

India Elections 2019: The New Cabinet and its Challenges

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Summary

India's new 57-member Council of Ministers, headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has 24 new faces. Despite having won a resounding mandate, the Modi government will have to hit the ground running.

Introduction

The new Council of Ministers in India, announced on 30 May 2019, has a mix of experience and fresh talent. Some prominent members, such as former Finance Minister Arun Jaitley and Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj, have not been included in the Cabinet due to health reasons. While Jaitley had written a letter to the Prime Minister on 29 May 2019, opting out of the government, Swaraj's omission was known only on the day of the announcement of the ministry.

Old and New Faces

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Amit Shah was widely expected to join the Cabinet and he has been appointed the Home Minister, which is effectively the number two person in the government. The only real surprise was the appointment of Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, a former Foreign Secretary (2015-18), as the Minister of External Affairs. It is rare in India for a recently-retired bureaucrat to make the transition to a Cabinet post. However, Jaishankar's stellar track record, not only as Foreign Secretary, but also as Ambassador to the United States and China, would have been seen as an asset by the government.

Smriti Irani, who earlier held the textile portfolio and defeated Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in a high-profile contest in Amethi, has been rewarded with the additional responsibility of women and child development. Kiren Rijiju, who was junior Minister of Home Affairs, is now the Minister of State (with Independent Charge) of Sport and Youth Affairs.

There are some notable omissions from the Council of Ministers. These include Maneka Gandhi, who held the women and child development portfolio; Suresh Prabhu, who was Minister of Commerce and Industry, and Civil Aviation; Uma Bharti, who held the drinking water and sanitation portfolio; and Rajyavardhan Rathore, who was in charge of youth affairs and sport.

There are others whose portfolios have changed. Rajnath Singh has been moved from home to defence and Nirmala Sitharaman from defence to finance. Sitharaman is the first woman

to hold the finance portfolio after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi held it briefly in 1970-71. There are others who have been given additional responsibility. They include Piyush Goyal, who, in addition to railways, also has charge of commerce and industry, Nitin Gadkari, who holds the road transport and highways portfolio as well as micro, small and medium enterprises, and Dharmendra Pradhan, who is in charge of petroleum and natural gas and steel.

There are, however, gender, religious and regional disparities in the Council of Ministers. While the newly-elected Lok Sabha (Lower House) has the most number of women members of parliament ever and the 2019 elections saw the highest ever turnout of women voters, only six women find place in the Council. As in the first term, there is only one Muslim minister – Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, a member of the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) – who retains the charge of minority affairs. South India does not find much representation either with only six ministers from the southern states. This could be a reflection of the BJP's poor performance in the south, with the exception of Karnataka and Telangana. The BJP made inroads into West Bengal and Odisha, where the party had a minimal presence, and there are two ministers each from the two states. Of the four ministers, only one – Pradhan – is of Cabinet rank.

With the BJP having won a comfortable majority on its own, its allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would not have been expecting much largesse. Three major allies – the Shiv Sena, Akali Dal and Lok Janshakti Party – have been given one Cabinet berth each. However, the Nitish Kumar-led Janata Dal (United), which won 16 seats in Bihar, has chosen to stay out. For the allies, the challenge would be to retain their position in their respective states in the face of a dominant BJP.

Challenges

Despite the strong mandate for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP, the new Council of Ministers faces several challenges. In fact, the situation for the government in its second term is perhaps more challenging than in 2014. This is especially so on the economic front. The latest gross domestic product data released by the government shows that India's economy grew at 5.8 per cent in the January-March 2019 period, its slowest in five years. Another set of figures has revealed that India's unemployment rate hit 6.1 per cent in the 2017-18 fiscal year, which is reportedly the country's highest in over four decades. These figures were withheld by the government in the run up to the elections.

The new Finance Minister will have her hands full in reviving the economy in the face of a liquidity crisis, weak investment and rising food inflation. The Union budget, which will be presented on 5 July 2019, is expected to give a roadmap for the next five years. The home ministry will also be closely watched on its stand on contentious issues like illegal immigration and special privileges for Jammu and Kashmir.

The international situation is a challenging one. The commerce ministry will have to immediately address the issue of the United States (US) ending preferential trade status to India from 5 June 2019. The US sanctions on Iran, which supplies 10 per cent of India's crude

oil needs, is also a thorny issue. The foreign ministry, among other things, will also have to reset relations with Pakistan following the Balakot air strike.

Among the first policies implemented by the Cabinet is an expansion of a cash handout scheme for farmers as well as a pension scheme for small farmers, traders and self-employed. This is an indication that the government is likely to continue with its vote-catching welfare and populist schemes.

The next few months will reveal whether Modi, in his second term, has an appetite for transformative economic reforms.

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