

Next Cabinet reshuffle to be 'strategic and substantive', with key ministries changing hands: Analysts

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Apart from the appointment of two new Deputy Prime Ministers (DPMs), the next Cabinet reshuffle is unlikely to be as extensive as the changes made earlier this year, said political analysts. Instead, the upcoming Cabinet reshuffle – which analysts expect to be in April next year, after the Budget – is likely to be more "substantive and strategic".

This is partly because the next set of Cabinet changes is expected to be the last one before the next General Election (GE) is called.

The next GE is due by early 2021 but there has been talk that it could be held as early as end of 2019.

Analysts are largely eyeing changes to three key portfolios — education, defence and foreign affairs — which were among those that did not change hands in the May Cabinet reshuffle.

These, they say, could be helmed by new Ministers as the fourth-generation leadership comes to the fore, several analysts said.

There are divided opinions on the law ministry given that Singapore has only had three Law Ministers since Independence. Prior to incumbent Law Minister K Shanmugam, who has held the portfolio for more than a decade, Professor S Jayakumar and the late Edmund Barker occupied the position for almost 20 years and 24 years, respectively.

HENG AND CHAN LIKELY TO BE DPMS, KEEP PORTFOLIOS

Last week, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) announced the office-bearers of its new Central Executive Committee (CEC), with Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, 57, and Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing, 49, taking up the first and second assistant secretary-general positions respectively. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong – who is the party's secretary-general – also announced that the 4G political office holders have chosen Mr Heng as their leader, and he in turn has asked Mr Chan to be his deputy.

Mr Lee, 66, also said that the Cabinet changes will be made "in due course", making it the fourth round of changes following the 2015 GE.

With Mr Heng now considered Mr Lee's successor — the Prime Minister is expected to hand over the reins after the next GE — most of the analysts expect Mr Heng as well as Mr Chan to be named as DPMs, on top of their existing portfolios.

The two current DPMs are Mr Teo Chee Hean, 63, and Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, 61.

Analysts expect Mr Teo and Mr Tharman to become Senior Ministers, following the path of some previous DPMs like the late S Rajaratnam in 1985, and Prof Jayakumar in 2009.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament (MP) Viswa Sadasivan said Mr Heng and Mr Chan "complement each other in terms of leadership style, energy and exposure".

While most analysts expect the two men to take up the DPM posts, National University of Singapore political scientist Bilveer Singh said there is a possibility that Mr Shanmugam, 59, who is currently also the Home Affairs Minister, could fill one of the posts alongside Mr Heng. Mr Shanmugam has a steep experience in security issues and governance, Assoc Prof Singh noted.

This despite the fact that Mr Shanmugam had described earlier reports suggesting that he would be appointed an assistant secretary-general and DPM as "breathless speculation" that "may be off the mark".

Nanyang Technological University political scientist Woo Jun Jie felt that it was more likely for Mr Shanmugam to take over the role of Coordinating Minister for National Security from Mr Teo, on top of his current Home Affairs portfolio.

As for Mr Heng, Dr Gillian Koh from the Institute of Policy Studies noted that as Finance Minister, he is already in a good position "to take the helicopter view... and he has the policy levers that influence all of Government through his position at the Ministry of Finance".

It was also unlikely that he would switch portfolios, even as he takes on the DPM role, most of the analysts agreed.

The same goes for Mr Chan, who only took over the trade and industry portfolio in May. Moreover, concerns over the ongoing trade war between United States and China and the opportunity for Mr Chan to build deeper ties with the business community could also see him staying put in the Trade and Industry Ministry, Dr Koh noted.

ONG YE KUNG TO DEFENCE OR FOREIGN AFFAIRS?

The last round of Cabinet changes saw nearly two-thirds of the ministries helmed by a 4G leader, with the exception of defence, health, law, home affairs, foreign affairs and transport portfolios.

This time, analysts said ministerial movements could be on the cards in less than a handful of ministries — Education, Defence, Foreign Affairs and Law — with incumbent Education Minister Ong Ye Kung, 49, expected to move to another heavyweight ministry.

Mr Ong was put in charge of the entire Ministry of Education (MOE) in May, having previously co-lead it with Mr Ng Chee Meng. Mr Ng is currently a Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and the labour chief.

Analysts said Mr Ong could take on the defence or foreign affairs portfolio.

Should Mr Ong be appointed to lead either ministry, it reflects the possibility of him holding a higher office further down the road, for example as DPM if Mr Heng becomes Prime Minister.

"He was one of the three frontrunners to succeed Mr Lee. He is still young and as long as he performs, we cannot rule him out for higher office," said Assoc Prof Singh. "Politically, he is a significant member."

Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan noted that Mr Ong has been at the MOE since 2015 and has introduced policy changes to reduce emphasis on grades and deepen lifelong learning.

As such, it is "about right" that he is exposed to new portfolios and challenges. "Since he has put the wheels in motion, it would be easier for someone new to takeover," said Assoc Prof Tan.

PAP stalwart Ng Eng Hen, 59, has been the Defence Minister since May 2011.

Mr Ong's prior experience as Second Minister for Defence could serve him well if he were to succeed Dr Ng, said Assoc Prof Singh.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) — which has been under Dr Vivian Balakrishnan since 2015 — could also see changes. It is a key portfolio which the 4G leadership team will need "strong exposure to given the strategic importance of diplomacy for Singapore", said Asst Prof Woo.

Mr Ong was picked by some analysts as a potential candidate to succeed Dr Balakrishnan.

He has the "presence and confidence that can serve Singapore well on the international stage", said Assoc Prof Tan.

Ms Grace Fu could be the other likely candidate to head MFA, said analysts, citing her experience as former Second Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2012 to 2015. Ms Fu is currently helming the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

Asst Prof Woo added: "Among the 4G leaders, Ms Fu and Mr Ong possess strong backgrounds in trade and economic co-operation, particularly with China."

If Mr Ong drops his education portfolio, analysts felt that Ms Indranee Rajah, 55, currently the Second Minister for Education, could take over given her deep experience in the education ministry.

Ms Indranee was Senior Minister of State for Education from Nov 1, 2012 to Sep 30, 2015. She is also leading the inter-agency taskforce which seeks to help children from disadvantaged families, the analysts pointed out.

Nevertheless, Ms Indranee is also a potential candidate — alongside current Senior Minister of State for Law Edwin Tong, 49 — to take over the law ministry should Mr Shanmugam relinquish the portfolio.

Former PAP MP Inderjit Singh said that both Ms Indranee and Mr Tong have extensive experience in the private legal sector, before joining the Government.

SOME 3G LEADERS COULD STAY PUT

There could be at least three important ministries — Transport, Health and Home Affairs — where an old hand is required to stay on, said the analysts.

The transport ministry had previously been described by observers as a "poisoned chalice", and veteran minister, Mr Khaw Boon Wan, 65, could be tasked to "see through the suite of changes

to the public transport system" until the next GE, Assoc Prof Tan said. "It is best to hand over to his successor with a clean slate, and free of problems," he noted.

Agreeing, Assoc Prof Singh added: "You need an experienced hand to handle a sensitive portfolio."

Likewise, at the Ministry of Home Affairs, Mr Shanmugam could stay on to see through upcoming legislative changes following the recent Penal Code review, as well as regarding deliberate online falsehoods, said Assoc Prof Tan.

SIM Global Education associate lecturer Felix Tan pointed out that with the terror threat to Singapore remaining at its highest, an "experienced minister is needed to ensure plans are in place and Singaporeans remain prepared".

Analysts also expect incumbent Health Minister Gan Kim Yong to continue in his post.

"He has been doing a good job. Why would you want to change?" said Assoc Prof Singh, noting that Mr Gan has managed to "depoliticise health as an issue" through recent policy initiatives such as CareShield Life.

Still, with healthcare spending expected to overtake education within the next decade, there is a need to groom a successor, said Assoc Prof Tan.

Currently, there are three Senior Ministers of State for Health – Dr Amy Khor, Dr Lam Pin Min and Mr Tong – and there is a likelihood that a Second Minister for Health could be appointed, Assoc Tan said.

"It is important for the successor to cut his or her teeth now to understand how to control spending yet ensure good outcomes," he said.

BALANCING EXPOSURE AND EXPERIENCE

The last two Cabinet reshuffles were announced in April last year and in the same month this year, after the national Budget and debates on committee of supply bills were concluded.

The upcoming reshuffle might follow a similar timeframe, Dr Koh said.

Several analysts reiterated the need for Mr Lee to strike a fine balance between broader exposure for the 4G leaders and cultivating deeper understanding of their existing portfolios.

Given the relatively short runway which the 4G leaders have to take over from their predecessors, the focus will be more on "broad-based exposure" before the next GE, said Assoc Prof Tan.

After the polls, there could be a shift towards giving certain Cabinet ministers more specialised roles, he said. "Every Cabinet needs its mix of generalists and specialists," he added.

Assoc Prof Singh felt that, at some point, the 4G leaders should be given time to sink their teeth into their respective portfolios.

"The 4G leaders have been around since 2011 and it's not a good argument to say, 'I still need to test them' as Mr Lee has been testing them for quite some time," he added.