

A method to Singapore's Cabinet renewal

Retiring of old guard in line with the People's Action Party's emphasis on leadership renewal, say analysts

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The impending departure of People's Action Party (PAP) stalwarts S Jayakumar and Lim Boon Heng from the political scene will bring the total number of ministers who have retired in recent years to five, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong moulds the next generation of leaders to bring the Republic forward.

Professor Jayakumar, 71, and Mr Lim, 63, join Dr Tony Tan, 71, Dr Lee Boon Yang, 63, and Mr Yeo Cheow Tong, 63, as Cabinet ministers who have stepped down since Mr Lee took office in August 2004.

Currently, 10 of the 21 ministers — including Prof Jayakumar and Mr Lim, who will not be standing in the coming GE — were elected in the last three elections in 1997, 2001 and 2006.

Analysts and Members of Parliament told *Today* that the injection of new blood — and the stepping down of old guard — in the Cabinet is in line with the PAP's emphasis on leadership renewal. And some noted that the pace of renewal could get faster in the future, dictated by the changing demands — both of the electorate and of aspiring political leaders.

Political analyst Hussin Mutalib said that it was important for the ruling party to send a signal to the educated and IT-savvy Generation Y voters that their “newer aspirations will be taken care of by younger leaders whose ideas are in sync with the new Singapore”.

The National University of Singapore political science professor added: “Not replacing (the old guard) will endanger the PM's public promise of leadership renewal — and enable the Opposition camp to exploit this as yet another election issue.”

Noting that there is a good age spread among the incumbent Cabinet ministers, veteran MP Charles Chong said the Government would have to “keep up” the renewal process and “induct younger potential ministers to come in”.

Fellow MP Inderjit Singh pointed out that, while the pace of renewal in the Cabinet has been constant, the rate of transition to office holders for new candidates has cranked up a notch since the 2001 GE.

Mr Singh said he expects “five to eight” new faces to be appointed Ministers of State — positions which will test out the calibre of potential full ministers as well as allow them to gain experience — soon after the coming GE.

He added that the younger ministers and those appointed as office holders after the coming GE will be able to take over the reins, given the stability of the Government.

As the Prime Minister put it in a 2009 interview, the current Cabinet line-up is a “transition team” — which balances younger ministers with the “energy and fresh ideas and approaches”, and older ones with “experience and advice to give, especially in this crisis”.

On the Cabinet renewal process, Mr Lee had added: “Each step is careful, measured, but cumulatively and progressively over the years, the effect is of a substantial decisive change.”

The possibility of a faster pace of renewal was mooted by Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong recently, as he noted the need to meet the aspirations of new candidates.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies noted the “chicken-and-egg” process in recruiting individuals of high political and managerial calibre into politics.

Such people are needed so that they can hit the ground running and manage government soon after Polling Day — but they also need to know they are on track before they can actually be persuaded to leave their current positions, she said.

“It is also difficult to return them to their original positions especially if they come from the business sector which is so competitive,” she said.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan pointed out that a “faster pace of renewal is probably inevitable but it must be calibrated so that change does not result in compromised policy-making, and encouraging short-term thinking”.

Assistant Professor Tan added: “We should be guided by what is needed to ensure that sound policy-making rather than catering to personal ambitions.”

He reiterated that there should be no downside — should the learning curve becomes shorter — if potential ministers are exposed to different roles, and adequately prepared for increasing responsibilities.