

Next PM likely to be appointed as PAP's second-in-command at party elections: Analysts

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TODAY, 27 September 2018

Political analysts expect at least one, if not two, new assistant secretary-generals — the second-in-command positions — to be appointed by the People's Action Party (PAP) after its Central Executive Committee (CEC) elections later this year.

And one of them will be the ruling party's successor to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who is expected to retain his position as the party's secretary-general and lead it in the next General Election (GE) due by April 2021, said analysts interviewed by TODAY.

This will represent a narrowing of the field which comprises three frontrunners: Mr Chan Chun Sing, 48, Mr Heng Swee Keat, 57, and Mr Ong Ye Kung, 48.

The topic of political succession was thrust into the spotlight again, after Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said on Monday (Sept 24) that the process is gathering steam, with a team already in place and "put through its paces".

Speaking at a corporate governance event, Mr Shanmugam said the line-up of the PAP's next top decision-making body — which will be elected later this year at the party's biennial party conference — will provide a clue to the identity of Singapore's next Prime Minister.

"Look out for the slate of candidates elected. Look at the positions they hold and that should give you an indication of where the transition process is," Mr Shanmugam had said.

At each party conference, PAP cadre members vote on the candidates for the CEC. After they are elected, the CEC members will co-opt others into the committee, and the office bearers will be chosen.

Speaking to TODAY, Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan noted that the appointment of one or two of the three frontrunners to the post of assistant secretary-general "will be a strong indicator" as to who might be the next Prime Minister.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), reiterated that they "must certainly move into that position to be primed for leadership in both the party and Government".

Right now, the PAP's first and second assistant secretary-general posts are filled by Mr Teo Chee Hean and Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam respectively. Mr Teo and Mr Tharman are also Deputy Prime Ministers.

Assoc Prof Tan noted that it is possible that both men might vacate their party posts and assume the roles of chairman and vice-chairman as part of leadership renewal.

The PAP's incumbent chairman and vice-chairman are Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan and Dr Yaacob Ibrahim respectively. Dr Yaacob recently stepped down as a Cabinet Minister but remains a Member of Parliament.

"The likely theme for the upcoming CEC election is change amid continuity, where we will see the third-generation leaders making way for the fourth-generation leaders," Assoc Prof Tan added.

Dr Felix Tan, an associate lecturer with SIM Global Education, pointed out that both Mr Lee and Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong had undergone a similar transition process within the party: They first assumed the assistant secretary-general role in the party, before rising to the top post of secretary-general.

SUPPORT FROM PARTY MEMBERS VITAL

At the beginning of this year, there was some talk that Mr Lee's successor would be appointed as a Deputy Prime Minister in a Cabinet reshuffle, as this would not only give the successor exposure and prepare him for the top job, but also signal to the public that he is next in line.

However, Mr Lee came out publicly to cool the speculation, saying that he was "not expecting to have new Deputy Prime Ministers" after the round of changes. Sure enough, when the new Cabinet lineup was announced in April, Mr Teo and Mr Tharman remained as Deputy Prime Ministers.

Noting that there are various stages to Singapore's political succession, Dr Koh said that Mr Shanmugam's recent comments sent the message that PAP cadre members have a say in the identity of Mr Lee's successor.

"This is important to note. It isn't just one stage, but there are many stages to this process of political succession," said Dr Koh, adding that various constituents — including PAP members — will be sizing up the potential candidates.

Veteran PAP member Sidek Saniff, who was a former Senior Minister of State for Education and Environment, told TODAY that potential successors are not only judged by their performance on the national and international stage, but also how they fare within their constituencies.

He added: "The PAP members will judge at the initial stage. Then the public will assess and decide."

Nevertheless, political scientist Bilveer Singh from the National University of Singapore noted that while the cadres decide who gets into the CEC, it is still the party's secretary-general who makes the final call on the appointments within the committee.

"But what is changing slowly is that the party leaders know they cannot be aloof and out of touch (with) the party," added Assoc Prof Singh.

'DON'T RULE OUT ONG YE KUNG'

While the field of frontrunners is set to narrow, the analysts said it is still not easy to predict who would make the cut.

They noted that both Mr Chan and Mr Heng have an edge over Mr Ong, simply because they have more experience as Cabinet Ministers since they entered politics earlier.

In an interview with The Straits Times in January, Mr Ong also said he has someone in mind for the top job, and suggested that it was not himself.

But Assoc Prof Singh cautioned against discounting the chances of Mr Ong, who has been “performing well”.

Mr Chan and Mr Heng were elected into the CEC at the last party conference held in December 2016, continuing an unbroken streak since they entered politics in 2011. Both were elected to the CEC in the 2012 and 2014 internal elections as well.

Mr Ong, who entered Parliament in 2015, was not elected in what was his first party election, and was co-opted later.

Both Mr Chan and Mr Ong are now the PAP’s organising secretaries, while Mr Heng is a CEC member.

Dr Koh pointed out that Mr Ong’s appointment within the party has provided him with exposure to the party cadres, since the role involves the “strategising of party messaging, recruitment and especially electoral tactics, and who to field in the next GE”.

However, this exposure “has to translate to good standing with the party cadres for him to be a duly elected member of the CEC” at the next party election, “as it must with any other frontrunner for premiership at this stage”, said Dr Koh.

Regardless of who is primed to succeed Mr Lee, the analysts believe that Mr Lee will lead the PAP in the next GE.

Dr Felix Tan noted that it would be extremely challenging for the fourth-generation leaders to assume the mantle of leading an electoral battle, as they still have “a lot to learn on the job”.

Dr Koh noted that Mr Lee himself had said that he would hand over the reins after the next GE.

“All I can say is that unless there are extenuating circumstances, Mr Lee (will keep) his word,” she said.

Assoc Prof Singh added: “I don’t expect PM Lee to be sitting backstage as the stakes are too high (during the GE).”