

Singapore Promotions Prompt Speculation Over Premier's Successor; Chan Chun Sing, named as trade minister, is seen as contender to replace Lee Hsien Loong

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Singapore's prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, promoted several junior ministers Tuesday, including one who is seen as a possible successor.

The changes come amid speculation over who will replace the 66-year-old Mr. Lee, who has indicated he plans to step down in the coming years. He has served as premier since 2004, and his People's Action Party has governed since independence in 1965. The party is expected to run the government for the foreseeable future, allowing it effectively to choose future leaders years in advance.

Among the promotions was Chan Chun Sing, 48, who was named trade minister. He is one of a small number of people who analysts have identified as possible contenders to succeed Mr. Lee.

Mr. Chan spent more than two decades in the Singapore military, rising quickly to become the army chief, before entering politics in 2011 and taking on a series of posts including minister for family and social development.

"What we have seen today is Mr. Chan Chun Sing being brought back to government," said Gillian Koh, head of politics and governance research at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. The position "allows for the experience and exposure that any premier-in-waiting requires."

Another possible contender is the finance minister, Heng Swee Keat, 57, though his future was thrown into question after he suffered a minor stroke in 2016. He made a full recovery.

"The younger ministers will progressively take over more responsibility for governing Singapore," Mr. Lee said on Facebook. "The leadership transition taking place in the next few years is well under way."

An important financial and transport hub of 5.6 million people, Singapore is wrestling with an uncertain global economy and a domestic backlash against high numbers of foreign workers.

Succession plans have been a persistent preoccupation as Mr. Lee ages. He collapsed from heat exhaustion and dehydration during a 2016 speech and suffered from lymphoma in the early 1990s but says he now has a clean bill of health. His term ends in 2021.

Mr. Lee's father, Lee Kuan Yew, ruled for 31 years and established Singapore as a meticulously planned, smooth-running society that became a widely admired modern nation in Asia but kept close curbs on political freedoms and the media.

The younger Mr. Lee has softened the tone of many policies, but rights groups say political control remains tight, with little room for opposition. Analysts say a new leader will need to

chart a delicate path for the trade-dependent country as giant powers such as China and the U.S. tussle for influence over the region's affairs.