



**IISPP**  
INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL  
STUDIES AND PUBLIC POLICY

CENTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

**CSEAS COMMENTARY**



[www.rupp.edu.kh/iispp/cseas](http://www.rupp.edu.kh/iispp/cseas)

CSEAS Commentary #25 / May 2024

---

## **Prime Minister Lee’s Final Major Speech & the Swearing-In Ceremony of the Fourth Generation Prime Minister**

**Chhun Phalanady**

### **Introduction**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong delivered his final speech on May 1st, 2024, marking the leadership transition to Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, who became the new Prime Minister on May 15th. Mr. Lee had planned to step down in 2022 but delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lawrence Wong, the first non-Lee family Prime Minister, served as National Development and Finance Minister. He gained prominence during the pandemic for his role in managing the crisis. The upcoming general election's timing remains uncertain, with the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) facing a decline in support among younger voters.

### **PM Lee’s Final Major Speech**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong delivered his final speech on May 1st, 2024, as he prepared to pass the baton of leadership to Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong. Mr. Lee expressed gratitude for the opportunity to serve the nation for 40 years and emphasized his commitment to effective leadership aligned with the aspirations of Singaporeans. He acknowledged the Public Service's collective effort and the Labor Movement's tireless efforts in enhancing the well-being of workers and their families.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Lee called upon all Singaporeans to unite and support his

---

<sup>1</sup> “PM Lee Hsien Loong at May Day Rally 2024,” Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, May 1, 2024, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-May-Day-Rally-2024>.

successor, Lawrence Wong, and the 4G leadership team as they enter a new chapter in Singapore's story.<sup>2</sup>

These questions arise. Who is Singapore's fourth prime minister, Lawrence Wong? What is his background? And what does the future hold for Singapore's political landscape, especially with the upcoming GE?

## **About the Fourth Prime Minister**

Lawrence Wong, Singapore's first non-Lee family Prime Minister and the first leader born post-independence, previously served as the Minister of National Development and Finance. He assumed leadership of the party's 4G team in 2021, succeeding Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat.<sup>3</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Mr. Wong played a crucial role as the co-chair of the multi-ministry task force, effectively managing Singapore's low infection and mortality rates.<sup>4</sup> He was instrumental in highlighting Singapore's significantly lower COVID-19 mortality rate than countries like Germany and the U.S.<sup>5</sup> He also maintained fiscal prudence, with Singapore's expenditure estimated at \$72.3 billion out of an initial budget exceeding \$100 billion.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, Mr. Wong and his 4G team initiated the Forward Singapore (SG) exercise in June 2022, engaging over 200,000 Singaporeans in discussions on various topics such as careers, aging, and environmental sustainability. This exercise aimed to redefine a "good life" and promote

---

<sup>2</sup> Eugene K B Tan, "Commentary: With Lawrence Wong Set to Take Over as PM, the Clock Starts on Battle for Hearts and Minds," *CNA*, April 17, 2024, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/singapore-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-lawrence-wong-election-4269016>.

<sup>3</sup> Tang See Kit, "Singapore's Next General Election Likely to Be Held in Late 2024 at the Earliest, Analysts Say," *CNA*, November 5, 2023, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-next-general-election-2024-pap-leadership-transition-3898556>.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Mohan, "Lawrence Wong's Leadership Amid COVID-19 Pandemic Helped Elevate Him to Top Post: Observers," *CNA*, April 14, 2022, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/lawrence-wong-4g-leader-analysts-2626466>.

<sup>5</sup> Natasha Ann Zachariah, "Singapore Came Through Pandemic Well Without Spending Excessively: Lawrence Wong," *The Straits Times*, April 3, 2023, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/singapore-came-through-pandemic-well-without-spending-excessively-lawrence-wong>.

<sup>6</sup> Lim Min Zhang, "\$72.3 Billion Spent on Fight Against Covid-19 Over FY2020 and FY2021: Indranee," *The Straits Times*, September 13, 2022, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/723-billion-spent-on-fight-against-covid-19-over-fy2020-and-fy2021-indranee>.

lifelong learning. Initiatives like SkillsFuture were introduced to create diverse career pathways. At the same time, the National Mental and Well-being Strategy prioritized guidelines for mental well-being and work-life balance, including flexible working arrangements.<sup>7</sup>

### ***May 15th's Swearing-In Ceremony***

During the swearing-in ceremony on May 15th, Lawrence Wong became Singapore's fourth Prime Minister, emphasizing the importance of pragmatic compromises, unity, and embracing differences. He drew inspiration from the unity displayed during the COVID-19 pandemic. PM Wong acknowledged the changing global landscape, with geopolitical tensions and rising nationalism, signaling the end of the era of peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region. He highlighted the significance of Singapore's active engagement with ASEAN, strengthening regional cooperation, and maintaining stable relations with the United States and China. PM Wong emphasized the need to foster partnerships with these powers to shape a new global order over the long term.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Upcoming General Election**

