

Lawrence Wong's political workplan ahead of Singapore's next general election



PAP deputy secretary-general Lawrence Wong at the party convention on Sunday. Mr Wong and his 4G leaders have provided a compass for the party and people to guide Singapore through troubling times, says the writer. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

Entrusted to reform the People's Action Party for more than a decade, the presumptive secretary-general and prime minister of Singapore has at least four tasks ahead.

Gillian Koh

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had first raised the issue of political succession more than 10 years ago before the 2011 General Election (GE2011).

This week, a timeline was set. A clear signal was sent that the People's Action Party was ready to take its final steps in the transition to Singapore's fourth premier.

"I intend to hand over to DPM Lawrence (Wong) before the next general election," PM Lee, who is also PAP secretary-general, said at his party's convention on Sunday.

"If all goes well, I will hand over by the PAP's 70th birthday (in November) next year (2024)," he

added, assuring Mr Wong that he will be "at the new PM's disposal" to go where he may be useful.

Mr Wong, the PAP's deputy secretary-general, was not coy about taking up this mantle. "I am ready for my next assignment," he declared at the same event.

WONG, AT THE HEART OF PARTY REFORM

In his speech, Mr Wong said he will lead the party to adopt new strategies and programmes, "so that at that time when we mark this happy occasion... we can look forward to a refreshed PAP ready to fight the next election". This is his first task.

There are steps towards decentralisation and empowerment in the party he

hinted at. Activists will be better equipped as leaders and trusted with new resources to craft projects meaningful to them, while presumably seeking input from local constituents.

If so, such bottom-up efforts can help the PAP become more immediately relevant to the ground and deeply engage with it. The ability to form bonds of friendship and emotional ties with constituents is what Mr Lee said the men and women in white need at the past two party conventions.

In truth, Mr Wong has been a reformer in the party for a long time now.

At the 2013 PAP convention, three years after GE2011, which saw a swing of 6.5 percentage points away from it and the loss of Aljunied Group Representation

Constituency (GRC) to the Workers' Party (WP), Mr Wong had a key role in drafting an important party resolution and its refreshed Constitution, which were subsequently adopted.

Amid citizen worries that the PAP had lost touch with the ground and after deep internal soul-searching, Mr Wong helped the party recommit itself to its democratic socialist ideals – to building a fair and just society, and "strengthening an open and compassionate meritocracy".

This political movement translated into shifts in government policy. Examples include the 2016 KidStart and Fresh Start Housing Scheme, which provide active support to disadvantaged families to do better in life. Changes were announced to the PSLE scoring system in 2013 to reduce excessive competition. The roll-out of a SkillsFuture Credit system in 2015, as well as the subsequent expansion of the Workfare Income Supplement and the Progressive Wage Model, help to temper the vagaries of a capitalist economy.

THE UNIQUE ELECTORAL QUANDARY

Even if the PAP can rediscover and channel its reformist streak to win over Singaporeans, Mr Wong has to confront a longstanding electoral trend. This is his second task.

Three years ago, Mr Wong was trusted to deliver a public statement on the PAP's analysis of its performance at GE2020.

At the time, he acknowledged that winning 61.2 per cent of the votes cast was 4 percentage points lower than the party had hoped for, and that it was disappointed to have lost Sengkang GRC.

There were four key reasons for the results, he explained. A critical factor among them was the compelling argument by the opposition parties to deny the dominant PAP a blank cheque to govern. This, in effect, was using the PAP's strength against itself.

The Institute of Policy Studies' post-election survey series conducted since 2006 confirms much of these findings.

Professionals in the higher middle-income bands are more likely to feel that the country is better served if there are opposition voices in Parliament to hold a strong PAP government to account and for alternative views to be explored, as part of a governing system.

Those who have benefited from the system will feel that voting against it on occasion will keep it honest and committed to good governance.

Mr Lee himself mentioned this again at the PAP convention.

