

Deciding who will be the first among equals

Next PM needs buy-in from both his peers and the people

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If the career paths of Singapore's two most recent Prime Ministers are anything to go by, it appears likely that the next person to succeed Mr Lee Hsien Long is already among the new faces that the People's Action Party (PAP) has unveiled so far.

Singapore's second Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, was in the elite administrative track in the Civil Service before his appointment to the Government-linked Neptune Orient Lines, while his successor Mr Lee was a Brigadier-General in the Singapore Armed Forces before his entry into politics.

Among the slate of new PAP candidates formally introduced so far, three were from the administrative service: National Trades Union Congress assistant secretary-general Ong Ye Kung, 42, former Energy Market Authority chief executive Lawrence Wong, 39, and former Monetary Authority of Singapore managing director Heng Swee Keat, 49.

Another two were former army generals: Mr Chan Chun Sing, 41, and Mr Tan Chuan Jin, 42.

Political watchers as well as Members of Parliament have differing views, though, if the search is over.

Three-term MP Inderjit Singh said: "It will definitely be someone out of these five, but there is no clear leader now ... The one who can win the hearts of the people and also show superior performance will be it."

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh added: "Looking at the track record — how past and current PMs have been selected, and to the extent that the PAP is to be predictable and nothing else changes — the candidates do show promise to be the next PM."

But the caveat is that "the future can throw up different scenarios, which may make leaders of people we don't quite think of to begin with", Dr Koh said.

Political watchers have also pointed out that the two former generals have been placed in Tanjong Pagar and Marine Parade GRCs respectively, two constituencies helmed by past PMs. "They seem to be functioning as second in command in the GRCs, which would indicate a certain amount of trust," noted one observer.

Mr Lee, who assumed the premiership at age 52 and is 59 this year, had said in a Reuters interview last year that Singapore "should not have a prime minister who is 70 years old or more than 70 years old".

Mr Lee had added: "I mean the physical demands of the job, you can still be there, but you will not be doing it full justice. And you have to be in sync with the new generation of people. You may be in touch, but you are not of that generation."

Assuming that Mr Lee is planning to step down in about a decade, his successor should ideally be in his late 30s to early 40s now — which would appear to rule out Mr Heng.

Some analysts noted that a strong grasp of the economy and finance, while crucial to be a Prime Minister of Singapore, comes at the political level.

But there may not be a cookie-cutter formula as to who the next PM should be. Political analyst Eugene Tan pointed out: “We shouldn’t write off the current MPs ... The new candidates may not be suitable for higher political office, or they may find politics not their cup of tea.”

Former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin added: “Lee Hsien Loong will be around for a long time. By then, the conditions of the world may ultimately dictate what sort of PM Singapore will need. It could very well be someone from the private sector.”

And the party could still spring a few surprises, though. PAP MP Ong Kian Min related the example of how, back then, Mr Goh was not Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew’s first choice but bowed to pressure from the Cabinet which supported Mr Goh. “This really shows that it is not the decision of just a few people, but of everyone. The successor needs buy-in from both his peers and the people.”

As PAP organising secretary (special duties) Ng Eng Hen — who had coordinated PAP’s recruitment efforts for the coming GE — had put it in a 2008 interview, from the group of new candidates will have to emerge future ministers, who will then have to “decide among themselves who is *primus inter pares*, first among equals”.