

‘More exposure for fresh faces, younger ministers’ in new Cabinet

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SINGAPORE — With leadership succession among the issues at the forefront of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s mind, the new Cabinet — which he will unveil within the next two weeks — may be enlarged to expose new faces, while seats may be shuffled to expose younger ministers to more portfolios.

And while five ministers retired from the Cabinet after the 2011 General Election — the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, Mr Mah Bow Tan, Mr Wong Kan Seng and Mr Raymond Lim — with Mr Lim Boon Heng retiring just before the polls, retirements are unlikely to take place immediately this time, said political analysts and Members of Parliament (MPs) interviewed, as Mr Lee is likely to call on veteran Ministers to “mentor” new faces.

The newcomers touted as office-holder material this time include former Chief of Defence Ng Chee Meng, former senior civil servant Chee Hong Tat, and Keppel Corporation director Ong Ye Kung, who was a high-flying civil servant before he quit to join the National Trades Union Congress in 2008.

Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Dr Gillian Koh said with leadership renewal being a key consideration, new MPs with potential will to be put in place to build up experience “haste post haste”.

“I do think, however, that with Mr Chan Chun Sing, Mr Tan Chuan-Jin, Mr Lawrence Wong and Mr Heng Swee Keat already in place, we can expect Mr Ong Ye Kung, Mr Chee Hong Tat and Mr Ng Chee Meng to be moved up quickly.

“I think that it would be good to see some women given heavyweight portfolios and I also expect to see some Malay new faces moving into the junior ranks for government as well,” she said.

Cabinet membership may be enlarged to allow younger office-holders to focus on specific portfolios and learn the ropes from senior Ministers. Chua Chu Kang GRC MP-elect Zaqy Mohamad said: “If (the Prime Minister) wants to do a renewal, then there would be a transition where you see older Ministers mentoring younger ones, or even younger Ministers-of-State. So it may look like an expanded team.”

However, Associate Professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University pointed to the possibility of easing newcomers in slowly. “The Prime Minister might opt to ease them in initially before making changes a year or so into their first appointment ... The fourth generation leadership will need to be mentored and guided and so the steady hands of their senior counterparts will be a boon,” he said.

Apart from Mr Lee himself, incumbent Trade and Industry Minister Lim Hng Kiang was the longest-serving office holder in the 12th Parliament, having been elected into Parliament in 1991 and appointed a Minister of State for National Development.

There were four Cabinet reshuffles after the 2011 election, and National University of Singapore political scientist Hussin Mutalib expected the changes to continue, “in line with the PAP’s practice of rotating and moving around Cabinet appointees to further expose them to new portfolios”.

Political watchers, noting that the newcomers tipped for the Cabinet have civil service and military backgrounds, also were also wary of a lack of diversity. “There is a need to be acutely aware of groupthink, as such practice of thinking or making decisions tends to result in unchallenged, poor-quality decision-making when the Ministers are so alike,” said Assoc Prof Tan.

Assoc Prof Hussin also said the need to strike a balance in terms of gender and race may be a consideration this time, as well as promoting ministers and MPs who did well in the GE.

Tampines GRC MP-elect Baey Yam Keng (Tampines GRC) said there have been attempts to diversify the Cabinet, adding that Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen and Minister in Prime Minister’s Office Grace Fu are among those who come from non-civil service backgrounds. “I think it is also a team effort by the whole Cabinet, and so far Singapore has benefited from that,” he said.

As for the closely-watched Transport Minister hot seat, analysts expected a “seasoned Minister” to fill the spot. “If there is a scope for re-think, consultation, rebuilding a consensus on the issue, then it will be a pairing of an old hand and a fresh face that PAP would want to establish as real premiership material,” said Dr Koh.

Heavyweight ministers might also be appointed for the Health and Manpower Ministries, as new healthcare schemes, foreign manpower and the Central Provident Fund are set to remain hot-button issues in the years’ to come, noted Mr Zaqy and Singapore Institute of Management academic Dr Felix Tan.

Dr Tan also said that the ability of potential office holders to communicate and “connect with the ground” will be a key consideration. “I think the ability to listen to residents, understanding the needs of Singaporeans and being able to connect with the people is crucial,” he said.