



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

IT is almost a month since President Barack Obama addressed MPs in the Central Hall of Parliament. As expected, he waxed eloquent about the strength and resilience of Indian democracy. But look what's been happening since. Democracy in turmoil and a government in paralysis. Never in the history of India have almost all the pillars of democracy come under strain as it is now. For the past few weeks, Parliament, the office of the prime minister, the ruling Congress party, high constitutional offices like the Central Vigilance Commission and the Comptroller and Auditor General, not to speak of the media have come under the most intense scrutiny. Thanks to the government's cussedness in refusing to yield to Opposition demands for a joint parliamentary committee to probe the 2G spectrum scandal, we are about to witness for the first time ever, an entire session of Parliament going by without any meaningful business being transacted.



Manmohan Singh

In a set-up like ours, it is the duty of the government to develop a consensual approach to ensure that governance is not continually derailed. It is more so when the ruling party doesn't enjoy a majority on its own and has to seek support of multiple partners to stay on in office. But the relations between the Congress and the Opposition parties are so icy that administration is paralysed and the resultant turmoil overshadows the burning issues of the day like inflation, law and order, Naxalism, education, healthcare, etc. Hardly a day goes by without yet another skeleton tumbling out of one more government closet.

Far from attempting to repair the damage, the government chooses to remain obstinate. Much of the government's pain is actually self-inflicted. You can sense that things are going to go wrong when the voice of corporate lobbyists prevails on a matter like selection of a minister in a crucial ministry. It came as no surprise last week when the Supreme Court chided former telecom minister A. Raja for showing disrespect to the prime minister by ignoring Manmohan Singh's advice on spectrum pricing. The judiciary is now questioning not just ministerial behaviour but even high constitutional authorities like the CVC and the CAG. In office, they have all done their jobs admirably well, but it is their post-retirement sinecures that have caused not only the courts but even political parties to question the impartiality of their tenures. The Opposition parties want CVC P.J. Thomas out because they don't believe he is impartial. Congressmen retort that more than two

decades ago, the then CAG TN Chaturvedi who had indicted the then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in the Bofors scam was later rewarded by the BJP with a Rajya Sabha membership and a subsequent promotion as governor of Karnataka.

If this government had done its homework carefully, the office of the CVC would not have been dragged into the dirt it now finds itself in. Unfortunately, this government is not blessed with talent that commands enough cross party respect to help defuse tensions. Yet there is an acute shortage of leaders. The undisputed leader Sonia Gandhi is content looking after the party and has no inclination to interfere in the gov-

ernment. Senior leaders like Sharad Pawar have absolved themselves of all responsibility of ensuring government stability.

Pranab Mukherjee remains the exception. His stature as a minister is only rivalled by his abilities and integrity as a leader. He is the only firefighter who commands respect across the spectrum. But with the government stumbling from one crisis to another, Pranab is clearly too exhausted to think up new and ingenious ways to win over the Opposition.

The only other firefighter is A.K. Antony but he is so much of an introvert that, faced with a problem that requires tackling, he is more likely to cross his fingers

and hope it would go away on its own. Of the rest, barring the odd Kapil Sibal, Veerappa Moily or P. Chidambaram, all are loyalists strutting around in 10 Janpath's shadow. None of them is either willing or capable of either dealing with the Opposition or dividing it. And to top this, we have a prime minister with unimpeachable integrity and honesty but absolutely apolitical.

The result is that we have a party in power but no leaders, a government in office but no governance, a parliament in session but no legislation. All this makes one thing clear: the pillars of democracy that President Obama so spiritedly spoke about are beginning to crumble.

Pillars are crumbling

ARYA PRAHARAJ



UPA plans to be cautious in appointments for a change

SEVERAL KEY appointments are due in the next few months including new chairmen for the State Bank of India and several public sector banks, a new chief for the securities and exchange board and deputy governors for the reserve bank. The current incumbent at SBI, O.P. Bhatt, retires on March 31 and the Centre hopes to complete the selection process by January.

