

Manmohan Needs Action, Not Words, for Image Makeover



It is ironic that a reluctant prime minister of what is the world's largest democracy has been forced to speak when he would rather keep quiet. Traditionally, a premier isn't expected to present himself for frequent media interrogations. His action should speak louder than his inaction. When a country's chief executive speaks, the nation stops talking and listens. Not anymore. Last week, when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

spoke to just five chosen editors, it wasn't his decision. From all indications, it was because of a directive from the Congress High Command to explain his Government's failures to the media. The tone and tenor of his dialogue with editors reflected Manmohan's frustration, not with the system, but with the press. Unlike his usual charming self, he was blunt and aggressive. He charged the media with playing accuser, prosecutor and judge. For the troubled prime minister, the media has become his most troublesome irritant. But he did announce, "I am in command."

If the media was looking for a scoop, a revelation or even a feeble admission from Manmohan, it was in for disappointment. It was evident that the message was ignored. The medium was targeted. It would be unfair to blame the prime minister for finally adopting the blame game culture of politics. As the opposition parties and civil society leaders mounted their attack on the UPA, the Congress party failed to counter them effectively. Its spokespersons and even ministers spoke the language of confrontation and arrogance. Its allies either kept quiet or chose to speak against some of the Government's decisions.

If the image of the prime minister has got a beating, it has less to do with the paralysis of governance and more to do with the vicious slanging matches between some Congress leaders and the Opposition. Instead of defending the Government, most of them threatened to silence dissent with

force or other Government agencies. The message was clear: fall in line or land in jail.

Now, when political warfare has failed to silence either the media or the Opposition, the Congress leadership has drafted its best and credible face not only to fend for himself, but also to defend the party. Strangely, the prime minister alone is being accused of maintaining a cryptic silence on most of the controversial issues being raised. A large number of senior Congress leaders were expecting both Sonia

that coalition compulsions were responsible for the rotten in the system. Tragically, one of India's cleanest prime ministers is now facing public scrutiny for the actions of others. Yet, the fault is his own too. Since he never saw himself as an apolitical premier, Manmohan chose a team that was more loyal to him than the party. Most of Team Manmohan's members are from Punjab; the economic fraternity or his social circles. It began with the appointment of Kutty Nair—a retired IAS officer from the Punjab cadre—as his principal

secretary and the selection of his former student Montek Singh Ahluwalia as deputy chairperson of the Planning Commission. Their agenda was to advise the prime minister and project him as a person serious about the second phase of economic reform.

For the past seven years, Manmohan has been projected as the face of the Government and not a leader who leads the nation. This was primarily due to the conflict between the party's interests and the government's projection. While those in the Government wanted all decision-making

to revolve around the prime minister, others in the party wanted to establish the Congress High Command's supremacy. The creation of the UPA and appointment of the National Advisory Council (NAC), with Sonia Gandhi as chairperson, spawned conflicts. Manmohan Singh wisely chose to concentrate on governance. Here again, he was hemmed in by some coalition partners. It was hard to be tough with those who were once his bosses or colleagues.

Now that the prime minister has succumbed to speak out more frequently, he has to be clear. Those who admire Manmohan expect him to lead from the front. Credibility and honesty—his two precious assets—have already been eroded. He has nothing to lose; his future doesn't lie in politics. His aggression at the editors' meet would have been more lethal only if it had reflected his deeds and not mere words.

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and Rahul to come forward and take on the Opposition. Some of them have already sought Rahul's intervention in dealing with the outspoken civil society leaders. But the mother-son pair has concluded that silence is the best option. Neither can either be easily accessed or questioned. Since they aren't technically in power, they can afford to distance themselves from the misdemeanours of ministers and mismanagement of the system. They have been following the Nehru-Gandhi tradition of keeping the media at arm's length. Indira Gandhi, and later, Rajiv Gandhi hardly ever spoke to the media. When they did, they chose the time and the people. But when it comes to others, the rules of the game are suitably altered. That is what exactly happened to Manmohan.

Four months ago, when his ministers and others were caught in scams, Manmohan was forced to speak to TV editors; he made the cardinal mistake of admitting