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The Cabinet reshuffle effectively confirms Ministers Chan Chun Sing, Ong Ye Kung, and Lawrence Wong as the main contender to be the 4G prime minister. TODAY file photo

Last Friday's (April 23) Cabinet reshuffle announcement was not intended to shed any light on which fourth-generation (4G) leader would be the prime minister-in-waiting.

If anything, it might be at least another year or so before Singaporeans will know who the anointed successor to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is.

But the reshuffle effectively confirms ministers Chan Chun Sing, Ong Ye Kung, and Lawrence Wong as the main contenders to be the 4G prime minister.

For outgoing Education Minister Wong, his appointment as the Finance Minister is an endorsement of his ability and potential.

Mr Wong's steady rise to prominence can be attributed to his assuring performance as co-chair of the multi-ministry taskforce, which leads the whole-of-Government response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, too much should not be read into Mr Wong's latest assignment as giving him the edge.

As Mr Lee noted, Mr Wong "is a natural fit to do the job" of Finance Minister.

Mr Wong has been Second Minister for Finance since 2016 and, prior to that, a board member of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, the de facto central bank.

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Mr Wong's appointment will enable a seamless transition given the central role of fiscal policy, especially government spending, in the current crisis.

It will also give him a platform to demonstrate his ability at a time of significant demands on the public coffers and the imperative for inter-generational equity in public spending on major infrastructure projects.

The upcoming Goods and Services Tax increase will also test Mr Wong's skills in selling an unpopular policy.

With his upcoming move to the Health Ministry, Mr Ong Ye Kung will again be in the spotlight. In a short span of close to six years, Mr Ong will have helmed three high-profile ministries.

As Health Minister, Mr Ong must ensure that the healthcare system can more than cope with the healthcare challenges unleashed by the pandemic, which in the World Health Organisation's assessment would likely be followed by other pandemics.

His ideas on healthcare infrastructure and healthcare finance will be crucial given the growing healthcare needs and expectations of an ageing society.

Mr Ong will also be the co-chair of the Government's task force on Covid-19.

How Mr Ong and Mr Wong work together on the task force will be closely watched. Both men have quite contrasting styles and strong personalities.

Together, they will be the face of the Government's response to the pandemic.

How Singapore balances the public health requirements with the economic imperatives of opening our economy and borders matters immensely.

Securing the support of Singaporeans that the proper balance is struck is another continuing challenge.

Mr Wong's and Mr Ong's nine-month sojourns in the Education and Transport Ministries respectively are probably the shortest stints for any minister.

Their redeployment to the pandemic's frontline ministries reflects not only the confidence the prime minister has in them but also the urgency of ensuring that the contenders are equal to the task of governing Singapore.

For Mr Chan Chun Sing, his move to the Ministry of Education will see him lead the largest ministry (in terms of headcount) and the second largest budget-wise (after defence).

His stints as the Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress (2015-2018) and at the Ministry of Trade and Industry (2018-2021) will stand him in good stead.

The education system will continue to be a key differentiator for a trade-dependent nation-state to remain economically relevant and vibrant.

Beyond the strictures of examination proficiency, the education system must also nurture lifelong learning and imbue sound values so that Singaporeans will be able to lead meaningful lives in an increasingly insecure and unpredictable world.

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While ringing in the changes at seven ministries, PM Lee continues to retain 3G ministers in the Defence and Home Affairs Ministries.

For a country that emphasises national security and law and order, this may well precipitate necessary changes in these two ministries in the next Cabinet reshuffle in the next 15-18 months.

No 4G leader has helmed these important portfolios although 4G leaders have been deployed there as Second Ministers in the past decade.

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Mr Chan and Mr Wong were first elected into Parliament in 2011 while Mr Ong was elected in his second attempt in 2015.

The other 4G leaders, mostly elected in 2011, would have worked in the Government with the contenders for between five and 10 years.

As most of them hail from the public sector prior to their joining politics, many of the 4G leaders have already known each other for longer.

Hence, Singaporeans are puzzled why the 4G leadership needs more time to come to a consensus on who their new leader would be.

Unlike previous successions, it appears that there is no standout leader this time.

Another key consideration is who among them can be the face of the ruling party at the next General Election and beyond.

He must himself be re-elected comfortably and, more importantly, engender trust and confidence for his party in the most crucial General Election for the 4G leaders.

The stakes are also higher this time. There is no margin of "error"; regardless of how the ruling party does at the next election, the 4G team cannot afford another abrupt change at the top.

They will have to balance the quest for a gifted politician without sacrificing the cherished qualities of moral integrity and technocratic substance.

Although time is of the essence, the 4G team must do right by Singapore and Singaporeans.

They are selecting a leader not just for themselves and the ruling party, but for the Government and the country. How the ruling party handles the succession will feature prominently in the next General Election, which will be the sternest test for the 4G team.

Last Friday, Mr Lee was mindful of the 4G leaders needing the time and space to come to a consensus on who among them will step up.

But the ongoing search also raises the question of why the meticulously-managed selection process did not work so well this time.

Perhaps the uncertainty can be traced to the last leadership renewal and succession.

PM Lee was deputy to Mr Goh Chok Tong between 1990 and 2004.

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With Mr Lee assuming the reins of government in 2004, the search for the 4G premier took on urgency only in the 2011 general election when five or six new candidates were unveiled as having such potential.

Future leadership succession should not cut it so fine.

Mr Chan, Mr Ong and Mr Wong will come under intense scrutiny from their 4G peers and fellow Singaporeans in the months ahead.

In their new portfolios, besides broadening their policy experience and sharpening their policy nous, they must show that they have what it takes to be the leader Singapore needs for a radically different post-pandemic world.

They must convincingly carry the ground with them while inspiring confidence in Singapore's future as she navigates the uncertain waters in an insecure age.

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