

Cabinet changes from Nov 1

Shanmugam is one of four ministers in reshuffle; PM calls ministerial changes a 'natural progression'

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LAW Minister K. Shanmugam will take the helm at the Ministry of Home Affairs, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced yesterday.

In all, three Cabinet ministers will have new appointments while one minister will be promoted, in what was widely seen as part of the process of political renewal.

At the same time, four other political office-holders will be promoted.

The changes will take effect next Monday.

Mr Shanmugam, 51, currently the Second Minister for Home Affairs, first entered the Cabinet in 2008.

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng, 64, will relinquish his Home Affairs portfolio and become Coordinating Minister for National Security.

In addition, he will head the new National Population and Talent Division to be created next year. Professor S. Jayakumar, 71, who is to give up the post of Coordinating Minister for National Security, will stay on as Senior Minister.

He will remain in charge of coordinating policies on climate change and overseeing foreign policy matters that cut across different ministries.

Mr Lui Tuck Yew, Acting Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, 49, will be promoted to full minister in the same ministry.

Two of the four government office-holders who are moving up are Senior Parliamentary Secretaries Amy Khor and Masagos Zulkifli.

They will become Ministers of State.

The other two are Parliamentary Secretaries Sam Tan and Maliki Osman, who will become Senior Parliamentary Secretaries.

All four office-holders will remain in their current ministries.

'This reshuffle is a minor adjustment,' the Prime Minister said in a statement.

'For the ministers, it is a natural progression... For the senior parliamentary secretaries and parliamentary secretaries, the promotions are to recognise their abilities and contributions.

'Therefore they have been appointed in their present posts and there are no changes in postings,' he added.

The announcement was made just before PM Lee left for the 17th Asean Summit in Hanoi, Vietnam, last night.

Political watchers and MPs saw the change as part of the Government's drive to rejuvenate the Cabinet in incremental steps.

'This is the passing of the baton,' said MP Alvin Yeo, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs and Law. 'The party has always been concerned with self-renewal, so this is all part of the ongoing process.'

Long-time MP Inderjit Singh noted that Prof Jayakumar was making way for younger Cabinet colleagues.

'He has been slowly relinquishing his responsibilities,' he said. 'This is a process that started much earlier, when he gave up the Law Ministry to Mr Shanmugam.'

Former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin said Prof Jayakumar, an MP in East Coast GRC, could step down as an MP in the next general election, due by February 2012.

'It's part of the eventual succession plan,' Mr Zulkifli said. 'This is not a case where you make changes because of pressing political necessity.'

He added that Mr Lui's promotion was a vote of confidence from the PM.

Responding to the reshuffle, Prof Jayakumar said that he was pleased to be changing guard with Mr Wong, a long-time Home Affairs Minister who would be familiar with national security issues.

'I cannot think of anyone better equipped for the job,' he said.

Mr Wong, in a statement to The Straits Times, said his departure came with 'a tinge of sadness' on leaving a post he has held for 17 years, although he was confident Mr Shanmugam would get the Home Team's full support.

Mr Lui outlined some of his priorities as a full minister, including the Government's programme to provide a next generation broadband network that will give quicker Internet access.

Political commentators interviewed were divided over the timing of the reshuffle and its implications for the election. Several said the Cabinet changes demolished the rumour of an election in December.

Said senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Dr Gillian Koh: 'Having done a reshuffle, you would want people to fit into their new role before an election... Why would you reshuffle now if an election is imminent?'

Mr Singh said the new line-up ensured a third-generation leadership would be in place before the election.

'The PM can now choose to call an election any time he likes,' he said.