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## **What the new Cabinet line-up says about leadership continuity and renewal**



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's first Cabinet line-up after the July 10 General Election is a nod to the sign of the times largely requiring the maintenance of the status quo. Three features stand out.

First, this is a "Covid-19 crisis" Cabinet. Secondly, the leadership transition proceeds apace with incremental change. Thirdly, the new line-up reflects the consistent themes of change and renewal amid continuity, but with the accent on continuity.

Mr Lee's placing a "premium on experience and a sure touch" of all hands on deck to tackle the crisis of a generation sees nine out of 15 ministries with no change of ministers, underscoring a desire for stability and experience in the battle against Covid-19.

Any doubts that Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat will succeed Mr Lee were subtly addressed too. Mr Heng continues as the overall second-in-command and Finance Minister, and takes on the additional portfolio of Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies that he had unofficially assumed since May 2019.

This indicates that the fourth-generation (4G) leaders do not see their team, led by Mr Heng, as not commanding the trust and confidence of Singaporeans.

Following the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) GE2020 overall result and Mr Heng's team subdued performance in East Coast Group Representation Constituency, much chatter and speculation had arisen over whether the succession plans would be relooked.

The Cabinet and 4G leaders are clear-eyed and steadfast that these plans remain unchanged and on track.

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On Sunday (July 26), speaking on behalf of the 4G ministers, Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said: "We are — all of us, in complete unity — behind the leadership of Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, so there is no need for any discussions or questions on that. We are in absolute unity under his lead."

The core 4G leadership appears to be coalescing around Mr Heng, Mr Chan Chun Sing, Mr Ong Ye Kung, Mr Lawrence Wong and Mr Desmond Lee. The new assignments for the latter three indicate that they are being readied for bigger challenges while being exposed to and stretched in their new roles.

For example, Mr Ong's role in the Transport Ministry will require him to ensure that Singapore's lifeblood and standing as a top-notch aviation, maritime, and logistics hub is enhanced even as these sectors are being upended. Our connectivity to the world is a precious resource, particularly in a post-Covid world.

The Transport Ministry will also handle major bilateral projects as well as sensitive airspace and maritime issues with Malaysia and Indonesia, as noted on Saturday by PM Lee, who added that this requires "a very good minister at the helm, with Cabinet experience and political nous".

Likewise, for Mr Wong (Education) and Mr Desmond Lee (National Development), moulding a nation of lifelong learners and innovators and rethinking urban planning and physical transformation are vital ingredients for Singapore's relevance and resilience in the face of existential threats such as an uncompromising economic environment, climate change, and global pandemics.

The next 18-36 months is the final lap of Singapore's third handover of leadership. But Covid-19 has mandated that Mr Lee "maintain a greater degree of continuity" than he would otherwise have done.

Thus, six third generation (3G) Ministers remain in the Cabinet although it is possible that the next reshuffle, likely in 12-24 months' time, might see a few of them step down.

The infusion of new blood continues with seven first-time parliamentarians becoming political office holders. This includes Dr Tan See Leng, whose appointment as a full minister after a career in the private sector is notable.

Since 1984, only former Finance Minister Dr Richard Hu and Mr Heng were appointed as full ministers upon their first-time election as Members of Parliament (MPs), although Dr Tan will not be solely helming a ministry for now.

Given the uncertain but devastating trajectory of Covid-19, there is a fair chance that PM Lee will remain as prime minister when he turns 70 in February 2022. He has pledged to see Singapore through the current crisis and hand over the country in a good stead to his successor.

This commitment is not unusual. Mr Lee's predecessors had also done the same. The battle against the severe acute respiratory syndrome of 2003, which ended in July that year, saw Mr Goh Chok Tong handing over power to Mr Lee the following year.

Mr Goh himself might have succeeded Mr Lee Kuan Yew earlier than in November 1990 but for what the Government said were internal security concerns a few years earlier.

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Not changing horses midstream is a political dictum in Singapore, acutely applicable in the current crisis.

It is critical for the pandemic health situation to be first brought under control and for economic challenges and threats to livelihoods to be effectively dealt with before the focus can shift towards opening a new chapter in Singapore's political leadership.

We should be very concerned if the top leadership were to be more fixated with their reins of power, rather than battling Covid-19 and preparing for the uncertain post-Covid world.

To be sure, Covid-19 does not provide political leaders the luxury to chart the handover timeline with certainty. There are, however, downsides to an inordinate delay for the handover from the 3G to the 4G.

It would raise legitimate doubts over whether the 4G is equal to the task of governing Singapore with the trust and confidence of Singaporeans and other stakeholders such as investors and our partners.

With 37 political office holders — almost half of the 83 PAP MPs in the new 14th Parliament — the task falls on the PAP backbenchers, the Opposition and (soon to be appointed) Nominated MPs to push the front bench to not only govern well but to also lead with empathy, humility, and dedication.

There will be the need to appoint new office-holders over the course of the new Parliament's term. Given the challenges of finding suitable people willing to seek election as MPs and the shorter runway the 4G leaders have compared to the 3G leadership, the search for the next generation of leaders must continue in earnest.

Mr Lee was deputy prime minister for 14 years (1990-2004). The downside of a long apprenticeship, if you will, is the inevitable slowing down of leadership renewal at the highest levels. The search for Mr Lee's successor, arguably, could not begin in earnest when Mr Lee had not even taken office as the head of Government.

Looking at the 4G leadership, its core members were mostly first elected in 2011.

It's still early days to tell whether the 5G PM is part of the new line-up. Slightly more than a third of the office-holders are below 45 years of age. But the likelihood of a "4.5G" PM cannot be excluded given the shorter runways of leadership transitions.

Finally, diversity is a watchword of the new line-up. There are five office-holders (including two ministers and two junior ministers) and one mayor from the Malay community and another six Indian office-holders (including five ministers).

There are nine women, including Ms Rahayu Mahzam, the first Malay woman office holder since Madam Halimah Yacob resigned as Minister of State to become the Speaker of Parliament in 2013.

There are also a few more political office holders with some private sector experience but more can be done on this front.

The ideal political office holder in Mr Lee's view is someone with grassroots, community outreach, policy work, and private sector experience. This is on top of the need for commitment, leadership and integrity. All these make for a tall order, but one which Singaporeans have come to expect of their political leaders.

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With the new leadership team constituted, how the PAP Government governs will greatly influence the outcome of the next general election which must be held by Nov 23, 2025, in the year that Singapore celebrates her diamond jubilee year of independence.

For now, the Cabinet has their work cut out and will have to hit the ground running.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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