

Now PM Lee is clearly in charge, say political watchers

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A mixture of sadness and optimism greeted the shock announcement yesterday that Singapore's two most senior political leaders would be leaving the Cabinet.

Sadness, because the impending retirement of Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong marks the close of a critical chapter in Singapore's political history.

Optimism, because it marked the beginning of a new era, which will ultimately define the legacy of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Political watchers, former ministers and MPs past and present told The Sunday Times yesterday that one clear result of the two high-profile retirements was to remove any doubt over who calls the shots in government.

Said former Joo Chiat MP Chan Soo Sen: 'I would say, this certainly makes this general election a real watershed in that when the new Cabinet comes out, it will be really seen as PM Lee's Cabinet, with him clearly in charge.'

'All of us who work in government have no doubt that he is in charge, but with two former PMs sitting in the Cabinet, it doesn't look that way to some.'

The sentiment was echoed by Dr Kevin Tan, adjunct professor of law at the National University of Singapore, who added that the move was good for the People's Action Party (PAP).

He said: 'Anything that goes wrong will fall on PM Lee's shoulders. That's good, because he's accountable. It's a positive thing for the public perception of the PAP. MM is 87. This shows they are serious about change.'

Jurong GRC MP Halimah Yacob put it this way: 'This is a significant moment in our history and marks the passing of an era. It also shows a very confident Prime Minister who wants to have a stronger stamp on how he steers his Cabinet and Singapore's direction.'

For Mr Ong Keng Yong, director of the Institute of Policy Studies, the announcement, coming exactly a week after Polling Day, reflects how serious the PAP is about responding to ground sentiment.

'This is the right moment for PM to make changes,' he said. 'It will impress on the electorate that the position they have taken, and the reaction they have given during the recent campaign, is not left unattended.'

Though the PAP still received more than 60 per cent of the votes, it was its worst performance since independence. But Mr Ong stressed that the retirements would have happened sooner or later, no matter what the result.

'Even if the PAP had, say, more than 65 per cent, I think they would still have made this move, maybe just not immediately after the elections,' he said.

Retired MP Othman Haron Eusofe was certain that the experience and wisdom of both leaders would not be lost completely.

He said: 'What's different is basically how direct the interaction is. Before, they were part of the Cabinet and they were there from the beginning when policies were being discussed. Now they will offer their thoughts and advice when they see something wrong or if they are consulted.'

First-generation minister Othman Wok said the retirements would be felt more by older Singaporeans than younger ones.

'For the older generation like me, people will definitely feel very sad,' he said.

'It's too early to say what will happen. Let's see how the younger leaders take this loss of two great leaders.'

One area where the absence will have a big impact though is in terms of Singapore's foreign relationships.

Mr Chan observed that MM Lee and SM Goh had long served as 'special envoys' for the country.

'And this is where my concern is. The new foreign minister would not have the kind of network that (Foreign Minister) George Yeo had, and he won't have these two working almost as special envoys to open doors for Singapore,' he said.

Perhaps fittingly, given that the two leaders wanted to make way for a younger generation, there was a wave of tributes coming in through social media website Facebook.

Mr Lim Swee Say, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, used the site to convey his thanks to the two leaders: 'I am grateful to our former PMs for changing Singapore as a nation and changing our life as Singaporeans for the better. Thank you, MM. Thank you, SM.'

Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan, in turn, wrote that the retirements meant the younger generation would have to step up.

He said: '(The) decision of MM and SM to leave the Cabinet marks the beginning of a new era. Younger generation will now have to prove their worth and build on what the older generation has achieved. This is our Singapore