

The Big Read: For Singapore's next PM, the journey starts with the men and women in white

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It is an all-white affair that takes place once every two years: Over a thousand men and women congregate for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) conference, where they will elect the party's top decision-making body, take stock of its performance thus far and chart the party's path forward.

However, unlike previous conferences, the one to be held later this year is set to hold added significance: For the first time, the identity of the man who will eventually become the next chief of the PAP — and in all likelihood, the Republic's next Prime Minister — is expected to become clearer to Singaporeans through the party's Central Executive Committee (CEC) election.

In the last two leadership transitions — first to Mr Goh Chok Tong, and then to Mr Lee Hsien Loong — both men had already been identified as the next Prime Minister before they assumed the first assistant secretary-general position in the PAP CEC during the party conference, and later the post of secretary-general. So, the party's internal elections then were seen by many as a mere formality in that regard.

Mr Goh assumed the post of first assistant secretary-general in the PAP CEC in November 1984, before he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister a month later following the December 1984 General Election (GE). Nevertheless, prior to his party appointment, Mr Goh had emerged as the clear leader among his peers in the Cabinet. He became Prime Minister in November 1990, and secretary-general about two years later.

PM Lee was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in November 1990, and became the PAP's first assistant secretary-general in December 1992. He became secretary-general in December 2003, and Prime Minister in August 2004.

Dr Gillian Koh, from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), noted that there is no rigid template for the successor to the Prime Minister to follow, by attaining certain posts within the party vis-à-vis the process of promotion in government positions, and the public announcement of the successor's identity.

Reading the tea leaves on who will be Singapore's next Prime Minister has been an ongoing exercise in the past one-and-a-half years, with political buffs engaging in a fresh round of speculation following Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam's comments last month.

He had said that political succession is gathering steam, and hinted that the transition will become clearer after the upcoming PAP's CEC election.

"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.

Political analysts had previously told TODAY that they expect at least one, if not two, new assistant secretary-generals — the second-in-command positions — to be appointed by the PAP after its CEC election.

Referring to Mr Shanmugam's remarks, Dr Koh felt the key point was that the potential successor must receive strong support from the PAP cadres.

"If the senior members of the ruling party have said that the upcoming CEC election is a critical one and will provide indication of who that successor may be, then we will read it as significant and that the party system is relevant to the process," added Dr Koh, who is the deputy research director at IPS.

A CADRE SYSTEM SHROUDED IN SECRECY

Within the PAP, there is an inner circle known as cadres. These are party stalwarts who have the privilege which no other ordinary member has: The right to decide which individuals make it into the party's top decision-making body.

For years, not much is known about the cadre system. Even within the party, members do not know who is a cadre among them, and there is no known published data on their numbers.

But in a media interview in 1998, former Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng offered a glimpse into a system that had been shrouded in secrecy. He revealed then that the PAP had more than 1,000 cadres. They received no perks, other than the right to vote in the CEC election. The PAP did not respond to TODAY's queries on latest figures.

Mr Wong had said there was no instruction for cadres to keep their identities a secret, adding that they did not disclose it due to an unwillingness to "boast about it".

According to nine PAP cadres including two former Members of Parliament (MPs), who spoke to TODAY on the condition of anonymity, cadres tend to be individuals who hold key leadership positions within a branch. These include secretary and chairman of the youth wing in each branch.

This is how the process goes: An MP in each branch nominates at least two individuals to be cadres each year. Since there are currently 83 PAP branches, it could mean that over 150 individuals are nominated to be cadres each year.

They are nominated based on their years of experience as a party member and possess outstanding qualities such as loyalty to the party and being people-oriented. Individuals then go through single or multiple rounds of interviews with a panel comprising ministers and MPs.

Then comes the confirmation. Individuals are notified that they have become cadres through a letter sent by mail. "I think I teared when I got the letter," said a cadre member from Bishan-Toa Payoh Group Representation Constituency (GRC).

"It is such a privilege that I will value (it) for the rest of my life."

Asked why there is secrecy about the cadre system, one former MP said: "So that members do not game the system. We only want people who are absolutely loyal to the party. No other intentions, full stop."

Another former MP added: “I think proclaiming that you are a cadre might create some sort of a hierarchy, and we don’t want that. We value all the members, except that some have been in the party far longer and we need to recognise their loyalty.”