The timing of the upcoming general election in Singapore remains uncertain, with possibilities ranging from late 2024 to mid-2025. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has maintained dominance in Singapore's political landscape since 1959, although it has experienced a decline in support among younger voters. Former Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam's strong performance in the 2023 presidential election demonstrated continued trust in the PAP.<sup>9</sup>

Lawrence Wong, a frontrunner in the race to become the next Prime Minister, has gained the people's trust, particularly during the pandemic. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Communications and Information in March 2023 showed that approximately 71% of respondents

---

<sup>7</sup> Members of the Forward SG, "Forward SG: Building Our Shared Future," Forward Singapore, October 2023, accessed May 17, 2024, [https://www.forwardsingapore.gov.sg/-/media/forwardsg/pagecontent/fsg-reports/full-reports/mci-fsg-final-report\\_fa\\_rgb\\_web\\_20-oct-2023.pdf](https://www.forwardsingapore.gov.sg/-/media/forwardsg/pagecontent/fsg-reports/full-reports/mci-fsg-final-report_fa_rgb_web_20-oct-2023.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Fabian Koh, "'We Will Lead in Our Own Way': Lawrence Wong Takes Office as Fourth Prime Minister of Singapore," CNA, May 15, 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/we-will-lead-our-own-way-lawrence-wong-takes-office-fourth-prime-minister-singapore-4338016>.

<sup>9</sup> Reuters, "Singapore Picks Economic Czar Tharman Shanmugaratnam as Its Next President," CNBC, September 3, 2023, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/09/02/singapore-presidential-race-economic-czar-tharman-shanmugaratnam-wins.html>.

expressed confidence in the government's handling of future pandemics.<sup>10</sup> However, dissatisfaction among younger voters and the increased influence of opposition parties have challenged the PAP's support.

<b>Table: Confidence in Singapore, Key Institutions and Self to Face a Pandemic in the Future</b>	<b>% Agreement</b>	<b>% Neutral</b>	<b>% Disagreement</b>
I am confident that Singapore would be able to get through it.	75	18	7
I trust the Government to know what to do.	71	20	10
I would be mentally prepared to deal with it.	69	23	7
I am confident that Singaporeans would help each other through the pandemic.	69	22	9
I am confident that our healthcare system will be able to manage it	69	19	12

Source of Data: <https://www.mci.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/7-in-10-sg-residents-positive-overall-quality-of-life-post-pandemic/>

In the 2020 general election, the People's Action Party (PAP) experienced a decline in support, particularly among younger voters. Despite securing a substantial majority in parliament with 83 out of 93 seats and capturing 61% of the popular vote, the PAP's support decreased by 9% compared to the 2015 election. This decline in support among younger voters, mainly those aged 21-25, is attributed to dissatisfaction with the country's carefully managed democratic system and a perceived stifling of social and political consensus. As a result, opposition parties like the

<sup>10</sup> “Poll by MCI Finds 7 in 10 Singapore Residents Positive About Overall Quality of Life Post Pandemic,” Ministry of Communication and Information, March 19, 2023, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.mci.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/7-in-10-sg-residents-positive-overall-quality-of-life-post-pandemic/>

Workers Party won 10 seats, while the Progress Singapore Party, led by a former PAP member, garnered 10% of the popular vote, although they did not win any seats.

In the upcoming months, it will be crucial for Mr. Wong to present a compelling case for a fresh electoral mandate, focusing on policies related to employment and training that directly impact the majority of eligible voters.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the transition in Singapore's leadership from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to Lawrence Wong signifies a significant change. PM Wong's role during the COVID-19 pandemic, displaying expertise and fiscal prudence, has positioned him as a frontrunner in the upcoming general election. Trust in the government's crisis management is evident, and implementing the Forward SG masterplan will showcase PM Wong's leadership approach. The election will shape Singapore's political landscape as voters assess the PAP's performance and policies.

---

**Chhun Phalanady** is a junior researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP), Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP).

---

*The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS). Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) of the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP) aims to be a highly reliable and advanced hub of knowledge on Southeast Asian affairs to catalyze progress and advance prospects of positive integration, peace, and development. With its pool of high-caliber researchers, IISPP's CSEAS aims to be an alternative to ad-hoc research, training, and policy dialogue arrangements with limited or short-lived national and regional impacts.*