

Prime News

Singapore's new home-grown legal team

Li Xueying

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Law Minister, Chief Justice, Attorney-General and Solicitor-General are all from NUS

A NEW generation of leaders is taking the helm in the legal field, and they have one thing in common: they went to the law school here.

They are: incoming Law Minister K. Shanmugam, Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong, Attorney-General Walter Woon and Solicitor-General Koh Kuat Jong.

All four were home-groomed at the National University of Singapore, or the University of Singapore as it was known in earlier years.

This common feature was highlighted by Mr Shanmugam yesterday in a wide-ranging interview with The Straits Times, his first since the announcement of his Cabinet appointments earlier this month.

Giving his take on it, he said: 'To some extent, it would mean a good understanding of the local legal scene, legal training and development.'

They also would have benefited from being involved in local law for many years, he added.

Mr Shanmugam himself would have clocked 23 years as a top litigator here, by the time he takes over the Law Ministry mantle from Professor S. Jayakumar on May 1.

On what will be the hallmark of the new slate of legal leadership - 'exciting and interesting' was how he put it - he said: 'Each person brings a different skill set to the table.'

CJ Chan, 71, appointed two years ago, was a 'doyen' among corporate practitioners while Prof Woon, 52, who became the Attorney-General last Friday, is 'exceptionally bright' and has experience as a diplomat. Mrs Koh, who also took up her new post last Friday, was trained in economics before moving into law.

'It would be an interesting mix and from slightly different generations as well,' said Mr Shanmugam.

The 49-year-old will be Singapore's third law minister since independence in 1965.

During the interview, he touched on a range of issues, from the role of lawyers in civic society to libel law. He also gave his assessment of the Singapore legal profession.

The 'depth of talent' here is not yet comparable to that in cities such as New York and London. This will take 10 to 15 years to achieve, he said.

'We have some lawyers who would easily fit into any top law firm in the world.

'But law is closely linked to commerce, and as a financial centre and commercial jurisdiction, we are behind London and New York.

'So to that extent, the cutting-edge products usually come out in London and New York first. We are always playing catch-up.'

He outlined three developments that will propel the profession here to world levels.

First, as the economy develops further, lawyers will get more chances to oversee larger and more complex deals.

Second, as they go overseas and foreign firms set up here, more will get greater exposure. Third, for more stars to emerge, there must be a larger base.

'The biggest law firms in the world have 2,000 or more lawyers. Our biggest has 300 lawyers,' Mr Shanmugam noted.

Noting that some Singapore law firms do cutting-edge work, he said: 'The task is to make sure that is across the board, with at least five to seven law firms able to do that kind of work.'

Mr Shanmugam will also be the Second Home Affairs Minister, but he does not see himself staying in that role for long.

'I'll probably be there for a short while and then probably move on to something else - law and something else.

'So I see it as a sort of training stint to understand the issues and therefore perform better as a law minister.'

xueying@sph.com.sg