



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

ON TOP of the agenda at last week's day long AICC session was the selection of the 23 member Congress Working Committee, the party's highest policy making body to which 12 members are elected and 11 are nominated. In keeping with tradition, courtiers engaged each other in a royal battle to prove their loyalty to the Gandhi family. In all the bootlicking at the meeting, the 1,200 members forgot why they met in the first place. Instead, perhaps for the first time ever, the AICC authorised the Congress president to nominate all 23 CWC members.

I see a contradiction between what the top leadership preaches and what the old guard practises. Rahul goes around the country, supervising elections in the Youth Congress and talking about the democratisation of the party. But the entrenched lobby loathes, indeed fears, change. Reports have it that both Sonia and Rahul were keen on elections being held for the 12 seats in the CWC but the chorus to authorise Sonia to handpick the CWC was led by the old guard. This is not surprising because amongst themselves, they cannot arrive at a consensus on any one issue. But the one thing that unites them is the fear of internal party elections throwing up popular, young winners who could pose a threat to their stranglehold over the party. So, out with the elections.



Rahul Gandhi

For some time now, there has been talk about Sonia effecting an organisational makeover. We often hear about the one-man-one-post policy being implemented but four union ministers—Ghulam Nabi Azad, Mukul Wasnik, V. Narayanswamy and Prithviraj Chavan—continue as general secretaries while A.K. Antony and Veerappa Moily are in charge of crucial states. Even Rahul's rapid climb up the Congress ladder hasn't altered the status quo. With Sonia authorised to nominate all members, I gather several seniors like Arjun Singh, Mohsina Kidwai, Mallikarjun Kharge and Urmila Singh will be dropped from the CWC as will some permanent invitees like Karunakaran, R.K. Dhawan. Rahul is likely to have a big say in deciding who gets into the latter category. But we will wait to see how the old guard reacts.

The happenings in the Congress are one up on Newton's Third Law. Here every action that the leadership contemplates is met with an opposite and more forceful reaction. And it is not a new phenomenon.

Sanjay Gandhi used terror tactics to bring the old order to its knees, but ultimately Indira Gandhi had to split the party in 1978 to regain control over it. Rajiv brought in his own young team when he first joined poli-

tics to assist Indira. The team was very much in place when Rajiv was anointed prime minister and seemed in control when a quarter century ago, he pledged to rid the party of wheeler dealers and power brokers. But long before his untimely demise, Rajiv had cast aside many of the young technocrats who joined him when he set out on his political journey. He had become a prisoner of the system. The same seems to be happening to Sonia and Rahul.

The AICC sessions were held in the backdrop of the crisis of credibility that is engulfing the Congress. Two major scams have haunted this government

for the past few months and a third was added last week. It was hoped that Sonia Gandhi, Rahul and Manmohan Singh will use the AICC to send out a strong message to the country that the perpetrators of the scams will be brought to book and the money recovered. But there was not a word about the 2G spectrum or the Commonwealth Games scams. There was total silence also on the less monumental but no less shameful Adarsh Society scam in Mumbai despite the public outrage over it.

This situation doesn't augur well for the Congress.

In many of the "bulk deal states" where the party won a

large chunk of the seats in 2009, the Congress is in a disarray. In Andhra Pradesh, there has been no government worth the name since the death of YS Rajashekhera Reddy more than a year ago. In Maharashtra, the Congress and NCP are reeking from the stench of corruption.

For the Congress to be third time lucky in 2014, it is imperative that immediate clean up operations are set in motion to improve its image in these states. Sonia wants change, but the old guard groups together to resist it. She must win this inner party battle to have any hopes of winning four years from now.



Out with the old order

Babus' split over Headley could reflect deeper tussle

IT IS often said in jest that a gathering of two Mallus makes a trade union, while a gathering of four throws up a splinter union. The powerful Mallu lobby in babudom has so far defied this dictum but of late the differences are surfacing. The National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon and the Home Secretary G.K. Pillai have so far worked in absolute tandem but in recent days the two rarely seem to agree on anything. That such differences have cropped up on the eve of President Barack Obama's visit has left South Block red faced.

