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He said then that Singapore “should not have a prime minister who is 70 years old or more than 70 years old”.

It is now abundantly clear that there will be a delay in his passing on the reins of head of Government to his successor amid the Covid-19 crisis.

Will this unwittingly cast doubt on the fourth-generation (4G) leadership?

Since July, Mr Lee has indicated on at least five different occasions that even as leadership renewal remains one of his top priorities, he will see the crisis through before stepping down. The most recent was last Sunday (Nov 8) at the ruling People's Action Party ordinary conference.

The first hint of a timeline change was in March 2020.

Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean, in his reply in Parliament on the pandemic's impact on the timing of the General Election (GE), said that “when you are sailing into a storm, you want to be certain who your captain is, and that he will not be changed halfway”.

“You want to make sure that he is there – together with you, working with you, guiding you through the storm.

”In the past week, two second-generation leaders also appeared to publicly support the delay in political succession.

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In a book released last Friday (Nov 6), former Senior Minister S Jayakumar raised the question of whether PM Lee would revisit his earlier intention not to contest the next GE if the Covid-19 crisis drags on for four to five years.

Professor Jayakumar added that many Singaporeans will want Mr Lee to reconsider and hand over only after Singapore has turned the dangerous corner, and that he was glad that Mr Lee had given himself some flexibility on the succession timeline.

For Prof Jayakumar, "however capable the 4G leaders, we should not change horses in midstream".

On Monday, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong chimed in with a similar comment.

Writing on Facebook, he said PM Lee's latest comment on handing over the leadership reins after seeing Singapore through the current crisis reminded him of the proverb:

"Don't change horses in mid-stream". "For us, stay strong together to reach the bank safely — with sturdy, fresh horses waiting," Mr Goh added.

The remarks by Mr Goh and Prof Jayakumar, and their timing are unlikely to be coincidental.

For Mr Lee, Mr Goh, Mr Teo and Prof Jayakumar, it is only right, proper and prudent to have the changing of the guard only when the Covid-19 public health and economic crises are put to bed.

The leitmotif is that the sinews of government must now be put squarely on emerging stronger from the crisis. As such, talk on the political succession timeline is not only speculative but an avoidable distraction.

Going by precedent, it is not unusual for Singapore's outgoing premiers to hand over power on a clean slate.

For example, Mr Lee Kuan Yew did so on Nov 28, 1990, a day after securing points of agreement with his Malaysian counterpart, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, on Malayan Railway land in Singapore, a long-time bugbear in bilateral relations.

Likewise, Mr Goh handed over the reins of government on Aug 11, 2004, after the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) outbreak in 2003 was decisively dealt with.

No one knows how long this Covid-19 crisis will last. What if Singapore does not decisively emerge from the crisis when the current government's term ends on Aug 23, 2025?

A delay in political succession may come at an undetermined cost, given the backdrop of how the 4G took some time in determining who among them would be first among equals and a lacklustre electoral performance by the PAP in GE2020.

Any inordinate delay would raise legitimate concerns over the readiness of the 4G leadership to take over — never mind that they are said to be already in charge of the day-to-day administration.

Secondly, any delay in political succession will have a knock-on effect on anointed successor Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Heng Swee Keat's tenure as premier.

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He turned 59 on Nov 1. If he takes over in his early 60s, might he be able to serve two terms and, if so, would this result in a delay for the 5G leadership to take over?

Mr Heng will have to start planning to hand over when he assumes office; his predecessors had initiated the same process in their late 50s. How might this influence perception of his premiership?

Then DPM Teo stated at the Singapore Perspectives 2018 conference that a certain vitality and energy was needed to lead a country, and the leadership of the country must not become aged.

The late Mr Lee and Mr Goh resigned as prime minister several years before they turned 70. Mr Lee himself put it well in 2010 that "you can still be there (coping with the physical demands of the job), but you will not be doing it full justice... you have to be in sync with the new generation of people. You may be in touch, but you are not of that generation".

The ruling party has its work cut out as it seeks to respond and adapt to the changing political landscape, including how to win over younger voters. With the bulk of the core 4G leadership in their mid- to late-50s by the time they take over, the political transition cannot be dragged on, especially if the crisis persists beyond 2022. The pace of leadership renewal and succession has to significantly quicken in tandem.

It would not augur well if the 4G prime minister has too short a runway to stamp his mark before the next GE. Going by the GE results in 1991 and 2006, a new leader at the helm takes some time to win over voters.

Amid the crisis, the 4G team can show their true mettle and that they are equal to the task of leading Singapore.

While there are genuine concerns about the next generation of leaders, including whether they are as capable as their predecessors, these are inevitable questions to have in any political transition. This is especially so with Mr Lee in top political leadership for so many years since he was made DPM in 1990. Furthermore, a 4G prime minister will almost certainly have 3G ministers on his team.

Singapore's Cabinet since the 1970s has been inter-generational in that it has leaders from more than one generation. In fact, between 1990 and 2011, the Cabinet had ministers from three generations.

This helps to ensure continuity and stability as the senior leaders have a wealth of experience, expertise and networks that the younger leaders could benefit from. This is a unique feature of Singapore's meticulous approach to leadership renewal.

While there is no "right time" for the 4G leadership to take over, an uncertain or inordinate delay may inflict untold damage to the public trust and confidence in the 4G leaders.

Singaporeans recognise that the leadership renewal and succession is at a very advanced stage but an undue delay poses significant challenges.

As the 3G and 4G leaders are all part of the same crisis-response team, a timely and adroit switch of horses even mid-stream can provide that vital lift, renewed strength and fresh vigour in the nation's response to the crisis and preparation for a post-Covid world, which has all the makings of a vastly different era.

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