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What to Make of India's Latest Ministerial Reshuffle

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With 18 months to go before general elections are due, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced on 28 October 2012 what is expected to be the final reshuffle of the federal Council of Ministers. With two heavyweight portfolios — Finance and Home — having been reallocated earlier this year, the latest reshuffle was more an exercise to inject some urgency into the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government which has been battered by corruption scandals over the past two years and is seen to be in a state of policy paralysis.

There were some who had expected that the rejig, where 17 new ministers were inducted, would feature Rahul Gandhi, considered the heir to the Congress leadership. This was, however, not to be. It was always unlikely that Rahul would join the government at a stage where he would have little time to showcase his talent. He has said over the past few years that his interest lies in reviving the Congress party. Prime Minister Singh has now repeated this, saying that though he was keen to have Rahul in the Cabinet the latter was preoccupied with party affairs.

Though Rahul stayed away from the Cabinet, he made his presence felt in the latest reshuffle. At least four members of his inner circle, all of whom are young by the standards of Indian politics, have been given fairly prominent portfolios. Three of them — Jyotiraditya Scindia, Sachin Pilot and Jitendra Singh — were already junior ministers but have now been given more responsibility as ministers of state with independent charge. Of the three, Scindia has

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the most significant portfolio, that of power (electricity). The fourth, Manish Tiwari, is a new entrant with independent charge of information and broadcasting. The average age of the Cabinet has only gone down marginally from 59.6 years to 58.9, but the rejig has placed younger leaders at the helm of more visible ministries.

Rahul might have left his imprint on the reshuffle, but it still raises real questions about his future role. Ever since he joined politics, it has been taken for granted that he will one day take over as prime minister. But now that UPA's second term in government is coming to an end, Rahul's elevation will have to wait. For the time being, moves are afoot to officially elevate Rahul, a two-time Member of Parliament and Congress General Secretary in charge of youth affairs, to No 2 in the party hierarchy. This would also signal that Rahul is the prime ministerial candidate when the Congress contests the next general elections.

This strategy is not without its problems. By steadfastly refusing to take up government office, Rahul has no public record to speak of. His performance as an MP too is ordinary. The only yardstick to measure Rahul by is his attempts to turn things around within the Congress. Here too his record is mixed with the Congress debacle in the 2012 Uttar Pradesh election, where Rahul led the party's campaign, a blot on his report card. Following the UP election, Rahul has kept a low profile and has hardly been seen or heard talking about any of the burning issues in India. This has meant that he still remains a cipher for most voters.

Rahul's reluctance to join the government is, of course, just one element of the latest rejig, the third since the UPA was re-elected in 2009. One of the more significant changes was the appointment of Salman Khurshid as External Affairs Minister in place of the ageing S M Krishna. Khurshid, who was earlier the Law Minister and has served as Minister of State for External Affairs between 1993 and 1996, was preferred over Commerce Minister Anand Sharma (earlier junior minister for External Affairs between 2006 and 2009), who was thought to be in the running for the foreign minister's post this time. Though allegations of corruption have been lobbed at Khurshid by activist Arvind Kejriwal in the recent past, not many will quibble with the appointment of a younger and more articulate replacement for Krishna.

A surprise has been the return of former Minister of State for External Affairs, Shashi Tharoor, who had resigned in the wake of a controversy over his links with the Indian Premier League's cricket team from Kochi. He returns as junior minister of Human Resource Development (HRD). Some ministers have also been divested of their second portfolio with the important HRD ministry being taken away from Kapil Sibal and given to the relatively young M M Pallam Raju, who was earlier Minister of State for Defence.

The other appointments have seen the usual game of musical chairs that are characteristic of Cabinet reshuffles in India. Many of the ministers had hardly settled into their jobs before they were moved out to a new ministry. Khurshid, for example, was appointed Law Minister in 2011 before he was replaced by Ashwani Kumar in this reshuffle. Perhaps the most controversial is the shift of Jaipal Reddy from the Petroleum Ministry to the relatively low

profile Science and Technology. Reddy himself is said to be unhappy about the move and there is speculation that it has something to do with his run-ins with private players, including the Reliance Group, over various issues.

There are some other points to note about the reshuffle. First, the regional balance of the Cabinet reflects the immediate ground realities of Indian politics. There are as many as five new ministers from Andhra Pradesh, including the Telugu film star Chiranjeevi who has been given the tourism portfolio. In the 2009 general elections, Andhra returned the most Congress MPs of any state. But in recent times, the Congress has split in the state and the agitation for a separate Telangana has undermined the party. To stem the losses, the Congress has chosen to give the state as much representation as possible in the Cabinet. West Bengal is the other state that has profited from the reshuffle with three ministers. This was necessary not only to fill the vacancies created by the pull-out of the Trinamool Congress from the government, but also to show Trinamool who's the boss. It's no accident that two of the three ministers from West Bengal — Adhir Chowdhury and Deepa Dasmunshi — are known Trinamool-baiters. Second, the Railway Ministry is with the Congress for the first time in the period that the UPA has been in government since 2004. This period has seen a freeze in passenger fares which has pushed Indian Railways into the red. With Congress' Pawan Bansal being appointed Railway Minister, there is an opportunity to bring the Railways back on track. Bansal has already hinted at a passenger fare hike to cut losses. Third, the additional portfolio of Parliamentary Affairs for Urban Development Minister Kamal Nath is significant ahead of the winter session of Parliament. The last session of Parliament was virtually a wash-out due to protests over corruption and the UPA needs to do some hard bargaining with the Opposition parties if it is to push through much-delayed legislation such as the land acquisition bill. Nath, a hard-nosed politician, is a good candidate to get the opposition on board.

Will the long-overdue facelift of the Cabinet give the scandal-tainted Congress a bounce before the next elections? It might if the newly-appointed ministers are pro-active and have some achievements to show in the limited time that they have. They would do well to follow the example of Finance Minister Chidambaram who has been actively pushing an agenda of reform. It is, however, foolhardy to expect even the most vigorous of ministers to suddenly change the Congress' culture and work miracles in this period.

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