

Cabinet reshuffle shows that S'pore has multiple choices for next PM: Political analyst Gillian Koh

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COMMENTARY: "I think that what the 3G, and certainly PM Lee Hsien Loong, has done is to make it clear that Singapore has a choice, that the PAP has several candidates that it wants to test out and to profile."

In the week following the [Cabinet reshuffle](#), many people have speculated what it means for Singapore's future Prime Minister position, particularly regarding potential frontrunners Chan Chun Sing, Ong Ye Kung, and Lawrence Wong.

We spoke with Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), in a Clubhouse session on Apr. 28 about what the new shifts mean for the future of the People's Action Party (PAP) and for Singaporeans.

The commentary below is adapted from the insights that Koh shared in a more than an hour-long Clubhouse session with Mothership and other listeners.

Adapted from Clubhouse session with Gillian Koh

What is your analysis of the latest Cabinet reshuffle? We understand that in an [interview](#), you mentioned that you saw this as a consequential reshuffle. Could you elaborate?

Seven ministries with new leaders. The key thing is, these ministries have been on the frontlines of dealing with Covid.

So I don't know if the former ministers are kind of taking a break or rotating, but key thing is with [Deputy Prime Minister] Heng Swee Keat stepping aside — there needed to be changes because of that.

Lawrence Wong

Heng Swee Keat has had someone be Second Minister for Finance for quite a while now. And that's Lawrence Wong.

So he has been Second Minister for Finance since 2016, believe it or not. Talk about backup plan, right? We were looking at whether Lawrence Wong, who is of course one key member of the 4G leadership, would be promoted to become full Minister for Finance.

And so that's what has happened, which makes him a serious candidate for Heng's replacement as premier-in-waiting.

Of course, since 2011, the People's Action Party has been talking about leadership renewal. And certainly after the General Election in 2015, there was even more interest in that.

Ong Ye Kung

And with that, there were two other candidates who have been spoken about so much: one of them is Ong Ye Kung. And this time around, you see him move from Minister for Transport to Minister for Health.

And of course, because of Covid, the Ministry of Health has the biggest budget this financial year. (The total expenditure of MOH in FY2021 is projected to be \$18.84 billion). He's going to be there in the hot seat in dealing with the pandemic.

You have Wong and Ong sharing the limelight, so to speak. Actually, it's really the very hard work of being co-chairs of the Multi-ministry Taskforce on Covid-19. That's quite significant.

You have two very strong candidates to replace Heng as a possible successor to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Chan Chun Sing

One final thing, the third very strong candidate — certainly has been spoken of as such on the ground — is Chan Chun Sing, who's been Minister for Trade and Industry. Come 15th of May, he will be moving to Ministry of Education.

With that, he's adding to his portfolio another opportunity to go close to the ground, interact with people. And there's nothing like meeting lots and lots and lots of parents and trying to see if you have the political capacity to be persuasive and make everybody happy.

In sum, it's a promotion for Wong, promotion for Ong, and Chan Chun Sing going back down to the ground from [Ministry of] Trade and Industry to build up his political capital.

As we look at the Cabinet reshuffle, we noticed that there are two 4G ministers who were moved within a year. Some might see this to mean that they are seen as highly competent ministers who are able to lead a ministry and adapt to a new ministry faster than the rest. What do you think of that?

As I said, one very significant move is Lawrence Wong becoming full Minister for Finance. He's been Second Minister for Finance since 2016. So that work is not new.

It's just that he was given — in addition to being Second Minister for Finance, and then co-chair of the Multi-ministry Task Force on Covid-19 — the post of Minister for Education.

So basically, it's not a shift, but he's getting a promotion within one job that he's had for a very long time. That's, in a way, a stamp of approval.

He's been under the tutelage of Heng Swee Keat, and probably has the confidence of Heng, in terms of becoming full Minister for Finance.

It's a different kind of move for Ong Ye Kung, who went from half a Minister for Education after he was first elected in 2015, to full Minister for Education, and then after the election in July 2020, became Minister of Transport.

I think in his case, it's quite a quick shift to [Ministry of] Health.

But I bet you in [Ministry of] Transport, he was also managing significant implications of how the public health situation with Covid was being managed, but with its second order effects.

So it's not that he's unaware of what's going on within [Ministry of] Health. In fact, he's probably one of the key petitioners to the Ministry of Health to do this, and to do that, so that he could meet his brief well as Minister for Transport.

The quick rotation you're probably thinking of is the one from Ministry of Transport to [Ministry of] Health.

For Lawrence Wong, it's him bedding down in the Ministry of Finance and, of course, dropping [Ministry of] Education.

Which then is a shift for Chan Chun Sing, from [Ministry of] Trade and Industry to [Ministry of] Education. And Chan Chun Sing's been in [Ministry of] Trade and Industry for a much longer time (nearly three years). So that's not a sudden move by any means.

You [mentioned](#) that for Mr. Chan's move, it was a little "curious". Could you elaborate a bit?

Well, I suppose the Ministry of Education has been a post for those who are high flyers, who are moving up, who are certainly going to be not just part of a leadership team, but among the top ranking leaders of that team.

Think of Teo Chee Hean who was DPM, Tharman Shanmugaratnam [who was] DPM, who were previously Ministers for Education. Heng Swee Keat started his political career in government as Minister of Education. [It was] also the same with Ong Ye Kung.

Chan Chun Sing is doing it the other way around and putting [the Ministry of] Education a little later in his political career.

Having said that, he has had the most varied track record since he entered Parliament and then government in 2011. He's been everywhere, including heading up the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

Then he swung out to be Secretary-General of NTUC, which was quite interesting, because you don't usually think of politicians swinging out and swinging back into the mainstream. Then from Secretary-General of NTUC, he swung back to mainstream government, and went to MTI.

And now he's going in quite a novel fashion to [Ministry of] Education. Usually, for more heavyweight ministers, you see that happen (being appointed to MOE) earlier in their political career.

Lawrence Wong may have been a bit different — being made to helm Education while juggling to other high-profile, high-demand portfolios.

Do you think PM Lee has somebody in mind to succeed him? Do you think that was shown during the recent reshuffle?

I think that what the 3G, and certainly PM Lee Hsien Loong, have done is to make it clear that Singapore has a choice, that the PAP has several candidates that it wants to test out and to profile.

So I think you'll see this in terms of the Cabinet lineup, although [PM Lee] would not have been the only person who shaped that — he did mention discussing the Cabinet lineup with Heng Swee Keat after the GE, knowing that Heng was going to relinquish the [Ministry of] Finance post.

So I think that there is some process of discussion and consultation, and I think that Lee Hsien Loong probably wants to suggest that actually there is choice.

And when you look at this reshuffle itself, you see that it isn't just one person that's pushed forward.

Clearly, Ministry of Finance is very important — it has oversight of all government activity, it has to put the resources behind strategic plans of the government and the country.

But you see that Ong was also given a bigger portfolio, a more critical portfolio — Ministry of Health — not just because of the size of the budget, but it's obvious that he will soon have to lead the charge out of this pandemic with the PM and colleagues, taking over from current health minister, Gan Kim Yong.

I wish to recall that a long time ago, in 2013, there was a by-election in Punggol East, which was a surprise. But the PAP candidate did not do well. The WP candidate prevailed.

The Monday after that by-election, we had the PM at an IPS conference. And he said that the PAP had learnt that it needs to give more time to people to warm up to its candidates. And I think, really, that he has to give more time to his candidates to also connect well with the ground.

So you'll see that there's this awareness that it isn't just about whether PM Lee has his favourites, or his favourite, but it's also about how the ground takes to the leaders and how the leaders connect across government and across the business sector, civil society, and with people as well.

And it's a good thing for Singapore that there is choice, now that Heng Swee Keat made that surprise announcement.

Do you think there are any posts within the cabinet that are more significant? Because you mentioned in one of your [interviews](#) that what is important to note is that there are a couple of external-facing ministries that are still helmed by senior 3G leaders.

That was the surprise, that there was no transition to the younger fourth generation leaders in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence. These are two ministries that are external-

facing and, of course, during Covid and prior to Covid, there has been a set of important geopolitical and economic shifts with the rise of China.

With that, ASEAN and all the Southeast Asian countries have been trying to find their way through the middle of what to do about rising China, as the U.S. was also going through change due to transitions in power domestically, from Obama to Trump.

It's not an easy space to navigate. And certainly not an easy space for Singapore and, therefore, certainly not an easy space for the ministers in charge.

So, there was no transition or handover in these two areas, which means that the changes have very much focused on refreshing the team that's dealing with Covid, with an accent on the domestic response.

Of course, you can argue they will have some interface with the international community, especially if you're, say, the Minister for Health, or the Minister for Transport, because you're talking about a global public health issue. The responses, medical standards, vaccines, and vaccine certification all require international exchange and collaboration.

For Mr. Ong as Transport Minister, over these past few months, he had to do that a lot, because he's talking about border control and infection control.

I think that's a good point, to kind of revisit or look at that again, and notice that this is a blending of 3G and 4G, giving 4G a lot more time to deal with the domestic response — not neglecting the international, but leaving the very senior and seasoned hands to deal with those ministries that are completely focused on the international front.

Any last thoughts on frontrunner candidates?

I think the most important point is to remember that Singapore itself is evolving.

Having had many years of the Heng Swee Keat model of collaboration with the ground, he responded to the fact that Singaporeans, civil society activists, and even business leaders all feel that they want to be more closely engaged in the process of governing — governing our domains, but seeing how we can all contribute to the governance of Singapore.

Whatever happens, the kind of leader that we will probably be looking for will be somebody who is able to facilitate and get all to work together to bring the best out of everyone.

It's a different model of leadership — is it one that's directive? Or one that's participative, and maybe even transformational? So I think that requires the time, the occasion, the crisis, to really show up.

Which means we've got to give it time for the circumstances, for the current crisis, to mould and shape and really hone a leader who knows how to connect and bring the best out of Singaporeans who are ready to self-manage, to self-govern, but work together to bring about a different and better Singapore. One who is comfortable, even with the younger generation among us.