Not much is known about the CEC election process as well. According to the two former PAP MPs, various groups such as the outgoing CEC, branch chairmen and secretaries, will nominate up to 20 individuals in total.

The nomination process takes place about two to three months before the party conference, where the internal election will be held.

Cadres said that in the lead up to the CEC election and on the day itself, nominees do not canvass for votes such as by giving speeches.

Results will be released on the same day as the voting, though the number of votes that individuals receive will not be disclosed. The 12 individuals with the highest votes will automatically be elected into the committee, which also decides who they want to co-opt.

Cadre members said the system was implemented to prevent a hostile takeover of the party from within. It was a lesson which the PAP learnt after left-wing members attempted such a move back in 1957, before they were expelled and later formed their own party called Barisan Sosialis.

“We don’t want history to repeat itself,” said a cadre member from Tanjong Pagar GRC.

THE THREE FRONT RUNNERS

So far, three names have surfaced when it comes to the question of who will succeed PM Lee: Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing, 48; Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, 57; and Education Minister Ong Ye Kung, 48.

Both Mr Chan, a Tanjong Pagar GRC MP, and Mr Heng, an MP from Tampines GRC, entered politics after the 2011 GE.

Mr Chan, a former army general, started out as Minister of State for the then Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts.

He has since gone on to assume several other posts, including Second Minister for Defence, Minister for Social and Family Development, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, as well as being the secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress.

Currently, he is also the Minister-in-charge of the Public Service, and Deputy Chairman of the People’s Association.

After the 2011 GE, Mr Heng — who was formerly the managing director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore — was immediately elevated to a full minister, helming the Ministry of Education.

Mr Heng, who was out of action for several months after suffering a stroke in May 2016, had co-chaired the Committee on the Future Economy — which charted the strategies for Singapore’s next phase of growth — and also led the Our Singapore Conversation project.

Since 2015, he has helmed the Finance Ministry.

Having lost in the 2011 GE as part of the PAP's Aljunied GRC team, Mr Ong joined the Cabinet only after the subsequent polls in 2015, where he was fielded in Sembawang GRC.

He was first appointed Senior Minister of State for Defence, and subsequently Second Minister for Defence before helming the Education Ministry on his own since April this year.

Within the party, both Mr Chan and Mr Heng were first elected into the CEC in 2012, and subsequently in the 2014 and 2016 party elections.

After the 2012 CEC election, Mr Chan was appointed organising secretary — a post he holds till today — and also became chairman of the party's youth wing.

Last year, Dr Janil Puthuchery, who is currently the Senior Minister of State for Transport as well as Communications and Information, took over as chairman of the PAP's youth wing.

Meanwhile, Mr Heng has remained a non-office bearer in the CEC.

For Mr Ong, he was co-opted into the 18-member CEC formed about two years ago — just 15 months after he was elected to Parliament — and was given the post of organising secretary. Apart from Mr Chan and Mr Ong, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong also holds this post.

While Mr Chan may have held more party posts than the other two frontrunners, PAP cadres said the leadership race is still tight, and are uncertain who among the three is in the lead.

A cadre from Jurong GRC felt that the three men “are the best among the pool” because they hold “important portfolios, handle the key issues like finance and education”.

Though “it is still hard to say who is leading”, the cadre member added: “What is certain is that one of them will become the new assistant secretary-general.”

LOBBYING ‘NOT THE PAP WAY’

Unlike in other countries, where factions exist and those vying for leadership posts are forced to canvass or lobby for support, no such lobbying happens within the PAP, party cadres told TODAY.

Prior to the CEC election, for instance, leaders “do not go around calling on cadres to vote for them”, said the cadre from Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC. “They know that we have the right to vote for whoever we want and trust our assessment,” he said.

A Tanjong Pagar GRC cadre added: “Previous leaders have never (lobbied for votes). It is not the PAP way.”

Another cadre from Sembawang GRC reiterated that the practice is to “just walk the ground to interact with both residents and members to understand ground concerns”.

Still, the uncertainty over the identity of PM Lee's successor is worrying for some cadres, while others are unfazed and called for patience.

The cadre, who is the chairman of the youth wing in his branch in the east, said that “some party members are watching the succession process with some anxiety”.

