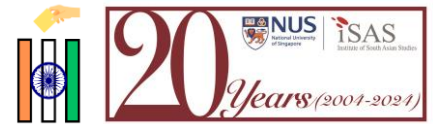


Indian Council of Ministers 2024: Adequate Representation for Coalition Partners

Vinod Rai



Summary

The significant characteristic of the Union Cabinet of the third National Democratic Alliance is the presence of a number of ministers representing the allies of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The Cabinet formation has ensured the right balance of regions, castes, allies and seniority of members of parliament. It is a diversified Cabinet providing for sufficient representation to states such as Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand which are due for assembly elections in the current year.

Unlike the earlier two general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) did not get a complete majority in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Parliament) in the 2024 general election. As a consequence, the BJP has to provide its allies with a sizeable representation (11 portfolios) in the Council of Ministers (Cabinet). Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently took the oath of office along with [another 71 ministers](#).

In keeping with the newly created political dynamics, the Cabinet embraces diversity by incorporating representatives from various communities with a keen eye on caste equilibrium. Among the ministers, four hail from the Other Backward Classes, including two from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Additionally, three ministers represent the upper castes, while two ministers belong to the Dalit community. This is aimed at sustaining the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) alliance and maintaining stability in the government.

In an attempt to maintain a perfect balance in the Cabinet, eight members of parliament from Bihar have been appointed ministers. Former Bihar chief minister, Jitan Ram Manjhi, from the Hindustan Awam Morcha (Secular) and Gaya member of parliament; Janata Dal (United) and member of parliament from Munger, Rajiv Ranjan Singh; and Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) and member of parliament from Hajipur, Chirag Paswan, have been accommodated in the Cabinet. The 80-year-old Manjhi is a well-known Mahadalit figure in caste-ridden Bihar. He served as chief minister for about 10 months in 2014. In Andhra Pradesh, where the National Democratic Alliance won 21 out of 25 Lok Sabha seats, two members of parliament from the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) were inducted into the Cabinet.

In a significant decision, two members of the BJP, namely, L Murugan from Tamil Nadu and Ravneet Singh from Punjab, have been included in the Cabinet despite losing the election. The allotment of the various portfolios indicates that the prime minister has chosen continuity. The 'big four' ministries viz home, defence, finance and external affairs have been given to Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, Nirmala Sitharaman and S Jaishankar respectively. They held the same portfolios in the last government. Nitin Gadkari, another senior minister

in the former Cabinet, has also been assigned his earlier charge of Ministry of Road Transport and Highways.

The BJP's national president, J P Nadda, who was part of the 2014 NDA government, a Rajya Sabha member of parliament from Himachal Pradesh, is back in the Cabinet as Minister of Health and Family Welfare and Minister of Chemicals and Fertilisers. A notable omission is the BJP's member of parliament from Himachal Pradesh, Anurag Thakur, though he retained his seat from Hamirpur. Thakur served in the earlier Cabinet as Minister of Youth Affairs, Sports, and Information and Broadcasting.

Ram Mohan Naidu of the TDP, the youngest Cabinet minister at 36 years, has been allotted the Ministry of Civil Aviation. Key figures like Shivraj Singh Chauhan of the BJP (former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh) and H D Kumaraswamy of the Janata Dal (Secular) have been assigned to the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Rural Development; and the Ministry of Heavy Industries and the Ministry of Steel respectively. In the present administration, Jyotiraditya Scindia has been appointed Minister of Communications and Minister of Development of the North-Eastern Region. Prataprao Jadhav from Shiv Sena has also been inducted as a minister of state with independent charge for the Ministry of Ayush (Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy – Indian Systems of Medicine) and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The state of Kerala has been given representation through two ministers of state.

The complexion of the new Cabinet is an indication of the priorities of the government in terms of caste and regional balance with a special emphasis on the states which are scheduled to go to polls later this year. The Cabinet has been fortified by the BJP's heavyweights such as Chauhan, Nadda and Manohar Lal Khattar (former chief minister of Haryana) to emphasise the heft and talent of the party. This is a clear acceptance of the fact that whilst in previous years, the Modi writ ran unquestioned, in the current scenario, if the allies had to take up positions, senior BJP ministers will be able to have the party press its own agenda. Further, by providing ministerial berths to members from Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the prime minister seems to message his party's arrival in the southern states. On the other hand, the Nationalist Congress Party (Ajit Pawar's faction), which has only one member of parliament in the Lok Sabha, was offered only one minister of state portfolio. The party did not accept that offer as its nominee, Praful Patel, had served as a Cabinet minister in the previous United Progressive Alliance government. This could be a precursor of equations in Maharashtra undergoing a change before the Assembly elections.

The composition of the Cabinet has been hailed as a balance of talent and regional representation. It is the first time that Modi will lead a coalition. He previously had a majority in Gujarat and in the two earlier central governments. There is every indication that the economic policies hitherto followed will be continued and that the government's stability seems to be assured. An indication of the long-term intent and priorities will be provided in the Budget to be presented on 1 July 2024.

.....

Mr Vinod Rai is a Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute in the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a former Comptroller and Auditor General of India. He can be contacted at isasvr@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.