

# Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat to become DPM from May 1

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Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, widely tipped as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's successor, will become Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) from May 1, a move political observers say further cements his position to take over Singapore's top post.

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) announced changes to the Cabinet yesterday, which will see the existing DPMs - Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Mr Teo Chee Hean - relinquish their appointments but remain as Senior Ministers.

Mr Heng, who will be appointed acting PM in Mr Lee's absence, retains his existing portfolios as Finance Minister and chairman for the Future Economy Council and National Research Foundation.

Mr Teo will continue as Coordinating Minister for National Security.

Mr Tharman, who is Coordinating Minister for Economic and Social Policies, will be re-designated as Coordinating Minister for Social Policies but will continue to advise the PM on economic policies, PMO said.

Sovereign wealth fund GIC also announced yesterday that Mr Tharman, who is a GIC director, will be appointed deputy chairman from May 1.

In a Facebook post yesterday, Mr Lee said the next generation leadership is taking shape.

He wrote: "The team is working closely together, building up public trust and confidence in their leadership. I ask all Singaporeans to support them, and work together to secure a bright future for Singapore."

Mr Tharman said on his Facebook page that Mr Heng was the best person to become DPM and to take over as PM.

"He has exceptional ability, mettle and the confidence of the 4G team," he wrote.

Mr Heng said in a statement he was deeply honoured by the trust and confidence of Mr Lee and the Cabinet in entrusting him with the DPM post.

"My colleagues and I are united in our purpose to serve Singaporeans to the best of our abilities," he said.

Mr Lee has said that he intends to hand over the reins of government by the time he turns 70, which will be in 2022.

He and Mr Goh Chok Tong, Singapore's second PM, both held the DPM post while they were earmarked to take over their predecessors.

Both also held the post of the People's Action Party's (PAP) first assistant secretary-general before eventually becoming PM, a role which Mr Heng took on last November.

Political analysts told The New Paper that yesterday's announcement puts to bed any doubts over who will be Singapore's fourth PM.

There will now only be one DPM, instead of the usual two, which Institute of Policy Studies deputy director of research Gillian Koh said establishes a clear pecking order in Cabinet.

The analysts also noted that the latest Cabinet changes, the fourth since 2015's General Election (GE), are minimal compared with the reshuffle last April, which saw fourth-generation (4G) ministers helm 10 out of the 16 ministries.

SIM Global Education associate lecturer Felix Tan said there might be further reshuffles, while Education University of Hong Kong's Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie said the Government is likely easing Mr Heng into his new role before making other moves to cement the 4G leadership.

While it is premature to link the changes to an impending election, Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said it was clear the PAP is deep in election mode.

He said: "The fact that the ministers have not shifted portfolios is, to me, an indicator for them to consolidate their work and their achievements so the PAP Government can go to the voters with as good a report card as possible."

The next GE must be held by April 2021.

IPS' Dr Koh said the PAP may want to wait for another Budget and reshuffle before calling for one, but all bets are off if the global economy were to turn south before then.

She said: "Mr Heng who is Finance Minister, and his deputy, Mr Chan Chun Sing, who is Minister of Trade and Industry, will have full control and responsibility to act using the key levers in Government to deal with such a scenario."