

‘Targeted Moves in Cabinet Reshuffle Hint at Early GE’

Siau Ming En

TODAY, 10 April 2015

Singapore — The “limited and targeted” Cabinet changes announced on Wednesday, growing regional uncertainties, the public’s deep sense of gratitude towards the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew and the euphoria that will be generated by celebrations of Singapore’s Jubilee year — these factors and developments point to an early General Election before the year is up, political analysts said yesterday.

The latest Cabinet changes saw new leaders appointed for two ministries — Mr Lim Swee Say and Mr Tan Chuan-Jin helming the Ministry of Manpower, and the Ministry of Social and Family Development, respectively — and the promotion of Mr Masagos Zulkifli to full Minister.

The next GE must be held by January 2017.

Associate Professor Eugene Tan, from the Singapore Management University, said: “If the (Prime Minister) is looking at elections in the year 2016, I would argue that he would be likely to have embarked on a (major) reshuffle ... he would have gone for more changes ... (but) it was very limited and targeted.”

Citing the unstable political situation in Malaysia and Indonesia, and the terrorist threat from the Islamic State, National University of Singapore (NUS) political scientist Bilveer Singh said the election could be held before December this year.

“It will be strategically sound to have a strong government ... and the faster the better,” he said.

Both Dr Tan Ern Ser, an NUS sociologist, and former Nominated Member of Parliament Viswa Sadasivan predicted that the GE date could be in September.

Dr Tan noted that the “Lee Kuan Yew dividend” could be further reinforced with the celebrations in August for National Day and the 50th anniversary of the Republic’s independence.

Mr Viswa noted that while there was generally a deep sense of gratitude for Mr Lee’s contributions, the sentiment could change over the next few months, when critics of Mr Lee may emerge in greater numbers.

Nevertheless, this could be overcome with SG50 celebrations.

Prior to Mr Lee’s death, analysts had said that the GE could be held by the first quarter of next year.

Observers were divided on whether the PAP could benefit from holding the election soon after Mr Lee’s death last month.

Assoc Prof Tan said some people might perceive it as trying to gain an “illegitimate political advantage” that rides on his passing.

But Dr Singh felt that Mr Lee's death could be a critical determinant as to when to hold the next election, because "the image, sympathy and support for the PAP has been boosted immensely".

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh also cited other considerations that could affect the timing of the next GE, such as having to wait a while for the effects of the policy reforms and initiatives — such as the MediShield Life system and revised CPF system — to be fully felt by the public.

"If the PAP thinks that Singaporeans are pragmatic then that might be an important consideration," she added.