

Heng Swee Keat's elevation to DPM leaves no doubt on succession plan: Analysts

Low Youjin

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The Cabinet changes on Tuesday (April 23) were done to send a clear message that Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat is in line to become Singapore's next prime minister and nobody else, said political analysts.

But given the need to expose the fourth-generation (4G) leaders to more portfolios before they fully assume the mantle, the analysts did not rule out the possibility of a second round of Cabinet changes this year, which would not be unprecedented.

Institute of Policy Studies' deputy director for research Gillian Koh said that if there was any lingering speculation that the other frontrunners remained in the frame, the move to appoint just one deputy prime minister (DPM) — in the form of Mr Heng — come May 1, puts it to bed.

“What it signals is that there is a clear pecking order; there should be no confusion about that,” she said.

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) announced on Tuesday that Mr Heng, 57, will be promoted to DPM, while the two incumbent DPMs, Mr Teo Chee Hean and Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, will relinquish the posts and remain in the Cabinet as Senior Ministers.

There were no changes to the portfolios of the other ministers.

Since independence, the Government has typically operated with two DPMs at the helm concurrently.

The move to have only one DPM was out of the ordinary, noted Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie, a Singaporean political analyst at the Education University of Hong Kong.

ONE MORE ROUND OF CHANGES TO COME?

Nevertheless, some analysts believe a second DPM could be appointed in time to come, and another round of Cabinet changes could be on the cards in the months ahead.

Reiterating that Tuesday's announcement reaffirmed Mr Heng as the “leader of the pack”, political scientist Bilveer Singh from the National University of Singapore said that the next round of changes would likely be significant, with more of the 4G leaders being brought to the fore.

As recent as 2017, two rounds of Cabinet changes were announced within a year — in April and September that year.

In the first instance, several 4G political officeholders were promoted, while then-Minister of State for Manpower Teo Ser Luck stepped down to return to the private sector.

The subsequent round of changes saw Mr Tan Chuan-Jin relinquish his role as Minister for Social and Family Development to be nominated by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as Speaker of Parliament. Then, Mr Desmond Lee, who had been Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, was appointed to take over Mr Tan.

In November last year, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) announced the office-bearers of its new Central Executive Committee (CEC), with Mr Heng and Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing taking up the first and second assistant secretary-general positions respectively.

This prompted talk that one, or both, of the pair will be appointed DPMs in Cabinet changes ahead.

Should a second DPM be appointed later this year, Mr Chan, 49, is expected to be the leading candidate, the analysts said.

Assoc Prof Singh, however, believes that Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam, 60, could also be a possibility — given his extensive experience in national security, which would complement Mr Heng's strengths in finance and the economy.

Citing the example of the recent Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka, Assoc Prof Singh said: "We need someone whose eyes are focused on security because anything can happen."

As to why Mr Lee opted not to retain either Mr Teo or Mr Tharman as DPM alongside Mr Heng, associate lecturer Felix Tan from SIM Global Education said that the decision was taken to give ample space to the 4G leaders to grow and develop. "They will not be there to hamper (their) progress," he added.

Still, keeping both the outgoing DPMs as senior ministers would help create a "smooth transition" for Mr Heng to settle into his new role, said Asst Prof Woo.

"I think the main focus (of this round of Cabinet changes) is to prepare the next PM," he added.

TIMING OF NEXT GE

While the Cabinet changes announced on Tuesday were less extensive than they had expected, the analysts agreed that the next General Election (GE) remained on track to be held by the end of this year or early next year.

"I think the PAP is ready for a GE whether it is this year or next year, or whether there is another Cabinet reshuffle before that or not, because, the question of who it is offering as the next PM is now settled," said Dr Koh.

She noted that Mr Heng — as the successor to Mr Lee — would also have some inputs on the timing of the next GE.

"The PAP may, however, wish to take advantage of one more Budget day and another reshuffle to fine-tune its policies and political line-up until it is optimal, before doing so (calling a GE)," she said.

Assoc Prof Singh said that the PAP should strike while the iron is hot. "The longer the prime minister waits, I think the (sentiment on the) ground will get worse as the economic situation is not good."