



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

CONGRESS leaders and workers in Maharashtra are beginning to wonder if there is one rule that binds the party's leaders in their state and another for those in other regions. Last week, when Ashok Chavan was given the marching order, he was merely following the path down which many of his Congress predecessors were dispatched by the party high command — forced out of office without completing a full term. Chavan's ouster was an attempt to project a clean image for the Congress, whose government in Delhi is facing flak on a host of corruption charges. No doubt it gave a moral edge to the Congress but it signaled the erosion of the state's political authority.

For more than four decades now, the Congress has been slowly but steadily disintegrating in Maharashtra which was once a "bulk seat" state. Ashok Chavan was the 20th chief minister since the state came into being in 1960 and barring two — Manohar Joshi and Narayan Rane of the Shiv Sena—all others have been from the Congress.

Yet, only one — Vasant Rao Naik — completed a full term. He, in fact, ruled uninterrupted for eight years from 1967.

The rest were all waylaid by either internal party rumblings, charges of corruption or sacked because of appalling inefficiency. Each time change was effected, the high command claimed the high moral ground. In reality, this was nothing but political expediency as many of the chief ministers ejected from office later found their way back. There were some exceptions: Abdul Rahman Antulay, Shivajirao Nilangekar-Patil and Sudhakar Rao Naik, but even they were brought to the Centre.

As late as 2004, Sushil Kumar Shinde, without doubt among the most acceptable of Dalit leaders in the Congress, was asked to go barely months after he had taken the Congress to a handsome victory in the assembly elections. He was replaced by, well, the man he replaced barely a year-and-a-half earlier, Vilasrao Deshmukh. The latter was forced out of office in 2008 not because of 26/11 but because he took his actor son on a conducted tour of the burnt out Taj Hotel. And now, Chavan has been shown the door because some of his relatives are among those who got apartments in the controversial Adarsh Society.

The story is repeated in the case of the state PCC presidents too, most of whom are not allowed to settle into their seats. The average tenure of the MPCC chief has been about two years and Pratibha Patil, now the country's president, led the MPCC for exactly 18 months.

To a large extent, regional lead-

ers themselves are responsible for the party's pathetic plight in many of the states. Most of the PCCs are so horribly divided that state-level leaders can never agree on anything and leave the decision making process to the high command, a euphemism for 10 Janpath. We saw this most recently at the AICC session in Delhi earlier this month which was specifically convened to elect 13 members to the Congress Working Committee. Instead, the AICC voted as one to let Sonia Gandhi decide who will be in the CWC. The absence of the democratic process means that the party is being led by "leaders"

who are thrust upon the cadres. With all power being concentrated to a few hands in Delhi, there is little attention paid to the states. There is no one in the party in major states such as Karnataka, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, West Bengal and Orissa who can be truly called "leader" After Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy's death, Andhra Pradesh has joined the group.

Ashok Chavan's ouster has left local Congress leaders really peeved. I was in Mumbai last week and met up with a lot of them who had much to say about the high command's discrimination. The charge against Chavan

is loose change compared to the allegations against, say Sheila Dikshit or a host of central ministers. Yet, Dikshit is in her 13th year in office and scam tainted Union ministers carry on merrily.

The party is likely to pay a high price for the very different yardstick that is applied in Mumbai. With 48 seats, Maharashtra sends the second largest contingent of MPs to the Lok Sabha after Uttar Pradesh. It's a "bulk seat state" that's very crucial to the Congress and its alliance partner, the NCP. But the high command's revolving door policy doesn't hold much hope for the Congress in that crucial state.

Too high a command

R. PRASAD



Nephew pips daughter in NCP's 'Pawar' struggle

THE PECKING order in the NCP is now clear. After years of suspense and speculation, Sharad Pawar has decreed that daughter Supriya Sule will reign in Delhi, while nephew Ajit Pawar will have Maharashtra. That is the unambiguous message from 51-year-old Ajit's appointment as the deputy chief minister, in place of Chhagan Bhujbal.

