

Changes reflect maturing Singapore priorities

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Some have described the Singapore Cabinet changes announced on Tuesday as a manifestation of the “politics of appeasement”. That would be reading too much into the so-called “new normal”.

Regardless, two things stand out for me in the Cabinet changes. First, the restructuring of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) and the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) to form the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI), as well as the establishment of the new Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY).

The second is the quickened pace of the leadership transition and renewal.

Taken together, the changes demonstrate how government and governance in Singapore have to evolve since the May 2011 general election. The government is called upon to be more responsive and sensitive to the intangibles like society and community issues as they impact profoundly upon the well-being of Singaporeans.

Such issues are now given the due recognition as being fundamental to the legitimacy of the Singapore-style governance. All these against the pressing need to prepare the putative fourth-generation leadership to assume greater responsibility.

PRE-EMPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Singapore society continues to evolve, necessitating the government machinery not only to adapt to the rapid changes but, where possible, to engage in pre-emptive management of key issues.

The formation of MCCY and MSF reflects the omnibus ministry that MCYS is, which may have inadvertently resulted in a perception that MCYS has an inherent diffused focus given its multi-faceted suite of portfolios. MCCY and MSF represent quite contrasting imperatives of a maturing Singapore.

On the one hand, the creation of MCCY signifies, among other things, the growing importance of the post-material needs and aspirations of Singaporeans and the desire to be a gracious and cultured society.

Thus, against the backdrop of a more complex and increasingly diverse society, the need for Singaporeans to develop a robust sense of belonging and rootedness — manifested in strong civic bonds and a cohesive national identity — becomes no longer a luxury but a necessity.

ENGAGING YOUTH

Sports, arts, heritage, volunteerism and philanthropy are invaluable platforms by which a vibrant national culture can be developed, nurtured and sustained. As such, the sports and arts communities need not fear that sports and the arts are now shunted aside. Instead, the role of sports and the arts in Singaporean society is now so well established such that there is no need to specifically mention them.

Contrast this with the specific reference to youths in the MCCY name. It underlines the recognition and commitment to engage and develop our youths. More so than ever for Gen Y and Gen Z Singaporeans, the world is their oyster. Opportunities abound for them outside our borders. Whether they will feel committed to Singapore cannot be left to chance.

The establishment of MSF reiterates the centrality of family and society in Singapore. In this regard, how we handle bread-and-butter concerns even amidst plenty, to having a robust and principled social safety support system, will continue to have a deep bearing on the kind of society we are.

Having a dedicated ministry to focus solely on social and family issues reflects the urgency and importance of not relegating these issues as a poor cousin to the pervasive economic imperative.

RENEWAL PROCESS

The changes to the Cabinet line-up highlight the quickened pace of leadership transition and renewal. By November 1, leaders first elected in May 2011 will helm four out of 16 ministries, covering education, social, and manpower portfolios.

Their learning curves will be steep as the wheels of government will not slow down on account of their being new to their portfolios.

In the so-called “new normal” political landscape, the office-holders will have to demonstrate not just technocratic know-how, skilful problem solving but also sophisticated political nous and sensitivity to competing and even conflicting interests and needs.

They will have to become more politician-like even as they deep dig into their technocratic expertise. As policy trade-offs are already becoming more evident and will have to explicitly laid out, how the political leadership stewards the country through the various policy options will be an integral part of the governance agenda.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has indicated that the latest changes to the Cabinet line-up will not be the last during this term. It's a deliberate process of leadership renewal as we transition from the third- to the fourth-generation political leadership.

More than ever, Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans alike will closely assess how the new line-up performs.

After all, how our political leadership performs will bear heavily on the destiny of Singapore and Singaporeans. — Today



Publication: The Malaysian Insider

Date: 2 August 2012

Headline: Changes reflect maturing Singapore priorities

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