

DPM Wong's choice of deputies the 'safe' option: Observers

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SINGAPORE - In selecting two experienced ministers as his deputies in his first Cabinet, Singapore's next prime minister Lawrence Wong made a safe choice for both the country and the People's Action Party (PAP), observers said.

They noted that the leadership transition from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to Deputy Prime Minister Wong occurs at a time of geopolitical and economic uncertainty, with a general election to be held within the next 18 months.

DPM Wong, 51, who will be sworn in as Singapore's fourth prime minister on May 15, will continue as Finance Minister.

He announced on May 13 that his two deputies will be Minister for Trade and Industry Gan Kim Yong and current Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, 63.

Describing Mr Gan's promotion as a "political masterstroke", Dr Mustafa Izzuddin, a senior international affairs analyst at Solaris Strategies Singapore, said having two experienced DPMs will be pivotal in mitigating uncertainty and unpredictability in the governing of Singapore.

"This is a principled pragmatist Cabinet that will continue playing a pivotal role in enhancing the domestic social compact and navigating the Singapore vessel in external waters amid both geopolitical and geo-economic headwinds and tailwinds," he added.

PM Lee's first Cabinet in 2004 also comprised two deputy prime ministers who were senior to him – Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam and Professor S. Jayakumar.

Several observers said, though, that the choice of Mr Gan in particular came as a surprise.

SMU associate professor of law Eugene Tan said that while Mr Gan is deserving, well recognised and even-tempered, not appointing a contemporary as one of his DPMs could lead some to wonder if it is because DPM Wong could not find a peer he can work closely with and whether the 4G (fourth-generation) team "lacks cohesion and unity".

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh also pointed out that Mr Gan was the party chairman but stood down in November 2022.

"So, politically, you cannot blame anyone for making the mistake of thinking that his trajectory would take him in the opposite direction," she said.

Mr Gan, 65, does not currently hold a position in the ruling party's top decision-making body, its central executive committee (CEC).

DPM Wong was chosen as the leader of the PAP's 4G team in April 2022 and made deputy secretary-general of the CEC, while DPM Heng was appointed chairman.

The party leadership is currently supported by two other prominent 4G leaders – Education Minister Chan Chun Sing, 54, and National Development Minister Desmond Lee, 47 – who were installed as assistant secretary-generals in November 2022.

The new line-up announced on May 13 had Mr Chan, Mr Lee and other ministers retaining the portfolios they currently hold in PM Lee's Cabinet.

This means Mr Teo Chee Hean, 69, will remain Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security; Dr Ng Eng Hen, 65, will remain Defence Minister; Mr K. Shanmugam, 65, will stay on as Home Affairs and Law Minister; and Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, 63, will continue as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

DPM Wong had signalled in April that only “marginal adjustments here and there” are to be expected with his handover.

He added then that it has never been the case in Singapore where all older ministers step down at the same time whenever there is a leadership transition.

NUS associate professor of political science Bilveer Singh said: “This minor reshuffle is more symbolic than substantive.”

He added that the important aspect of the new Cabinet is the promotion of the younger PAP leaders while Mr Gan's appointment signified continuity. However, the 4G leaders such as Mr Chan, Mr Ong Ye Kung and Mr Desmond Lee still hold key strategic posts.

Former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin said that how the rest of the 4G leadership fare in the election could affect promotions in the Cabinet reshuffle after the election.

“There is no hurry to have a clean sweep and change to the 4G. For now, the focus is the election,” he said, noting that drastic changes to the Cabinet could affect voters' confidence.

Likewise, former MP Inderjit Singh opined that DPM Wong expects that voters will want to elect a proven team.

“There are pros and cons to this. The outcome of the general election will then be a personal mandate for DPM Wong and not so much for the 4G team,” he said.

On May 13, DPM Wong said that if his government is re-elected, he plans to rotate the younger 4G ministers in different portfolios and give them wider exposure and experience.

He also announced promotions in the new line-up including Ms Low Yen Ling, who will be promoted from Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth, and Trade and Industry, to senior minister of state for the same portfolios.

Minister of State Desmond Tan will become senior minister of state, while Senior Parliamentary Secretary Rahayu Mahzam will be promoted to minister of state and take up a new appointment in the Ministry of Communications and Information. She will continue in the Ministry of Health, but relinquish her portfolio in the Law Ministry.

With regard to the expanded list of nine senior ministers of state, Prof Tan said: “The long list suggests the concerted effort to get the 4G and 4.5G junior office holders ready to take on

bigger assignments in the years ahead. So we can expect some of the SMSes (senior ministers of state) to be promoted to full ministers after the GE.”

DPM Wong said on May 13 that more “fresh blood” is needed as some of the older ministers are likely to retire either at the end of this term or shortly after.

Before the 2020 General Election, former transport minister Khaw Boon Wan retired from politics aged 67 after 19 years of service. Meanwhile, former minister for communications and information Yaacob Ibrahim stepped down from the Cabinet in 2018 and retired from politics in 2020, aged 64, after 23 years of service.

Observers listed Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean, 69, and Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen, 65, as senior statesmen who may be stepping aside as part of the renewal process.

SM Teo made his political debut in the 1992 by-election in Marine Parade GRC and was promoted to full minister in 1996, while Dr Ng made his political debut in the 2001 General Election and became a minister in 2004.

Mr Zulkifli, who refrained from naming ministers who could be stepping down, said: “Whether they retain the senior ministers or not, the system is such that they still can provide guidance when needed. They’re in the system and that’s how it’s always worked.”