



RACE COURSE ROAD

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Manmohan Needs to Rein in His Babus

A leader's success depends on the company he or she keeps. Or avoids. The ominous disconnect between 7 Race Course Road (the PM's official residence) and South Block (the PM's office) was revealed last week during l'affaire Bangladesh. Within 12 hours of its Web release, the PMO was forced to withdraw some frank statements Manmohan Singh had made to Indian editors on our troubled relationship with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The journalists realised the sensitivity of his remarks and kept them out of their reports. But South Block mandarins, including National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon, goofed up royally. PMO sources say five senior officials cleared it; it was assumed the draft had Menon's approval. Once in cyberspace, all hell broke loose in Dhaka, forcing an embarrassed PMO to hastily delete controversial references. Earlier, in July 2009, the foreign office released the confidential Sharm el-Sheikh agreement on terrorism, courtesy Menon, then foreign secretary. It is not merely his Cabinet that the prime minister needs to reform and restructure. He needs to review the quality of babus around him. Their snafus can't be explained away as coincidental misinterpretations. If Manmohan meant to stop A Raja's dubious activities, his aides should've fulfilled his wishes. If the prime minister wanted to delink Kashmir and Afghanistan, his policy experts shouldn't have done a Sharm el-Sheikh. If Manmohan intended to be sensitive on Bangladesh, his diplomats should have warned him about its undiplomatic consequences. His advisers seem to be pursuing their own agenda at the cost of his image. Unless 7 Race Course Road takes charge of South Block, the institution of the prime minister may be irretrievably eroded and damaged.



Menon

No Dropdown Menu, No Reshuffle

After two rounds of confabulation between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress President Sonia Gandhi, the Cabinet reshuffle has been put off. It has more to do with the ministers to be dropped than the new faces to be inducted. Manmohan's enigmatic smile revealed his compulsions. Constitutionally, it is the prime minister's prerogative to choose his Cabinet. In a Congress-led coalition government—unless the Prime Minister is a Gandhi—the Congress High Command and regional party bosses choose. To assert his position, Manmohan has conducted a sweeping reshuffle, involving top ministries like finance, home, defence, external affairs and human resource development. Barring External Affairs Minister S M Krishna, none of the above owe their berths to Manmohan. Home Minister P Chidambaram has indicated he would be happy to vacate North Block. Since the economy is in deep trouble, Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee wants out. Only Krishna wants to stay on, despite his below-average performance and advanced age. Manmohan and Sonia had agreed on discarding some tottering ministers and non-performers, but on the top five ministers there was no consensus. There was talk about bringing back Shivraj Patil, currently Punjab governor, as defence minister and making A K Antony home minister. Meanwhile, the DMK and TMC insisted on their full quota of three ministers. Earlier, Mamata Banerjee was the only Cabinet-rank minister from the TMC. If babus who possess the best listening devices are to be believed, the real reason behind the delay is the prime minister's inability to find Krishna's replacement. The PMO doesn't approve of a foreign minister with a mind of his own since traditionally the prime minister controls foreign policy.

The Great Railway Bazaar

Will the Trinamool Congress lose the Railways portfolio? Since Manmohan Singh's new mantra is fast-tracking infrastructure projects, he seems determined to hand over Railways to a Congress minister. The ministry had almost gone into an administrative coma in the past two years. Last week, Manmohan overruled the railway ministry's recommendation on the new Railway Board chairman. The TMC was in favour of Sanjiv Handa but the prime minister chose Vinay Mittal. Such was the case with the Member (Traffic) as well. The TMC wants to retain Railways because over 40 senior railway officials are deputed to the chief minister's office in Kolkata. Mamata had started many rail projects in West Bengal. Though she missed 80 per cent of Cabinet meetings and spent only one out of seven days in Rail Bhavan, she milked the ministry to her advantage. If the TMC loses the portfolio, not only would Mamata's officers come under scrutiny, some West Bengal rail projects may be slowed down or derailed. With 19 Lok Sabha members and Pranab Mukherjee on her side, Mamata may offset the coalition advantage Manmohan has acquired because of the demoralisation in the DMK.



Banerjee

Krishna Has Centre Court Vacation

External Affairs Minister S M Krishna loves England and Wimbledon. He knows how to mix pleasure with work. Even at 80, he doesn't miss a single opportunity to schmooze with desi and foreign glitterati and chatterati while watching tennis. Last week, he spent a few hours doing official work in London, but the rest of his stay was spent at Wimbledon. He spends most of his time globetrotting, and visits India only when political or administrative compulsions force him to. He keeps all Indian ambassadors on their toes; they have to ensure that he gets the maximum attention and first class hospitality when he is abroad. They also have to make sure that Krishna restricts himself to the written official brief since he has a habit of deviating substantially from what he is expected to speak. According to diplomatic sources, Krishna is living it up overseas.