He added: "PAP is known for its clarity. There cannot be space for a sense of uneasiness to creep in among party members."

Another cadre from Sembawang GRC pointed out that though the transition process is shorter this time round, members need not worry as there is a mixture of experienced and new leaders.

"The members are guided by the leaders. If they say (the younger leaders) are not ready, we will accept and have to be patient because they know best," he noted. "The last thing we want is for them to rush through it."

WHAT PAP CADRES LOOK FOR IN THEIR LEADERS

As much as it is a privilege to be cadres, they also have a heavy responsibility come the PAP election, when they have to decide who they want in the CEC.

Candidates for the CEC must have a combination of attributes: Leadership traits, people-oriented, and most importantly empathy, said several PAP cadres.

The cadre, who leads the youth wing in his branch in the east, said equally important is how the individuals perform in their respective constituencies.

"If the individual cannot connect with his or her constituents, then there is no point to even be in the CEC," he added.

Those interviewed also noted that competency and popularity are not mutually exclusive, though the former should take precedence.

A Tanjong Pagar GRC cadre noted that the late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew did not believe that politics was a popularity contest, but rather to change people's lives.

"He was strict and people might not initially like him, but eventually, his competency earned the people's respect. Soon enough, he became popular and well-loved."

Former PAP MP Irene Ng, who is now a writer-in-residence at think-tank Iseas-Yusof Ishak Institute, said when cadres vote for the CEC, key factors that they base their votes on is whether the candidate can "address the complex challenges facing the country and its people, attend to the bread-and-butter concerns of the average man-in-the-street, take care of the most vulnerable in society, and carry the ground with him. And of course, to win the elections".

Former PAP MP Inderjit Singh said that support from cadres is significant. "Cadre members typically have a very good feel of the ground as reflected by sentiments of general party members."

Mr R Ravindran, a former MP who is now a lawyer, echoed a similar sentiment, saying that cadres are "very careful" in selecting the CEC members.

"They look at the whole picture — international standing, national performance and grassroots performance. These are factors cadre members are conscious of. They have interacted with these leaders, they know the leaders very well," he added.

From time to time, MPs are also co-opted into the CEC. Currently, there are two of them in the committee — MP for Potong Pasir Sitoh Yih Pin and MP for Bukit Batok Murali Pillai.

In 2011, two MPs — Ms Denise Phua of Jalan Besar GRC and Mr Seah Kian Peng from Marine Parade GRC — also made it into the CEC. But their circumstances were different.

They were not elected into the committee when the CEC election was held in 2010, but were among six fresh faces brought in later to replace veteran politicians who had stepped down from the party's top-decision making body.

The new faces were chosen through a poll of branch chairmen and cadres representing the PAP branches, as well as groups such as the party's youth and women's wings.

It is rare for party stalwarts who are not political officeholders in the government to be elected into the party CEC. Former PAP MP Tan Cheng Bock, who sat on the CEC from 1987 to 1996, was one such example.

A cadre from Tampines GRC said some members might feel that certain MPs also possess leadership qualities, passion and drive for public service. As such, they also deserve a place in the CEC.

The cadre from the PAP branch in the east, said: "As an experienced cadre member, I can tell you that even some MPs can receive more votes than a minister. Why? Sometimes it is because they are seen to have more empathy."

He reiterated that the CEC election reflects "democracy in action", a view shared by other cadres.

One cadre from Sembawang GRC said that they are "not cornered to vote for a particular person". He added: "We are free to make our choices and our leaders respect that because they know it is important to get a mandate from party members first."

Current PAP members, former PAP MPs, and political analysts who spoke to TODAY all agreed that it was important that the next party leader and potential future Prime Minister be elected into the CEC — being co-opted is not an option.

Mr Singh said that if the future leader fails to be elected, "I doubt he will have the moral authority to lead the party".

Lessons from other countries also illustrate the need for leaders to have strong party support.

Last month, Australia welcomed a new prime minister for the sixth time in 10 years. Following the infighting within the ruling Liberal party, former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was ousted by his own party members. The United Kingdom's former premier Gordon Brown, too, had faced multiple leadership challenges from members of his own Labour Party, though he managed to ride out the storm.

