

What's next for the PAP

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Top task is leadership renewal

As the dust settles on its election victory, the top task for the People's Action Party (PAP) is to prepare its next generation of leaders and move them into place.

Leadership renewal was a key thrust of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's messages during the nine-day campaign. Now, all eyes are on who will be named when he announces his new Cabinet in the week ahead.

Mr Lee had urged Singaporeans to vote for him and his team. And they did, with the PAP winning an unexpected 69.9 per cent of the vote share.

With the refreshed mandate, PM Lee must firm up the leadership for the next transition by 2020.

So, who is the fourth-generation leadership likely to comprise?

As the dust settles on GE 2015, Insight looks at what lies ahead for the PAP, which got its strongest mandate since 2001, as well as what's next for the opposition.

Political observers expect to see several newbies who featured heavily during the campaign. Indeed, at a lunchtime election rally, PM Lee identified Mr Ng Chee Meng, Mr Ong Ye Kung, Mr Chee Hong Tat and Mr Amrin Amin as potential leaders.

As former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin puts it: "If he named them, it is a sure sign that these new MPs will be given portfolios so as to test them. He must have given much thought to even suggest these names during the elections, especially against a background of a tight campaign."

Institute of Policy Studies' Dr Gillian Koh expects at least half to be named acting ministers, with the rest becoming junior ministers.

This would be in line with the Class of 2011 who form the nucleus of the fourth-generation leadership: Following that election, Mr Heng Swee Keat, at age 50, made it to full minister. Mr Chan Chun Sing was appointed an acting minister, while Mr Tan Chuan-Jin and Mr Lawrence Wong became ministers of state, before moving up to be acting ministers a year later. All four are now full-fledged ministers.

History suggests that speed matters. Those who make it to the highest levels of Singapore's political leadership have some things in common: They are identified very early and given a lot to do.

Out of nearly 40 Cabinet ministers since the 1970s, those who rose to the very pinnacle first became full ministers typically in under three years, the fastest among their cohorts, and were given key roles.

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong entered politics in 1976, and was made full minister in 1979. PM Lee entered politics in 1984, was tasked to head an Economic Committee in 1985, and was made full minister in 1987.

Adding to the urgency of renewal is that the next round of leaders must evolve more quickly. PM Lee fought five elections before taking office in 2004, at 52. His successor will not have that benefit. Mr Lee, 63, has said he hoped not to continue as PM beyond the age of 70.

Dr Koh believes his potential successor will become deputy prime minister within this term.

LACK OF GROUND EXPERIENCE

But veteran MP Inderjit Singh, who retired at the latest election, thinks the next generation is already disadvantaged by the shorter run-up.

"It would have been ideal if some of the ministers and potential PM came in during the 2006 elections and spent at least a term as an MP before taking any ministerial position," he tells Insight. "The biggest challenge for all the new ministers and the future leadership is the lack of ground experience as most of the named leaders come from what are considered the 'elites' of society, who had accelerated careers in the civil service or the military."

Among the four names Mr Lee mentioned, only Mr Amrin, a lawyer, bucks the trend. Mr Ng is the highest-ranking military man to enter politics, while Mr Ong and Mr Chee were high-flying civil servants. The challenge is for these potential ministers, especially whoever emerges as likely prime minister, to display "the ability to connect with stakeholders, find the opportunities to stamp their mark and improve areas of public policy", Dr Koh says.

The lack of experience could be tempered by the promotion of second ministers to full-fledged positions in the next reshuffle, points out Mr Zulkifli. With more senior ministers still in Parliament, they can help with the transition, he adds.

Leadership renewal is not just restricted to the highest echelons - it is expected to trickle down to party branches as well. Activists tell Insight that younger branch secretaries and the involvement of those under-35 in newer technologies, like social media campaigning, were integral to the PAP's strong election win.

Still, the main focus is on who will be the next prime minister. Mr Inderjit says: "Now that we don't have Lee Kuan Yew to help the new leader any more, a clear-cut successor is important. But it's also important for the PAP that their choice of successor gets the full support of all the ministers and MPs. And so it is important that he or she stands out very clearly."

PAP: Activists say that the involvement of under-35-year-olds in newer technologies, like social media campaigning, was integral to the party's win. WP: There are rumblings of discontent among some segments of the party over the leadership's apparent preference for newer faces.