



POWER & POLITICS

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EARLY NEXT month, New Delhi will roll out the red carpet for US President Barack Obama. There will be a lot of protocol, pomp, diplomacy and dinners. And of course there will be much speech-making about shared values of the two large multi-ethnic multi-religious democracies and the common challenges that India and the United States face. We saw the first part of this being enacted in Washington a few months ago when Obama invited Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife Gursaran Kaur as guests for the first state dinner of his administration.

In June last, the president made a surprise visit to the State Department during a reception that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was hosting for the visiting foreign minister S.M. Krishna. The gesture was supposed to send across the message that India remains pretty much on the top of his agenda.

In the months since, India gone out of its way to ensure that the presidential visit is a success. Considering that only very recently we showed the world how tardy we are in gearing up for big events, the facelift for Parliament House, where the president will address a joint session, is being overseen by top government honchos besides the secretary general of the Lok Sabha. In the next few days, foreign secretary Nirupama Rao will go live on Lok Sabha TV and Doordarshan to tell viewers about the high importance that India attaches to this visit. Our ministers have been jetting to and fro between New Delhi and Washington to make sure that when the red carpet is rolled up and before the guests are ready to leave, they will complement us for being good hosts. In the last four months, half of the senior ministers of the Manmohan cabinet have visited the US, the Indo-US Business Council has met twice and the Indo-US CEO's summit once while several high ranking officials of both countries have been flying in and out of the two capitals to hold backroom discussions.

But behind the public displays of bonhomie, the irritants remain and questions are being asked whether we are bending over backwards to please the visitors even as they continue to blow hot and cold. Take a look at the extent to which we go to keep them happy. Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee promised American businessmen during his June visit that New Delhi will address their concerns on infrastructure, investment restrictions, opening up the insurance sector and on expediting legislation on the land acquisition act. During his visit to Washington last month, Commerce Minister Anand Sharma promised American businessmen calibrated FDI liberalisation in the defence

and retain sectors.

Remember, these are contentious issues on which a consensus eludes the political class. And what does Uncle Sam give in return? Nothing. During the many recent rounds of meetings, the American response to every India demand has been "we have a positive attitude". Clearly, they are reluctant to put their money where their mouths are. Defence Minister A.K. Antony went to Washington last month to request the Americans to remove the restrictions on defence imports to India which were imposed after the Pokhran blasts in 1998. He met, among others, the US Defence Secre-

tary, National Security Advisor besides the secretary of State but came back empty handed. He also raised the issue of Pakistan using arms given by the Americans to fight the Taliban against India and the response he got from his US counterpart was that they will have something to say about it closer to the presidential visit. India has also consistently been raising issues like the recent hike of H1-B visa fees that has adversely affected our IT sector and US support for India's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. On all these, Washington continues to hedge. While they are telling us to open up our markets, the

Obama administration is amending American laws to protect their markets.

Consequently, there is a tussle going on in the establishment. The bureaucracy is vertically divided with the babus in the MEA and the economic ministers being more American than the Americans themselves, while the others are reluctant to blindly embrace all things American. Barack Obama may not get the kind of rapturous reception that greeted Bill Clinton in Central Hall but with the establishment bending over backwards to accommodate every American demand, the president will be heading back with cheer.

Alagiri sure is a busy man these days

DESPITE the Sonia offensive during her visit to Chennai a fortnight ago, the Congress and the DMK seem to be getting along just fine. Last Thursday, Union Chemicals and Fertiliser minister M.K. Alagiri and younger brother and Tamil Nadu Deputy Chief Minister M.K. Stalin landed in Delhi and called on the prime minister Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi. No they were not discussing the fragile nature of the relations between their two parties. Rather, it was a social call.

The two went to Race Course Road and then 10 Janpath to extend personal invitations from M Karunanidhi for the wedding of Alagiri's son Dayanidhi scheduled for November 8 in Madurai, Alagiri's constituency. A cynic wryly commented that since Alagiri seldom attends cabinet meetings, the prime minister was rather pleasantly surprised to see his cabinet colleague calling on him at his home. Considering that Sonia raised the hackles of the DMK by her Congress-will-go-it-alone statement, it is well possible that discussions between the two sides were not limited to details about the bride and the groom.

Sources say that, miffed as they are, the DMK may concede more seats to the Congress to keep the alliance intact for 2011. Political crystal ball gazers in Tamil Nadu predict that soon after his son's wedding, Alagiri will quit as Union Minister to jump into the campaign in the southern districts of the state which Karunanidhi has entrusted to him. The six districts under Alagiri's charge account for 112 of the 234 assembly seats and his challenge is to ensure victory in at least 80 of those. If that happens, Stalin's accession as chief minister may not be as smooth as everyone expects it to be. It may be recalled that a few months ago, Alagiri had rubbish reports about his younger brother's right to natural succession and sought an open contest for the father's successor. Talk about sibling rivalry, this is it.

Uncle Sam wants us



R.PRASAD

MANMOHAN Singh is known to be stickler for time and he expects others also to be the same. As prime minister, nobody keeps him waiting, but on the flip side is the fact that however busy his schedule is, he rarely cancels a meeting, not even if he is slightly indisposed and is civil enough not to keep his guests waiting. The Assam chief Minister Tarun Gogoi was therefore surprised and perhaps even a trifle irritated when he was forced to bide time in the reception area in the prime minister's office in South Block for more than 45 minutes last week.

Gogoi who is still recovering from a prolonged illness had come to Delhi for his scheduled appointment and reached South Block well before the appointed hour.

But as the



Punctual PM delayed by Maya's charm offensive

clock ticked away, little did he realise that the reason for the delay was due to the fact that Manmohan, assisted by his aides, was in a meeting with Mayawati. The Uttar Pradesh chief minister was making a detailed presentation before the prime minister about the pending projects in her state but the duration of the interaction—an hour

Mayawati

and ten minutes—caused tongues to wag. Speculation mounted about the political fallout of such a long interaction between the two at a time when Sonia and Rahul Gandhi were taking the battle for the heartland to Mayawati's turf. Congress leaders, at least on record, chose to be silent on the matter but two senior party MPs from Uttar Pradesh sent the rumour mills into overdrive spreading tales of Mayawati using the meeting to drive a wedge between the prime minister and the Congress president.

The last word on the matter is not yet out but Mayawati displayed something that she seldom does: grace and courtesy. As she strolled out of the prime minister's room, she came to know that the ailing Gogoi had been waiting for a long time. She promptly dispatched her political aide to the Assam chief minister who apologised on behalf of the chief minister.

WE Indians expect our national leaders to be honest, dedicated, eloquent and possess the common touch. Sushma Swaraj has all that, yet she has always been seen as a leader of the Hindi belt. Eleven years ago, she did go down to Bellary to take on Sonia Gandhi in the Lok Sabha elections and got enough votes to convince us all that she has it in her to acquire a pan-India presence. Now she has decided to do exactly that. In early December, she will lead a BJP delegation to Sri Lanka to personally see the rehabilitation work undertaken in the north eastern provinces of the island nation.

The invitation came from the Sri Lankan government to the BJP, which chose her to head the group. She will be the first Indian leader to visit Sri Lanka since its government officially proclaimed that the LTTE had been totally eliminated.

As the Leader of the Opposition, she holds the rank of a Cabinet Minister, which means it will be no private visit and a senior official from the Ministry of External Affairs will have to accompany her. But something tells me that her mission is not merely about compassion for the Tamils of Sri Lanka but also the valuable votes of their brethren in Tamil Nadu. The state is going to polls next year and the BJP president has already announced that it plans to put up candidates in all 234 constituencies.