

Singapore: Lawrence Wong To Lead Amid Economic And Political Challenges



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05-03-2024 ~ Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong is set to become Singapore's next leader on May 15, succeeding Lee Hsien Loong. His leadership will be closely watched as he takes the helm.

Singapore has announced that Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong will take over as the country's next leader on May 15. Wong, 51, has garnered unanimous support from lawmakers within the People's Action Party (PAP). He will succeed Lee Hsien Loong, who has held the top job for 20 years.

Wong, who earned praise for his management of the island's pandemic response, has been regarded as Lee's successor since April 2022. During this time, the ruling party selected him to lead the "4G" or fourth generation of leaders in Singapore's political parlance—politicians the party aimed to have govern the country in the future.

Before that, Heng Swee Keat, a former central bank chief and education minister and choice for the post of Prime Minister, suddenly stepped aside in 2021,

throwing the party's succession plans into disarray.

The term "generation" suggests a significant transition rather than a complete overhaul of cabinets, as some ministers served under more than one prime minister. The first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, led the first generation of leadership from 1965 until 1990. He was succeeded by Goh Chok Tong, who held the premiership for the following 14 years until 2004 when Lee Hsien Loong assumed leadership.

Wong began his political career in 2011 and has since held various ministerial positions, including defense, education, finance, and national development. Following his successful leadership during Singapore's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Wong was selected by his fellow cabinet ministers in early 2022 as a leader of the next generation through a selection process that excluded Lee and other senior ministers. Shortly thereafter, Lee appointed him as Deputy Prime Minister.

Singapore adheres to a parliamentary system, where general elections are conducted once every five years. Since gaining independence, Singapore has been characterized by a one-party dominant state led by the ruling PAP. Despite this, the opposition led by the Workers' Party has made notable strides, securing seats and now overseeing two group representation constituencies, marking a substantial breakthrough in the electoral landscape.

Lawrence Wong confronts numerous challenges as he readies to assume office on May 15. Singapore is grappling with significant concerns regarding the escalating cost of living. The ruling party has also been shaken by a corruption scandal.

In February 2024, Singapore's core inflation, which excludes private transport and accommodation costs to better reflect household expenses, surged to 3.6 percent year-on-year. This marked a significant uptick from January's rate of 3.1 percent and surpassed market expectations of a 3.4 percent increase. It represented the highest reading for core inflation since July 2023.

The acceleration in inflation was primarily driven by elevated services and food inflation, partly attributed to seasonal effects linked to the Chinese New Year. Chinese New Year, also known as Lunar New Year or the Spring Festival, stands as one of the most significant and widely celebrated holidays in Singapore. During this period, there is typically an increase in consumer spending, leading to price

hikes.

This year, overall inflation also rose to [3.4 percent](#) in February from 2.9 percent in January.

The ruling party has also encountered an uncommon setback in recent years, which has tarnished its renowned clean image. This was an indictment on corruption charges of then-senior minister, S. Iswaran. He faces 35 charges (and more pending) linked to bribery and corruption. The prosecution alleges that he accepted various gifts from a Malaysian tycoon and developer, as well as from another contractor.

Singapore's record on freedom of speech has been a subject of considerable concern. The 2021 People Power under Attack report by CIVICUS Monitor highlighted a decline in the country's civic space rating from "obstructed" to "repressed." This shift underscores a recurring pattern of infringements on civic rights, especially concerning freedom of speech. Throughout 2021, Singapore utilized restrictive laws such as the Public Order Act, the 2017 Administration of Justice (Protection) Act, the Protection Against Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), and defamation laws to target human rights advocates, journalists, and critics.

A significant event occurred when the government applied legal pressure on independent news platforms. In September, the police gave a "serious warning" to [New Naratif and its managing editor](#), Thum Ping Tjin, for publishing unauthorized electoral advertisements in 2020. Furthermore, in October, the national media regulator canceled the license of the Online Citizen after the platform allegedly refused to reveal its sources of funding.

The introduction of the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act further threatened freedom of expression, allegedly in the name of preserving national sovereignty. These actions, ostensibly taken to uphold order and protect national interests, have raised substantial concerns about the diminishing of civil liberties and the silencing of dissent in Singapore.

But most importantly Singapore, once adept at harmonizing its economic ties with China alongside its security partnerships with the United States, now faces mounting difficulty in upholding this equilibrium, especially compared to the initial years of Lee's premiership. The burgeoning economic sway of China in the

vicinity has become markedly pronounced.

China's assertiveness in regional waters has escalated. While the Philippines, led by Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., seems inclined towards siding with the United States on security matters despite China's economic prowess, the remaining Southeast Asian nations (excluding Laos, Cambodia, and strife-torn Myanmar) continue to navigate a delicate balance among the dominant powers in the region.

Yet, even for a nation as affluent and diplomatically adept as Singapore, managing the delicate equilibrium between these two forces is becoming increasingly challenging. China's efforts to extend its influence into the domestic affairs of every Southeast Asian nation are evident. Within Singapore, apprehensions regarding Chinese interference in domestic politics are mounting among senior officials, prompting the passage of stringent legislation to counter foreign intervention.

The conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, which strikes a chord with Singapore's substantial Muslim minority, has negatively affected the reputation of the United States in the city-state.

In the lead-up to Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's impending leadership, Singapore finds itself at a critical juncture. The transition represents a continuation of the People's Action Party's (PAP) governance, yet it also exposes the party to challenges and criticisms. Wong's ascent to power is not devoid of complexities; he steps into a role overshadowed by economic uncertainties and recent damage to the PAP's once-pristine image due to a corruption scandal. He faces the delicate task of navigating these turbulent waters.

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