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A new, post-Lee Kuan Yew era

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Citation

EUGENE, Tan K. B.. A new, post-Lee Kuan Yew era. (2011). *Today*. 2-2.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research/3787

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A new, post-Lee Kuan Yew era

Departure reinforces belief that Singapore system based on institutions not personalities



EUGENE K B TAN

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 they should step down to give the PM a free hand as he decides on his new Cabinet lineup. "It cannot be government as usual", in MM Lee's words.

It is a magnanimous act of statesman-

ship and a powerful expression of humility by MM Lee and SM Goh.

And I hope that Singaporeans, regardless of their political inclinations, will pay tribute and recognise them for their sterling contributions and achievements. Together, they have accumulated 87 years in the Cabinet, including 45 years as Prime Ministers. We now stand on their shoulders as we move forth.

As PM Lee finalises his new Cabinet lineup, which could be announced this week, at least six of the previous 21 Cabinet members will not feature. Besides MM Lee and SM Goh, Mr S Jayakumar and Mr Lim Boon Heng had announced their retirement from politics prior to the GE. Mr George Yeo and Mrs Lim Hwee Hua were defeated in the GE.

We are likely to see a streamlined and leaner Cabinet. Young MP-elects will be blooded at the junior office-holder levels to accelerate their learning.

NEVER SEEN SOCIETY SO POLARISED

As Singapore transitions to the fourth-generation leadership, the engagement of a new generation of voters will take new directions and gain fresh impetus. The new Cabinet's political style will not be cramped; it will be

unencumbered by the political values and baggage of the past. How the engagement will play out remains to be seen, but it underlines the message that the PAP Government is not averse to change.

That MM Lee and SM Goh have taken the lead with their politically enlightened and shrewd decision to step aside so that this break from the past can take place, makes it even more imperative for Singaporeans to heal the divisions among us.

It is all too easy to externalise and engage in a blame game vis-a-vis the difficulties, pressures and challenges Singaporeans have encountered in the past decade. There is no silver bullet to address the multi-faceted and complex issues that modern societies have to deal with.

Yet even with the heat of the elections over, there is still much vitriol and baying for blood circulating on social media. I have never seen our society being so polarised, that political loyalties become a source of division. Are we cutting our nose off to spite our face?

I hope that we now get down to healing the divisions.

EMBOLDENED POPULIST PRESSURES

The fact is 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.

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 shoe-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? ■

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