Looking for Singapore's next leader

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HE MAY be the leader of a nation of just 4 million souls, but he—or she—must be able to balance with the president of a superpower, and be listened to with respect.

Which is why finding the right person to fill the shoes of Singapore’s Prime Minister is not the easiest task.

Mr Lee Hsien Loong, now on a visit to the United States, signalled last month that the search for his successor was on. Singapore should not have a 7-year-old ruler, he told parliamentarians, and he wanted his successor to be ready to take over in 10 years’ time.

But just what kind of leader should Singapore be looking for? A hard-headed realist, unafraid to lead by lecturing and berating or to employ knuckleduster tactics? Someone who has lived abroad, but prefers a softer and conversation-style, a paternal sort of way?

A person who blends both styles, while keeping up an engaging and witty demeanour? Or, perhaps, someone quite different altogether.

Political observers insist he spoke to agree, generally, that the next Prime Minister needs to be a product of his time rather than simply cut from the same cloth as that of his predecessors. “More of the same is not enough”, even if it’s good enough now, said Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Joyce Counselling.

The People’s Action Party (PAP) Government and its Premiers have done well by all its accounts, developing a reputation for pragmatism in solving problems. “But I think Singaporeans will be looking more for a person who can connect, entertain and inspire his colleagues”, said Ms Counselling.

The next Prime Minister should have the distinguishing ability to meet Singaporeans on their terms, said National University of Singapore political science lecturer Rinah Singh. Rather than “patronising”, he or she would have to “communicate.”

Associate Professor Singh: “The need to satisfy the electorate will not only be pragmatically. If you’re opening Singapore to the world, foreign ideas about politics will seep in. People will be more critical, more demanding. They want to see more transparency, more accountability.”

REASONS FOR THE SEARCH: GENDER, RACE, AGE

While styles will change, some routes markers along the way to destitution PM are unlikely to vary. Mr Goh was the Finance Minister and Senior Minister of State (MOS), and with the trade and industry, health and defence ministries as ministeries. Mr Lee, who is still Finance Minister, has been MOS and Second Minister for Defence, and rose from MOS to hold minister in his trade and industry portfolio.

Political watchers agree that security and economic issues still provide key towering grounds for the top post. “The ability to defend ourselves in critical, while the economy is the benchmark of how our country survives,” said Mr Lee.

Mr Lee is deputy leader of the PAP, and is less reliant on the list of important portfolios because it is critical for building the Singapore of the future.

Some factors signal who are the least likely candidates for the Prime Minister spot. Gender, for example, are Singaporeans ready for a female premier? Institute of Southeast Asian Studies fellow Dr Yen Pisien says yes.

When Ms Goh Chok Tong took over in 1990, it was no surprise he had experience in quite different, next MP Charles Chong. “He’s known that tough leaders to be followed by the ‘boss proper’. Look at Margaret Thatcher’s rule as a power, and then John Goh was relevant because of the leader’s view.”

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Current Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, who took office in 1990, has blended both styles, and he has had to, MP Angela Singh says.

“The in is six where we’ve got a good base on, but it’s quite a volatile environment. So, a quick, sharp, decisive approach is necessary, but, at the same time, the population wants to be involved,” he said.

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The next Prime Minister, who could take over in 10 years’ time, should be able to connect with citizens, inspire and communicate—someone whose personality resonates with Singaporeans, says observer.

He could be younger than 52 years old, the age at which Mr Lee Hsien Loong took office, and could be from a minority race.

because what is obvious to me is that there is no obvious successor.”

Mr Lee, who is 13 years younger than Singapore’s Prime Minister, has said he wants Singapore’s next Premier to take over at a younger age than when he did— he was 56 then.

Political watcher Yen Pisien believes a younger successor is needed to connect with young voters who will be a force to be reckoned with. “Everything will be speeded up on. All the trends point to this. The ages of our permanent secretaries, chief of defence forces are all coming down, I don’t see this being reversed.”

A TOP-DOWN OR A DOWN-UP SEARCH

So, the next Cabinet reshuffle— and political watchers expect it to be the year—will be important for Mr Lee to assemble his future team.

After the last General Election, he said Dr Lee Soon Tong would stay on as Minister for Communications, Information and the Arts—a position he has been given, and Dr Yen Bakhshan was appointed Second Minister.

More recently, Mr Lee said the search was on for a new Law Minister—by last year, Prof. S Jayakumar would have held the post for 20 years—from among the current MPs or outside the PAP. Mr Tai believes a “probable a headache”. “It’s a specified area and requires someone with the legal empowerment,” he said.

In the lead up to the reshuffle, a good deal of attention may also be paid to the four newest Opposition MPs who have been seen as the Prime Minister of Singapore, and not as the leader of the PAP.”

Generally, the usual trajectory is careful planning, especially if a minister has the caliber to rise to the top, said Dr Toremo Chang. “The PAP would have to make this person into the public sphere, build his profile and see how people react to him as a leader. That would entail management of image.”

It would also entail senior ministers taking a backseat on big occasions to give younger ministers a chance to step forward and deliver.

Ultimately, the hallmark of political renewal in Singapore has always been a well-choreographed and mostly key process. The search for the nation’s fourth generation of leaders—and its Prime Minister especially—is unlikely to deviate much from this.

But with greater political awareness, the search may become more a “down-up” process, said Ann Prof. Singh.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan, for one, said he would like leadership transition to be “encouraging” Singaporeans. “The process of political succession and renewal should not be seen as a PAP party activity. It must engage Singaporeans and have the style of effecting enhancing the virtue and value of public service,” he said.

“Even as the Government subscribes firmly to the ‘republican’ principle, it must incorporate with its renewal process a sense of minister, passion and commitment to Singapore,” he said.

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