Political analyst Eugene Tan said that Singapore's next leader is likely to be "politically insecure" if he does not have a resounding mandate from his own party. This will also affect the stability of his government, he added.

“A Prime Minister who has very strong support within his own political party will be less likely to fall victim to internal party struggle. He will also be able to lead and govern without having to fear that his own position is under grave threat,” said Assoc Prof Tan, a law professor at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Without confidence from his own party and Cabinet ministers, “factions can quickly develop and power struggles can ensue”, he noted.

SNAP GE ON THE CARDS?

PM Lee, 66, who has said he would not wish to be Prime Minister beyond 70 years old, has also indicated that he would hand over the reins after the next GE, which is due by April 2021.

With that being the case, some observers believe an early election could be called as soon as late next year — in order to give more breathing space for the leadership transition after the polls. This would also allow the next Prime Minister to have a longer runway before leading the ruling party in the subsequent GE.

In contrast, if the coming GE is held in 2020 or 2021, PM Lee will be pushing 70 and the spotlight — as well as pressure — could be greater on his successor.

National University of Singapore political scientist Bilveer Singh said the possibility of the GE being held next year cannot be discounted.

There is already indication that the Government has started to sweeten the ground by giving utilities rebates, among other things, he noted.

Furthermore, ground sentiments might change as the implementation date of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) hike draws near, he added.

The Government has said the increase will take effect between 2021 and 2025.

Singapore will also commemorate its bicentennial next year, with PM Lee previously describing it as an important milestone and an occasion to reflect how the nation came into being.

SIM Global Education associate lecturer Felix Tan said that it would be to the PAP’s advantage to tap the feel-good factor by calling the elections.

“It would reflect well upon the PAP to predicate all their achievements and also appeal to the emotions of Singaporeans. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if they are able to use this event to great effect,” he added.

Still, some analysts noted that a snap GE would mean a “short runway” for PM Lee’s successor to prove his mettle, as Assoc Prof Singh puts it.

SMU’s Assoc Prof Eugene Tan reiterated that the time frame might not allow Singaporeans to get to know the successor better and “for him to leave a strong impression”.

“This could affect party dynamics in that he may not command the same authority that his predecessors did when they had the luxury of time and opportunity to deal with issues, enabling them to stamp their mark even before they became prime minister,” Assoc Prof Eugene Tan said.

However, Dr Felix Tan argued that the 4G leaders should, and will, have the confidence and backing of party members, regardless of when the GE is called.

“If elections are held earlier, then all the more the PAP should have a successor who they are very certain has the tenacity and the capability to lead the team forward, especially in winning the confidence of Singaporeans,” he said.

While PM Lee is expected to lead the PAP in the next GE, the analysts noted that his successor will need to play a prominent role as well.

He will have to receive a strong mandate based on his merits “and not be shielded by PM Lee”, Dr Felix Tan pointed out.

SMU’s Assoc Prof Tan stressed the need for the 4G leadership to be the “face and engine” of the party leading up to the next GE, from strategising to running campaigns.

With so much at stake in the coming polls, will the outcome be seen as a gauge of public endorsement of PM Lee’s successor?

Such a viewpoint “would be too myopic”, said Assoc Prof Eugene Tan.

How the PAP performs depends on a variety of factors including how it has governed in the last few years and how it campaigns, he added.

“It would also be imprudent for the PAP to campaign and make the next GE as a referendum of sorts on PM Lee’s successor and his team,” he added.

Others, such as Ms Ng, said it depends whether the party will make political succession the key issue at the campaign.

“But going by precedent, the future Prime Minister will have to win his own mandate by leading the elections not long after taking over,” added the former Tampines GRC MP.

Mr Inderjit Singh said that the PAP could test the level of support for the future Prime Minister by making it a key issue in its campaigns.

A delicate balance will have to be struck — for PM Lee to play a leading role while giving room for his successor to shine as the PAP gears up for the electoral battle.

Using a football analogy, NUS’ Assoc Prof Singh said there will be times when PM Lee might “probably pass the ball more often” to his successor. But the current premier will continue to be the “centre forward and captain of the team”.

Switching to another analogy, Assoc Prof Singh added: “The Prime Minister-in-waiting will be an ‘L’ plate driver, with PM Lee as the instructor.”