

## **News analysis: Covid-19 has set back leadership renewal in Cabinet as old hands needed to see through crisis**

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- Political analysts expected more changes but understood the need for continuity amid crisis
- DPM Heng's position as PM-in-waiting does not appear to be affected, they said
- But they noted that PM Lee's hope to step down before he turns 70 seems to be interrupted by Covid-19
- On the more notable changes, they said that Mr Ong Ye Kung's move to the Ministry of Transport is not typical
- Mr Lawrence Wong's political career is on an upward trajectory, they added

The Covid-19 pandemic has set back the timeline of Singapore's leadership renewal process, political analysts said while looking at the number of ministers who have retained their original portfolios following the latest round of Cabinet changes.

Out of the 15 government ministries, six will be helmed by new ministers. The ministries on the frontlines of the Covid-19 pandemic — the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Manpower — are among those still helmed by the same leaders.

In comparison, in the Cabinet reshuffle after the 2011 General Election (GE), 11 out of the 14 ministries then had a new minister at the helm, and after GE2015, nine out of 15 ministries saw new leaders put in charge.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said on Saturday (July 25) during a press briefing on the latest reshuffle that he arrived at this line-up after considering how to balance continuity during a crisis with a need to expose ministers to new portfolios and introduce new blood into Government.

However, political analysts interviewed by TODAY said that they were expecting more political renewal, and that even though Covid-19 may have curbed Mr Lee's ability to make radical changes, there was still scope for more leadership turnover.

Mr Lee, now 68, has previously said that he wants to pass on his mantle to the fourth generation (4G) of political leaders before he turns 70, but during the 2020 General Election campaign, he also pledged to hand over his premiership only after he sees the nation through the Covid-19 crisis.

Calling the latest line-up of political officeholders a "Covid-19 Cabinet", Associate Professor Eugene Tan, a political commentator who teaches law at the Singapore Management University (SMU), said that the incremental changes reflect the Government's desire to ensure that Singaporeans have confidence in the team handling the pandemic.

“If you were to retire some of your 3G (third-generation) leaders, it may not provide that trust and confidence crucially needed,” he said.

While leadership renewal is important, Assoc Prof Tan said that Singapore is in a situation where “we can’t have the cake and eat it, too”.

“Between having a team ready to continue the Covid-19 battle and exposing your team, the second priority is seen more as a luxury,” he said.

Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt Abdullah of the Nanyang Technological University’s School of Social Sciences said, however, that he felt the Cabinet changes could have been “a bit more adventurous”, although he said that the reasons behind Mr Lee’s decisions are sound.

Political analyst Woo Jun Jie said that were it not for the Covid-19 crisis, there would likely have been more movements, with more officeholders appointed to new roles.

“At the Ministry of Health, for example, there would certainly have been some rotation going on if there were no pandemic to contend with. Because of Covid-19, the decision was made to keep Mr Gan on, when the portfolio could have been passed to a younger minister to take over,” he said.

The loss of labour chief Ng Chee Meng, who was voted out in GE2020, is likely to have had an impact as well, he said. Had he been re-elected, Mr Ng, as a relatively new member of the 4G team, could have been heading his own ministry in this reshuffle, Dr Woo said.

## **HENG AS PM LEE'S SUCCESSOR**

During the briefing, the panel was also asked about Mr Heng Swee Keat’s position as the likely successor to Mr Lee’s premiership.

Mr Heng has been widely tipped to become Singapore’s next prime minister, after he was named the first assistant secretary-general of the People Action Party (PAP) at its convention in November 2018.

Mr Lee referred the question to the 4G ministers, led Mr Chan Chun Sing, the party’s second assistant secretary-general, to reply that the team’s current focus is on helping the country overcome economic challenges and save jobs during the pandemic.

“We have no plans to do otherwise, and we have no plans, no discussion on any change in plan,” Mr Chan said. He retains his role as Minister for Trade and Industry.

Asked what she thought of his response, Dr Gillian Koh, the deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that it was somewhat disappointing as she had expected to hear more about this aspect of the party’s leadership renewal plans.

Dr Koh said: “As a signal to the general public, he is basically saying that nothing has changed and that it is not politics that come first, but the national interest. It’s not about who is the leader, but about whether the Government’s eyes are on the national picture.”

The analysts also said that Saturday’s announcements showed that the succession scenario post-GE2020 is still very much the same as before, with Mr Heng still tipped as the person most likely to take over the reins of the Government, albeit at a later stage than initially planned, because of Covid-19.

