Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has unveiled his new cabinet two weeks after winning his first general election as prime minister.

The new line up will see more reinforcements to the priority areas of education, foreign affairs and youth matters.

Five new MPs-elect are being appointed to political office and several ministers will have new portfolios, including three from the batch of new ministerial talents named in the last Cabinet.

What is the significance of some of the changes? A question Howie Lim put to Eugene Tan, Associate Professor of Law from the Singapore Management University.

ET: There are elements of both continuity and change. The key ministries remained helmed by experienced MPs and I think it’s very much about consolidation at the core with renewal at the fringes. So, the larger goal is to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of other political appointees exposed to high level policy making and I think at the same time, there’s also that keen desire to ensure that these office bearers acquire cross disciplinary competence and experience so that issues can be tackled from a holistic perspective. They’ve also set the stage for further renewal in one to two years time with a new Labour Chief and a new minister for the Information, communication and the Arts. I think it’s very much a self renewal process in a very incremental manner so nothing dramatic, nothing too disruptive. It’s change at a very gradual pace. In a way, announcing the likely changes in one to two years time also sets the stage for the fact that government is prepared to consider other MPs as well for other political appointments.

What is your reaction to the changes on the foreign affairs area and the trade portfolios as well?

ET: They demonstrate the importance of foreign affairs and trade to a small country like Singapore. It continues to emphasise the importance of developing Singapore’s external wing as well as to enlarge Singapore’s operational space. I think in trade, with the two new Ministers of State, they bring with them experience as well as expertise in the private sector as well as in the area of developing trade and investment and this does adhere to the plan to actually enhance diplomatic and economic ties with Saudi Arabia, as well as much of the Middle East. It’s also to expand Singapore’s network of Free Trade Area Agreements. For foreign affairs, given Singapore’s higher international and regional profile as well as the commitments that come with that, I think there’s a need to strengthen the ministry so we have two ministers and two senior ministers of state and it’s also to ensure that the office bearers holding the foreign affairs portfolio also will have sufficient time and energy to attend to their local constituents.

It was highlighted that there were a lot more women MPs fielded this time round and yet we still see no woman cabinet minister. What is the significance of this?

ET: I suppose we shouldn’t read too much into this. Perhaps the prime minister feels that the time is not quite right. But now we have two women office bearers instead of just one so we have Minister of State Lim Hwee Hua and Senior Parliamentary Secretary Amy Khor. I believe as they acquire more experience in political office it will be a matter of time before we see a woman cabinet minister and besides, with more women MPs, we should also expect to see a few of them being tried out in this term of Parliament so in short, the PM will have more candidates to choose from and so I do expect in the fullness of time, we should see a woman cabinet minister and hopefully in the term of this new Parliament.

Is it a cause for concern that some of the younger members of this new line up were from uncontested wards in the elections and have little or no experience in government? Surely this is not an area where trial and error should be used.

ET: I think there will definitely be some concerns in some quarters that they’ve not earned their stripes but I think beyond that, it’s really their ability, their commitment and their tenacity that will be important in political office. I think we see them in very much an apprentice role at this point in time and their learning curves will be steep but I don’t think that they’ll fall short of the task. At same time, they have to be mindful that they cannot lose sight of their basic obligation as members of parliament. I think this process of selection is unique to Singapore and I think there will be concerns with this process. I get the sense that in Singapore the pace of renewal needs to be hastened and I suppose this is one way of hastening the process. I think government thinks that the method has been tried before and it’s worked and so now it’s time for these MPs to show that they can attend to their constituents and as well as be an effective political office bearer.

Associate Professor of Law from the Singapore Management University, Eugene Tan.