

Will Singapore's ruling party's internal election reveal more about the future prime minister?

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- The PAP is expected to maintain the status quo in choosing its central executive committee
- Observers are on the lookout for any clues on leadership succession, including what is in store for education minister Lawrence Wong

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and an unprecedented economic crisis, Sunday's internal election for the leadership of Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is expected to maintain the status quo, according to party insiders and analysts.

They said PAP cadres were not likely to rock the boat during a crisis. Some 2,000 cadres are expected to re-elect Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to the apex of the PAP's power structure, with six other key lieutenants – Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, and ministers Gan Kim Yong, Chan Chun Sing, K. Shanmugam, Grace Fu and Masagos Zulkifli – remaining core members of the party's 35th central executive committee (CEC).

But there are two things pundits are looking out for: firstly, any clues on the party's thinking about education minister Lawrence Wong, and secondly, an indication of which first-term members of parliament are destined for bigger things.

Wong is the government's point person for Singapore's handling of the pandemic, and has earned plaudits for his poise and eloquence in fulfilling that role.

The party has traditionally tended to co-opt rising leaders and those popular with cadres to the 18-member CEC, and Wong – a former senior bureaucrat who joined politics in 2011 – was co-opted in 2018. While he also served in the top decision-making body from 2012-2014, he was not part of it for the subsequent four years.

This year, some observers said they would not be surprised if he was directly elected. Others went further to suggest he was "prime minister material".

Lawrence Loh, director at the Centre for Governance, Institutions and Organisations at the National University of Singapore (NUS), said Wong's appearances in the media this year as Singapore dealt with the pandemic had pitched him as a "steady hand with clear articulation skills".

Inderjit Singh, a PAP stalwart who served as an MP in Prime Minister Lee's group representation constituency (GRC) from 1997 to 2015, said in his mind Wong was "emerging as a potential choice as a future PM".

Of a similar mind was Sumiko Tan, executive editor of the government-friendly *The Straits Times*, who interviewed Wong for an article last week. She wrote that "some political pundits now say he could well be a contender for prime minister one day".

Wong's inclusion as an elected CEC member could pave the way for his ascendance in the party, Singh and others opined.

Gillian Koh, deputy director of Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies, a government-linked think tank, said the party conference would be a test of whether Wong "can garner sufficient votes to enter the CEC on his own steam".

NUS political scientist Bilveer Singh described the education minister as having "the right pedigree".

"He is being tested in different portfolios and is definitely in the running for the post of the prime minister in the near future," he said, adding that he expects Wong to take on key positions once he enters the 36th CEC "but not to replace Heng or [Chan Chun Sing] this time round".

'NO DRASTIC CHANGE'

At the moment, however, Deputy Prime Minister Heng remains poised to succeed Lee. In 2018, the PAP in effect anointed him as its next leader when he was made first assistant secretary general – second in command to Lee.

Chan Chun Sing, the trade and industry minister who was at one point seen as the frontrunner to replace Lee, was handed the party's No 3 position as second assistant secretary general.

The decision was taken following a selection process for the PAP's top leadership position – and consequently the prime ministership – in which younger ministers chose among themselves as "first among equals", with the incumbent prime minister sitting out of the process.

But following Heng's surprisingly thin victory margin in the East Coast GRC in July's general election, some commentators suggested the PAP might be having second thoughts about his selection.

Heng's contemporaries in the next-generation cabal of ministers – known as the PAP's 4G leadership – later sought to quash such thinking, with foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan saying the group was in "full unity" behind the party No 2.

But Heng is unlikely to ascend to the premiership any time soon, with Lee indicating following the election that he would stay on with older colleagues – such as long-time lieutenants Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Teo Chee Hean – to steer the country out of the pandemic and "hand over Singapore intact and in good working order to the next team".

In a book launched on Friday, former senior minister S. Jayakumar, who served in the cabinets of Singapore's three prime ministers before retiring in 2011, wrote that he believed many Singaporeans would want Lee to step down "only after Singapore has turned the dangerous corner".

"We've had many other crises before, but this is a particularly difficult one. I don't think this is the time, really, to talk of succession," said the 81-year-old to reporters at the launch event.

None of the experts who spoke to *This Week in Asia* believed there would be changes to the party hierarchy following Sunday's vote. Singh from the NUS said: "Drastic change is not part of the PAP's culture or ecosystem."

Internal elections at the PAP, which has been in power since 1959, are designed in a way that ensures top leaders are picked only by the most senior rank-and-file members, who are known as cadres.

There are 12 elected seats in the party's CEC, and another six are later co-opted into the committee – two of these go to the cadres with the 13th and 14th highest votes, and the remaining four are chosen by the new CEC.

The outgoing CEC indicates to cadres a slate of up to eight candidates seen as "core leaders" – or, as political observer Gillian Koh put it, "must-vote individuals".

Cadres are free to not vote for these candidates, though doing so is thought to be rare. They are free to pick others from a slate of up to 20 nominees for the four remaining CEC slots.

While the public rarely gets a view of the party's internal machinations, the polls have long been used by observers to parse leaders' popularity among rank-and-file PAP members.

Cadres' support is "an important gauge of members' political sway and legitimacy", political analyst Woo Jun Jie said.

ELECTION REFLECTION

Political analyst Woo said he would also be monitoring developments involving transport minister Ong Ye Kung, who garnered among the highest vote shares in the July polls.

The roles that Wong and Ong assumed within the CEC should be closely watched, Woo said, adding that if they took on key appointments such as treasurer, organising secretary or vice-chairman, it would signify greater support within the party.

These roles will be assigned after the new CEC's first meeting, which is likely to be weeks after Sunday's party conference.

Also being eyed are possible exits to make way for new blood in the CEC.

The NUS' Singh said he believed defence minister Ng Eng Hen and Ng Chee Meng – leader of the PAP-linked National Trades Union Congress – might leave the party's top decision-making body.

Koh also concurred with the likelihood of such movements in the CEC. "There has to be some movement in this respect in order to make room for further leadership renewal," she said, adding that changes could yet be left to the next conference in 2022.

Alongside the party polls, Prime Minister Lee is expected to deliver a speech to members on Sunday – his first major address to the PAP since the July election.

While it retained its decades-old parliamentary supermajority in polls held amid the pandemic, the party co-founded by Lee Kuan Yew – PM Lee's father and the country's independence leader – ceded ground to the opposition.

The Workers' Party won 10 of the country's 93 seats, sending the most opposition lawmakers to the legislature since the 1960s.

In the aftermath of the vote, commentators said the party's weaker-than-usual showing was down to declining support among younger voters. Inderjit Singh, the former PAP MP, said the party conference was an opportune moment to reflect on the July result.

"I think cadre members are looking forward to hearing from the leaders their analysis and the plans moving forward," he said.

Political scientist Bilveer Singh said it was likely that party members would want answers as to the PAP's less-than-stellar showing, given that it recorded 61.2 per cent of the national vote share – lower than the 65 per cent it had hoped for.

"I think there is no running away from the 2020 general election and its results. I don't think Prime Minister Lee can go to the party convention and say 'this was a great general election'," he said. In the aftermath of the polls, Lee said Singaporeans had given the PAP a "clear mandate" though it was not as strong as he hoped for.

"Remember, for the PAP, a 'clear victory' is a diplomatic way of saying 'we did not do as well as we expected'," Singh said. "If true, then why, and who should take the rap?"