Pillai's statement expressing disappointment over the non sharing of intelligence details about David Coleman Headley, the main accused in the 26/11, by American security agencies has already brought a riposte from the US Ambassador in New Delhi, Timothy Roemer. But at a seminar in the Capital last week, Menon obliquely contradicted the Home Sec and backed the US envoy. "If you look at the broader picture, the kind of access we got to Headley is unprecedented", he said.

Obviously both sides can't be right. A wag suggests that the tussle at the top could be a fallout of the differences between the PMO and the home ministry. While Nair and Menon reflect the views of the Prime Minister, Pillai, who has a carte blanche from P. Chidambaram, is reflecting the views of the powerful Home Minister, who is a hawk on matters relating to Pakistan. So where does 10 Janpath stand in all this?

The PMO is keen that the Obama visit passes off without a hitch and is doing all to ensure that nothing is said or done that would annoy the visiting President. That 10 Janpath doesn't share the PMO's enthusiasm over the visit is clear from the fact that so far no Congress spokesman has said anything about the presidential visit so far. My take: Pillai is on a strong wicket.

TODAY, the winter session of Parliament begins. President Barack Obama will address the joint session and with even the Communist parties saying they will be in attendance, it should be smooth sailing for the president. But the fun and games will start thereafter as the Congress is approaching the session with a bad case of nerves. The 2G spectrum, Commonwealth Games and Adarsh Housing Society scandals have handed the BJP enough ammunition but it is not the Opposition that the Congress fears most, but its own allies in the UPA.

Sources tell me that major allies like the DMK and the Trinamool Congress will adopt an its-not-our-problem kind of approach when the BJP and the leftists target the government for the colossal



Mamata Banerjee

Allies will not bail out Congress in winter session

scams, the first two of which have cost the country anywhere up to ₹2,00,000 crore and the third has in its grip, the entire top brass of the Congress party in Maharashtra.

Despite the cozy relations at the top level, Congress-DMK ties have touched a new low. The DMK is miffed that the Congress did not rally around it when telecom minister A.Raja was targeted in the spectrum scam.

Congress leaders in Tamil Nadu are unhappy that the DMK refuses to share power with the party in spite of the fact that without the Congress' numbers, the DMK is actually in a minority. Already an influential section of state Congress is keen to fight the next elections with Jayalalitha.

The Trinamool Congress, on the other hand, feels that Mamata's doughty battle against the leftists in West Bengal would amount to nothing in the face of the scams haunting the UPA government. Mamata feels the Left will latch on to the scams and, by association, use corruption as a plank to run down the Trinamool's attempts to wrest power. It is most likely then that in the second last session before West Bengal goes for assembly polls, Mamata will instruct her party men to adopt a hands-off approach towards the Congress. One thing is clear. The highlight of the winter session won't be the Obama address but what follows thereafter.

□ WHILE Rahul Gandhi goes around discovering India—rather two Indias of the rich and the poor, as he naively told the AICC session in New Delhi last week—kid sister Priyanka, as the Executive Trustee of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, is taking time off from her duties as a wife and mother and devoting more and more time to charity work. Her energies are now focused on 20 parliamentary constituencies where the Foundation is committed to providing all facilities for elementary education for all children.

Needless to say, much of the focus is on Amethi and Rae Bareilly, the constituencies represented by her brother and mother. She is said to have personally attended to more than 2500 cases to ensure that children are enrolled in schools and are provided with all the necessary materials. She has appointed an old classmate of hers as her executive secretary and reluctant as she may have been considering many were around for years, removed around 20 officials who are 70 years of age or older. The foundation was established within a month after Rajiv's death in 1991 to promote the former prime minister's ideals and vision for the country. It runs a number of projects for the development of children, women and other marginalised groups.

It has had its share of controversies and questions were even raised over the propriety of handing over a building built on land allotted to the Congress party. But with Sonia at its helm, the RGF has overcome all these.