

An urgent need to inject new blood: Observers

Average age of ministers falls as PM fast-tracks Government renewal process

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In a little over a year, the average age of the ministers in the Republic's Cabinet has fallen from about 59 — before last year's General Election — to 52, based on the line-up unveiled on Tuesday by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

The latest reshuffle saw Ms Grace Fu, 48; Mr Lawrence Wong, 40; and Mr Tan Chuan-Jin, 43, join the Cabinet.

With effect from yesterday, Ms Fu became Minister in the Prime Minister's Office while Mr Tan became the Acting Manpower Minister. Mr Wong will be the Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth from Nov 1.

The addition of the trio lowered the average age of the Cabinet further after several long serving ministers — including the Republic's first two Prime Ministers, Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Mr Goh Chok Tong — stepped down after the GE last year.

Members of Parliament (MPs) and political analysts attributed the relatively youthful line-up to the urgent need to inject new blood into the ranks and ensure they have enough time to learn the ropes. There is also the matter of grooming the next Prime Minister, the observers noted.

Looking at the bigger picture, they pointed out that a younger Cabinet was also a nod to the increasing demands — including the need to engage more, particularly on social media and with the youth — placed on political leaders.

Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh noted that senior government leaders have said that it takes at least five years to groom a minister.

“It is necessary to fast-track the renewal process to allow time, experience and exposure to throw up suitable candidates for the role of the next PM; they have to be obvious to the party and the public over five to, even 10 years, when the current PM will be almost 70 years old,” she said.

Veteran Member of Parliament Inderjit Singh said there was a need to play catch up, after the 2006 cohort did not produce as many ministers as one might have hoped. “So now, we are five years behind,” he noted.

Nominated MP Eugene Tan said there is also an “imperative to reach out and connect with younger Singaporeans”, while Chua Chu Kang Group Representation Constituency MP Zaqy Mohamad reiterated that it was necessary for the current batch of political leaders to connect with the segments of population that will be led in the next lap by the new PM.

In a recent article, Daily Telegraph Assistant Editor Philip Johnston noted the falling average age of the United Kingdom Cabinet — it now stands at 50, one of the youngest around the world — as “people worship at the altar of youth” in the country. He wrote: “Youth is not necessarily a barrier to high office, nor should it be; but it inevitably is the handmaiden of inexperience — and this combination can be dangerous.”

On whether the same concerns apply to Singapore's political leaders, Assistant Professor Tan did not think so.

While he noted that four ministries — out of a total of 16 — would be helmed by ministers with less than 18 months' experience, he said: "Critics will say it is too lopsided, that the Cabinet is now too lightweight ... But I don't think the Cabinet is bereft of experience. In any case, we have reached a stage where there is no alternative, with only eight years to go before our current PM steps down."

Mr Zaqq added: "Although they may be short on political experience, some in the new batch were senior civil servants, so they aren't entirely new to Government. To some extent, there are concerns, but the PM is mitigating risks by testing them first in certain portfolios, for instance."

With the average age of the ministers falling, while the general population ages, Dr Koh did not think that a younger Cabinet would alienate older Singaporeans.

She said that the ministers were diverse enough in terms of representing different age groups. Mr Zaqq also pointed out that, if necessary, the more senior backbenchers can assist a younger minister when it comes to engaging older Singaporeans.

In any case, political scientist Lam Peng Er noted, youth brings vitality to any political party and would be better than having "increasingly ageing politicians".

At the party level, there was also a need to groom leaders to fill the shoes of Mr Lee and Mr Goh, for instance, in anchoring constituencies for the coming GEs.