

Where might Singapore's political leaders come from?

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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong last week welcomed members of his new Cabinet, and assuming the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) continues its unbroken streak of power, one of them is likely to become Singapore's next prime minister.

Now, what political cues can be gleaned from the portfolios assigned in the new Cabinet? Yahoo Singapore recently spoke to several analysts as well as former Ang Mo Kio GRC Member of Parliament (MP) Inderjit Singh to get their thoughts on the recent developments. Look to the private sector?

When asked where he believes future political leaders will come from, Singh, 55, a former deputy party whip for the PAP, pointed out that the second-tier office holders come from the private sector.

"(Many) of them are actually from the private sector. Whether it is Indranee (Rajah), Koh Poh Koon, Janil Puthuchery, Desmond (Lee) and so on and so forth, many of them are from the private sector," he said.

Senior Minister of State for law and education ministries Indranee Rajah, 52, used to work for private law firms Drew & Napier and Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer.

Senior Minister of State for home affairs Desmond Lee, 39, also has a background in the legal profession, having worked at the Attorney-General's Chambers and in the legal department of the Ministry of Finance-owned Temasek Holdings.

Janil Puthuchery, 42, used to work in hospitals in London and Sydney; Koh Poh Koon, 43, has been working at Fortis Healthcare. In January next year, Janil will be taking up the post of minister of state for education and communication and information, whereas Koh will be minister of state for trade and industry and national development.

The four will be among the 15 senior ministers of state and ministers of state forming the new government.

Notably, Desmond Lee's, father Lee Hock Suan, served in the government as a minister from 1998 to 2004. Meanwhile, Janil Puthuchery's father, Dominic Puthuchery, was one of the founding members of the PAP before he left to form the opposition party Barisan Sosialis with other leftists.

Possible successor

A Singapore prime minister or deputy prime minister emerging from the current crop of second-tier office holders may still be far into the future.

However, there are already signs that at least one minister is being groomed to be the successor of Lee Hsien Loong, 63, who has indicated before that he would not want to be prime minister beyond age 70 or be the head of the PAP beyond 2020.

Editor-in-chief for local socio-political site Inconvenient Questions Viswa Sadasivan believes that the two key cabinet positions to become a prime minister in Singapore are education and finance.

In the new Cabinet line-up Finance Minister post has been passed from Tharman Shanmugaratnam to Heng Swee Keat, who was previously Education Minister.

Heng's appointment sees him getting the "traditional exposure for a DPM-in-waiting", said Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies Gillian Koh.

Lee himself has not publicly identified anyone he would prefer to be his successor, but he has said the person would "most likely" come from the members of his new Cabinet.

Does age, race matter?

In the guessing game for who could be the next prime minister, however, Tharman's name keeps coming up. It has also spurred talk on whether a non-Chinese can ever be leader of Singapore, wherein ethnic Chinese make up the majority of the population.

Tharman, who is of Indian descent, is currently the Deputy Prime Minister and coordinating minister for Economic and Social Policies. He is seen by many as an outstanding performer in the Cabinet with a "brilliant" track record.

Aside from the issue of race, however, some believe that the 58-year-old's age will work against him in being considered the next prime minister.

Singh said that it would be "reckless" for Singapore to make Tharman prime minister due to the narrow age gap between the DPM and the prime minister.

"I personally feel it will be quite reckless for us to have an interim PM for a short period of time, jeopardising future fourth generation leadership, who could run Singapore for another 15 to 20 years," he said.

In the past, the late Lee Kuan Yew, the father of Lee Hsien Loong, was only 35 years old when he became Singapore's first prime minister. The older Lee was in office for 31 years, from 1959 (pre-independence) to 1990 (post-independence).

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong succeeded him at the age of 49, and he served for 14 years before the current prime minister took over in 2004. The younger Lee then was 52 years old, not far from the ages of the younger members in government now.

New ministers being tested

New Members of Parliament (MPs) Ng Chee Meng and Ong Ye Kung are joining the government at ages 47 and 45, respectively. The both of them have been made acting ministers for education, with Ng taking the portfolio for schools and Ong getting the responsibility for higher education and skills.

The assignments are seen as a sign of the great expectations the PAP leadership has of them, as office holders are typically tested in several ministries before they take on even more senior roles.

Certainly, they don't seem to have been picked because of any strong prior background in education. Ng was Chief of Defence Force before joining politics this year, while Ong was a high-flying civil servant before he joined the labour movement and Keppel Corporation as director for group strategy.

“Singapore has this funny disease, you know, this disease is, if someone is good in one area, he will be good in all areas,” National University of Singapore’s associate professor Bilveer Singh said.

He noted that education is the “hot potato” ministry in the country, and this could be the reason why Ng and Ong have been given acting minister posts in the field.

“(Education is) one of the most important ministries. Teo Chee Hean was in education, Tharman was in education... Goh Chok Tong (was) directly involved here, former PM Lee (Kuan Yew) was always involved in education. So I think, they’re being sent there to be tested and tried,” he said.