

Heng Swee Keat's decision catches many by surprise; Pritam Singh pledges to work with next 4G leader

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Singapore's leadership succession has been reset by [Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's decision to step aside as future prime minister](#), but the transition to the ruling party's fourth generation leaders must continue, said Emeritus Senior Minister and former prime minister Goh Chok Tong on Thursday (April 8).

Mr Goh noted that Mr Heng had made "a selfless and courageous decision in the interest of Singapore".

His comments followed the announcement by Mr Heng that he would make way for a younger minister to take over as leader of the ruling party's fourth-generation group of ministers.

The development stunned many people, including Leader of the Opposition and Workers' Party chief Pritam Singh, who told The Straits Times: "The news of DPM Heng's decision to step down as Singapore's next PM came as a surprise.

He added: "As the Opposition in Parliament, my Workers' Party colleagues and I will work with whoever is selected by the 4G PAP, and the Government of the day, for the betterment of Singapore and Singaporeans."

At a press conference on Thursday at the Istana, Mr Heng, who turns 60 this year, cited his age, and the fact that the Covid-19 crisis will not come to an end soon as reasons for his decision.

Flanked by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and others, he said that with succession plans delayed by the pandemic, he would be older by the time he takes over as prime minister and will have a shorter runway.

He said a younger leader would be better able to rebuild Singapore after the pandemic and lead the next phase of the nation-building effort.

On Mr Heng's decision, Mr Singh said: "We wish DPM Heng and his family well, and the best of health. Like many Singaporeans, we await the forthcoming Cabinet changes, and the 4G PAP leadership's next choice for PM."

Ms Nydia Ngiow, senior director of BowerGroupAsia Singapore, which advises companies on government affairs and policies, described Mr Heng as "a victim of the pandemic", which she noted had uprooted many best laid plans.

But she, as well as other political watchers, believe the timing of the announcement also points to results of the general election last year at play, in which Mr Heng [led a team that retained East Coast GRC](#), though by a lower margin than in the previous election.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director for research Gillian Koh said: "Any political watcher in Singapore must admit that there were Singaporeans questioning the political future of Mr Heng after the General Election in 2020."

"While Mr Heng dismissed any linkage whatsoever between today's announcement and the GE, in the minds of some Singaporeans, they will not be all that surprised by the announcement."

This was echoed by former PAP MP Inderjit Singh, who said the overall result of the GE, in which the PAP clinched 61.24 per cent of the votes, did not indicate widespread support for Mr Heng's leadership. "He must have felt the 4G needs more time to gain greater support and time is not on his side," he added.

Some observers saw Mr Heng's move as a testament to the resilience of Singapore's system, adding that it was unlikely to affect political stability and trust in the Government.

Former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin and former PAP MP Hong Hai, MP for Kampong Chai Chee from 1989 to 1991, saw it as demonstrating the PAP's ability to adapt to the dynamic nature of the political landscape.

Said Mr Zulkifli: "The party is strong enough to say that if it's time to make a change, it's time to make a change. Whether at an individual or party level, they know at the end of the day that it is the best man and best team that should run the country. It demonstrates the strength of our system."

Observers like Singapore Management University Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan and Dr Koh said having PM Lee remain at the helm in the meantime maintains stability and assurance.

Prof Tan said: "It's a setback but it won't affect political stability, trust in the government. I would be worried if we proceeded with plans knowing they are not in the best interests of Singapore and her people."

National University of Singapore Associate Professor of Sociology Tan Ern Ser said while the change may look on the surface like a "serious disruption of the succession plan", the 4G team probably had a ranked order of succession in place all along, and would be able to activate the next plan.

But Dr Mustafa Izzuddin, a senior analyst at management consultancy firm Solaris Strategies Singapore, said Singaporeans will understandably be concerned about the development.

He added: "It is incumbent for the Government to provide clarity and certainty on its leadership succession plans."

Meanwhile, Progress Singapore Party secretary-general Francis Yuen said: "DPM Heng stepping down as the designated successor to the PM in a time of major economic challenges

to our country does not augur well for Singapore. We are concerned that it will shake the confidence of Singaporeans and foreign investors.”

As the news settles in, all eyes will be on the 4G team that will now have to select a new leader.

Said ESM Goh of the developments: "I prefer to study the implications of DPM's decision, observe how the 4G Ministers will step up to the plate, before making further considered comments."