Shuffles towards the fourth prime minister

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For The Straits Times

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced a Cabinet reshuffle. This is the third since the start of his parliamentary term in January last year.

The first was in October last year when the notable shifts were the promotion of Ng Eng Hen and Ng Chee Meng to full ministers. The second, at the end of April, or four months ago, saw Josephine Teo and Mr Desmond Lee become full ministers and Dr Lam Pin Min, Dr Janil Puthucheary, Dr Koh Poh Koon and Mr Chee Hong Tat promoted to senior ministers of state. Mr Teo lost a deputy and senior minister of state, if it was announced, would step out of public office.

What we know so far is that PM Lee has nominated Mr Tan Chuan-Jin to be the next Speaker of Parliament. Replacing him at the helm of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) will be Mr Desmond Lee.

In explaining his decision, PM Lee emphasised that Mr Tan remains an "important member" of the team though in a different role, which means that the switch is intentional, rather than one of expediency – it is not to fill a gap temporarily.

Indeed, PM Lee’s statement that Mr Tan has the "temperament and personality" for the role of Speaker strengthened the impression that his decision was very much based on considerations of Mr Tan’s intrinsic qualities. Mr Tan was acknowledged for having strong networks in the social sector and for his ability to manage relationships with a broad set of stakeholders.

There have been speculations linking the process of leadership renewal will conclude that Mr Tan is not out of the running to be Singapore’s fourth prime minister, leaving the main contenders as Mr Heng Swee Keat and Mrs Josephine Teo.

Minister Tan Chuan-Jin, an event for families last Saturday at Boon-Ang Mo Kio Park. Those who have been studying the process of leadership renewal will conclude that Mr Tan is out of the running to be Singapore’s fourth prime minister, having been nominated to be the next Speaker of Parliament. ST PHOTO: ABEL FERNANDEZ

Mr Heng Swee Keat had been floated as Mr Tan’s preferred successor because of his track record and reputation for building a broad coalition that included various factions within the ruling party. However, the new appointments and the process of leadership renewal suggest that the race for the top role may be more complex than previously thought.

The serious candidates for the position of deputy prime minister are likely to be shifted into the position of deputy prime minister by the end of this parliamentary term. However, the choices of these candidates will depend on various factors such as the need for different skills and experiences.

For instance, Mr Heng Swee Keat is seen as a strong leader with a broad network of contacts, while Mrs Teo is known for her ability to manage complex issues and to communicate effectively.

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