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S'pore-Handover

S'PORE PAYS TRIBUTE TO GOH CHOK TONG

SINGAPORE, Aug 12 (Bernama) -- It was business as usual for outgoing Premier Goh Chok Tong as he chaired his last weekly Cabinet meeting at the Istana yesterday afternoon.

Goh, 63, who hands over power officially to his deputy, Lee Hsien Loong, tonight, looked relaxed as he sat with Lee to his right and his successor's father, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew across the table.

"There's nothing exceptional in today's meeting," said Goh. But he noted that he was "most relaxed and very happy, because it has been a satisfying 14 years."

Under the Cabinet reshuffle unveiled on Tuesday, the senior Lee, who turns 81 next month, will be Minister Mentor. He will give up the title Senior Minister to Goh.

Goh also takes over as chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) from the 52-year-old Lee, who retains his Finance Ministry portfolio.

"I have a good team to help me with my work, and most important, a new team with a new Prime Minister is in place, and that team will take Singapore to much greater heights," Goh told reporters at the start of the meeting.

"I'm still in the same boat. So now there's a new captain, but I'm still a member of the crew...I've still got to mend the rigs, I've got to help steer the boat if necessary, so I don't miss anything," he said, when asked what he would miss most about his PM post.

When Lee Kuan Yew stepped down in 1990, Goh was not his first choice as successor. Now, on Goh's last day as Prime Minister, Lee also paid tribute to his achievements.

"His style is that of a team leader. He is able to get capable people to work for him. When necessary, he persuaded Singaporeans to accept tough measures. In this way, he has seen Singapore through several major setbacks like the Asian financial crisis in 1997, and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003."

Despite testing times with Indonesia under President Habibie and with Malaysia under Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Goh kept relations in working order, he said in a statement yesterday.

"Now Singapore is in good shape. The economy is recovering strongly after he won the support of the unions and their members to reduce Central Provident Fund contributions of employers and to revamp the wage structure to move away from seniority-based pay scales," said Lee.

The elder statesman said although Goh is not a natural politician, by determination and sustained effort, he learned to become an effective public speaker.

"He has added to what my generation built and created more opportunities for our people in so many fields. He has done well for all of us. I am proud and happy that I was a member of his team. We worked well together," said the nation's founding father.

The nation also rose to its feet Monday night when celebrating National Day to pay a fond and rousing tribute to Goh.

"This has been a rousing celebration for Singapore. And for me personally, an emotional one as well," said Goh, after witnessing his final parade.

For many of its citizens, the affable Goh will always be remembered as more 'Thank you' notes, continue to pour, with the local media publishing

warm greetings, well wishes and messages from people from all walks of life.

"Thank you Mr Goh for making Singapore a more caring, kinder, and gentler society," said Singaporean Cynthia Lee, who sent a postcard to the Straits Times from Australia published yesterday.

"PM Goh has found a path for Singapore from 'good' to 'great'. He has injected soul into society. To me, he will always be remembered as our Prime Minister, our Minister of Soul. I am more proud than ever to be a Singaporean," said Leon Tham.

"My grandma is a big fan of SM (senior minister) Lee. If Singapore were a play, I think that you are a fabulous second act to SM Lee's great opening act," said Jean Tan-Roberts.

"I admire the Lee Kuan Yew style and zealous efforts in bringing up Singapore, but you have the charm that has warmed our hearts," said Anne Leong.

"When you assumed office, you were called a 'seat-warmer' by many. Now that you are retiring, you will always be remembered as 'The People's Prime Minister'," said Chia Ai Ling.

Compliments of his Mr Nice Guy image aside, "Goh cannot be reduced to these simple epithets -- even if he does carry himself with the equanimity of a junzi, having mastered the art of unsoured quiet wisdom", said Straits Times political editor Zuraidah Ibrahim.

Aware that Lee Kuan Yew was a hard act to follow, Goh who became Prime Minister at the age of 49, removed this gold standard from people's minds, she said, and reminded his audiences repeatedly that his predecessor's shoes were too big to fill.

"I do not intend to wear his shoes. I shall wear my own, and choose my own stride," Goh said at his inauguration on Nov 28 1990. "I intend to be myself and set my own style." Goh, she noted, had lived by those words, resisting any temptation to model himself on the elder Lee.

"In retrospect, it is astonishing that such a man was once thought a mere 'seat warmer'. He certainly managed to warm it for so long, the seat became him and he the seat. It is astonishing too that even Senior Minister Lee once thought him 'wooden', the Straits Times said in its editorial yesterday.

"If he had been wooden once, Singaporeans have forgotten that too, so natural did his rapport with the people become. It is astonishing, above all, that people once thought he would merely be a transitional figure, not a revolutionary one, like his predecessor.

"For in his quiet way, Mr Goh presided over far-reaching changes in Singapore. The country matured during his tenure, economically and socially, people became more vocal, and government learnt to take better account of public opinion. What greater tribute can there be to a political leader than to say he helped his people grow? Thank you, Mr Goh."

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