

Three female Cabinet ministers a boost for diversity: Analysts

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Come next month, the Cabinet will for the first time have three women ministers, two of them helming ministries of their own.

As part of the slew of Cabinet changes announced by the Prime Minister's Office on Tuesday (Apr 24), Senior Minister of State for Law and Finance Indranee Rajah will be promoted to full minister starting May 1.

She will be a Minister in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) as well as Second Minister for Education and Finance.

Ms Indranee, 55, will temporarily retain her law portfolio and be Second Minister for Law between May 1 and June 30 – until Member of Parliament (Marine Parade group representation constituency) Edwin Tong takes up his new role as Senior Minister of State for Law.

Meanwhile, Second Minister for Manpower Josephine Teo will become Minister for Manpower next month. She will succeed Mr Lim Swee Say, who will be stepping down as minister but remain as MP for East Coast GRC. Mrs Teo will continue to be Second Minister for Home Affairs but will relinquish her appointment in the PMO.

The third woman in the Cabinet is Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu, who became the first woman to helm a ministry of her own in 2015.

Ms Indranee entered politics in 2001 as an MP for Tanjong Pagar GRC. The Senior Counsel left her position as deputy head of law firm Drew & Napier's dispute resolution department in 2012.

She has held several positions, chairing the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Law and Home Affairs and, later, for Defence and Foreign Affairs, for instance.

She has been Senior Minister of State for Law since 2012 and was involved in the formation of the Singapore International Commercial Court, among other duties.

Her new appointment as Second Minister for Education marks a return to the Ministry of Education (MOE). When she was Senior Minister of State for Education between 2012 and 2015, she led the Applied Study in Polytechnics and Institute of Technical Education Review (Aspire) committee, which eventually paved the way for SkillsFuture, a national movement promoting lifelong learning and skills upgrading.

After the General Election in 2015, she relinquished her role at MOE to become Senior Minister of State for Finance and Law.

As part of the fourth generation of leaders, she has had to tackle hot-button issues. She addressed parliamentary questions on the Keppel Offshore and Marine bribery scandal earlier this year.

Speaking to Channel NewsAsia on Tuesday, Ms Indranee said a minister has a “task and responsibility like no other” and has to think ahead for Singapore.

Her new appointment in the PMO will provide a broader scope of work and dovetails nicely with her portfolio in the Ministry of Finance, she said.

“As you know, (the Finance Ministry) provides financing and budget for the different ministries. But (it) also, through budget and through its fiscal policy, tries to achieve various things. One example is internationalisation... the minister sets aside monies to basically help local businesses to internationalise. We also want to help our SMEs to upscale, build capabilities,” she said.

Speaking to reporters after the announcement on Cabinet changes, Mrs Teo said the move for her to helm a ministry and to promote Ms Indranee to full minister was to be expected.

“We now see many more women in politics, many more women who are able to hold their own in all fields of economics and society... From that perspective, it really isn’t surprising and I’m certainly very glad that Indranee is now appointed full minister and I believe there will be more,” she said.

Mrs Teo said the appointments were based on merit. “Once you give women the opportunities, they do rise to the occasion,” she said.

Political analysts also noted the significance of having three female ministers in the Cabinet, which some said has been a long time coming.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the presence of more women in the Cabinet was overdue. “The Government has to take the lead. There has been a shortfall for so long and they have to make up for the shortfall and be a role model for private sector when it comes to women in leadership positions,” she said.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said the appointments come in the wake of Mdm Halimah Yacob becoming Singapore’s first female president.

While efforts to get more women in politics “have been a shade slower” in some respects, these Cabinet changes “certainly speak well about diversity”, he said.