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Finance Minister Lawrence Wong's "overwhelming" endorsement as the fourth-generation (4G) leader by his Cabinet colleagues, other political office-holders, and the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) legislators last week draws a line under the extended political succession and renewal process.

It has been a year since Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat made the shock announcement that he was stepping aside as the presumptive 4G leader. The pandemic had thrown a spanner in the works of the best-laid political succession plans.

At one level, the announcement last Thursday (April 14) was really the PAP's internal decision on who their next leader would be. In that sense, the PAP is entitled to devise its own process so long as it is seen as sufficiently transparent, accountable, and enables the anointing process to be clothed with legitimacy.

But because of PAP's political dominance since independence, Mr Wong is set to succeed Mr Lee Hsien Loong as party leader, and as prime minister.

With his anointing as the 4G leader, time is of the essence for Mr Wong to garner the support of Singaporeans, who are now asked to place even more trust and confidence not just in Mr Wong but also in his team.

#### OPEN-ENDED HANDOVER TIMELINE

Unsurprisingly, there was no indication of any timeline on Mr Wong succeeding Mr Lee. It is still early days yet.

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The next General Election (GE) must be held by November 2025.

Past practice is not a good guide on when the handover of power will take place.

2G prime minister Goh Chok Tong was picked by a small group of about six ministers in an informal meeting after the 1984 GE and succeeded Lee Kuan Yew in November 1990, 26 months after the September 1988 GE.

Mr Lee Hsien Loong's selection as the next PM was made at a lunch meeting of ministers in mid-2004 and he took over from Mr Goh in August that year, about 37 months after the 2001 GE.

Mr Lee had been Mr Goh's deputy for almost 14 years (1990-2004). It is unlikely that we will see a similarly lengthy transition this time.

Mr Lee will probably continue as the PAP secretary-general when it conducts its central executive committee elections at the end of this year.

Mr Wong will likely be appointed first assistant secretary-general, replacing the incumbent Mr Heng.

It is unlikely that there will be an early GE.

Notwithstanding that the presidential election is scheduled for September 2023, the focus of the Government must be on rebuilding the ravaged economy and attending to the gaps and vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic.

An election may be called anytime from mid-2024 to mid-2025. At the media conference last Saturday, Mr Lee indicated two obvious options on the handover, which would mark the conclusion of the leadership succession and renewal from the 3G to the 4G.

One is for Mr Wong to succeed Mr Lee before the next polls while the other is for the transfer of power to take place after the GE, if the PAP wins.

In 2020, Mr Lee gave his commitment to see through the current pandemic crisis, before handing over Singapore "intact and in good working order" to his successor.

That it is unclear when Mr Lee will hand over to Mr Wong is to be expected.

Much will depend on how well received Mr Wong will be between now and the GE, which will be Mr Wong's fourth election.

If he is able to secure an unprecedented high level of personal popularity, then the PAP may decide that, strategy-wise, he should lead the party in the next GE.

But the 4G leadership is not a one-man enterprise. How Mr Wong's team will be received by voters will play a pivotal role in the electoral battles.

Given the relatively short runway to the GE, Mr Lee looks set to lead the PAP one more time. The PAP will likely capitalise on the collective appeal of Mr Lee and Mr Wong.

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On the campaign trail, we can expect the ruling party to portray Mr Wong as the worthy successor to Mr Lee. We can also expect both Mr Lee and Mr Wong to be prominent as the faces of the PAP's election campaign.

Mr Wong said on Saturday that the handover timeline will be determined by when Mr Lee and he agree that Mr Wong is ready to take over.

If the handover does not happen before the GE, then we can expect the handover to take place within 12 to 18 months after the polls.

#### **STRENGTHENING 4G TEAM UNITY AND COHESION**

The topmost priority for Mr Wong is to strengthen his team's unity and cohesion. What is clear is that Mr Wong and his 4G team will be on the ballot in every constituency in the next GE.

When asked about the difference in the selection process this time, which involved former PAP party chair and minister Khaw Boon Wan, Mr Lee replied that the "variation" was for "a more systematic and thorough way" to encourage "candour, introspection and objectivity, yet without impairing mutual relationship and trust amongst the team".

"People must be able to speak honestly to express their views of the strengths and weaknesses of the different potential candidates and speak frankly; what do they worry about? What do they feel comfortable about? Whom they would like to support?" he added. Such a process, he noted, enabled different views and different concerns to be surfaced "without it being personalised - an 'I like you' and 'I do not like you' matter ... putting aside personal preferences, ambitions and biases".

In other words, the selection process is not an end in itself but a means to an end.

Not only should it determine where the consensus lies but it has to build strong consensus, support and legitimacy around the new leader. It must strengthen the 4G team rather than undermine it.

Set against a more contested political landscape, Mr Wong has his work cut out in consolidating his core team, and finding new blood for the 5G team will be essential.

As there was no close second to Mr Wong in the leadership selection, he will have a freer hand in selecting his deputy. Had there been a close second, there may be a need to appoint that person as his deputy. The possibility of his deputy being someone younger cannot be excluded.

With the political succession settled, all eyes are now on Mr Wong.

He has to come into his own like never before and inspire trust and confidence in his team's and his ability and integrity to lead and govern Singapore in a more demanding and capriciously unpredictable domestic and international environment.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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