

## The Year Ahead: S'pore's political succession to pick up pace

**Kelly Ng**

**TODAY**, 26 December 2017

As the year draws to a close, TODAY kicks off a series looking at key issues on the local and foreign front in the next 12 months. In Singapore, we look at what lies ahead in areas ranging from climate change, the terrorism threat and public transportation, to electronics payment, the property market and sports. Beyond our shores, the focus will be on the Malaysian general election and Singapore's chairmanship of Asean. In the fourth instalment of the series, we look at political renewal at the highest level in Singapore.

SINGAPORE — With a major Cabinet reshuffle on the cards early next year, 2018 could turn out to be one of the most significant years in Singapore's political history, and set the stage for the decades ahead — should Singaporeans and the world at large get the clearest indication of who will succeed PM Lee Hsien Loong as the Republic's fourth Prime Minister.

Going by previous leadership handovers, PM Lee has left it late in giving the public an idea of who his potential successors could be, political analysts and observers say. They added that with the incumbent Government entering the middle of its term next year, the new generation of leaders has to take shape sooner, rather than later, to give them enough time to come into their own before the next General Election (GE) due by Jan 2021.

"The future Prime Minister (should have) started taking key duties by now... It is already too late," said former People's Action Party (PAP) Member of Parliament (MP) Inderjit Singh.

Going by precedents — both Mr Goh Chok Tong and PM Lee assumed the post of Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) before taking over the hot seat — Singapore's next Prime Minister will likely be appointed DPM in the reshuffle, which would not only give the successor exposure and prepare him for the top job but also signal to the public that he is next in line.

Apart from the identity of PM Lee's potential successor, the new Cabinet line-up is also expected to see the next generation of leaders take centre stage, as the men and women tasked to steer the country forward over the next decade and beyond. Which is why all eyes will be on the coming Cabinet changes, which analysts and observers expect to take place shortly after the Budget statement — traditionally delivered in February or March — and before the middle of next year.

### **A MATTER OF URGENCY**

In April, PM Lee had announced his plan for a major Cabinet reshuffle next year, which will see more new ministers helming their own ministries.

This would be the fourth set of Cabinet changes since the start of the incumbent Government's term in January last year.

Given the urgency of leadership renewal, the changes will probably happen "sooner than expected", said Dr Felix Tan, an associate lecturer with SIM Global Education.

"There is a need for the new crop of leaders to try and test out their roles, and get familiar with the different portfolios in order to ensure that they are prepared to take over the helm of certain

ministries,” said Dr Tan, who researches on international relations, politics and religion in Southeast Asia.

The next PM should ideally have served for two terms as a deputy and be given the exposure and responsibility on major policies “before he or she can confidently take on the job”, said Mr Singh, who was a Member of Parliament (MP) for the Ang Mo Kio Group Representation Constituency (GRC) between 1996 and 2015.

He noted that this was the same path taken by Mr Goh and PM Lee — Singapore’s second and third PM respectively.

While Mr Goh was not founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s first choice as successor, the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) second-generation leaders picked Mr Goh as the first DPM in 1985. In the five years leading to the official handover in November 1990, Mr Goh and his team were tasked with the day-to-day running of the country, as Mr Lee Kuan Yew sought to prepare the second generation leaders for succession.

Right after taking over the reins in November 1990, Mr Goh picked PM Lee as his second-in-command over Mr Ong Teng Cheong, a decision which Mr Goh arrived at after canvassing the views of his team. In his 2003 National Day Rally speech, Mr Goh announced his choice for Prime Minister, and his successor was sworn into premiership a year later.

The current leadership seems to be “running behind schedule”, said Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan.

“For a government that has always emphasised renewal and succession, this raises legitimate questions about the readiness of the fourth generation leadership, if not about the much vaunted process. By the time PM Lee steps down, he (could) be the oldest of our Prime Ministers,” said Associate Professor Tan, who was formerly a Nominated MP.

PM Lee, who has said he would not like to be Prime Minister beyond 70 years old, is 65 this year, and has served as the country’s top leader since August 2004.

Mr Goh was 63 when he stepped down after almost 14 years in charge, while Mr Lee Kuan Yew left the top job at 67 after leading the country for 31 years.

Assoc Prof Tan noted that PM Lee is poised to be Singapore’s second longest serving leader, “at a time when the terms as MPs and Cabinet ministers have gotten shorter”.

While most of the political analysts interviewed by TODAY expect PM Lee to step down after the next GE, some including political scientist Woo Jun Jie from Nanyang Technological University felt that he could let his successor lead the PAP at the coming polls “on his own merit”.

“This is to ensure the fourth generation leadership attains political mandate and legitimacy... It is crucial that the next Prime Minister is capable of securing citizens’ trust and support,” said Asst Prof Woo.

## A SHORTLIST OF THREE?

In October, PM Lee said during a dialogue at the Nikkei International Conference held in Tokyo that his successor is “very likely” already in Cabinet, and it is up to younger ministers to decide who the next Prime Minister will be as they will be the ones who have to support him.

In the eyes of political observers, the list of potential successors has narrowed over the past two GEs in 2011 and 2015 to just three: Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office Chan Chun Sing and Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung.

Among other factors, the three leaders have been given prominent tasks and responsibilities, as well as the platforms and opportunities during public speaking engagements to give their perspectives on major national issues.

