

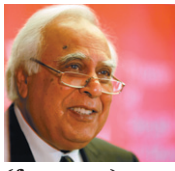


RACE COURSE ROAD

PRABHU CHAWLA

Seven Degrees of Spin Don't Cut it For UPA

The troubled UPA leadership has found that its strategy of bullying the media with cacophony has failed. The prime minister appointed a powerful seven-member Group of Ministers (GoM) on Media to serve as a “structured mechanism to disseminate information and to fill the news vacuum”. Home Minister P Chidambaram was chosen to lead his six other colleagues—Kapil Sibal, Ambika Soni, Salman Khurshid, Pawan Bansal, Ghulam Nabi Azad and V Narayanaswamy—all well-known lawyers. Chidambaram’s mandate is to deal with terror and Centre-state relations while Sibal’s is telecom scams.



(from top)
**Chidambaram,
Soni and Sibal**

Khurshid’s charge is Uttar Pradesh, and Azad’s Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Soni handles sensitive political issues, Bansal the PAC and JPC, and Narayanaswamy all CBI-related matters. The GoM was to meet daily. Chidambaram succeeded to charm hacks during his first media interaction on terrorism and the Uttar Pradesh farmers’ agitation. But that was the end of the GoM’s public performance. The Government had promised that one of the group would meet the media daily, if necessary. But a week later, when the petrol hike happened, the GoM shied away from journalists. Chidambaram probably expected Petroleum Minister Jaipal Reddy to defend the Government, but Reddy didn’t oblige. Perhaps he wanted to escape public ire, fearing that public opinion will anyway crucify him when LPG, kerosene and diesel prices go up in the near future. All members found various excuses to avoid press briefings. Finally, the Government issued a hand-out. The GoM still remains invisible with no briefings on the “most wanted” goof-up, Karnataka Governor Hans Raj Bhardwaj’s antics and Kanimozhi’s arrest. Most of its members are conveniently out of the ‘hot’ capital. Even when the GoM met soon after Kanimozhi’s arrest, it probably decided that silence is golden. Moral: Manmohan Singh needs deeds to speak, not spin doctors.



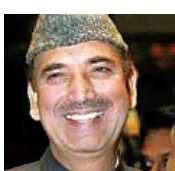
The Great Karnataka Disconnect

There appears to be a major disconnect between 7 Race Course Road and 10 Janpath on Karnataka Governor H R Bhardwaj. It is perhaps for the first time that a Union Cabinet has not responded to the recommendations of a governor even after a week has passed. Bhardwaj had suggested that the Assembly be kept in suspended animation and the popularly elected state Government be dismissed. But Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Home Minister P Chidambaram aren’t keen to open another front against the BJP. Any move to dismiss a duly elected government under Article 356 has to be initiated by the home ministry, but its officials have been instructed to keep the file pending. The Congress has been on the offensive—both at the Central and the state level—seeking the dismissal on the state Government on the basis of the Supreme Court strictures. In the absence of any clear directive from the high command, the prime minister is in a fix. The governor has thrown the ball in the Centre’s court by refusing to summon the Assembly session on the plea that New Delhi must take a final call. According to Raj Bhawan sources, the governor has been itching to move out of the state and jump into active politics in New Delhi. By adopting an aggressive anti-BJP stance, he has acquired political acceptability in the party. His actions now are meant to ensure his politically respectable exit from Karnataka even if it means embarrassment for the prime minister.



Azad’s Dire Andhra Diagnosis

The political health of Union Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad is under a cloud. When it came to handling southern politics, Azad was always perceived as the man with the Midas touch. But last month he became the target of his foes in the Congress because of its massive electoral reverses in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Soon after the results were declared, he was sent to



**Azad (top)
and Jagan**

Andhra Pradesh to deal with the crises created by the huge victory of Jagan Reddy and his mother in Kadapa. According to Congress sources, the party’s high command was so paranoid with the likely fallout from the rise of the southern mother-and-son duo that it wanted to neutralise their influence before they turn into a political tornado. The Congress has also failed to deal with the Telangana issue so far. Now Jagan is perceived as the alternative force in the state. Azad spent two days in Hyderabad and submitted a three-page report to the high command. Azad’s prescription: the party needs a Jagan to fight Jagan. Since the party has none—former YSR acolyte Kiran Reddy failed to vanquish Jagan—let the Government at least okay Telangana so it may retain at least a third of the state rather than lose all of it.



Fly Now, Appoint Babus Later

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh left India for a week-long overseas trip without revealing his mind about pending appointments to the posts of cabinet secretary, home secretary, chief vigilance commissioner, the two vacancies in the Union Public Service Commission and over half a dozen board-level vacancies in various Public Sector Undertakings, including the Oil and Natural Gas Commission. The prime minister is not willing to show his cards because of various pressure groups—including some UPA partners who are pushing their own candidates. The delay in choosing new babus has also a lot to do with a Cabinet reshuffle which Manmohan proposes after his return. Speculation is rife that even the Gang of the Top Five may be affected by the reshuffle. Moreover, new representatives from allies like the TMC and the DMK will have to be accommodated. So the prime minister will choose new bureaucrats to suit new ministers. Till then, the lobbyists have all the fun.