

# ISAS Brief

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## **Prime Minister Modi Expands His Team**

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Nearly six months after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government came to power in India, a much-awaited Cabinet expansion took place on 9 November 2014 with the induction of 21 new ministers. The load of some ministers has been made lighter, a few have got new responsibilities and there has also been an induction of fresh faces. Besides getting trusted ministers for key positions, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his advisers have factored in regional and electoral interests. However, Shiv Sena's wrangling with the BJP over government formation in Maharashtra cast a shadow on the cabinet expansion. The Sena, one of whose MPs was slated to be a minister, boycotted the swearing-in ceremony.

### **The Key Portfolios**

The most important changes in the Cabinet were the allocation of the defence portfolio, earlier held by Arun Jaitley in addition to finance, to former Goa Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar and

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the appointment of Suresh Prabhu as railway minister in place of Sadanand Gowda. The appointment of Parrikar, an alumnus of the elite Indian Institute of Technology and a former member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), as defence minister had been widely anticipated. As chief minister of Goa he had built up a reputation for being a tough and efficient administrator. He is expected to fast track indigenous production of defence equipment, where foreign investment has recently been upped to 49%, and oversee major arms acquisition deals. That Jaitley was in charge of two key portfolios for nearly six months as well as the fact that Modi had to uproot a successful chief minister and bring him to the Centre is an indication of the paucity of experience and talent among the BJP's MPs. Both Parrikar and Prabhu are not members of Parliament and would have to be elected to the Rajya Sabha (Upper House).

The induction of Prabhu, a former Shiv Sena member who was a minister under Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, into the Union Cabinet was also expected but his name was doing the rounds for the head of the revamped Planning Commission. That Prabhu, a chartered accountant by training, was given the important railway portfolio speaks of the faith that Modi has in him. Indeed, Modi was not averse to irking the Shiv Sena since Prabhu formally quit the Shiv Sena to join the BJP. Gowda, who had not lived up to Modi's expectations as railway minister, has been shifted to the law and justice ministry.

Though Jaitley, who is possibly closest to Modi in the Cabinet, was divested of the defence portfolio he will still hold multiple portfolios. In addition to finance, he has now been put in charge of information and broadcasting (I&B). This is significant since Modi, who rarely interacts with the privately-owned media, has put tremendous emphasis on the state-owned Doordarshan and All India Radio to reach out directly to the people.

Others who have been divested of multiple portfolios are Ravi Shankar Prasad, Prakash Javadekar and Nitin Gadkari. Prasad, the communications and IT Minister, has lost the law and justice portfolio, Javadekar, the environment minister, no longer holds the additional charge of I&B and Gadkari, the transport and shipping minister, has been stripped of rural development. The shift of Health Minister Harsh Vardhan to the low-key science and technology ministry is most likely aimed at allowing him to devote more time to the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections in early 2015 where he is a frontrunner for the chief minister's post. The BJP's

organisational man and strategist, J P Nadda, who lost out to Amit Shah for the BJP president's post, has been rewarded with the health ministry.

## **A Mixed Bag**

The other ministerial appointments are a mixed bag. Some have been accommodated with future elections in mind. Thus, three new ministers have been inducted from Bihar. Each of them is from a different caste which probably goes to show that the BJP is trying to get its electoral calculations right before the state goes to polls in 2015. Ram Kripal Yadav, who broke away from the Rashtriya Janata Dal to join the BJP before the 2014 national elections, belongs to the Yadav caste; Giriraj Singh, a known Modi loyalist, is a Bhumihar; and Rajiv Pratap Rudy, who had earlier been a minister under Vajpayee, is a Rajput. Similarly four new ministers are from Uttar Pradesh, which goes to polls in 2017, raising the state's total tally in the Cabinet to 12. Especially significant is the inclusion of Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, a prominent Muslim face of the party, given that the BJP has no Muslim MP in the Lok Sabha (Lower House). Naqvi, who is now the junior minister for minority affairs, is a member of the indirectly-elected Rajya Sabha as is his senior minister Najma Heptullah.

Among the first-time MPs who have been appointed ministers are Jayant Sinha, a former investment banker and son of BJP leader Yashwant Sinha; Rajyavardhan Rathore, an Olympic medallist; and singer Babul Supriyo. Sinha is expected to play an important role as the junior minister for finance while Supriyo's appointment is clearly aimed at future municipal and Assembly elections in his home state of West Bengal.

The expansion has not been without controversy. Ram Shankar Katheria, who has been appointed the junior minister for human resources development, has 23 criminal cases registered against his name. According to one calculation, despite Modi's promise of clean politics nearly a third of the ministers are tainted by criminal charges. While many of these charges are slapped on Indian politicians for taking part in street protests, some of them are for serious offences such as attempt to murder.

## **Conclusion**

The expansion of Modi's ministry brings it to 66 members which is still considerably leaner than former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's team, which had 78 members before the 2014 elections, and Vajpayee's which had a whopping 88. Both Singh and Vajpayee of course had to contend with coalition partners. The BJP has no such compulsions and this has shown in its dealing with its allies. It has already given short shrift to the Shiv Sena. In the Cabinet expansion the Telugu Desam Party, the BJP's ally in Andhra Pradesh, got only one junior ministry while the Akali Dal in Punjab did not get any. This is an indication that the BJP would prefer to fight the coming state elections on its own, unencumbered by allies.

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