Mr Heng — a former managing director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore who has helmed the education and finance ministries since he entered politics in 2011 — has been seen as a frontrunner for a while. He had a major health scare in May last year, when he collapsed from a stroke and was hospitalised for six weeks.

Following a remarkable recovery, he has resumed his ministerial and MP duties since August last year.

Mr Heng, 56, has been tasked to lead several major national initiatives, including the Our Singapore Conversation project and the Committee on the Future Economy (CFE). In May, he was also appointed as the chair of the Future Economy Council, which will implement the proposals by the CFE. The high-powered council include Mr Chan and Mr Ong, among other ministers from the fourth generation leadership. It is “their generation of leadership who will have to work with Singaporeans to take the country to new heights”, PM Lee had said.

On Mr Heng’s health concerns, Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies, noted that PM Lee had battled lymphoma and prostate cancer in 1992 and 2015 respectively.

“While there is a good body of younger leaders to keep the country running, how important will it be to hand the position of Premier to someone who does not have a health issue hanging over him?” said Dr Koh. “Is the nature of cancer that PM Lee faced of a different, more manageable level of risk than if one is a stroke survivor? What do citizens or investors think?”

Mr Chan, 48, who also entered politics in 2011, has been involved in various ministries, including defence and social and family development, and is currently leading the labour movement.

Among the three, Mr Ong, also 48, has the least experience in politics. He was on the ruling party’s Aljunied GRC team which lost in the 2011 GE, and he entered Parliament in the next elections four years later, as part of the PAP’s Sembawang GRC slate. Nevertheless, the analysts noted that he has gained extensive experience in both the public and private sectors, having been involved with the labour movement, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and Keppel Corporation, among others.

The analysts were split on who has the edge currently, although they noted that Mr Ong's relative lack of experience could count against him.

Assoc Prof Eugene Tan put Mr Chan — a former Chief of Army — in front, on the basis that the labour chief has been given key assignments that give him a lot of exposure to the grassroots. Apart from being secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress, Mr Chan is deputy chairman of the People's Association, which is chaired by PM Lee. His capacity as the PAP's party whip also accords him deeper engagement with the party's MPs and in running its parliamentary strategy, Assoc Prof Eugene Tan said.

However, Assoc Prof Alan Chong from the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies felt Mr Heng would be the successor, given the high profile portfolios and ad hoc assignments which he has been handed so far. "As chair of the Future Economy Council, Mr Heng needs to have a good grasp of how all of Singapore works. He has to have a sense of entirety of the country," said Assoc Prof Chong, who also noted that Mr Heng was the first among the fourth generation leaders to be made a full minister, right after the 2011 GE.

#### **4G LEADERS 'MUST COME TO THE FORE'**

PM Lee has previously said that it is up to the younger Cabinet ministers to decide who the next PM will be, as they will be the ones who have to support him.

Among other qualities, Singaporeans will take best to a charismatic leader who adopts a "conciliatory" approach on domestic politics and has good standing on the international stage, said Assoc Prof Chong, who researches on the political economy and political thought in Singapore.

He noted that DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam, 60, would fit the bill, but he had ruled himself out in September last year when he also told reporters that PM Lee's team has been focused on building up the fourth generation leadership to take over the mantle.

The political analysts and observers felt that regardless of the Cabinet changes in store, Mr Tharman and fellow Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, 63, would likely remain in the Cabinet — albeit in a different capacity — to facilitate a stable leadership transition.

Asst Prof Woo believes that Mr Tharman and Mr Teo will continue to serve as Coordinating Ministers for Economic and Social Policies, and for National Security, respectively. "They have experienced multiple portfolios over their political careers, and are hence able to take the 'helicopter view' that a Coordinating Minister requires," he said.

Apart from Mr Tharman and Mr Teo, Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan is the third Coordinating Minister, looking after national infrastructure. Last month, Mr Khaw, 65, suggested that he would not stand in the next GE, when he told Parliament that he "won't be in this House" in 2024 — the projected deadline for asset renewal work on the North-South and East-West MRT lines.

With some among the third generation leaders - consisting of Mr Tharman, Mr Teo, Mr Khaw, Trade and Industry Minister (Trade) Lim Hng Kiang, 63, and Manpower Minister Lim Swee Say, 63 - expected to take a backseat, the fourth generation leaders will need to come to the fore on the national stage, as well as internationally.

Assoc Prof Eugene Tan said: “It is not enough for the 3G leadership to endorse their successors. They have to win the hearts of Singaporeans... The 4G team patently needs to be more in the public eye and for them to be leaders in every sense of the word — not just possessing policy nous but also have the gumption and the guts to lead and to take knocks that are to be expected.”

While the core of the fourth generation leadership has been established, some analysts noted the need to continue drawing talent from more diverse sources, in order to avoid group think.

Both Assoc Prof Eugene Tan and Assoc Prof Chong expressed concerns that most of the next generation leaders had served in public or quasi-public sectors before entering politics. “Group think, even if it’s strenuously disavowed, cannot be excluded in such a set-up. There needs to be a broader base of talent and ability to draw from for our first team,” said Assoc Prof Eugene Tan.

On Thursday (Dec 28), watch out for our reports on Singapore’s public transportation system.