



RACE COURSE ROAD

PRABHU CHAWLA

Fill in the Blanks and You Get the Reshuffle

Opposition parties are calling Manmohan Singh India's weakest prime minister. But they are missing the trees for the woods. As the frivolous cacophony over the New Look Cabinet gets louder, Manmohan's spin-doctors are busy spinning their own yarns about its real purpose. Is it meant to fill up vacant slots? Or to drop the tainted and the old, and induct the clean and the bold? Is it meant to appease the allies or to rein them in? Or is it meant to induct Rahulites who will carry his agenda forward?

Since nobody except the Congress president and the prime minister are aware of the compulsions, composition and contours of the reshuffle, party spokespersons, media pundits and even the potential ministers are at sea. If newspapers and TV are to be believed, the prime minister is unlikely to change any member of the Cabinet Committee on Security that includes P



Sonia Gandhi with Manmohan Singh

Chidambaram, Pranab Mukherjee, S M Krishna and A K Antony. He is also unlikely to change ministers heading Commerce, Petroleum, Communications, Law and Fertilisers & Chemicals. It leaves Manmohan with very few options. Rejuggling Tribal Welfare, Child Development, North-East Affairs, Social Welfare, Medium and Small Scale Industries, and Minority Affairs, Manmohan would invite ridicule that his has been the most immobile Cabinet since 1980 with the balance of power remaining static. Most ministers running Railways, Petroleum, Commerce and Industry stayed on for more than three years. The last Cabinet reshuffle on January 19 saw no dismissals; it was a game of musical chairs in which over two dozen ministers moved from one office to another. Political observers are debating on both the timing and desirability of the new look.

From all indications, the primary criterion for keeping or dropping a minister has little to do with age or performance. Most members of India's largest, and perhaps most aged, Council of Ministers owe their berths to caste, community or loyalty to the Congress high command. This leaves the prime minister with limited manoeuvrability. Since Manmohan doesn't control the Congress party, he has been waiting for the list of ministerial names from 10 Janpath. He had toyed with the idea of inducting technocrats or professionals like Montek Singh Ahluwalia into the Cabinet, but didn't press further.

Undoubtedly, there is a pressing need to induct new ministers to fill the vacancies caused by the resignations of Mamata Banerjee, A Raja and Dayanidhi Maran—all UPA allies. The prime minister could have asked the allies for replacements and be done with it. Constitutionally, the prime minister chooses his colleagues, but it's not the political reality. Barring some individuals, Manmohan has never been permitted to choose his own Cabinet. He needs a lean, mean and clean Cabinet. But it is likely that the nation will only get more of the same.



But First, a Clean Sweep of Things

Though it is the prime minister who sends the list of ministers to the President for induction into the Cabinet, it is the Cabinet Secretariat that provides the full dossier on each to the PMO. Since Cabinet Secretary A K Seth is new to his job, it was left to his office to discreetly dig out the details of those on the probables list. The purpose behind the PMO and Congress President Sonia Gandhi gathering all this information is to avoid future embarrassments over corruption. Over a dozen names from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Punjab are under the scanners of the IB and other investigating agencies. The message was clear: the prime minister will not induct any new politician with deal-making tendencies. Even names suggested by the allies were sent for extensive scrutiny at the state level. Earlier, well-connected and resourceful candidates could influence the agencies but this time around, the exercise was kept a well-guarded secret. Even in the case of existing ministers, a fresh round of checks was conducted through direct and indirect means. No wonder, many aspirants were seen wooing those who could give them clean chits while ignoring those who appoint them.



The Man They Sent to Tell Maran

For the Congress, Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar is the most untrustworthy of allies. Not for the prime minister. According to party insiders, when its core group decided to get rid of Textile Minister Dayanidhi Maran, it couldn't find the means to convey it to the minister. Manmohan has always been wary of conveying bad news to his colleagues. Former prime ministers Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, P V Narsimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee used their political aides like R K Dhawan or M L Fotedar, Jitendra Prasad or Brajesh Mishra to extract resignation letters



Sharad Pawar

from allies or party colleagues. Manmohan usually depends on Pranab to do the dirty work, who didn't oblige this time.

Manmohan drafted Pawar in to persuade Maran to quit before last Thursday's Cabinet. Maran sought at least a month to decide, but Pawar cautioned him against the negative political impact on the UPA. A stickler for rules, the Maratha leader had spoken to Karunanidhi

before phoning Maran. Though the final deal between the DMK and the Congress will unfold only after the reshuffle, Pawar kept alliance interests in mind. Because he didn't want the Congress party to decide the fate of ministers belonging to regional parties, Pawar is believed to have assured Karunanidhi that Pranab Mukherjee will personally meet him and explain the future course of action. By obliging the Congress, Pawar made sure that the formula and the principle of power-sharing wouldn't change for him.