

POLITICS

Lawrence Wong, Singapore's new PM, begins term: 5 things to know

51-year-old leader edges toward election as change comes in bunches

Singapore's fourth Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong, speaks to supporters at a community event after the swearing-in ceremony on May 15. © Reuters

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SINGAPORE -- Singapore has its first new prime minister in 20 years, with Lee Hsien Loong, 72, stepping down from the post this week to make way for Lawrence Wong, 51, who was his deputy.

The political handover is taking place alongside **internal and external changes** that have challenged the city-state and handed Wong a packed agenda that includes keeping his ruling People's Action Party in power amid the turbulence.

Here are five things to know as his term begins.

What kind of leader will Wong be?

Wong has **vowed to take a different approach** to leadership than his predecessors. "Our leadership style will differ from that of previous generations. We will lead in our own way," Wong said during his swearing-in speech on Wednesday.

While steering the country to prosperity over decades, Singapore's government has also been critiqued as paternalistic. Wong has previously said that "every leader has to adapt" their style to the needs of the society of their time, words perhaps chosen to portray himself as a leader with a consultative style.

Wong is expected to follow the path set out by his predecessors and keep the city-state as open as possible. As a trade-reliant hub, the new leader has stressed the importance of maintaining interdependence through a wide network of bilateral and regional free-trade agreements.

Wen Wei Tan, an analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit, said the government is actively trying to enhance social safety nets by considering measures like conditional unemployment insurance. "These spending and policies mark the pivot to a more redistributive state," Tan told Nikkei Asia. "But we expect the government to maintain its overall pro-business stance."

What kind of support does Wong have?

The prime minister has not passed the big test of leading his party through a parliamentary general election.

Singapore has a unique "group representation constituency" system which some critics say has helped the PAP maintain its unbroken rule for decades. Under this GRC setup, parties field a team of up to five candidates, at least one of whom must be from an ethnic minority group, and the winning group takes all of the seats in an area.

Wong and his team of PAP candidates secured 63.18% of the votes in his constituency in the 2020 general election, 68.73% in 2015 and 66.57% in 2011, when he first contested in an election. In contrast, Lee Hsien Loong, won 71.91% of votes with his team in 2020, 78.64% in 2015 and 69.33% in 2011.

With an eye on engaging Singaporeans, Wong used social media to portray himself as approachable, someone who plays the guitar, for instance. He has over 130,000 TikTok followers.

A survey by global public opinion and data company YouGov conducted in April targeting about 1,000 Singaporeans older than 18 found that Generation Z citizens, those born from 1997 to 2009, tend to have a more positive perception of Wong. Overall, 53% of respondents from all generations said they find Wong to be "competent." In addition, 40% replied that they believe him to be 'trustworthy' and 28% answered that he is "a strong leader."

Supporters hold up signages in support of Singapore's fourth Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong, at a community event after the swearing-in ceremony in Singapore on May 15. © Reuters

Who from the ruling party's old guard surrounds Wong?

Wong has kept Lee in his cabinet as a senior minister. Senior politicians like Lee and those from Lee's old guard of government leadership are seen as advisors to Wong and his team of younger politicians.

Instead of appointing peers closer to his age as deputies, Wong **decided to have Gan Kim Yong and Heng Swee Keat, colleagues in their 60s**, be his immediate lieutenants. Gan, who doubles as trade minister, served alongside Wong in leading Singapore's coronavirus multi-ministry taskforce.

"Not appointing for now a contemporary as one of his deputy prime ministers will set tongues wagging on whether Wong can't find a peer that he can work very closely with and whether the 4G team lacks cohesion and unity," said Eugene Tan, an associate professor at Singapore Management University.

How has the world responded to Wong's inauguration?

Shortly after Wong was sworn in on May 15, congratulatory messages from global leaders began pouring in, including from U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Thursday spoke with Wong on the phone for about 15 minutes, stating that the two countries are "important partners" working together on "challenges faced by the region and the international community," according to Japan's foreign ministry.

Wong also spoke with Indonesian **President-elect Prabowo Subianto** and Malaysian Prime Minister **Anwar Ibrahim** over the phone. "There's much we can do with like-minded countries to achieve win-win outcomes and steer developments towards continued peace, stability and prosperity for Asia and the world," Wong said in a social media post following the calls.

With more countries turning to protectionism, the Singapore leader is expected to team up with "like-minded countries" and strive to maintain some momentum in multilateral economic partnerships, Manu Bhaskaran, an economist and CEO of the Centennial Asia Advisors consultancy, told Nikkei.

Meanwhile, global investors say they are keen for Wong to adopt policies that will help the Asian financial hub grow further. Jim Rogers, a Singapore-based investor who co-founded Quantum Fund with George Soros, expects Wong to continue Lee's work of maintaining a free and open economy. But he told Nikkei Asia that Singapore "needs to attract more investment within Singapore," adding that its stock exchange and investment markets are "languishing" compared to those of peers.

Lawrence Wong quickly rose through political ranks

	Events in Wong's career	Political events in Singapore
1994	Graduates from University of Wisconsin-Madison	
1995	Receives a master's in applied economics from University of Michigan	
1997	Starts career as civil servant at Ministry of Trade and Industry	
2004	Receives a master's in public administration from Harvard University	Lee Hsien Loong becomes prime minister
2005	Becomes principal private secretary to Lee	
2009	Appointed as CEO of Energy Market Authority	
2011	Enters politics; elected as a member of Parliament	
2015	Becomes minister for national development	Lee Kuan Yew dies at age 91
2020	Co-chairs multiministry coronavirus taskforce	
2021	Becomes minister for finance	
April 2022	Endorsed as PAP's next-generation leader	
June	Promoted to deputy prime minister	
July 2023	Appointed as chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore	
November		Lee announces he will step down by November 2024
May 2024	Sworn in as Singapore's fourth prime minister	

Source: Prime Minister's Office Singapore, government announcements

What will be the next big test for Wong and his ruling party?

With a general election that must be held by November 2025, Wong and his ruling PAP will seek a fresh voter mandate. An ideal result for Wong would be to score above the share of votes he and his team achieved in previous elections.

The PAP held total or near-complete dominance of parliament in the first few decades following Singapore's independence in 1965, but the feat has become more challenging of late, with the opposition winning a record-high number of seats in the previous election, in 2020.

Wong has acknowledged that the PAP is not guaranteed to form governments in the future and that opposition parties might come together in coalitions to lead Singapore.

The new prime minister also has to handle the task of rebuilding his party's image after a corruption scandal involving one of its former members, S Iswaran, the ex-transport minister who was **recently charged** on multiple counts of receiving favors such as soccer and show tickets in an ongoing graft case.

"Corruption scandals are rare in the history of Singapore," said the Economist Intelligence Unit's Tan. "Iswaran's case will definitely taint PAP's image in the lead-up to the general election, given that Singapore enjoys a good reputation on (keeping) corruption (at bay) globally."

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