

# After the PAP party election, what's next?

All eyes will be on appointments of assistant secretaries-general, chairman

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For The Straits Times

On Nov 11, the People's Action Party (PAP) held elections for its Central Executive Committee (CEC).

In effect, about 3,000 party cadres selected the vanguard of people who will lead them into the country's 13th General Election which is due to be held by April 2021, but expected earlier than that.

After all, next year is when the PAP marks 60 years of being in power. On May 30, 1959, after Singapore received the right to internal self-government from the British, the landmark election was held where the PAP won 43 out of the full 51 seats it contested. Politically, this fact is more salient than the celebration of the Singapore Bicentennial, marking 200 years since modern Singapore's founding, that is being planned. Talk of early elections gained further traction after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said on Sunday that "this may be the last party conference before the next

general election".

What were the highlights of the 2018 CEC election?

## TRANSITION TO 4G IN FULL SWING

First, this is now a predominantly fourth-generation or 4G CEC by way of numbers. The transition to a younger group of leaders and the next prime minister is now in full swing.

Only five members of the third-generation or 3G party leaders remain. In a typical PAP CEC, there are 18 members. Of these, 12 places are taken up by those elected into the CEC. Another two are co-opted from among the next group of top scorers in the election; and then another four members – usually backbenchers in Parliament – may be co-opted to represent the grassroots of the party.

By Sunday, the PAP had a slate of 14 in its CEC. More may be inducted later. Of these 14, the five 3G leaders who remain are: PM Lee, Mr Gan Kim Yong, Mr K. Shanmugam and Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, all of whom were elected; the fifth, Dr Ng Eng Hen, was co-opted.

Apart from those five 3G leaders, the others in the CEC are from the 4G set: Mr Heng Swee Keat, Mr

Chan Chun Sing, Ms Indranee Rajah and Ms Grace Fu, people who would have had interaction and the tutelage of the first PAP secretary-general and founding prime minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. There is also Mr Tan Chuan-Jin who is Speaker of Parliament, and as an MP in Marine Parade GRC, would have had extensive contact with a key second-generation leader, Mr Goh Chok Tong, former PM and former PAP secretary-general. The others among the 14 are: Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Mr Ong Ye Kung, Mr Ng Chee Meng as well as Mrs Josephine Teo, who was co-opted.

## STEPS TOWARDS NEXT PM

Second, while we are still half a step away from knowing who the successor to the current PAP secretary-general – who by convention will become the prime minister – might be, the picture will be clearer very soon, after the CEC elects its office-bearers. This usually would take place just a few weeks after the election but we should not discount the possibility that it might happen even sooner given the international summits that are taking place here over the next few days.

Already, the previous CEC's assistant secretaries-general (ASGs) Teo Chee Hean and Tharman Shanmugaratnam have

made way for new blood. This precedes the ceding of their roles as Deputy Prime Ministers.

The new ASGs appointed are then likely to be elevated to be DPMs as that rank is one that a potential PM must take up in the journey to becoming the first among equals of the 4G leaders.

The next piece of news about the office-bearers' line-up will thus be crucial for the party's leadership transition and for Singapore.

Meanwhile, a few observations can be made about the new CEC.

What is significant now is that there are still three candidates who might become PM, not two – Mr Heng, Mr Chan and also Mr Ong. Mr Ong, previously co-opted, has made it into the CEC on his own steam; he was not among the seven that the party leaders designated for cadres to choose in the election.

There is still strong representation of those with military backgrounds, with Mr Chan, Mr Tan and Mr Ng Chee Meng's presence. It is noteworthy that both Mr Tan and Mr Ng had been moved out of mainstream ministries into adjacent roles that are viewed as less prestigious politically – the former as Speaker, the latter as chief of labour movement NTUC – but both made it into the CEC by popular vote.

Mr Lawrence Wong and Mr

Desmond Lee, both full ministers in the Government, were not elected into the CEC.

What is outstanding too is that the party has achieved a high water mark of having three women in the CEC – Ms Indranee, Ms Fu and Mrs Teo. This helps to make real secretary-general Lee's point in his speech on Sunday that the PAP should always ensure it represents the social diversity of the population. It will be interesting to see if Ms Indranee will, in the next Cabinet reshuffle which should be imminent, get her own ministerial portfolio to match the standing she has achieved in the party. She is now Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Finance and Education.

All eyes will be on who gets appointed as the two ASGs.

One spot at the ASG level could be taken up by Mr Shanmugam to undergird a likely transition into a deputy prime minister who handles the critical security portfolio when Mr Teo relinquishes it in due course.

He is after all the leader with the most relevant experience to do so among the new CEC members. In that case, the second ASG spot will then go to the likely successor to PM Lee. Much speculation is rife that this will be Mr Chan. Indeed, a photograph showing PM Lee flanked by Mr Shanmugam and Mr Chan at the party conference was interpreted as signalling this.

However, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that both ASG spots will go to two younger ministers. The party chairman post can then go to Mr Shanmugam. And a third possibility is for there to be three ASG spots – one to Mr Shanmugam and two for leading 4G contenders for the premiership.

The second and third scenario will suggest that more time is needed for a final decision to be taken among the 4G leaders to pick someone who

will be considered the first among equals, as is the PAP tradition. The guessing game – and intense competition – on who will succeed PM Lee will continue even after the election of CEC office-bearers.

While a period of uncertainty may be unsettling, it is to PM Lee's credit that he has worked hard to build up a strong succession team so that the Government remains in steady hands. The strength of the team can be seen in how there is not just one but a few quality candidates for the top post.

Some may say that all politics is local but for Singapore, international actors will assess how deep and wide is the bench of political talent it has. This in turn will shape their perceptions of whether the country can manage political, social and geopolitical risk in a sure-footed manner, and ultimately, if they take bets with us or against us. Singaporeans appreciate the close nexus between the local and international in these developments and their electoral choices.

In an age when the political order globally has been upended by populism, tribalism and a deep cynicism about traditional political elites and institutions, in Singapore, the need for our political leaders to understand, engage, persuade and convince individual and corporate citizens is as crucial as it was in 1959.

So, on their part, this PAP new guard must appreciate that citizens need to be assured that the Government will address both their short-term concerns and long-term interests; that they can lead the nation to a higher level achievement and pride.

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