

# The Shah of Modi Government and India's Future



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE most talked-about person in the new council of ministers of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Amit Shah. His induction in the new cabinet and being given the charge of the Home portfolio was not entirely unexpected, given the intense speculation about it in the media in the run-up to the government formation. Shah replaces Rajnath Singh, who was the home minister during the entire five-year duration of Modi's first term as prime minister.

There are a number of reasons for Modi drafting in his new government a man who has been known as an astute party organisation man with great capabilities for both macro- and micro-level management of the party during his stint as BJP chief for the last three years. Shah is Modi's eyes and ears in the party, and that role will now be extended to the government. Now that both Modi and Shah—who have worked closely since 1980s during their days together in Gujarat politics—are there in the cabinet and Shah remains party president, there is expected to be a lot more political and ideological synergy between the government and the party in the coming years.

There are a number of reasons for Shah's induction in the cabinet and being made the home minister. First, given the ideological commitment of Modi and Shah and their shared vision for the future of India, the latter's presence in the government is likely to help sharpen its focus on the BJP's Hindutva plank on crucial issues. The Modi-Shah duo can be realistic up to a point but are not likely to compromise on Hindutva in any manner. Secondly, a new second rung of the BJP leadership in the government has emerged after the exit of Arun Jaitley, who opted out of the new ministry on health grounds, and Sushma Swaraj. Both were in their late sixties. But more importantly, the induction of Shah, 54, may have put in place a new line of succession if and when 69-year-



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (left) and president of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party Amit Shah gesture as they celebrate the victory in India's general elections at the BJP headquarters, in New Delhi, on May 23, 2019.

PHOTO: AFP

old Modi steps out. The fact that Shah was the third cabinet minister to take oath after Modi and Rajnath has not gone unnoticed. The challenge for Shah is to prove that he is adept not only as an organisation man but also, perhaps in equal measure, in governance and delivery.

Among Shah's immediate challenges is the implementation of the controversial National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam once the final list is published after July this year, and the situation that may arise in the north-eastern state thereafter. The final draft of NRC has left out over four million people, including Muslims and Hindus, and the process of objections and claims to inclusion is now on. The Supreme Court has refused to extend the deadline for the NRC roll-out beyond July 31.

The key questions the Indian government has to deal with are: what happens to

lakhs of people who do not find their names in the final approved NRC and their livelihood? Do they become stateless persons? Will they continue to have the right to own properties? Many of them are in government and private sector jobs. Will they be thrown out or will they need work permit to continue? Will they lose voting rights and will their names be deleted from voters' lists? Besides, the BJP manifesto and Shah himself at different election rallies had promised to extend the NRC in other parts of India, and the most to be affected after Assam will be West Bengal.

Apart from the landslide electoral mandate across much of the country, what seems to have given added confidence to the BJP to push ahead with the NRC is that it has succeeded in navigating through the tricky issue of Citizenship Amendment Bill—which seeks to give citizenship to

religious minorities who shift to India from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan—with little damage to it in the recent parliamentary election in the seven north-eastern states where the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh is a highly emotive issue. In the run-up to the election, the Citizenship Amendment Bill had created a groundswell of protests from the non-Bangla speaking population in the majority of areas in the North East but was welcomed by Bangla-speaking Hindus, especially in the Barak Valley in Assam.

The Congress and other opposition parties tried to capitalise on the protests, and two BJP allies in Nagaland and Mizoram threatened to part ways with the BJP. There was a point of time when the BJP was concerned about the impact that the Citizenship Bill might have in the Brahmaputra Valley region of Assam

dominated by Assamese language-speaking people.

But as the poll results showed, the BJP has, in fact, gained two more seats this time than in the previous national election five years ago, taking its tally of seats from seven to nine out of the total of 14 in Assam. The BJP not only won both the seats in the Barak Valley but also won one of the two parliamentary seats in Arunachal Pradesh, and most of the other seats in other north-eastern states were bagged by the party or its allies. In the Brahmaputra Valley, the BJP's good show is explained by a combination of factors: its promise to protect the identity of non-Bangla-speaking ethnic groups by implementing the NRC, as per Clause 6 of the 1985 Assam Accord, and giving constitutional status to six ethnic groups in the Brahmaputra Valley, promising the Citizenship Bill in the Barak Valley and by development measures including construction of two major river bridges and welfare schemes in tea garden areas.

Ironically, two BJP allies in Assam—the Asom Gana Parishad, a tie-up with which has given wider acceptability of the BJP among Assamese-speaking people, and the Bodoland People's Front—failed to win a single seat. True, the Citizenship Bill lapsed because it could not be mandatorily passed in the Rajya Sabha, where the BJP lacked majority, after its approval in the previous Lok Sabha. The BJP still lacks majority in the Rajya Sabha, and its hopes to turn the numbers game in the Upper House rest on its win in a series of assembly elections in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand later this year (members of state assemblies elect members of the Rajya Sabha as and when seats fall vacant there).

Under Shah as home minister, the BJP is expected to push the Hindutva agenda more aggressively not only through the NRC and the Citizenship Bill but also through the scrapping of the Constitution's Article 370 that gives special status to Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir and Article 35A that the party considers "discriminatory" against non-permanent residents and women in the state. With the BJP having secured a bigger majority of its own this time than in 2014 and the opposition weaker than before, Hindutva politics is set to take firmer roots.

