

## **Comment: Reshuffle gets 4G leaders to tackle Covid-19 crisis, while 3G keeps a watchful eye on security**

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Singapore civil servants have had a week to get used to their new realities after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced a Cabinet reshuffle on April 23.

There were a number of significant moves - [seven ministers](#) switched portfolios - , but political observers were perhaps most interested in the final destinations of the men touted for the top job, namely Chan Chun Sing, Ong Ye Kung, Lawrence Wong and Desmond Lee.

When the dust settled, Chan landed in the Ministry of Education, Ong went to the Ministry of Health, and Wong became the new Finance Minister. Lee stayed where he was, at National Development.

There were other moves as well, such as Josephine Teo heading the Ministry of Communications & Information, Gan Kim Yong moving to Trade & Industry and S Iswaran helming the Transport portfolio.

But perhaps of significance were the posts that PM Lee did not change.

*3G ministers not moved around much*

During the press conference when PM Lee announced his reshuffle, he was asked by Mothership on his thinking about most of the 3G ministers not being moved, with the exception of Gan.

"The ministers who needed to be moved have been moved, and the numbers (seven ministers) are not small," he said, adding that the decision was not a matter of moving the 4G ministers around while keeping the 3G ministers where they are.

"It's a matter of who I need to fill which slot most urgently."

However, it is notable that the key national security and external-facing ministries -- namely Home Affairs, Defence and Foreign Affairs -- were all untouched, and continue to be led by members of the 3G leadership, many who have entered politics at least a decade or more before the 4G leaders.

Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean, as Coordinating Minister for National Security, also remains in his role. Teo was also designated the [Acting Prime Minister](#) when PM Lee is away, a state of affairs that will last until the 4G chooses a leader.

*Focusing on the homefront*

While the 4G ministers are redeployed to "gain different exposure and experience," in PM Lee's words, these responsibilities are mostly inward-focused.

Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, mentioned that moving to Education will give Chan the opportunity to [get closer to the ground](#) and interact with the public. She added that the appointment will also give Chan the opportunity to build up political capital locally.

The same goes for Health, where Ong's main task will be containing the spread of Covid-19 within Singapore. Contrast that to the Transport Ministry where he came from, where he negotiated tricky bilateral issues such as the Air Travel Bubble with Hong Kong and the suspension of the High Speed Rail project with Malaysia.

While Finance does have an external element, the Finance Minister's main role is to manage the Budget and decide funding levels for each ministry and agency. More domestic issues like the Goods and Services Tax and rebates will be under Wong's purview, going forward.

Meanwhile, Lee's portfolio at National Development is also another internally-oriented Ministry, making decisions on shaping Singapore's landscape.

#### *Safe hands*

While the four contenders settle into their roles, Singapore's national security and outward-focused ministries remain in the hands of experienced 3G ministers like Shanmugam, Ng and Balakrishnan.

Even Trade & Industry, which oversees international deals, will now come under Gan, another 3G man.

Whether intentional or not, PM Lee's reshuffle may have sent a message to any foreign powers that may have been watching. The leadership question and the reshuffle will not cause any disruption to Singapore's security, whether internal or external.

Now I'm not the leader of any country (at least in the real world, I love playing games like Civilization VI where you do just that).

But if I was one, and I knew my team needed more time to decide who among them will become primus inter pares, then letting them gain experience in inward-focused ministries while my security team carries on with their good work strikes me as a sensible move.

#### *Covid-19 baptism of fire*

But make no mistake -- being in a domestic-focused ministry does not mean it's an easy job.

In fact, it's notable that the ministries most responsible for dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic are now in the hands of the 4G team.

Or put it another way -- the team that PM Lee has chosen to overcome the gravest crisis afflicting Singapore in its history are all 4G leaders.

Health is the most obvious ministry here, but anyone who sat through Heng Swee Keat's multiple budgets of 2020 will appreciate the role that the Finance Minister plays in mitigating the fallout of the pandemic.

Education plays a major role too, with other countries debating how does the state [continue to educate children](#) if they can't physically attend school.

For Singapore to emerge stronger from the "crisis of a generation", the 4G ministers will need to work closely together to formulate a coherent and comprehensive strategy. Any personal differences they may have [as Yahoo alleged](#), will need to be set aside when faced with a threat like Covid-19.

Perhaps that is PM Lee's plan. If the 4G is to lead Singapore after PM Lee relinquishes the reins, this baptism of fire could be the the final missing ingredient in forging a battle-tested team.

For now, the 4G team will have the time and space needed to settle on a frontrunner, and a common enemy to band together against. The ball is entirely in their court.