



RACE COURSE ROAD PRABHU CHAWLA

The Falling Value of Brand Manmohan

The Congress has finally discovered that Brand Manmohan is not a bestselling political label anymore. Or why would he be sitting tight in Delhi except for token campaign-end appearances while other Congress leaders are on the road in the poll-bound states? No prime minister in Indian history has got such minimal public exposure in state Assembly elections that will set the tone for the next general election. On the other hand, sycophantic requests are pouring in from most of the states for both mother



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and son as star campaigners. Strangely, Sonia Gandhi has chosen to spend most of her time electioneering in Tamil Nadu where the party's chances are poor. While she stood next to beleaguered DMK Chief M Karunanidhi in a show of coalition solidarity at a rally, Rahul avoided all contact with the DMK's top leadership, choosing to throw weight only behind candidates of his choice such as K T Benny in Kerala. Many state leaders have made it clear that it is not worth spending huge amounts of money on Manmohan Singh's sparsely attended rallies; even some of Sonia's have been very thinly attended. As a result, in the states/UTs where the Congress is confident of winning—Kerala, West Bengal and Puducherry—the party is taking no chances by presenting Manmohan in public since he is perceived as an inefficient commander who is helpless in reining in recalcitrant ministers. Manmohan's supporters are dismayed by the fact the Congress leadership has decided to distance itself from its own government which, ironically, was only following party diktats right from the beginning. It has finally dawned on them—Brand Gandhi is considerably more powerful and durable than the Singh Durbar is.

The Devolution of Delay

The Central government's paralysis is affecting not just the ministries but has also spread confusion in the states. Electioneering has nothing to do with it. The inability of the UPA leadership to define the contours of the compromises it has to make with its allies and its own regional and old satraps has put all crucial gubernatorial appointments in deep freeze. The prime minister has chosen to play it safe and keep mum; Congress President Sonia Gandhi has decided to wait and watch. It's almost a year since Rajasthan governor Prabhakar Rao died, but the post is still vacant with Punjab Governor Shivraj Patil holding additional charge. Tamil Nadu Governor Surjeet Singh Barnala's term ended in November 2010, but both Sonia and Manmohan have failed to find a candidate acceptable to Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi. Perhaps coalition dharma compels the prime minister to avoid any change till after the state elections. After all, the governor's role would be key in the event of a fractured verdict. The most glaring delay appears to be the difficulty is finding a suitable replacement for the Lt-Governor of Delhi, Tejinder Khanna. His three-year term also ended in April last year. Considered a close confidant of the prime minister, Khanna has come under severe attack from former CAG V K Shunglu for his role in the Commonwealth Games. Since Home Minister P Chidambaram has been away electioneering, North Block mandarins have not even moved the file. Insiders say the real reason appears to be the lack of regular communication between 10 Janpath and 7 Race Course Road.

When Too Much News is Bad News

The PMO is keeping a wary eye on Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh's growing tendency to grab the headlines. What has annoyed the prime minister is that Mr Green's official letters get published in newspapers along with his beaming photographs much before they reach him or the ministers to whom they are addressed. According to Ramesh-watchers, during the past one year, the Green Minister has grabbed twice the media space in terms of pictures and reports than even the Congress president and the prime minister put together. There is a feeling in the Government that by making his unilateral decisions public, Ramesh takes away the rights of the PMO as well as other colleagues to express their views



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on the subject. Of late, Ramesh has also been rolling back some of his decisions. Since an impression has been created that Ramesh reflects the view of Rahul Gandhi, no one dares to take him on. The reality is that he has revitalised the green agenda and forced corporates to change their attitudes towards the environment. However, Ramesh's lust for visibility and his rigid vision has made him quite vulnerable as well.

Mamata Plays a Secret Hand

The Assembly polls seem to be setting the roadmap for a realignment of the Congress's GenNext leadership. These elections are also defining the relationship between Rahul Gandhi and regional parties. For instance, in West Bengal, Trinamool leader Mamata Banerjee is wooing those close to Rahul, even if it means offending the local Congress leadership. Recently, she decided to invite State Youth Congress President Mausam Noor to campaign for TMC candidates in Islampur against the wishes of Deepa Dasmunshi, wife of former Union minister Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi, a Lok Sabha member from Raiganj. There is no love lost between Deepa and Banerjee. The TMC leader has kept most Congress leaders out of the joint campaign except Noor, a niece of former Union minister A B A Ghani Khan Choudhury. Banerjee may be keeping a distance from Sonia and other Congress leaders, but has identified the link which will come of use in opening a dialogue with the Congress's prime minister-in-waiting.