

Cabinet reshuffle says little about who's in lead to be Singapore's next PM: Analysts

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The latest shake-up to the Cabinet on Friday (April 23) has offered few clues as to who could be the next prime minister-designate, several political pundits said.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong held a virtual press conference earlier in the day to announce the many changes to several ministries.

What the changes do show is that three of the potential candidates who could succeed PM Lee are being handed opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities to Singaporeans and their colleagues, some political analysts who spoke to TODAY said.

On Friday at the Istana, PM Lee announced that he will be redeploying seven ministers, out of the 15 ministries in total, to new roles on May 15, in an extensive reshuffle that is earlier than usual in the current government's term.

The decision comes after the shock announcement two weeks ago that Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, who had previously been picked by the fourth-generation People's Action Party (PAP) ministers as "the first among equals", will take himself out of the running to become the next PM.

While the issue of the PM's succession plans was not addressed at the press conference, the analysts told TODAY that many people were closely watching who will replace Mr Heng as the next prime-minister-in-waiting.

This time, though, it would be difficult to read the tea leaves as to who among the three ministers identified as potential candidates — Mr Chan Chun Sing, Mr Ong Ye Kung, Mr Lawrence Wong — is ahead of the pack.

Mr Chan will be moved from the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) to the Ministry of Education (MOE).

Mr Ong will take on the Ministry of Health (MOH) portfolio, while Mr Wong will helm the Ministry of Finance.

Transport Minister Ong and Education Minister Wong will be leaving their current positions that both had only held for fewer than 10 months.

Associate Professor Bilveer Singh, deputy head of the National University of Singapore's department of political science, said: "The reshuffle shows that PM Lee appears to still be rotating the three kingpins around and that there is still no frontrunner."

“In a sense, this reshuffle does not signal leadership renewal as it is about the urgency of filling up the position that Finance Minister Heng has stepped away from.”

Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), is of the view that National Development Minister Desmond Lee is also one of people in contention and that these four figures still “loomed large in the limelight” after this Cabinet reshuffle.

Former PAP Member of Parliament (MP) Inderjit Singh said: “The significant thing about this announcement is that... (the changes) are quite wide-ranging and that kind of indicates that the field is wide open for who the next guy is going to be... Everyone who is given a new ministry is to be re-tested, so we can’t conclude that there is a clear winner here.

“But at least one thing is sure — these three (Mr Chan, Mr Ong and Mr Wong) are definitely the ones who are being considered.”

OPPORTUNITIES TO SHINE AS CONTENDERS

Regarding the three contenders, the analysts said it was clear that PM Lee had moved them into roles and responsibilities that would give them ample opportunities to show their capabilities.

PM Lee said as much when he announced the redeployments, which would enable the fourth-generation (4G) ministers to work together in their new roles: “This will make the new team readier to take over from me and my older colleagues.”

Mr Inderjit Singh said that it also provides a chance to reassess the 4G leaders who are helming new ministries.

“It means that you throw them in a new arena and then you get a chance to assess. Otherwise, if anyone had remained in the same areas as before, that would be an unfair advantage,” he said.

Giving their thoughts about each of the three potential candidates, the analysts said that the decision behind the new appointments are unconventional at this stage of their political careers.

Mr Andrew Yeo, senior associate at strategic advisory business firm Global Counsel, said that for Mr Wong, for instance, it may seem like his new role as finance minister may place him as the leading candidate.

After all, Mr Wong will be assuming the portfolio at an administratively complex phase, Mr Yeo noted, with the pandemic requiring adept management of competing priorities.

Others noted that Mr Wong would have the unenviable task of implementing the impending Goods and Services Tax hike from 7 to 9 per cent sometime before 2025.

“Fronting the post-General Election discussion for the PAP and co-chairing the multi-ministry task force certainly signals a political willingness to test his mettle as Singapore’s future leader, but these are early days and it is too soon to call the race over,” Mr Yeo added.

Several also pointed out that the finance minister role was considered an important step before becoming the prime minister. Only former prime minister Goh Chok Tong had not been a finance minister, though he had taken on the role of senior minister of state for finance.

On Mr Ong, who will soon assume the role as co-chair of the task force that leads Singapore’s crisis response alongside Mr Wong, the move to MOH is a step up from his current role in the Ministry of Transport (MOT).

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at IPS, said: “The movement of Ong Ye Kung was a surprise because he had just been placed in transport after the General Election last year. Moving to MOH is an upwards move, in terms of responsibility, budget, and being in the direct frontline of the fight against Covid-19.”

Dr Felix Tan, political observer at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), said that this new responsibility to lead the Covid-19 task force would put Mr Ong on a level playing field with the other two contenders, since Mr Wong and Mr Chan had both been more involved in the work of the task force so far.

“This move to the MOH and the task force in the middle of the pandemic will bring Mr Ong to the forefront of the crisis response and could allow him to shine.”

As for Mr Chan, Assoc Prof Woo from IPS said that the move was also highly unconventional since it was rare for a full minister to move from an economic ministry to MOE.

At the press conference on Friday, PM Lee praised Mr Chan for his wide experience across different types of portfolio, as he had spent time in the unions and was in charge of the Ministry of Social and Family Development from 2013 to 2015.

PM Lee also said that despite his lack of economic management experience, Mr Chan had “mastered the job” in MTI.

Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt Abdullah from NTU's School of Social Sciences said that Mr Chan’s new role in MOE would be an opportunity for the public to see a different side of Mr Chan.

Dr Koh of IPS agreed, adding that Mr Chan would essentially be stepping out of the international scene to one that is wholly domestic, which would give him the chance to reinforce his standing among the population as well as to carry out the education reforms that have been planned.

“This is where Chan Chun Sing has made his mark. He is the ‘last-mile delivery’ guy, in terms of execution of policies,” she said.

DISRUPTIONS NOT IDEAL

Having said all that, several analysts bemoaned the lack of clarity as to who will be PM Lee's successor, since the latest reshuffle implies that the evaluation of who is best suited to the role has only just begun.

Going as far as to call it a "leadership crisis" after Mr Heng abruptly bowed out, Assoc Prof Bilveer Singh said the next Cabinet reshuffle could be the one to look out for, predicting that it could herald the appointment of a second deputy prime minister.

Such a move, which could be timed with the next round of the PAP's internal party elections, could end the guesswork over the successorship outcome.

It was also hard to shake off the fact that the short stints by Mr Wong in MOE and Mr Ong in MOT were not ideal, the experts added.

This is of concern since MOE is at a critical juncture to propel lifelong learning and to manage the deep impact of the pandemic on a whole generation of younger Singaporeans, while MOT's work in the beleaguered aviation sector and public transport issues are of great concern to Singapore and Singaporeans, they said.

Asst Prof Walid said: "It's hard to think of one major policy achievement by Lawrence Wong in the few months that he was in MOE, for example.

"Ultimately, we must realise that at the very end of this political chess game, there are ministries and statutory boards that need to be run, and the lives of Singaporeans depend on the decisions they make."

On Friday, PM Lee said that it was not desirable for Cabinet ministers to be quickly rotated out of their ministries since it would cause disruption to the ministries' work but such moves are sometimes necessary.

"But I hope that after this adjustment, the new ministers in those two posts will be able to settle down for some time," he said.