

Heng's consultative style augurs well for him to take over as PM: Analysts

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Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat's consultative leadership style, preference for consensus-building, and expertise in economics are attributes that will stand him in good stead to lead Singapore as the country navigates complex policy issues, political analysts said.

These qualities will also help close ranks within the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), after years of talk on who will succeed Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

On Friday (Nov 23), the protracted chatter on political succession was put to rest after Mr Heng, 57, was named the PAP's first assistant secretary-general. This means it is almost certain that he will succeed Mr Lee, 66, as the party's secretary-general and as prime minister after the next General Election (GE) due by April 2021. Speculation had swirled around the identity of the next prime minister, with the number of frontrunners narrowing down from as many as half a dozen to two (Mr Heng and Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing) in recent weeks.

Political observer and Singapore Management University's law lecturer Eugene Tan pointed to Mr Heng's leadership of the Our Singapore Conversation project in 2012 and 2013 as indicating his "preference for consultation" and getting people to agree by consensus.

The national consultation exercise canvassed views from nearly 50,000 people on housing, healthcare, transport, education and other issues.

This required taking in a range of opinions, and getting Singaporeans to appreciate different points of view, Assoc Prof Tan said.

"He strikes me as someone who is determined to build consensus, particularly on issues where there may be no clear-cut answers," he noted.

Mr Heng also realises that society has changed and issues cannot be approached in a top-down fashion, Assoc Prof Tan said.

"Looking at his different roles and how he conducted these different multi-stakeholder dialogues... he's someone who will refrain from a top-down approach."

His ability to bring people together could be why the fourth-generation leaders within the party chose Mr Heng as the "first among equals". "Whether he's able to rally people and whether people are willing to go the extra mile for him are important attributes of a top leader, particularly one in the position of prime minister," Assoc Prof Tan said.

As Singapore navigates many complex policy issues, political scientist Woo Jun Jie, from the Nanyang Technological University's School of Social Sciences, said that there was a need for a leader with the expertise and willingness to listen to feedback from across society, so as to find solutions.

Mr Heng, he said, has "deep" expertise in economics and finance to steer the economy — possibly the most important area where Singapore needs leadership — having helmed the Monetary Authority of Singapore until 2011, when he stepped down to enter politics.

He is also willing to put his ear to the ground.

"It's not possible for any one person to possess all the information or all the expertise, so you need somebody who can work... as part of a team to engage them and solve problems together," Assistant Professor Woo said.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that Mr Heng's "defining attribute" as a leader is that he is very comfortable engaging citizens in the process of crafting government policies.

His consultative approach will also allow the views of his teammates to be "clearly expressed and manifested," Dr Koh added. "Given that his team comprises many outstanding young leaders — some with very clear points of view, some who are very assertive — he is a leader who will allow the rest of his team to shine as well."

RALLYING AROUND CHOSEN LEADER

Announcing the new line-up of the PAP's top decision-making body on Friday, Prime Minister Lee said that the younger political leaders had been meeting in recent months.

They decided on Mr Heng as their next leader, who in turn asked Mr Chan to be his "number two". Mr Chan was named the PAP's second assistant secretary-general.

Mr Lee, who remains as secretary-general, said that PAP Members of Parliament also endorsed the two men.

Backing the decision were 32 younger PAP political office-holders, who also issued a statement saying that they "endorse and support" Mr Heng and Mr Chan as their leaders.

Dr Koh said that the remarks from the prime minister and the young leaders underscored the consensus among the fourth-generation leaders to go with Mr Heng, and puts to rest any notion of division within the party.

Assoc Prof Tan said that while the younger leaders would have had their own preferences on who should lead them, Mr Heng's leadership style will help the party to close ranks.

The PAP's earlier cohorts of leaders had been able to achieve this, he noted.

Agreeing, Asst Prof Woo from the NTU said that differences of opinion may emerge when choosing a leader, but after having picked one, the PAP has had a history of converging around their leader and "coming back together as one".

Even so, Associate Professor Alan Chong of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies said that every successful political party has its factions, "and people will be watching for signs of factionalism".

On whether this would be a potential issue given that there is general agreement on Mr Heng as their next leader, he added: "The question mark will always be there until (Mr Heng) earns his mandate in the next GE."