

4G leaders likely to helm PAP's second-in-command positions after Shanmugam distances himself from the post: Analysts

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With Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam dismissing speculation that he will be appointed to one of two second-in-command positions in the ruling party, some analysts said on Tuesday (Nov 13) that this could pave the way for fourth generation leaders to helm both posts, in a move that underlines the urgency of leadership renewal in the People's Action Party (PAP).

Traditionally, the party's assistant secretaries-general (ASGs) would also take up the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) positions in Cabinet.

And should two 4G leaders occupy the ASG posts, "there is a strong likelihood that either or both of them would be made DPM at some point", said Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan.

As for Mr Shanmugam, Assoc Prof Tan said: ""(He) is more likely to be appointed the party chairman or vice-chairman than ASG. Based on his remarks, it would seem likely that the two (or even three) ASG positions could be assigned to 4G leaders."

Responding to media queries, Mr Shanmugam described reports suggesting that he would be appointed an ASG and DPM as "breathless speculation" that "may be off the mark".

The speculation stems from the fact that in the PAP's new Central Executive Committee (CEC), Mr Shanmugam is the PAP's next most senior Member of Parliament, after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Photographs of the elected CEC members, who were standing on a stage after the results of the internal elections were announced on Sunday, also showed Mr Shanmugam and Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing flanking Mr Lee, who occupies the secretary-general position. Mr Chan is touted as among the frontrunners to become Singapore's next Prime Minister.

But Mr Shanmugam said: "I can understand the speculation based on the photograph at the party conference and my relative seniority. But these assessments are based on a snapshot, of a point in time, rather than a deep understanding of how the PAP operates and how transition works."

He added: "I have said on Sunday, in response to a question as to whether I will be one of the ASGs, that these matters have to be decided by the CEC, but that my own view is that the appointments must reflect the future and not the transition."

National University of Singapore political scientist Bilveer Singh noted that Mr Shanmugam, who has over 30 years of experience in politics, "need not be an ASG" to perform an "extremely strategic and critical role".

"He is definitely a very heavy political weight who will play a key role in guiding national politics, especially in the political-security domain for some time to come. I don't see this being in the hands of the 4G (leadership) yet" said Assoc Prof Singh.

On Monday, TODAY reported party cadres saying that Education Minister Ong Ye Kung is out of the running to succeed Mr Lee as he is not deemed to be a core leader within the ruling party.

Mr Ong was not among the names recommended by the PAP's outgoing CEC to be voted into the party's highest decision-making body, prior to the internal elections.

This leaves Mr Chan and Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat as the remaining frontrunners.

The analysts said that given the latest developments, it was likely that Mr Chan and Mr Heng would be appointed as ASGs when the CEC meets to determine its officebearers in a few weeks.

Said Assoc Prof Singh: "If you really want a regeneration... it may well be Heng and Chan. This is to politically acclimatise them to party politics."

He added: "Don't forget, all these guys are former civil servants and bureaucrats and not natural politicians. If anything, we lack natural politicians in this country and especially political mobilisers, which may be a handicap in times of crisis; bureaucrats and civil servants can do just that much."

On Sunday, Mr Lee announced that five senior leaders — Mr Teo Chee Hean, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Mr Khaw Boon Wan, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim and Mr Lim Swee Say — would be stepping down from the CEC, which is the party's top decision-making body.

Mr Teo and Mr Tharman were the first and second ASG respectively, while Mr Khaw was the chairman. Dr Yaacob and Mr Lim were vice-chairman and treasurer respectively.

SIM Global Education associate lecturer Felix Tan noted that having a 3G leader in one of the ASG positions could "provide the stability to the CEC and the experience in an advisory capacity", among other things. On the other hand, having younger leaders filling up all the ASG positions "will strengthen the dynamics of the 4G leaders as a whole". "This will allow the 4G leaders to comfortably cement their positions within the party and also to run the party on their terms. There will be more autonomy for the 4G leaders to manoeuvre in such instance," he said.

He added: "If the ASG positions are given to the 4G leaders, then it would send a message that the 4G leaders are ready to take over the helm sooner than we thought."

Still, Assoc Prof Eugene Tan reiterated that "each leadership renewal and succession is different. "The party CEC may take the view that it is not necessary for the two ASGs to be from different 'generations' for the transition this time," he said.

He pointed out that the overarching theme of the latest leadership renewal "has been about the team". "So it may not matter significantly who is appointed to the various positions save for the party chair, secretary-general, first assistant secretary-general, and treasurer," he added.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that the positions of ASG within the party and DPM in the Cabinet, "linked or not, have signalled the party and government's priorities in security, succession and the symbiotic relationship with (the) labour (movement)".

However, she noted that there are many possible scenarios.

The most important things which she felt the PAP and the government it runs will seek to achieve are: To signal that “the leadership succession process is in play where the final outcome will be determined by the generation of leaders that is taking over, and that the issue of the country’s security is firmly managed especially given the troubled times we live in the world over”.

Dr Koh said: “While analysts like us look at the past and also what the possible line-ups signal internally and more importantly, externally, it is always possible for an adaptive political party like the PAP to change the script, adopt a new playbook.”

Agreeing, Assoc Prof Tan did not rule out the possibility of another third generation leader such as Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan or Health Minister Gan Kim Yong taking up one of the ASG posts.

He said: “Numerous possibilities are on the table. The newly-elected party CEC will deliberate and decide what is best for the party as it gears up for the next general election.” ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY FARIS MOKHTAR