



The 2019 Lok Sabha elections

Part V: The New Indian Government

Prime Minister Narendra Modi took the oath of office on May 30, 2019 at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Altogether 58 ministers including six women were administered the oath by the President of India. Most of the members have continued to be in Modi's council of ministers after the formation of the new government, albeit with some new faces.

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The New Indian Government

On the 30th of May 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) took the oath of office with altogether 58 ministers, amongst them 6 women, in a very impressive ceremony in front of the office of President of India, the historic *Rashtrapati Bhavan*.

8500 people, amongst them prominent representatives from the BIMSTEC-states and other parts of the world as well as 8 heads of states and Prime Ministers, watched President Ram Nath Kovind administer the oath in front of a wide spectrum of leading representatives from the Indian state, politics and society, including Bollywood stars.

Continuity and the major ministries

During several rounds of talks between Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, the BJP President, the new cabinet was decided. It represents to a large degree continuity, with quite a lot of the ministers from the previous government, but also with some new faces.

Arun Jaitley, the former finance minister, cited health reasons for opting out, as did the former Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj.

A major criterion for nominating a minister is also the focus of the BJP on gaining further access electorally, like for instance in West Bengal. The BJP is very well on the march to become a truly pan-Indian party. In the meanwhile, the BJP has taken into consideration the numerical representation of the party from each state.

Hence the states that have the highest number of ministers in the Modi government are from Uttar Pradesh (10), followed by Maharashtra with 7, Bihar 6, and 3 ministers each from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Karnataka. Most allies of the BJP have got one seat each. Most of the states have got ministerial representation, however Andhra Pradesh and some of the north-eastern states did not find any ministers in the government. Andhra Pradesh did not see a single seat being won by the party.

The alliance partner *Janata Dal United* (JDU) did not join the new government, since the JDU did not accept the BJP offer of only one cabinet berth for each NDA-partner, like the others did.

One of the interesting facts that have found continuation is the presence of MPs having criminal records and out of these 16 of them have joined the Council of Ministers.

The most important ministers

Great attention is given to Amit Shah, whose relation with Narendra Modi goes back to 1982. Never has the relationship between a Prime Minister and the Party president been as good and harmonious as between the duo. Will this continue within this government? Currently, after an exhaustive campaign, Modi conveys a jovial impression and the readiness for team work. *"The man in a hurry appealed to his ministers: Talk less and work more."*

Amit Shah

After some deliberations, Amit Shah, the most powerful BJP President, joins the government as Home Affairs Minister, following reports that he would become the Finance Minister.

The rise of Amit Shah to the undisputed No. 2 position stems also from the fact that he won altogether 16 elections for his party since 2014.

It is said about Amit Shah, that he can well diagnose and treat central problems. He is considered as 'ruthless' and represents the face of BJP's muscular politics. It is expected that in future the *National Security Adviser* (NSA) Ajit Doval will have to step slightly back with regard to 'internal security'. Will Shah approach some of the preferred projects of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS)?

Shah, in charge of 'internal security', can use the plethora of agencies at his disposal for his work. He is expected to move increasingly against illegal immigration. Will this amount to a *National Registry for Citizens*? Certainly not in the near future.

A long-term challenge is the Kashmir problem. Shah, "*the Chanakya of Indian politics*", is perceived to have more clarity than his predecessors with regard to this crisis ridden state. The fact is that a new Kashmir policy is required.

With India facing important problems in the Kashmir Valley along with article 370, possible repercussions after the expected construction of a Ram-temple in Ayodhya, the Naxalite/Maoist question and the possibility of a *National Registry for Citizens*, the Home Affairs Ministry offers a lot of scope for Amit Shah to intervene.

If there is at all a No. 2 in this cabinet, then it is Amit Shah, whose rise reveals his long-term ambitions to be one day the successor of Narendra Modi.

Shah is a great follower of 'Hindutva', which will remain in focus. He could retain for some time the office of the Party president till the next round of Assembly elections and hand over to a suitable candidate with the possibility that he/she takes also some orders from the Modi-Shah duo. J. P. Nadda, the former health minister, is a favourite to occupy this office.

Rajnath Singh

The former Home Minister Rajnath Singh took over the important Defence Ministry, where major reforms are due. Singh also has a good knowledge of paramilitary forces.

Rajnath Singh is confronted with the Herculean task to modernize the armed forces. For over 19 years, there have been talks and negotiations about the *Rafale* fighter plane, but not a single one has joined the air force.

Nirmala Sitaraman

In a surprise move, Nirmala Sitaraman, till now Defence Minister, becomes the new Finance Minister, together with '*Corporate Affairs*' under his portfolio. Ten years ago she was a BJP spokesperson, but she is now the most powerful woman in the cabinet.

The rise of Nirmala Sitaraman is remarkable, as the finance ministry is a big promotion after becoming the first defence minister as a woman. She holds a '*Masters in Economics*' from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, and is focused on - while keeping an adequate distance to - the big Indian companies. She has already worked under the former Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, whom she considers as her mentor.

After Indira Gandhi, who also was a finance minister, Sitaraman is only the second woman in this capacity. Together with her Minister of State, Anurag Thakur, she has "*to kick-start the economy*"

which is in shambles.” Will she be able to raise the exports along with one of her priorities i.e., to create jobs?

Can she succeed to bring back economic growth to more than 7%? In 2018/19 it was 6.8%, while in the current quarter it is less than 6.5%. The demand has come down and the only functioning engine cylinder is public expenditure. She has to increase private investments. A reform of the banking sectors is also required.

Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar

The nomination of Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar as Foreign Minister constituted a big surprise.

The former *Foreign Secretary* worked in this capacity with Modi together and the Prime Minister appreciates him much.

Jaishankar, son of the former Doyen of India’s security policies, K. Subrahmanyam, served as Ambassador to China and the United States. He knows Modi from his time as Chief Minister of Gujarat, while visiting China and Japan. Modi chose Jaishankar because of his competence for this key ministry.

Singh, Shah, Sitaraman and Jaishankar are part of the important Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS).

Representation

The new government shows greater presence of ministers from the *Lok Sabha*. Irrespective of the attempt to have a wider regional representation, it is still north- and west-centric, with caste-identities playing a role, in some cases with a reduced quality.

The cabinet has a strong presence of *Other Backward Castes* (OBC’s), whereas only one Muslim Minister has been nominated.

The new ministers, some without much experience, have to demonstrate their capabilities in their new positions. Altogether, Modi trusts his old team to a large degree. Loyalty is important to him, also in order to document his dominance.

Agriculture in focus

Like indicated, besides the economy, which according to experts has not yet “bottomed”, agriculture plays a major role. The Prime Minister wants a profitable agriculture. This requires a number of structural reforms in the agricultural sector, also in order to maintain a sustainable development.

At least as a short term measure, the income transfers to farmers and pension programmes, also for workers of the informal sector, have proved their worth and did not make agrarian distress a decisive campaign topic.

With regard to the rural distress, the frequent droughts and farmer suicides, agriculture will be of top-most importance. Narendra Singh Tomar, Minister of Agriculture as well as Farmers Welfare, Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (the system of local self-government in the country) has the difficult task of fundamentally transforming agriculture. If this is not really happening, then dangerous scenarios might be looming in the country-side.

D. V. Sadananda Gowda, Minister of Chemicals and Fertilizers, wants to accelerate the production of cheap fertilizers for farmers. He thinks that this way the doubling of farmers' incomes is possible.

Besides the economy and agriculture, the supply of water for the population and especially the farmers will play a key role, with Gajendra Singh Shekhawat being the Minister of *Jal Shakti* (Water Power), whose mission could play a similar important role like "*Swachh Bharat*" (Clean India) in the first Modi-government.

Other important ministries

- Nitin Gadkari, Minister of Road Transport and Highways and Minister for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, is important with regard to infrastructure. This also holds true for the changing and modernizing of the rural areas with his second portfolio, assisted by the former Army Chief V. K. Singh.
- Piyush Goyal, considered as a possible Finance Minister, is in charge of the modernization of the railways and also in charge of the '*Commerce and Industry*' ministry.
- It is critically observed that fewer women are represented in government, although women have increased this time in Parliament. Smriti Irani, who defeated Congress President Rahul Gandhi, added to her Textile Ministry '*Women and Child Development*'. It is expected from her to demonstrate her capabilities in '*governance*'.
- Ravi Shankar Prasad, several times in the Rajya Sabha, was elected for the first time to the Lok Sabha, and will serve as the Minister for Justice, for Communication and for Electronics and Information Technology.
- Dr. Jitendra Singh remains in his influential position as Minister of State in the PMO and adds to the development of the North East Region.
- Hardeep Singh Puri, who lost in Amritsar, will continue with '*Housing and Urban Affairs*', besides Civil Aviation and, as a former diplomat, at "*Commerce and Industry*" with a view to international negotiations.
- Naturally, all the other ministries are of importance, e.g. skill development, but especially the *Ministry for Human Resource Development* (HDR) has an important function for the educational system, headed by Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank', a former CM of Uttarakhand. An educational reform is overdue and 500 000 vacancies could be filled.
- Finally, Prakash Javadekar, Minister for Environment, Forests and Climate Change, also heads the Ministry for Information and Broadcasting, through which he communicates the work of the government to the press and population. He strongly advocates the freedom of the press, which faces problems, given the concentration in the Indian media market and alleged interventions.

This 'Union' Cabinet gives a first impression being relatively compact and the Prime Minister seems to be ready to practice team work in order to achieve optimal results.

Perspectives

The new government is still in its early days. Its contours will be clearer in the months to come. Will it primarily concentrate on the urgent tasks to tackle the economy and confront rural distress and the water crisis? Or will "national security" with its internal and international dimensions, after being a major issue during the election campaign, come more to the fore?

Major reforms can be expected by the government with regard to a Uniform Civil Code and in the education sector. How far will the BJP push its social vision of '*Hindutva*'? Also Modi in his speech to the BJP parliamentarians had emphasised on '*Sabka Vishwas*' (Everyone's trust), which indicates

inclusion of the minorities to some extent. How Modi will gain the trust of the minorities and how this will be disseminated to the BJP cadre will unfold in the coming months.

Also the manner in which Modi and his party will proceed on '*Hindutva*', on the improvement of the economy, the easing of rural distress, and the overall target of job creation will have its impact on the upcoming assembly elections. This will give an insight on the party and personality that people prefer as their political choice.

India's Foreign and Security Policies are in good hands and it will be of interest to observe how India will position itself in the international system and in particular with regard to China and the United States. But also various states, like Germany, France and Britain, will be in focus and hopefully also the European Union.

The slogans for Modi, but also for Shah and Smriti Irani - although to a lesser degree - during the oath-taking ceremony, documented the huge support for this new government, which is increasingly coming under pressure to perform.

Its motto is "*Implementation, governance and delivery*". On the basis of these maxims, it wants to return to power in 2024.
