

Swee Say's union links 'a plus for Manpower Ministry'

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SINGAPORE — While labour chief Lim Swee Say had previously talked about his wish to retire from politics, his appointment as Manpower Minister next month was yesterday (April 8) hailed by political analysts and the business community who felt he still has a lot to contribute, particularly in his new portfolio, given his experience representing the unions and workers.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said Mr Lim, 60, was the “best immediate choice” to lead the Ministry of Manpower.

Citing Mr Lim's long-standing links with the unions and the business sector, Dr Koh said: “It will be a continuation of his efforts now with the power of being in government and with the understanding of how the ground, the workers, feel and think.”

National University of Singapore political scientist Bilveer Singh added: “He will be familiar (with labour issues), the only thing now is the wider mandate. ... It's an area where there are a lot of challenges, both from the perspectives of a changing global economy, regional crisis and growing expectation of a maturing society.”

He described Mr Lim as a political leader who could connect with the masses, and is an asset for the People's Action Party (PAP) given the more demanding political climate.

Mr Lim, who was managing director of the Economic Development Board (EDB) before he entered politics, joined the labour movement in 1996. He became National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) secretary-general in 2007.

In 2007 and 2011, Mr Lim had indicated that the 2011 General Election could be his last. In an interview with Lianhe Zaobao last year, he said his earlier remarks on stepping down were prompted by his concern over leadership renewal.

Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry President Thomas Chua also welcomed Mr Lim's appointment.

“With Minister Lim Swee Say's experience in NTUC, understanding (of) the needs of workers, and his years of experience in the EDB, we can expect even better coordination, together with (labour chief-designate) Minister Chan Chun Sing, in looking after the needs of businesses as well as in workers' welfare,” said Mr Chua.

Both Mr Chan and Mr Tan Chuan-Jin, who will take over the Ministry of Social and Family Development, are seen as among the core group of fourth generation leaders.

Dr Koh noted that observers were initially surprised when Mr Chan was appointed as Social and Family Development Minister, since it was not the “usual glamour post” for high potential leaders.

“But if we consider how today’s Singapore is concerned about the issues of poverty, doing better for the disadvantaged, and strengthening families as the bedrock of society, there is much to do, and a lot of potential to demonstrate leadership in,” she said.

The latest Cabinet changes are expected to be the last before the next General Election, which must be held by January 2017.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan felt that with the changes, “the signs are that the next GE will probably be called before 2015 comes to a close”.

But both Dr Singh and former Nominated Member of Parliament Zulkifli Baharudin did not think that the changes indicated in any way the timing of the GE. Since the 2011 GE, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has made tweaks to the Cabinet line-up annually, and the latest changes were part of the regular rotations, Mr Zulkifli said.

Nevertheless, the analysts agreed this will be the line-up that will take Singapore into the next elections.