It's a moment that Ajit has lobbied and waited for some years now. Each time the Congress changed its chief minister — there have been four in the past seven years — the NCP, which had the No. 2 slot, changed its deputy chief minister. On all occasions, Ajit fancied his chances but uncle Sharad decreed otherwise. It was always the likes of R.R. Patil and Bhujbal who got the nod over Ajit. But the long awaited promotion now settles the succession order in the NCP at a crucial juncture. Sharad is expected to play less of a role in the coming years as he dons the role of president of the International Cricket Council and India prepares to host the cricket World Cup next year.

For long it was believed that Supriya would be Sharad Pawar's successor in the state of which he was chief minister twice. But despite a stint in the Rajya Sabha and her election to the Lok Sabha last year, Supriya, who spent long years in the United States after her marriage, is considered a greenhorn compared to Ajit, who won the election to the Lower House in 1991. But perhaps what counted more than anything else is his cross-party friendships across the political spectrum. He is on first name basis with many leaders of the Opposition BJP and Shiv Sena. Considering Sharad Pawar's political instincts—he will embrace a foe to spite a friend—Ajit is probably more useful than the reticent Supriya if and when new alliances have to be sewn.

CABINET secretary K.M. Chandrasekhar is keeping a low profile these days. Even during US President Barack Obama's state visit to India last week, he was always around but never to be seen.

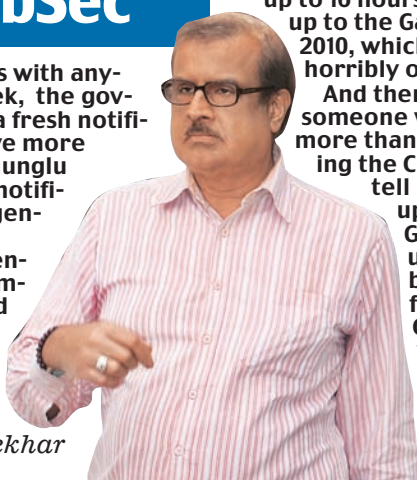
His current mood is attributed to the fatigue factor after successfully overseeing the Commonwealth Games, a job he was entrusted with by none less than the Prime Minister himself. While there is some truth in this, the real reason could be a tug of war that is taking place after the appointment of former Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India V.K. Shunglu as a single member commission to probe the irregularities in the Commonwealth Games-related developments.

Already the incumbent CAG Vinod Rai, is investigating the Games-related corruption and is hopeful of finishing the probe and handing over his report to Parliament by February. As CAG, Rai is answerable to none but Parliament. He has also stated that he will not

Cleaning up is always a thankless job Mr CabSec

share his findings with anyone. But last week, the government issued a fresh notification which gave more powers to the Shunglu committee. The notification asks all agencies of the state, including CAG, Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) and the CWG organising committee, to cooperate with him.

K.M. Chandrasekhar



Copies of the notification have been marked to CAG and the CVC which make it pretty much evident that they must cooperate with Shunglu. I gather that the Shunglu commission has issued summons to the CabSec to appear before the inquiry panel and this has upset the CabSec, who worked up to 16 hours a day in the run up to the Games to put CWG-2010, which threatened to go horribly off track.

And then comes along someone who retired as CAG more than 10 years ago asking the CabSec: "Come on tell us, what were you up to during the Games?". It's as unkind a cut as can be and I will be far from surprised if Chandrasekhar, who has over half of his latest tenure of extension left, decides to put in his papers.

□ THERE is a royal tussle going on in North Block where the finance ministry is located. And it's all about office space. There are 48 spacious chambers for secretaries, additional secretaries and joint secretaries (JS) in the first floor of one wing of North Block, but there are more than 60 officials and the fight is over accommodating the extra dozen officers. Of the 48 chambers, three are allotted for secretaries of finance, expenditure and revenue. It has now become a prestige issue as senior joint secretaries do not want to occupy the second floor since their batch mates in the same department are occupying much more spacious chambers on the first floor.

A joke doing the rounds is that room allotments were not made on the basis of seniority but on a first-come-first-occupy basis. Venu Rajamani, the IFS officer who was recently appointed JS in the department of economic affairs (DEA), was allotted a room on the ground — just opposite the reception counter. Another JS Thomas Mathew who, too, recently joined the DEA, did not get the chamber that should have been his as an additional secretary had already grabbed it. Matters have reached a stage where Pranab Mukherjee is being bombarded with complaints from officers daily. One officer told me, not in jest, that Pranabda could set up another GoM to keep the problem at bay for a while.