



RACE COURSE ROAD

PRABHU CHAWLA

Rahul Shows His Intent with Delhi Inauguration

It's official now. If the Congress wins the 2014 elections, Rahul Gandhi will be the prime minister. Rahul's presence as the chief guest at a Delhi government function on Friday appears to be the beginning of his yatra towards Raisina Hill. Until now, he has been evading all invitations from state governments and Union ministries to inaugurate official functions. For the past seven years, whenever he has visited a non-Congress state, it was only to attend political rallies and conclaves, leaving government events to be presided over either by his mother, or the prime minister. Last week, however, he drove all the way to the Delhi-Haryana border to dedicate the Guru Tegh Bahadur Memorial to the capital's Sikhs. His mother, Sonia Gandhi, laid the foundation stone four years ago. Spread over 12 acres, the project cost over Rs 22 crore. Since the memorial is meant to pay homage to the ninth Guru of Sikhs, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a devout Sikh himself, was expected to be the chief guest. But Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit pulled off a coup by getting Rahul to shed his reservations about openly associating himself with Government-sponsored functions. She was determined to get Rahul, and only Rahul, to do the honours. According to local Congress leaders, the Gandhi scion hadn't responded to her request for months. However, considering the coming civic elections in Delhi and Punjab state Assembly elections, Rahul was advised by his aides to grab the opportunity to connect with the powerful Sikh community. He made stirring speeches about the sacrifices made by the community and its gurus. Rahul even praised the prime minister, who he described as the community's most precious gift to the Congress. By accepting Dikshit's invitation, Rahul has sent a clear signal to all other chief ministers and Union ministers that he is now available to promote, inaugurate and launch new projects and schemes at official inaugural functions. The competition to get Rahul over to other states will ratchet up now—he will also get excessive media and political exposure at government cost. Does it mean less exposure for Sonia and Manmohan until the 2014 elections? Stay tuned.



Rahul Gandhi

Loyalty is Key for PMO Positions

Along with the Cabinet, the PMO has also been restructured. Like with the Cabinet reshuffle, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has played a game of musical chairs. While Pulok Chatterjee, a Gandhi loyalist IAS officer from the Uttar Pradesh cadre, has been brought in to replace Kutty Nair as the prime minister's principal secretary, Nair will serve as the prime minister's adviser with Minister of State rank. Some officials who have completed seven years in the PMO are being moved out. Chatterjee's appointment has created ripples in the upper echelons of the Indian bureaucracy. For the first time in decades, a person far junior to around half a dozen secretaries, including Cabinet Secretary Ajit Kumar Seth, has taken over as principal secretary. Retired senior civil servants like Nair, Brajesh Mishra and A K Verma were chosen for the job because the principal secretary's authority is so exalted that he even presides over various official government meetings, including those held by the chiefs of the armed forces. He also gives directions to all other secretaries. Chatterjee, a brilliant and efficient officer, is however junior to Deepak Gupta, Secretary, Non-Renewable Energy Ministry, Alka Sirohi, Secretary, Department of Personnel and Training, and K M Acharya, Secretary, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment. Even some state chief secretaries are senior to him. The prime minister usually follows protocol while filling sensitive posts; he opted for seniority while choosing the new foreign secretary and the cabinet secretary. Chatterjee was in the race even then. But when it came to choosing his own chief of staff, he had to accept loyalty over seniority—for the second time Manmohan had to keep the Gandhi connection in mind. Earlier, he inducted Bharat Vir Wanchoo as Director, Special Protection Group, superseding over a dozen senior IPS officers. Wanchoo also has been associated with the Gandhis for over two decades.



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Chief Ministers Play Lokpal Game

Why are most chief ministers not protesting the prime minister's exclusion from the purview of the proposed Lokpal Bill? Because if passed by Parliament, it will give them an excuse to keep themselves out of a Lokayukta probe. If the Bill is passed in its current form, the chief ministers are likely to insist on an amendment to the Lokayukta's powers. Stung by recent Lokayukta activism in Karnataka and Delhi, most chief ministers are arguing that a politically motivated Lokayukta could damage their moral authority by launching frivolous inquiries. However, none of them have made a formal move yet; but some prominent chief ministers, cutting across party lines are lobbying within their own parties to make the suggestion during the Parliament debate on the Lokpal Bill.

Khar in J&K a Net Gain for Omar

While Union External Affairs Minister S M Krishna and his trusted diplomats were dismissing Hina Rabhani Khar's meeting with Kashmiri separatists as a minor irritant, Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah was taking her on. Using his huge Twitter following, Abdullah reminded the attractive lady from Pakistan that she could have returned home better informed had she met leaders of the state's mainline political parties and other opinion-makers. He conveyed to overtly pro-Pak diplomats and bleeding heart liberals that the genuine Kashmiri leadership doesn't care for the looks of a dignitary who is of no substance or consequence to the state.