

## **Succession in limbo: 4G team needs to hone ‘fresh working dynamic’ after GE and Covid-19, analysts say**

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The People's Action Party (PAP) is being prudent in having the fourth-generation (4G) ministers in government deliberate afresh who will be their future leader, political analysts said.

They were weighing in on why the ruling party did not immediately name someone to step up to the role left by Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, who made a surprise announcement on Thursday (April 8) that he will no longer be heading the 4G team of political office holders and be the next in line to take over as prime minister of the country.

The analysts said that although DPM Heng had handpicked Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing as his deputy in the 4G team and there is some urgency to pick a successor, Mr Chan was not automatically named because many things have changed during the Covid-19 crisis that warrants a return to the drawing board.

The observers added that Mr Chan, 51, along with Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung, 51, and Education Minister Lawrence Wong, 48, would be on the shortlist of candidates to replace Mr Heng.

They noted that National Development Minister Desmond Lee, 44, could be relatively too young and inexperienced since he began helming a ministry only in 2017.

Law professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University, who was a former Nominated Member of Parliament, said that it is not just a matter of finding the “first among equals” — a phrase often trotted out by PAP leaders — but also who could make the “best pair” to lead Singapore.

Associate Professor Tan was referring to the dynamics between a prime minister and deputy prime minister that have been the norm since the days when the late founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew was leading the Government.

Deputy prime ministers were always dependable, capable, competent and resourceful, and heavily supported the prime minister, Assoc Prof Tan noted.

For instance, the late Goh Keng Swee was deputy to Lee Kuan Yew in the 1970s and early 1980s, while the nation's second prime minister Goh Chok Tong had Mr Lee Hsien Loong as his deputy from 1990 to 2004. Mr Lee Hsien Loong, in turn, tapped current senior ministers, Mr Teo Chee Hean and Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

Assoc Prof Tan pointed out, too, that in 2018 when Mr Heng was made first assistant secretary-general of PAP and Mr Chan, the second assistant secretary-general, Mr Lee Hsien Loong had said that the two have “complementary strengths, and make a good pairing”.

“Now that this pairing won’t come to fruition, I think it is a case of ‘let us determine which two would be the new best combination’. In a way, it is not one substitution for the other,” Assoc Prof Tan added.

The assessment for certain 4G leaders might also have changed, given that the Covid-19 pandemic had presented a rare opportunity to test how leaders stepped to the fore in a crisis.

Mr Wong, for instance, was a dark horse in the succession line in 2018. However, he should rightly be seen as a strong contender now after being given the unrivalled platform as co-chair of the Government’s task force for Covid-19 to demonstrate what he is capable of, Assoc Prof Tan said.

At Thursday’s press conference to announce the news, Mr Chan himself said that Mr Heng’s latest move presents an opportunity for the 4G team to relook its succession plan.

“We were all working on the basis that the issue of succession had been settled. We were all entirely focused on making sure that Singapore can get through the Covid situation and emerge stronger. Now that DPM has decided to step aside, we will need to relook the issue of succession,” Mr Chan said.

“DPM Heng chose me as his deputy in 2018 and the team supported it. Now that DPM has decided to step aside as the leader of the 4G, the 4G team should be given the opportunity to relook the question of succession holistically and we will make a collective decision on who will be the next leader of the 4G in due course,” he added.

Assoc Prof Tan, however, believes that the choice of leadership would not start on a clean slate to make it a wide open race again. The shortlist would likely feature the same ministers who were in the running before 2018, such as Mr Chan and Mr Ong, he said.

“If we start from a clean slate, then I think the handover to a 4G prime minister may never happen.”

#### *‘FRESH DYNAMIC’ IN TEAMS*

Political scientist Felix Tan, who holds an administrative role at Nanyang Technological University, said that naming a new successor immediately would be a “pre-emptive move”.

“To rejig positions, reshuffle the Cabinet, all these take time, and that’s why they don’t want to make any announcements at this point in time,” he said. “They want to make sure they are making the right decision.”

Agreeing, Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said that it has been three years after Mr Heng was chosen to be PM Lee’s successor back in 2018, and there is already a “fresh dynamic” in the party.

This is especially after the passing of the General Election (GE) last year, when there were new additions and new appointments at the upper echelons of the political party.

For instance, she said that Dr Tan See Leng and Mr Edwin Tong were appointed as full ministers shortly after the GE last year.

“The 4G (leadership) is saying, ‘Please give us time to develop a fresh working dynamic and feel for who should be our new team captain’.”

While the leadership might take some time to come to a decision, Dr Felix Tan said that the eventual successor to Mr Lee cannot be a face that is too new, and he still believes that either Mr Chan or Mr Ong will be the one to step up to the plate.

“These two names are very familiar with the ground. At the end of the day, whoever takes over as the prime minister-designate must have support from the domestic population.”

IPS senior research fellow Woo Jun Jie said that Singaporeans should still be able to expect the next successor to be selected after much internal deliberation, pointing out that leadership transition here is a “consensual process”.

“Just as DPM Heng was initially selected by his 4G peers after much deliberation, we can expect the next successor to be selected in a similar way,” he said.

Dr Koh said that the Cabinet reshuffle to be announced in two weeks’ time will offer some clues as to who may be considered for the future top job.

“You will have some signalling about who the potential candidates might be, and that would not (just) be subject to what the third-generation leaders say — the 4G team makes it very clear that it will also be its choice,” she said.

#### *PUBLIC PERCEPTION LIKELY DIVIDED*

The political analysts also said that the public will likely be divided into two camps.

One group will feel that the 4G leadership has been dragging its feet on its search for the next prime minister and question the team’s capabilities.

Dr Koh said: “People in this group will look at how the previous round of (selection) already took so long and seemed so rough a ride... It would seem like the Government is taking a step back to that situation — what the 4G leaders have bravely admitted to.”

Agreeing, Dr Felix Tan said that some Singaporeans may already have their doubts about the 4G leadership even before Mr Heng’s latest decision.

The doubts can be seen in the GE last year, with some questioning the 4G leadership’s ability in reaching out and connecting with the common people, he said.

“(The announcement) just puts the 4G team in a very difficult position to realign themselves... I think it really needs to go back to the drawing board.”

However, another group from the population may appreciate PAP’s adaptability during a crisis.

Dr Koh said: “Covid-19 is going to go on for another three to four years, and PM Lee will still be at the helm, and by the time (Mr Heng) goes in, he would be quite senior.

“So (people) may feel that this is indeed a responsible move.”

Mr Heng had said during the press conference that by the time the pandemic is over, he may be close to his mid-60s, giving him an insufficient runway to be the next prime minister.

#### *REPUTATION POSSIBLY BOLSTERED*

Would this bump in succession planning be a big hit to Singapore’s international reputation and standing? The analysts believe that nothing harmful will come of it because policy and governance here is generally seen as a team effort.

Dr Woo of IPS even said that this turn of events could instead bolster Singapore’s reputation, since the episode has shown that leadership transition here involves much serious consideration and deliberation, and prioritises collective interests and national needs.

Agreeing, Dr Koh said that it is precisely because international relations is important that it might have been better for Mr Heng to step aside.

“If not for Covid-19, the PM-in-waiting will already be in all sorts of international forums, meeting (world leaders) face to face, networking, concluding agreements,” she said. “How could we have a prime minister who does not have that opportunity and is just placed in that position?”

“Singapore needs a prime minister who has that standing and is a recognised face within the international community by the time he gets to the position,” she said.