

Commentary: With Lawrence Wong set to take over as PM, the clock starts on battle for hearts and minds

The accelerated handover from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to DPM Lawrence Wong suggests the general election will be called sooner rather than later. Mr Wong and the 4G PAP team have their work cut out for them, says SMU associate professor of law Eugene Tan.

SINGAPORE: Come May 15, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will draw the curtain on his almost 20-year tenure and pass the baton to his deputy Lawrence Wong. It marks the end of the carefully planned leadership transition from the third generation to the fourth, most of whom were born after Singapore became independent.

This renewal process had been relatively protracted and marked with uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed Mr Lee's plan to step down by 2022, which led to Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat taking himself out of the running for the top job in April 2021, citing his age and the short "runway", and the 4G team taking a year to choose its next leader.

But things have moved swiftly since Nov 5 last year when Mr Lee declared his intention to hand over the reins to Mr Wong before the next general election, and certainly by the 70th birthday of the People's Action Party (PAP) this November.

Still, the May handover took me by surprise and strikes me as being an accelerated timeline.

An earlier-than-anticipated handover is Mr Lee's strongest endorsement yet of Mr Wong and the 4G team. It also suggests that a general election could be called sooner rather than later.

A FRESH MANDATE FOR TROUBLED TIMES?

The first window for the pivotal general election is September 2024 after Mr Wong delivers his first National Day Rally. This gives Mr Wong no more than five months as Prime Minister to make a compelling case to Singaporeans for a fresh electoral mandate.

There appears to be some urgency on the part of the ruling PAP to go to the polls, given the deteriorating global geopolitical situation, especially after Iran's drone and missile attack on Israel over the weekend. An electoral mandate for the next five years before things spiral will enable Singaporeans to be clear-eyed about the issues and challenges that the country faces and decide which party is best placed to form the government.

We already saw this line of thinking in the 2020 General Election, held weeks after Singapore emerged from its COVID-19 circuit breaker. Mr Lee has said that the strong mandate allowed the government to make tough calls during the pandemic.

Amid the spike in global tensions and insecurities, the PAP will seek to impress upon voters that it is well tried-and-tested in security and defence matters and can be trusted to lead in

treacherous times.

But the accelerated handover does not foreclose the possibility of the election taking place in mid-2025, such as after Budget 2025. It gives the PAP and Mr Wong more options as to when to call the election.

WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS

Regardless of when the election is called, the clock has now started on the battle for voters' hearts and minds.

Mr Wong and the ruling party will have to show their mettle and gumption in the cut and thrust of retail politics. Will voters be persuaded to assess the PAP's performance since the 2020 General Election in a favourable light, given the recency of several price and tax hikes? Or that the PAP under Mr Wong's leadership is equal to the task of leading Singapore within a more troubled world and increasing domestic constraints?

Mr Wong will be the first Prime Minister to be born post-independence, as are many in his 4G team and in the electorate. The task of impressing these voters with the PAP's track record will be somewhat harder as the narrative of Singapore going from third world to first does not resonate as strongly as with Singaporeans born pre-independence.

After being tested by the COVID-19 pandemic which provided invaluable lessons in governance and leadership, Singaporeans got a sense of his leadership and how he would respond to crises and other prominent issues of the day during the "crisis of a generation" pandemic.

Singaporeans will want to know what makes Mr Wong tick and how he will get Singaporeans to collectively write the next chapter of the Singapore Story. In a more challenging environment, Mr Wong and his team have their work cut out for them.

They will have to present, persuade and secure the buy-in for their vision of Singapore for Singaporeans. To this end, it becomes of paramount importance to nurture the trust and confidence of Singaporeans in the 4G to lead Singapore.

FINAL MILESTONE IN LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

But it remains to be seen whether the pandemic has caused a significant change in how Singaporeans view the state of government and politics.

In 2020, there was no flight to safety that voters had previously demonstrated in earlier elections when there was an economic downturn or a serious security threat. In fact, the ruling party saw a dip in vote share and lost a second Group Representation Constituency (GRC).

The next election will be held against a backdrop of a consistent

desire in the electorate for more political competition and diversity, as well as concerns about complacency, unpopular policies and recent controversies involving senior party leaders on both sides.

Although the PAP has won every general election since 1959, such political dominance can be both an asset and a liability. The likelihood of voters punting for the opposition, especially where their candidates have the appeal of credibility, competency and commitment, cannot be understated.

When Mr Lee steps down as Prime Minister next month, it will be the final milestone in this generational change of leadership. The spotlight now shifts prominently to Mr Wong and his team.

They will have to demonstrate unequivocally that this generational transfer of power will in fact be beneficial to Singaporeans and Singapore and that the next chapter of the Singapore Story will be one that we can be proud of.

Eugene K B Tan is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University and a former Nominated Member of Parliament.