, given that he was not among the 12 elected into the CEC at the previous election in December 2016. He was, instead, among four additional party members who were co-opted in January 2017.

Observers had also said that being directly elected into the committee would be crucial for a member to be considered a candidate for Prime Minister.

"The key takeaway from today is that there's still a choice of three rather than a choice of two," said Dr Gillian Koh, who researches party and electoral politics at the Institute of Policy Studies.

"Because Ong Ye Kung got duly elected today, he has proven that he has some weight of support behind him alongside Heng Swee Keat and Chan Chun Sing.

"(This) makes it interesting and therefore something to watch whether the 4G leaders, both those within the CEC and those not yet within CEC, are ready to decide among themselves as to whether it is clear who of the three should go."

Mr Ong's election is even more significant as he was apparently not among the seven members whose names were clearly marked out on voting slips, Dr Koh said.

The Straits Times had reported on Saturday that the outgoing CEC had highlighted seven names on a list of 19 for party cadres to vote for. The report said the seven reflected the CEC's choice of the party's core leaders, and that Mr Ong was not among them.

Political commentator Eugene Tan, a law professor at the Singapore Management University, said it would be surprising if Mr Ong had indeed been excluded from the list of seven.

"Given that Ong Ye Kung is widely regarded as a front-runner despite being elected as a Member of Parliament in 2015, and has been impressive in his education portfolio, his election for the first time into the CEC indicates that he has good all-round support of party cadres," Associate Professor Tan said.

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARIES-GENERAL: WHO AND HOW MANY?

The CEC will meet in the coming weeks to appoint a new slate of officeholders, with all eyes on who will occupy the positions of assistant secretaries-general. It is understood that one of them will go on to become the next Prime Minister.

Deputy Prime Ministers Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Teo Chee Hean both held the positions before stepping down from the CEC on Sunday.

Dr Koh believes that one spot will go to Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam, whom she feels is poised to take over from Mr Teo as Coordinating Minister for National Security.

“Whoever takes this portfolio must be undergirded by his standing in the ruling party,” she said, noting Mr Shanmugam’s strong background in internal security and legal affairs.

But Dr Koh said the question is whether there will be two or three assistant secretary-general spots in total.

If it’s just one other assistant secretary-general besides Mr Shanmugam, then she said the choice for the next Prime Minister is clear. If it’s two other assistant secretaries-general, “the signal is that the issue is still in play as to who might be the premier”.

Because Mr Ong was not among the seven highlighted by the outgoing CEC, Assoc Prof Tan said it would be “quite unlikely” that he would be appointed as one of the two assistant secretaries-general, given that the make-up of the new and outgoing CECs is “largely similar”.

However, if Mr Ong did well in the poll among PAP cadres on Sunday, Assoc Prof Tan said the new CEC “may have a different view as compared to the outgoing CEC”.

The PAP does not release how many votes each member received.

“But I would still say if there were going to be two new assistant secretaries-general appointed, it would suggest that Chan Chun Sing and Heng Swee Keat are well-placed,” Assoc Prof Tan added.

There were, however, also other permutations. Assoc Prof Tan noted that the CEC may instead decide to have one assistant secretary-general from among the 4G leaders with the other from the 3G.

As suggested by Dr Koh, Assoc Prof Tan also noted the possibility of three assistant secretaries-general being appointed.

SIM Global Education associate lecturer Felix Tan suggested that succession plans are also still up in the air.

“There are the three people that have been speculated and I think it’s still some time before we really realise who is the one they’re going to choose,” he said.

Dr Tan said the likelihood is that Mr Ong and Mr Chan would become assistant secretaries-general, while Mr Heng might be given a “less taxing” role, given his Finance Minister portfolio.

“So he might not be the assistant secretary-general at this point in time but who knows, he could still be in the running. There can still be a lot of changes along the way,” he said.

Nevertheless, Dr Tan said the new CEC gives Singaporeans a clearer idea of who among the 4G leaders “will likely form the next Government or at least lead (the party at) the next General Election”.

“It does still send a clear message that these are the people with the credentials, credibility and capability to lead the team forward,” he added.