

## The Needle's Eye



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Cabinet reshuffles seem to generate more excitement than the announcement of cricket teams. So we know what the best game in town is. We knew weeks earlier that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was going to re-order his squad after the end of parliament's monsoon session. By Saturday, everybody and her sister knew exactly who was in and who was out. Six ministers had obediently resigned in advance. There were already three vacancies – Manohar Parrikar, Venkaiah Naidu and Anil Dave. It is zero-sum arithmetic: Modi had 75 members on his team before those vacancies, and has exactly the same number after nine new people got to wear the cap on Sunday. It was the third cabinet reshuffle since Modi took power. This team has to carry the baton for the final third of Modi's term.

However, politics is not cricket. A good cricket team can win by performing well together for the five days of a test match. If a government rules well for a five-year term, the party it owes allegiance to stands a good chance of winning the next election.

Of course, voter behaviour is not always predictable. The United

# By The Government, Of The Government, For The Election

Progressive Alliance (UPA) government was already tainted by corruption and the chaos of coalition antics in 2009. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth plunged dramatically to 6.7% in 2008-09 after three years of booming, above-nine-percent growth. Yet, Congress won 206 Lok Sabha seats with 28.5% of votes cast, 61 seats more than in the 2004 election when it won 145 seats with 26.5% of votes. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fell to 116 seats in 2009 from 138 seats in 2004.

Did more seats mean more stability for UPA-II? An analysis by PRS Legislative Research shows 16 changes in Manmohan Singh's cabinet between May 23, 2009, when he took oath for the second time, and May 16, 2014 when Modi was declared winner (remember Singh already headed a council of ministers before the 2009 polls). The comings and goings from the cabinet were comical. There were seven railway ministers in UPA-II, if you count C.P. Joshi's two short stints, so Modi's three railway ministers since 2014 do not seem so bad. But honestly – ten railway ministers in eight years? Now you know where the cruel phrase "train wreck" comes from.

India's cabinet changes are touted as transformational; is Modi really being different? Now that his "less government, more governance" slogan has been overtaken by the razzle-dazzle of 'New India' and the 4P's (please refer to your acronym/alliteration dictionary) let's analyse some of the changes Sunday brought about.

- All four ministers of state promoted to full cabinet rank – Nirmala Sitharaman, Piyush Goyal, Dharmendra Pradhan and Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi – are Rajya Sabha members and have no constituencies of their own.

- It is nice that four former bureaucrats have been made ministers, but none of them has domain expertise in the departments they have been assigned.

- Venkaiah Naidu, one of Modi's senior-most ministers, was promoted to Vice-President. One of his ministries (housing and urban development) will be looked after by a greenhorn minister of state. Although Hardeep Singh Puri was a successful foreign-service officer, he will be in untested waters with HUD, tackling the challenges of rapid urbanisation and 'smart cities'.

## FINAL FACTOR

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- Similarly, the ministry of micro, small and medium enterprises, which anecdotally was hurt grievously by demonetisation, has also been downgraded from cabinet status and will be run by an MoS.



ZAHID

- Naidu's other ministry, information and broadcasting, was ostensibly assigned temporarily to Smriti Irani, who now has two very unconnected departments – textiles and I&B.
- Again, the two junior ministers in

## NOT UNCOMMON

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the finance ministry were replaced by two others without domain knowledge at a time when the economy is not in good shape and needs a team of professionals and subject experts.

- I have argued in several columns for mega-ministries like Energy, Transport and Manufacturing to be created, with several junior ministers and banks of the best bureaucrats.

- What we have now is a higgledy-piggledy cabinet, with unconnected portfolios thrust together in random fashion.
- For instance Nitin Gadkari, who has successfully run highways, road transport and shipping, has been also handed the 'Namami Gange', river rejuvenation and water resources
- departments. Uma Bharti, the previous incumbent and clearly a failure, has not been fired and instead given drinking water and sanitation.

- Similarly, former Mumbai police commissioner Satya Pal Singh has been named minister of state for human resources and water resources; and Dharmendra Pradhan, who was a competent minister for petroleum and

natural gas, will now have to handle those subjects as a cabinet minister plus the unrelated but crucial ministry of skill development and entrepreneurship.

When I pointed to former finance minister Yashwant Sinha as an example of an ex-IAS officer who had made a successful switch to ministership, I was reminded by a senior BJP leader that Sinha had a six-year apprenticeship at grass-root level before Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar gave him his first ministerial job in 1990. In contrast, Puri and Alphons Kannanthanam are being catapulted into ministerial chairs. It will be an interesting experiment in lateral talent induction.

Sitharaman's elevation to Defence is the most intriguing of the changes in government. Doubtless a good pre-election affirmation of women's empowerment, it also signals that at its best, the BJP is an equal-opportunity party. Sitharaman is self-made and has an impressive background, including as a BJP spokesperson; but she was not a sparkling success in the commerce and industry ministry where she was a minister of state with independent charge. The 2015-2020 Foreign Trade Policy she drove gets only a pass grade – a 'mid-term' revision was due in September – and against a 2020 target of annual exports of \$900 billion, 2016-17 exports totalled only \$275 billion. A new industrial policy is due for announcement in October – the UPA's 2011 blueprint for creating 100 million

jobs by 2022 has clearly failed. The new policy will push both foreign direct investment and Modi's 'Made in India' campaign, but industrial output and manufacturing as a share of GDP are both in very poor health.

Commerce and industry, run for three years by Sitharaman at junior level, have now been handed over to Suresh Prabhu, who tried to reform the railways during his 22-month stint but fell victim to an unending stream of accidents.

For all the hype about urgent investment in infrastructure, those accidents were caused by the failure of successive governments to upgrade and renew tracks. And this brings us to what will be emblematic of 'Modi-I' over the next 20 months or so: it does not matter who runs which ministry. BJP President Amit Shah has already kicked off 'Mission 350'. Some of the newly promoted ministers – Pradhan (Kerala), Goyal (Tamil Nadu) and Sitharaman (Karnataka) – have already been assigned electoral responsibilities by Shah. How many responsibilities can a minister cram into a seven-day work-week?

Much can happen over 20 months to disrupt Shah's science of winning elections, booth by booth, voter by voter and caste by caste. For the moment, though, the opposition is supine and comatose.

"They (Modi and Shah) have 2019 in the pocket. They are now planning for 2024," the senior BJP leader told me with a straight face.