

## A team for new challenges

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AT A time when the economic chips are down, the Prime Minister yesterday unveiled significant changes — including a historical appointment of a woman to a full-fledged ministerial post — to reinforce the political team that will steer the country forward.

The rejuvenated line-up of Cabinet members and other office-holders, to largely take effect from April 1, will have not just new blood but more bodies to tackle the challenges ahead, namely in terms of the economy, jobs and the new media.

With 39 office-holders — 16 of whom will hold more than one appointment — the new team will be the biggest yet. Additional portfolios will be created in several ministries, including trade and industry, manpower and information, communications and the arts.

Most significant to political watchers, are the promotion of Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean to Deputy Prime Minister — he will serve as Acting Prime Minister in Mr Lee Hsien Loong's absence — and the ascension of Mrs Lim Hwee Hua as Singapore's first full-fledged woman minister.

As well as rising to the rank of Second Minister for Finance and Transport, Mrs Lim will serve as Minister in the Prime Minister's Office — swelling the numbers there with Mr Teo's addition and the veteran he replaces, Prof S Jayakumar, staying on as Senior Minister.

Describing the reshuffle as part of a process of renewal, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: "Clearly, we are doing it in small steps and in many stages."

The move falls into the pattern of mid-term Cabinet changes. Even so, political scientist Bilveer Singh was caught off-guard given the Government's focus on the economy. Mr Teo's appointment, he said, was "the most strategic". He added: "On paper, if anything happens in Singapore, at least we know who is the next man who will take over as Prime Minister."

But the traditional succession path, where the country's No 2 is in line to take over, may not hold true in today's circumstances. Last April, the Prime Minister had said his successor should ideally be "quite young" when he takes over "so that he has that vigour" to do a good job for about two terms.

Assoc Prof Singh noted, Mr Teo and Mr Lee are almost the same age — 54 and 57, respectively. "Mr Teo will be a very strong partner for Mr Lee in times like these ... (they) have been working together for more than 20 years, in the armed forces and now in politics," he said.

Meanwhile, the Manpower Ministry, which is grappling with the all-important issues of jobs, will be beefed up with new Minister of State Lee Yi Shyan, 47. As expected, Acting Minister Gan Kim Yong, 50, will be promoted to full-fledged status.

Newcomer Sam Tan, 50, will add to the ranks of the Ministry of Trade and Industry — another critical economic portfolio — and the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (Mica), as Parliamentary Secretary.

Mica will have fresh leadership to chart the course in the New Media age, with Mr Lui Tuck Yew, 47, taking the wheel as Acting Minister. His current role as Senior Minister of State for Education will be taken on by Mr S Iswaran.

Mrs Lim's promotions will bring the total number of ministries reinforced with a Second Minister to five. One intriguing question is what her role in the PMO will involve — other colleagues in the same office handle issues such as population, homeland security, climate change and ageing issues.

Jurong MP Halimah Yacob thought it would be good if Mrs Lim — who sits on the National Population Committee — takes over the procreation portfolio. "The people you really want to persuade to have more children are the women".

Despite the bigger team, Assoc Prof Singh notes that Singapore's Cabinet is still "one of the smallest in the world" for a "small but hyperactive" state.

Is it up to the tough road head? "I think we are sending out the right signal that we have got a very strong Cabinet," he said.