

Cabinet Reshuffle in India: New Faces and Electoral Compulsions

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Summary

On 7 July 2021, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the first major Cabinet reshuffle in his second term. While new talent has been inducted and some veterans eased out, the rejig had also been done with an eye on coming state elections.

In the first major reshuffle of his ministerial team since Narendra Modi was re-elected as Indian prime minister for a second term in 2019, several prominent ministers were dropped, fresh faces inducted and existing ministers given new or additional responsibilities.

Among the most prominent names to be dropped were Health Minister Harsh Vardhan and Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad. Vardhan's exit was not surprising since India had stumbled badly during his tenure in dealing with the COVID-19 second wave. While Vardhan might have been made the scapegoat for the catastrophe, for which the government was unprepared, his exit was not unsurprising. Prasad's departure was less so. Prasad had been vocal in his criticism of social media companies, especially Twitter, and their non-compliance of India's new information technology (IT) rules. Most people thought that he was articulating the government's stand, but it could be that he had overstepped the line. The other Cabinet ministers who were dropped were Sadanand Gowda (chemical and fertilisers), Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank (education); Prakash Javadekar (environment) and Santosh Gangwar (labour), who was minister of state with independent charge.

The new appointments are a mix of youth, by the standards of Indian politics, and experience. Perhaps the most watched among the new ministers would be Ashwini Vaishnaw, the Wharton-educated former bureaucrat who has been given the IT and communication portfolio, in addition to railways. With the government embroiled in a controversy with social media companies, Vaishnaw will have to hit the ground running. The same applies to Mansukh Mandaviya, a junior minister from Gujarat, who was in charge of chemical and fertiliser, and ports and shipping. He now holds the health and family welfare portfolio and will have to deal with the severe impact of the pandemic on India.

The other new entrants are Jyotiraditya Scindia, a former Congress leader from Madhya Pradesh; Bhupendra Yadav, a key organisation man within the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); Sarbananda Sonowal, a former chief minister of Assam; and Narayan Rane, a leader from Maharashtra who was earlier with the Shiv Sena and the Congress. Scindia has been given the civil aviation portfolio; Yadav labour and employment, along with environment; Sonowal ports and shipping; and Rane micro, small and medium enterprises.

In all, 15 ministers were inducted into the Cabinet, which included seven sitting ministers being elevated to Cabinet rank. Among those who were either given new portfolios or

promoted to Cabinet rank are Dharmendra Pradhan, who has been put in charge of education and skill development; Anurag Thakur, who will handle information and broadcasting, along with sport; Kiren Rijiju, who has been given charge of law; and Hardeep Puri, who will continue to handle urban affairs, along with the additional charge of petroleum and natural gas. Five junior ministers of state – Babul Supriyo, Debasree Chaudhari (both from West Bengal); Sanjay Dhotre (Maharashtra); Ratan Lal Katariya (Haryana); and Pratap Chandra Sarangi (Odisha) – were also replaced with fresh faces from their respective states.

While new talent was inducted, the reshuffle was done with an eye on coming Assembly elections, particularly Uttar Pradesh (UP), which sends 80 members to Parliament, and Gujarat, the home state of Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. Both states go to polls in 2022. Seven new ministers were inducted from UP, increasing the number of ministers from the state to 16. Three ministers were inducted from Gujarat, along with two existing ministers being elevated to Cabinet rank. There were four new ministers each from Maharashtra, Karnataka and West Bengal, all of which are likely to be electorally crucial for the BJP in the 2024 general elections. Modi's ministerial team, which stood at 52 when he began his second term, has now expanded to 77.

Besides electoral compulsions, caste arithmetic was also a factor in the reshuffle. Of the seven new ministers from UP, three are Scheduled Castes (SCs), three Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and one Brahmin, catering carefully to the state's caste composition. Nearly half the ministers in Modi's team belong to OBCs and SCs, who constitute the support base for the BJP. Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, who holds the minority affairs portfolio, remains the sole Muslim minister.

An innovation in the reshuffle was the announcement of the formation of a separate Union Ministry of Cooperation to focus on strengthening the cooperative movement in the country. While most cooperatives are governed by state laws, multi-state cooperative societies are governed by a Central Act – the Multi State Cooperative Societies Act, 2002. However, the ministry, to be headed by Amit Shah, could well take on more than reviving the cooperative movement. The opposition has already raised this issue, saying there is no need for a separate cooperation ministry. Some believe that the ministry is targetted at states like Maharashtra, which has the greatest number of cooperatives. It could be a way to strike at the opposition Congress and Nationalist Congress Party leaders, including Sharad Pawar, who control many of the powerful cooperatives in Maharashtra, including the sugar mills.

The reshuffle has seen the induction of new talent and the easing out of some ministers who are seen to have not delivered. However, it has also been done with political calculations in mind and looking ahead to state elections, particularly in UP. Over the next few months, we will get to know if the new ministers have the latitude to make an impact in a government that has been driven by the Prime Minister's Office.

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