

Cabinet reshuffle aimed at strengthening 4G collective leadership: Analysts

Kelly Ng, Siau Ming En & Faris Mokhtar

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The latest round of Cabinet changes appears to be more about building breadth and depth of the fourth-generation leadership team, and less about putting individuals — including the three frontrunners to succeed Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong — through their paces, political analysts said.

They felt that overall, Mr Lee took a cautious approach as far as the identity of the next Prime Minister is concerned, in spite of the fact that there were significant movements among the lower rungs of political office, with Senior Ministers of State and Parliamentary Secretaries swapping portfolios or getting promoted for example. Several backbenchers were also appointed to office.

While the reshuffle announced on Tuesday (April 24) involved changes in all but one ministry, 11 out of 15 ministries will not have a new minister at the helm.

The analysts were divided on whether there will be another round of changes in the near term. Some pointed to the need for the office holders to sink their teeth in their new portfolios, but others expressed concern at the short runway left for the next Prime Minister to gain the necessary experience.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said that Mr Lee "seems to be taking his time, doing it cautiously, building things up step by step, giving people time and space to grow into leadership positions".

She described the Cabinet changes as "cautious moves to raise positions of much younger leaders".

Dr Felix Tan, an associate lecturer at SIM Global Education, said Mr Lee had focused on "picking a team that whoever is in the running (to be the next PM) is able to gain respect from and work with". "Bear in mind, whoever becomes the Prime Minister, this will be his or her team.... (The PM will) need their backing, and will need to work with all of them," he added.

Noting that most of the changes involved less senior political officeholders, Singapore Management University associate professor Eugene Tan said it appears that by and large, Mr Lee wants the Cabinet ministers to build deep experience and expertise, going for the "long 'T' vertical bar".

Mr Lee has stressed the need for the Republic's leadership team to include members with different strengths, as no one leader can fulfil the criteria for competent leadership. Speaking at a conference in Shanghai earlier this month, he said: "We need to find a capable team who can work closely together, who can inspire the people's confidence and bring the nation forward, carve out a new path and make Singaporeans proud."

In January, Mr Lee made it clear that no new Deputy Prime Minister would be appointed in the reshuffle, adding that it "will take a little bit longer" for the Prime Minister-designate to emerge.

Most observers expect another Cabinet shake-up in about one to two years, before the next General Election due by January 2021.

"That is about the right time (when) you can say that they have acquired deep enough experience and expertise in their (respective) portfolios," said Assoc Prof Tan, referring to ministers who have kept their posts since 2015.

The next reshuffle will likely see the retirement of more veteran ministers, which will "free up some leadership positions", he added.

Murdoch University's Associate Professor Terence Lee, who researches on Singapore and Malaysia politics, expects Mr Lee to name new deputies in the next reshuffle to "indicate in clearer terms" who the Republic's next PM will be.

However, former People's Action Party Member of Parliament (MP) Sin Boon Ann stressed the need for the younger ministers to be given time to "sink their teeth into the policies they are working on". He said: "Another shake-up too soon will be unsettling for the Government."

Mr Sin, who was an MP for Tampines GRC from 1997 to 2011, said a shorter runway does not necessarily compromise the next Prime Minister's leadership calibre.

"We cannot assume that we cannot do what we had set out to do, simply because the runway is shorter," he said.

Next pm: who has the edge?

The observers felt that Mr Lee was still "keeping his cards close to his chest" by dropping no hints on who his successor could be.

Still, some suggested that following the Cabinet reshuffle, Mr Chan Chun Sing, who will be taking over the reins at the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), could have an edge over the other two frontrunners, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat and Education Minister Ong Ye Kung.

Both Dr Koh and Assoc Prof Tan said it was notable that Mr Chan was moving back into the thick of the action, having spent the last three years in the labour movement.

Said Dr Koh: "It's significant that (Mr Chan) is swinging back into Government... in MTI, and not other ministries because to be on track for premiership, (one needs the) MTI or Ministry of Finance (MOF) feather on your cap."

She added that there is recognition that Mr Ong — who was elected to Parliament in 2015, four years after Mr Chan and Mr Heng — was "a little late" in joining the Government. While remaining in the "heavyweight" Education Ministry keeps him in contention, a move to MTI, MOF or the Ministry of Defence is "de rigeur for one to be a frontrunner for premiership", she said.

Assoc Prof Tan said that among the three, Mr Chan, 48, may have "checked off more boxes", given the varied portfolios he has taken on since entering politics in 2011.

Mr Chan was Minister for Social and Family Development before he became labour chief in 2015. He has also been involved in the grassroots as deputy chairman of the People's Association.

The Cabinet changes will also see him becoming the Minister-in-charge of the Civil Service, taking over from Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean. This "gives (Mr Chan) another pathway to a significant stakeholder group", said Assoc Prof Tan.

Nanyang Technological University political scientist Woo Jun Jie said it was "surprising" that Mr Heng and Mr Ong kept their portfolios. "It appears that the focus is now on consolidating and implementing the programmes that they had initiated, rather than exposing them to new roles and responsibilities," he said. "For the time being, it would appear that Mr Chan is a particularly strong candidate."

Nevertheless, some analysts reiterated that Mr Heng and Mr Ong are still in the running.

Mr Ong, 48, has a "full canvas to paint on" as the minister helming the entire education portfolio following the Cabinet changes, said Assoc Prof Tan.

On the other hand, Mr Heng — a former high-flying civil servant who was Education Minister between 2011 and 2015 — has had extensive experience in the public service, and he has overseen several important national initiatives, including the Our Singapore Conversation project. Mr Heng, 56, had also led a steering committee that planned Singapore's Golden Jubilee celebrations, and is currently the chairman of the Future Economy Council.

Noting that all three frontrunners are helming a ministry on their own following the Cabinet changes, Assoc Prof Lee added: "The competition has just heated up because we can glean from this reshuffle that the Prime Minister may be looking for them to compete for the top job by demonstrating their competence in their ministry."