

Observers see shape of next generation of leaders emerging

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Observers and MPs yesterday saw the changes in the Cabinet and ministries as the first of several steps the Prime Minister must take in this term to stay ahead of the challenges facing Singapore.

The promotion of Mr Tan Chuan-Jin, Mr Lawrence Wong and Mr Chan Chun Sing - all of whom entered politics last year - shows renewal is clearly on the minds of the People's Action Party (PAP) leaders, said the analysts.

But there is no clear indication yet if the next Prime Minister is going to be one of the three acting ministers, touted to be key members of the "fourth-generation leadership".

Said Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Inderjit Singh: "The race is still the same. But now they are being tested more. They are given more responsibilities to see how they handle them."

Others, however, feel there is room for more leaders to emerge.

Joo Chiat MP Charles Chong said he would like to "see more fourth-generation leaders be inducted sooner rather than later".

PM Lee Hsien Loong also said yesterday he expects to do further reshuffles "from time to time during this term".

The National University of Singapore's Reuben Wong said this year is comparable to 2001, when seven office-holders - including Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam and National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan - entered politics.

However, there was a dip in 2006, he noted. Of the PAP MPs who entered politics that year, only one - Mr Lui Tuck Yew - became a minister in his first term.

While things are "more hopeful" now, the PAP could do more to strengthen the depth and diversity of its talent, said Dr Wong.

The appointment of Ms Grace Fu as a full minister and Ms Indranee Rajah as a Senior Minister of State was universally applauded, but former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong said there is "still some way to go for more female representation in the Cabinet".

The restructuring of two ministries into three - focusing separately on culture, community and youth, social and family development, and communications and information - showed the Government's sharpened focus on social cohesion at a time of growing stratification, said observers.

Mr Singh and the Institute of Policy Studies' Gillian Koh said the new Social and Family Development Ministry could pay more attention to the widening income gap and help society level up.

Mr Seah Kian Peng, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for community development, youth and sports, hailed the emphasis on building resilient families as a step

to social cohesion. But Mr Siew cautioned that "social cohesion is a broad concept. I'm not sure whether it can be done by just one ministry."

Dr Koh said the new Communications and Information Ministry underlined the importance of public communication at a time when people have more diverse needs.

"But just talking about it would be scratching the surface. People want to be more engaged in the process of policy formulation."