

PM makes changes to Cabinet; Varied range of talent, abilities needed as governance becomes 'more complicated and intense'

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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday announced changes to the Cabinet and other political appointments, as part of ongoing efforts to reinforce his team for national tasks which have become “more complicated and more intense”.

With effect from next month, Acting Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing will become a full minister — about two years and four months after he was elected as a Member of Parliament. Mr Chan will also be Second Minister for Defence.

Ministers of State Josephine Teo and Amy Khor will be promoted to Senior Ministers of State (SMS), while Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman and Ms Sim Ann, who are currently Senior Parliamentary Secretaries, will move up the ranks as Ministers of State. All four will remain at their respective ministries.

The changes that caught the eye of political analysts were the promotion of two backbenchers: Jurong GRC MP Desmond Lee will be appointed Minister of State (Ministry of National Development) and Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Low Yen Ling will become Parliamentary Secretary (Ministry of Social and Family Development). Ms Low's appointment will take effect from Oct 1.

Cabinet changes have become an annual affair in recent years. Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of his official visit to China, the Prime Minister said: “Every year I look at my team and see what changes I need to make, to update it, to reinforce it, to promote people who have done well and contributed.”

He noted that he had been making structural changes to his administration, including the restructuring of two ministries last year and the creation of the National Population and Talent Division.

He added that to complement these changes, not only political leadership is required but also, “people who can do the political work” such as engaging Singaporeans, as well as “getting our views across and making sure we know how people are feeling”.

Which is why “we need a team which has a varied range of talent and abilities and it's a team which you build up gradually over time”, he said.

Currently, Mr Chan, Mr Tan Chuan-Jin and Mr Lawrence Wong — all of whom entered politics in 2011 — are Acting Ministers.

Mr Lee noted that Mr Tan and Mr Wong have been Acting Ministers for “just one year so I will consider their situation again perhaps next year or the year after”.

He said: "It doesn't mean that if you weren't promoted, there is something wrong with your performance ... On the whole, I'm satisfied with the performance of all my ministers."

Mr Lee, 61, had said in 2010 that the Republic "should not have a Prime Minister who is 70 years old or more than 70 years old".

He reiterated yesterday that "it is not for me to determine my successor".

"It's for the young people, the younger ministers in the team to work out amongst themselves whom they will support as their leader. I think the people who are in the Cabinet now will be an important part of the next generation of leaders," he said.

Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh described the latest Cabinet changes as "small steps to succession planning". Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan, who is also a Nominated Member of Parliament (MP), said he expects to see more changes in the next 12 to 18 months, as the clock is ticking away to get the next generations of core leaders ready.

The Prime Minister said Mr Desmond Lee and Ms Low, who are both first-term MPs, have been "good backbenchers". On the fast-tracked promotion of the former, he said: "It's my assessment of what the person is able to contribute and where he fits in."

He added that the appointment will allow Mr Tan, who will relinquish his other portfolio as Senior Minister of State in the MND, to "focus on his responsibilities" in the Manpower Ministry.

"(Mr Tan) is not only Acting Minister for Manpower but also SMS for National Development. But I think that's too heavy of a responsibility for him to bear," Mr Lee said.

On making Ms Low an office-holder in the Ministry of Social and Family Development, he noted that Mr Chan "needs an assistant" and Ms Low, whom he described as personable, was interested in the area.