"The PAP faces a political quandary unique in the world: An overwhelming majority of the voters want us to form the government," he said on Sunday. "In fact, they expect the PAP to form the government. But among those who want us to form the government, quite a significant proportion also want our opponents to do better."

Finding the right political equilibrium between the need for a strong government and having enough opposition representation to keep it so is not an easy one to arrive at.

It is for this reason that Mr Wong rallied the party faithful to fight to win every seat. There is no telling which constituency is vulnerable in the heat of an election.

TACKLING ISSUES OF ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS AND COST OF LIVING

Another reason Mr Wong attributed the fall in support for the PAP in GE2020 to was the economic pain that middle-aged voters and small businessmen suffered during the pandemic.

His third task in gearing up for the next election is to assuage concerns about the economic climate and assure voters they have good jobs, wages, and support to cope with the rising cost of living. This was an issue hotly debated in Parliament this week, during a motion filed by the Workers' Party calling on the Government to review related policies.

Having led the charge as co-chair of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce tackling the Covid-19 crisis, Mr Wong has found that life has not gotten easier for Singaporeans.

The world has jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire – from the pandemic, to the eruption of the Russian-Ukraine war in February 2022 and now the Israel-Hamas war. Painful adjustments are needed in supply chains for business continuity and for companies to remain cost competitive.

But volatility and the rise in the prices of energy, food, minerals and precious metals are straining businesses and households.

Over the past two Budgets, Mr Wong, as Finance Minister, has assured Singapore that large sandbags of public monies to ease the transition to a higher-cost Singapore have already been planned for and more support will be available if needed.

The opposition will continue to decry the announced rise in goods and services tax and other statutory costs, which the Government will reiterate are needed for structural rises in social spending, especially to address the needs of an ageing population.

What is different now is that Mr Wong and his 4G leaders have provided a compass for the party and people to guide Singapore through these troubling times: new forms of social support including re-employment aid in the Forward Singapore report launched in late October.

It puts flesh on the PAP's vision for a compassionate meritocracy articulated in 2013, now reinterpreted for an age of radical economic, technological, social, and ecological disruption of 2023.

The challenge is to find enough time to translate these effectively to strengthen the belief that the

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The need for a strong mandate for PAP

FROM BI

PAP deserves a strong mandate to deliver further progress and social inclusion – possibly over the next two Budgets and through partnerships with the community and the corporate sector.

OVERCOMING THE FIRST CAMPAIGN

As Mr Wong addresses all of the above, there is a fourth task. New PAP leaders taking their party into a general election for the first time suffered an electoral swing away from it. Mr Wong has to think of how to overcome such an effect.

Singapore's second prime minister Goh Chok Tong conceded four seats to the opposition and saw a swing of 2.2 percentage points away from the PAP to a vote-share of 61 per cent in his first campaign as leader of the PAP in GE1991.

The opposition coalesced around a “by-election effect” strategy of contesting less than half the seats available, effectively returning the PAP to government on Nomination Day, so that voters can elect opposition candidates without worrying their vote would topple the incumbent party.

Mr Lee suffered an 8.7 percentage point swing away from the PAP and conceded two seats to the opposition in 2006 after the latter shifted to contesting more than half the seats.

At the party convention, Mr Lee noted that leadership transition in any country is tricky, and the next GE coincides with this milestone. Mr Wong must work hard against this factor, which the opposition will surely strategise around. This provides context for Mr Wong's refrain that he does not assume the PAP will form the government in subsequent elections.

Mr Lee has and will undoubtedly continue to explain that a strong mandate is crucial to bring into office a deep bench of capable leaders, foster unity behind government responses to challenges facing Singapore, and maintain confidence among citizens and investors in the country's future.

In turn, Mr Wong and the 4G leaders have conveyed their earnestness to serve and their sense of empathy with the struggles of the man in the street. As the PAP adopts a more relational approach in its work, they have plans to deliver on, which they hope will be appreciated when voters elect their representatives in Singapore's 15th Parliament.

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