Assoc Prof Tan said: “Whether it is PAP’s overall GE performance or more particularly the results in East Coast GRC (Group Representation Constituency), one can read it as this — that PAP does not see these factors as in any way undermining their trust and confidence in Heng Swee Keat as PM-in-waiting. That has become quite clear from today’s announcement.”

The PAP team contesting East Coast GRC in GE2020, led by Mr Heng, won with 53.4 per cent of the votes, lower than the overall 61.2 per cent of votes received by PAP in the election, and the 60.7 per cent vote share that the PAP had won in East Coast GRC in GE2015.

Others noted, too, that Mr Heng will be taking on a new role as Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies. Until today, the title of Coordinating Minister has only been held by Senior Ministers Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Teo Chee Hean, as well as by outgoing Mr Khaw Boon Wan, who has retired.

And this comes after Mr Heng’s appointment to the role of Singapore’s sole DPM in the previous Cabinet reshuffle, which took place in May last year, Dr Koh said.

“When Mr Heng was made the sole DPM, the message being sent then was that there was no other contender for premiership, and this position has been maintained in this round of Cabinet reshuffle,” she noted.

“So, we take it as a signal that the situation with the successorship was maintained vis-a-vis before the general election,” she concluded.

## **SUCCESSION PLANNING**

Analysts said that there could be a “fair chance” that Mr Lee may hold onto his premiership even after turning 70, which is not what he had originally intended.

During the briefing, Mr Lee was asked how his hope to step down by 70 could be reconciled with the promise he made to stay on through the Covid-19 crisis and hand over the country “in good shape” to the 4G leadership.

He replied: “I had expressed the hope that I would be able to hand over by the time I celebrate my 70th birthday. But I do not determine the path of the Covid-19 pandemic, and it will also depend on how events unfold.”

With only 18 months to go before Mr Lee turns 70, Assoc Prof Tan said that it looks like Mr Lee may not be able to fulfil his hope, as Singapore may not have recovered from the Covid-19 crisis by then.

However, analysts said that this will probably be welcomed by Singaporeans, and that it should not reflect a lack of confidence in the 4G leadership if Mr Lee does stay on as prime minister past 70.

After all, past premiership handovers have usually happened during periods of stability, Assoc Prof Tan said.

For example, former prime minister Goh Chok Tong handed over the reins to Mr Lee only in August 2004, more than a year after the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) outbreak had ended.

## NEW APPOINTMENTS

Of the other moves in this round of reshuffle, analysts said that the role of transport minister being handed to Mr Ong Ye Kung, previously education minister, was the most surprising change.

It is not typical for an education minister to take on the transport portfolio next, they noted.

In the past, education ministers, including Mr Teo Chee Hean, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Dr Ng Eng Hen and Mr Heng Swee Keat, had gone on to helm either the Ministry of Finance or Defence.

In recent years, the transport portfolio has been regarded as something of a poisoned chalice, with its past two ministers, Mr Lui Tuck Yew and Mr Raymond Lim, retiring from politics after their stints at the ministry.

Dr Koh said: "Transport is always going to be a very challenging portfolio, because everybody is a stakeholder in it. Yet it is difficult to handle — few are willing to pay the costs of our public transport system, and the ministry's position has been to deter the use of cars. Even when it comes to micro-solutions, we saw how challenging it can get with the personal mobility device issue in the last Parliament."

However, Dr Woo said that with Mr Ong — who is seen as a capable 4G leader — moving into the Transport Ministry, this could also indicate that the portfolio has been transformed by Mr Khaw's work.

"The political calculations today may not be the same as the past," Dr Woo said, noting that there is a need for the transport minister to navigate difficult issues such as Singapore's bilateral relations with its two neighbours Indonesia and Malaysia.

This could require a capable minister who can handle such sensitive matters adroitly, he said.

Mr Lee said as much in his briefing, when he commented on Mr Ong's move: "We need a very good minister at the helm, with Cabinet experience and political nous."

Apart from Mr Ong, some analysts also found notable the movement of Mr Lawrence Wong, from the Ministry of National Development to the Ministry of Education.

This is a more typical trajectory of political evolution, they noted, with the education portfolio often seen as a springboard to higher office.

Dr Walid said that Mr Wong's ascendance is not surprising given the competence he has shown in handling the Covid-19 crisis.

Agreeing, Dr Woo added that Mr Wong's political career so far has had a more diverse path than that of his 4G peers.

On top of his new education minister appointment and the role of second finance minister, which he retains, Mr Wong has held stints at the Ministry of Communications and Information, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, and the Ministry of National Development.

"Yes, it would appear to me that he is being groomed for more things to come," Dr Woo said.