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## PUBLIC TRANSPORT WOES

# Sufferings of the homebound people



TAMANNA HOSSAIN

LOST in thought, Shaful is standing in a long queue at the centre of a crowded area, and staring unthinkingly at everyone who walks by. Like many others, he has been waiting for his turn to reach the ticket counter since the crack of dawn. But this is not the story of Shaful alone; it is the story of every person commuting from Dhaka to their homes to spend Eid-ul-Fitr with their loved ones. Despite Dhaka's aspirations to become a "smart city," the metropolitan district continues to lack a decent or well-functioning public transportation system. People moving in and out of the city largely depend on the various public transportation systems available today. But, at this time of the year, getting oneself a ticket to travel to their dear ones is an immensely difficult process. Unfortunately, this is not the end of these sufferings, but rather the beginning. When people travel to their homes outside Dhaka, they face tremendous traffic congestion in the highways connecting the districts, due to the large number of vehicles moving in and out of the city every day.

From past experiences, one can predict that the trains will be affected by hours of schedule disruptions this time, while highway passengers will suffer from delayed buses and traffic congestion, lasting for hours. Whenever a train will arrive, thousands of people will scramble to get into the compartments and catch a seat or find some

space. Those who fail to find any room inside the compartments will climb onto the rooftops, risking their lives. On the other hand, passengers travelling by road will mostly suffer on different routes due to long tailbacks at various places and poor road conditions. The ferries carrying buses and other vehicles across the rivers will also face a huge challenge.

With just a day or two remaining before Eid, there must be initiatives to reduce the sufferings of the travellers. The authorities must understand that the number of passengers will only increase as the occasion approaches. They must

be well-prepared to handle the rush and ensure a safe journey for all. As such, law enforcers need to be deployed at vital points to prevent any unforeseen accidents. Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader has already extended a gesture of reassurance and stated, "the overall condition of highways is better than previous years." New bridges and flyovers which opened this year are also bringing an air of relief for the passengers.

During infrastructure construction and upgrading, capacity impairment (fewer lanes, closed sections, etc.) leads to congestion. Automobile-dependent cities around the

world use the concept of "ramp metering" by controlling the movement of each vehicle in a congested highway one at a time, rather than monitoring vehicles moving in masses. Adopting the ramp metering technique will decrease disruption on highway traffic movements. Traffic signal synchronisation is another process that could be beneficial to minimise the pressure on roads by tuning the traffic signals to the time and direction of traffic flows. This would be effective if the signals could also be adjusted on an hourly basis to reflect changes in commuting patterns. Any occurrence of road accidents also catalyses the possibility of congestion. Constructive accident management can be achieved by ensuring that vehicles involved in these unfortunate events or mechanical failures are removed as quickly as possible from the roads. It is crucial that these measures be coupled with intensive transport supply improvements. Transportation infrastructure

should be expanded to accommodate rapidly growing public transport demands, as the implementation of demand-oriented policies and mechanisms is integral to a sustainable transport system.

Keeping the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in mind, a sustainable transport system needs to be administered—one that will support the mobility needs of the society without damaging the environment or burdening the future generations. Transportation is deemed to be a core component that supports the linkage and development of socioeconomic systems. As a result, we should be concerned about the costs related to initiatives in the transportation system. So transportation must be cost-effective, and capable of adapting to the changing demands of the society.

We need to have more realistic discussions about the cost of implementing policies to better organise the public transport system, balanced against the massive amounts of public money spent in expanding and extending road networks. The envisaged "smart city" can only be achieved if all the issues are addressed in a timely manner. Safe society, stable socioeconomic conditions, and environmental sustainability may bring about the desired outcomes of the 2030 Agenda. A well-functioning transportation system is a crucial step towards fulfilling the "Smart City" dream.

For the time being, we just hope that the endless woes of Shaful and other travellers will not affect their joy of returning home for this Eid.

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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

QUOTABLE Quote

**JACK MA**  
(b. 1964)  
Chinese business magnate, co-founder and executive chair of Alibaba Group.

The world needs new leadership, but the new leadership is about working together

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

1 Social blunder

6 "As You Like It" forest

11 In the lead

12 Yes-man

13 Louvre location

14 Bushy boundary

15 Painter Magritte

17 Ready to go

18 Diner entree

22 Finished

23 "Enough already!"

27 Showed again

29 Oklahoma city

30 Wears down

32 Easter lead-in

33 Rough guess

35 Fragrant tree

38 Keyboard goof

39 Perfect

41 Accounting check

45 Blackboard material

46 Supply with fuel

47 Promoted

48 Gloss

**DOWN**

1 Opening

2 Cry of insight

3 — de lance

4 Market principle

5 Car of the '50s

6 Basically

7 Sturgeon eggs

8 Fathers

9 Border

10 Russian refusal

16 Sign of approval

18 Extra amount

19 At any time

20 Flying: Prefix

21 Habit of swearing

24 Entreaty

25 "—It Romantic?"

26 London museum

28 Got comfy

31 Pig's digs

34 Bridge utterance

35 School member

36 Without basis

37 Harvest

40 Had supper

42 Fawn's mother

43 Mamie's husband

44 Toe count

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

R	U	M	O	R		B	E	E	P	S
A	G	I	L	E		U	N	C	L	E
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E	V	A	D	E		A	R	I	S	E
S	E	N	D	S		M	E	E	T	S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott