Shape of 3rd generation team clear in next Cabinet reshuffle?

Observers predict promotions for junior ministers, including women

BY PHEE SHENG HUEH

THE final shape of the third-generation leadership will become clear when the Cabinet is reshuffled next year, analysts and MPs are predicting.

Following the Prime Minister’s announcement last week that he would make changes to the Cabinet after the next Budget debate, MPs believe that the new lineup formed next year would be Mr Lee Hsien Loong’s more long-term team.

Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Indrithi Singh even suggested that the new line-up would pretty much reflect PM Lee’s core Cabinet for the next decade.

“The current Cabinet is still a transitional one, with a good mix of old and new. The next one will last the next 10 years,” he said.

But West Coast GRC MP Arthur Fong reckoned that PM Lee would still seek to balance change with continuity, giving his ministers time to follow through on policies they are in the midst of rolling out.

Since assuming the office of Prime Minister three years ago, Mr Lee, 55, has chewed the big bang approach when forming his team, preferring instead an incremental strategy.

While observers thought that a potential successor might be appointed as his deputy prime minister (DPM) in 2004, he went for experience and clout, opting for older colleagues in Dr Tony Tan and Professor S. Jayakumar, who were both 64 then.

Dr Tan stepped down and Mr Wong Kan Seng became the other DPM. The PM retained both DPMs after last year’s General Election.

Observers are waiting to see if there will be a move at that level but do not expect both to step down at the same time.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan said: “While leadership renewal is always an imperative, PM Lee will not be in any hurry to dive in for a ‘fast food’ approach to political renewal. If the PM does decide to promote others to the level of DPM, two potential candidates according to MPs are Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean, 52, and Foreign Minister George Yeo, 52.

Said Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Charles Chong: “They are already helming heavyweight ministries, so they have definitely earned their stripes.”

At the Ministry of Education, a new man is expected as Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, 50, will relinquish the portfolio after the Budget debate next March. Last Saturday, he took over another heavyweight portfolio as Finance Minister, from PM Lee.

MPs predict that his replacement at Education could well be Manpower Minister Ng Eng Hen, 48. He had earlier put in more than three years in the ministry, as both minister of state and later second minister.

Tampines GRC MP Sin Boon Ann and Mr Fong believe Minister of State for Education and Manpower Gan Kim Yong, 48, is also ready to be promoted. In his case, the speculation is that he could go on to become Manpower Minister.

Minister of State for Education Lim Teck Yew, 46, who joined politics just last year, is another name being bandied about as a potential candidate for Education Minister.

Another anticipated change would be at the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts.

When announcing Cabinet changes in May last year, PM Lee said that Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts Lee Boon Yang, 60, is likely to retire.

Dr Lee had asked before the elections to step down. “I asked him to stay on in the Cabinet for half a term, to give me time to groom a successor,” said PM Lee then.

That would present an opening at the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), and MPs believe that a woman minister could be appointed.

Mr Singh said: “It’s about time we had a woman in Cabinet.”

Dr Seet Ai Meng came closest when she was Acting Minister for Community Development for three months in 1991, before losing her parliament seat in the elections.

While observers think that the Cabinet will also remain nimble, changing people to play different roles when required.

Some positions will likely remain unchanged, especially, as Mr Fong pointed out, for those involving policies still in gestation.

For example, means testing for hospital admissions is being reviewed and the man spearheading it, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan, would likely continue with the same post.

But Mr Fong also thinks that the Cabinet will also remain nimble, changing people to play different roles when required.

This is especially so at a time when the MPs expect globalisation to throw up “known” challenges like the widening income gap, and “unknown” challenges that require a mix of new ideas and steady hands.

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Publication: The Straits Times, p H3
Date: 5 December 2007
Headline: Shape of 3rd generation team clear in next Cabinet reshuffle?