A new, post-Lee Kuan Yew era

Departure reinforces belief that Singapore system based on institutions not personalities

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Less than a week after the watershed 2011 General Election (GE), the joint decision by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong to step down from the Cabinet indicates that the soul searching by the People's Action Party (PAP) is deep in progress.

As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged at his post-GE media conference last Sunday: "Many wish for the Government to adopt a different style and approach. It marks a distinct shift in our political landscape."

The timing and their statements on Saturday suggest that MM Lee and SM Goh have reflected on the hustings and GE results, and they have decided resolutely that the Cabinet will lose experience, institutional knowledge and political nous with the departure of six Ministers - particularly that of MM Lee and SM Goh - and there will be a period of adjustment as we transition to a new reality. This development is a major political milestone which will see unleashed new dynamics and new approaches to governance.

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There are emboldened populist pressures for change. While the PAP Government has refrained from a populist style of governance, it has to be popular if it wishes to remain in power.

But the GE and its aftermath have also, worryingly, demonstrated that there is an insidious belief in some quarters that a responsive government must involve giving in to unthinking, populist pressures such as being anti-immigrant or having a shoes-string government. What is right for Singapore in the long term must never give way to what are merely populist short-cuts.

It is another sign of the times that voters born after Singapore's independence will wield increasingly more electoral power in the years ahead. Notably, in MM Lee's and SM Goh's crisp joint statement, the words "young" or "younger" appear a total of six times. But it also concludes with the appeal that "the younger team must always have in mind the interests of the older generation ... who has contributed to Singapore must be well-looked after".

What happens to older citizens born pre-1965, who will have increasingly less electoral clout? There could be more conflicting interests ahead. As a society, we need to start sensible conversations about the way forward.

Both MM Lee and SM Goh leave behind a legacy of robust systems, processes and policies (which will, of course, be tweaked to meet the changing needs of our society). And their very departure will reinforce the belief that the system in Singapore is based on institutions, not personalities. It also demonstrates that Singapore is confident enough to move into a new, post-Lee Kuan Yew era. But as we do, can we show that we as a people have the maturity to close ranks and look beyond our navels?