With the government reeling under the Opposition onslaught over a slew of scams, caution seems to be the byword. That explains why the government has constituted a high-level committee under cabinet secretary K.M. Chandrasekhar to shortlist candidates for the SBI job.

Though the selection is the prerogative of finance minister Pranab Mukherjee, he is keeping the prime minister updated on all developments. The selection process could not have come at a more inopportune time. The recently unearthed housing scam has hit many of the biggest players in the realty lending sector and many senior officers of housing finance companies like the LIC Housing Finance, the Bank of India, the Central Bank of India and the Punjab National Bank have been arrested. At the rate they have been surfacing these past few months, there is every likelihood of this government being buried under an avalanche of scams by the time the next elections are due. A senior bureaucrat tells me that while the government has set in motion due processes to deal with the spectrum, CWG and housing loan scams, it is keen that no further scams crop. So far, the appointment of PSU banks chiefs has been marked by hectic lobbying and the government has more often than not caved in to pressure from industrial houses, bureaucracy, ministers and even MPs. With just the prime minister and the finance minister now involved in the process, the aim is to make it as transparent and least controversial as possible.

AS with PSU banks, so with bureaucrats, the government is learning from experience. There are signs of a tacit admission of an error of judgement on P.J. Thomas's selection as CVC. Last week, the department of personnel and training began an exercise to review the records of all senior bureaucrats who could be in line for sensitive postings in the near future.

The Thomas case has been an eye opener. He had never served as a joint or additional secretary at the Centre. Sources in the DoPT say that whenever he was sought to be empanelled as JS or AS, vigilance clearance was refused because he continued to figure as an accused in the 1991 palmolein corruption case in Kerala.

Yet he was directly cleared as a secretary at the Centre, first in the parliamentary affairs and later in the telecom.

Now hints are being dropped that he will step down. But the question still persists: what took him so long? His appointment had raised eye-

Govt seems to have learnt from Thomas episode

brows for the manner in which the UPA government virtually bulldozed it through. Until Friday, it appeared the government was determined to brazen it out. Railway minister Mamata Banerjee's assertion on Friday that she will leave it to the prime minister to take a call on

P.J. Thomas



Thomas was a clear indication that the government was determined to have its way.

Technically, the only way Thomas could have been seen off was if he willingly stepped down or two-thirds of the members of Parliament voted for his removal.

Thomas had said midweek last he had no plans to quit, while his removal by parliament is an unreal prospect given the legislative arithmetic.

If the government stuck by the CVC despite all the brouhaha, it was only because there was a belief in official circles that asking Thomas to step down would accelerate the Opposition onslaught on several other issues.

The government seems to have drawn the right lessons from the Thomas episode. Hopefully, the new DoPT exercise will help avoid a repeat. Hindsight, forethought.

HEADS have rolled in the government over the spectrum scam, but now the DMK has also initiated a cleaning up operation. Both A. Raja and Kanimozhi, who figured prominently in the Nira Radia tape conversations, are being relieved from all organisational posts in the wake of allegations of corruption in 2G spectrum allocation and their damning conversations during which they are said to have made "unauthorised claims" on the DMK participation in the Union Cabinet in 2009.

Unless the family prevails, the party is formally expected to announce its decision early next week. Tamil Nadu is poised for assembly elections next year and with the Jayalalithaa propaganda machine blaring out the inconvenient tapes in every nook and cranny of the state, the DMK is on correction mode.

Despite his fragile health, Karunanidhi has suddenly turned active on party matters again and recently was closeted for long hours, first with sons M.K. Alagiri and M.K. Stalin and later with grand-nephews Dayanidhi and Kalanidhi Maran. Raja, whose continuation in the cabinet was once made non-negotiable by Karunanidhi, is suddenly persona non grata in the patriarch's Gopalapuram residence.

Sources tell me that the sudden flurry of activity is aimed at sending across the message that the DMK also has a zero tolerance policy against wrongdoers. But the bigger message perhaps it to the AICC. After the purge, we can work together in alliance for the assembly elections due next April.