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## *Creating forward momentum for next GE when Lawrence Wong is PM*

Time is needed to strengthen government, country and the PAP before he seeks new mandate.

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After he is sworn in, DPM Lawrence Wong (right) will be Singapore's fourth prime minister, succeeding PM Lee Hsien Loong. PHOTO: ST FILE

UPDATED MAY 03, 2024, 05:53 AM ▾

PUBLISHED APR 17, 2024, 05:00 AM



The formal process of Singapore's leadership succession, which began in 2011 when current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong declared his quest to find its fourth prime minister, took a significant step closer to its conclusion on April 15.

PM Lee announced he would hand the mantle of leadership [to Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lawrence Wong on May 15.](#)

While the governing People's Action Party (PAP) takes pride in its ability to plan long-term, this is not for its own sake, nor is it out of brash arrogance that it has the means to determine precisely what must happen in the future.

The truth is far from it.

Instead, it is born out of a belief that leaders can be made and that takes time. It also recognises that Singapore does best when its politics and policies are as predictable as possible – citizens, investors and friends know who and what they can depend on. Governance bandwidth is saved for instances when life throws a curveball.

The years of transition did see an unexpected turn of events.

Monday's announcement reminds us that PM Lee's notion of the ideal slate of leadership candidates was scuppered with the outcome of the general election (GE) in 2011 – one high-flying recruit was defeated by the opposition Workers' Party (WP) in the group representation constituency (GRC) of Aljunied.

We know that the first choice of successor stepped aside when the Covid-19 pandemic meant PM Lee had to stay in office for a longer and indefinite period to see the country through.

DPM Heng Swee Keat, selected by his cohort of younger leaders to be their *primus inter pares* (first among equals) in 2018, said in April 2021, in the midst of that crisis at age 60, that someone with a "sufficiently long runway to master the demands of leading our nation" and who can "formulate and see through our longer-term strategies for our country" [should assume the role instead](#).

PM Lee has been at the helm for two decades; Singapore's second prime minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, for 14 years; and founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, 31 years. Hence, while like his predecessors, PM Lee will be appointed Senior Minister in Cabinet when he stands down, his successor DPM Wong, who is 51 years old, should have the vigour, longevity and wherewithal to stay the course for at least as long as Mr Goh or PM Lee's five parliamentary terms.

This also means that DPM Wong must work long and hard to prevail effectively over the vagaries of external and internal policy conditions, as well as higher political contestation locally. After all, both PM Lee and DPM Wong have declared on several occasions from the time of the 2020 GE that the PAP was going into each GE fighting to form the government rather than take that outcome for granted.

So how will the new leader of the party lead his team into the next GE, which should be called before this parliamentary term ends in August 2025? What are his key tasks in these 15 months before him?

## Political agenda – strengthening party ranks

DPM Wong's immediate priority is to plan and introduce his first Cabinet on May 15.

Several members in the current one were inducted into politics in 2001 by Mr Goh, who also recruited Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean in 1992.

DPM Wong has indicated that the latter will remain in Cabinet and [bigger changes will take place only after the next GE](#).

When the time comes, several of the leaders who have been voted in since 2011, and considered within the same cohort of leaders with DPM Wong, will be mature leaders in government, and can more than succeed those of the Class of 2001.

There has to be an even broader impetus to promote younger politicians and junior ministers to take the reins of government earlier, rather than later.

There are at least three reasons for this. The median age of Singaporean voters is 43 years old. The PAP would want most of its leaders to be those who can identify with the bulk of the population and vice versa.

Second, it has to signal its ability to attract fresh blood of high quality and place them in positions where they can themselves master the demands of leading their peers, as well as impress senior and seasoned voters who have seen the best of the Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong years.

Finally, and not least, because of the unique electoral system that the PAP has established for other reasons – there has to be a sufficient number of strong policy-oriented but politically savvy younger leaders to anchor the large GRCs, of which there are 17 today.

There are 14 single-member constituencies that need politicians who are deeply embedded locally and can stand independently, and renewing these ranks is no mean feat.

Such are the burdens of being the governing party – it has an insatiable need for honest, talented and public-oriented people to refresh its slate and nurture leadership qualities.

DPM Wong and the PAP recognise that it no longer suffices for politicians to be parachuted into large ministerial positions and anchor local constituencies, as voters have become more demanding and wave the threat of exercising their choice before the incumbents.

We saw what happened in Aljunied GRC in 2011, when ministers were not voted back into Parliament, as well as [in Sengkang GRC in 2020](#).

While it is prudent to persuade Singaporeans to decide on which party provides the best possible policy positions and governance performance when they head to the ballot box, the raw politics of the PAP's choice of personalities must not distract them from making that rational choice.

Only time and exposure to new faces can minimise this risk.

## Policy agenda – responding to extreme change

As for this question of policies, DPM Wong has not only launched a major blueprint for socio-economic reform in November 2023 – the Forward Singapore report – but also put resources behind it.

He laid out the first instalment of the plan [in 2024's Budget](#) with its accent on supporting home ownership and the marriage and parenthood aspirations of young Singaporeans; improving the employability of middle-aged Singaporeans; enhancing retirement adequacy and healthy longevity for our seniors.

In a year that suggests that disruptions in geopolitics – with their knock-on effects on shipping, trade, the costs of resources, and disillusionment in globalisation and collaboration for common good – are worsening, the commitment to helping Singaporeans cope with the acute elevation of costs of living is welcome and may require reinforcement.

There is much scope for the new prime minister, who might wish to maintain a firm hold on the finance portfolio to calibrate fiscal measures, to address emerging pain points of business and people in 2025's Budget.

Implementation of what has already been set in motion has to be felt on the ground too.

## Timing DPM Wong's first election

With a clearer sense of the outlook for the country by the first quarter of 2025, when the country marks its 60th anniversary of independence, and elections in several major powers of the world are concluded, even if the external conditions do not improve, there is time enough for DPM Wong and his party to shape policy to help people and businesses make the most of difficult circumstances.

He can give new Cabinet members, his Members of Parliament, prospective election candidates and the broader PAP ranks the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to that, and thereby provide the strongest footing possible for a general election.

The next National Day Rally, PAP party convention, commemoration plans for SG60 and the 2025 Budget will be signal events to do so.



The opposition movement is certainly not standing still.

The year 2023 was filled with news of collaboration among these alternative parties to strengthen their electoral tactics. The WP has said its medium-term electoral goal is to help deny the PAP a two-thirds majority in Parliament needed for constitutional amendments.

The incumbent party will have to deliver some of the promised effects of the new social compact and develop fresh ways to connect with the populace it acknowledged it needs at its past two party conventions.

These are how Singapore's fourth prime minister will probably create forward momentum for people and politics, before he leads his party to the polls.

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**Correction note:** An earlier version of this commentary wrongly noted that the WP said it will tilt towards the strategy of fighting to form the government at the next GE. This is inaccurate and has been corrected. The WP has said its medium-term electoral goal is to help deny the PAP a two-thirds majority in Parliament needed for constitutional amendments. We are sorry for the error.