

POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

WHEN he was appointed general secretary of the Indian National Congress three years ago, Rahul Gandhi was given charge of the party's youth wings — the Indian Youth Congress and the National Students' Union of India. The unmistakable spring in the steps of these frontal organisations is proof that he has made a difference. Something similar is happening in the parent organisation and in the government. After leaving the party and policy matters to the old guard all these years, Rahul is suddenly taking a string of initiatives and making statements that are sparking debate in the Congress and setting the agenda for the UPA government, leaving many of his senior party colleagues standing.

Rahul was in Kolkata on the day of the all-party meeting on Kashmir convened by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, but he was all the while being updated about the goings-on at Race Course Road during the five-hour session. His keen interest may have something to do with the fact that after the last assembly elections in Kashmir, it was his support that helped friend Omar beat his father Farooq Abdullah for the chief ministership.



Omar Abdullah

So, when he came to know that Omar was being pilloried not just by the Opposition BJP and the PDP but even powerful elements in the Congress at the all-party meeting, he addressed a press conference in Kolkata to reiterate faith in his friend. "Kashmir is a difficult place and Omar is a youngster doing a tough job. We have to give him time and support him in his job," Rahul said.

With Rahul backing Omar to the hilt, Congressmen were quick to fall in line while Mehbooba Mufti, who fancied her chances of replacing Omar with the Congress's help, saw it slip by.

It was the first time that Rahul had expressed himself publicly on a contentious political issue but it may have far-reaching consequences which are difficult to predict now. But it is no flash in the pan and the young general secretary has been preparing for this for long.

A casual glance at the schedule of this itinerant traveller over the past 16 months of UPA-2 would reveal that there is hardly a place in the country that Rahul has not visited. He has made no less than 46 cross-country trips during this period. This, of course, does not include the frequent private tours that he is known to make in the company of sister Priyanka and her family.

Though in the beginning, he limited himself to subjects related to the young generation, he was soon taking on larger local issues at the state level and

even the biggest of political enemies such as Mayawati.

The UPA government may seem like a bundle of confusion and contradictions but there is none of that in the young man's mind. Many states are due for assembly polls in less than a year and in some, as in West Bengal, the Congress has to take on the Left as well as do the delicate balancing act of trying to win votes while at the same ensuring that a powerful ally like Mamata Banerjee is not annoyed. Rahul went to Kolkata and Shantiniketan last week to convey the message that after 33 years of communist misrule, Bengalis deserved a change.

He was equally forthright in telling the Trinamool Congress

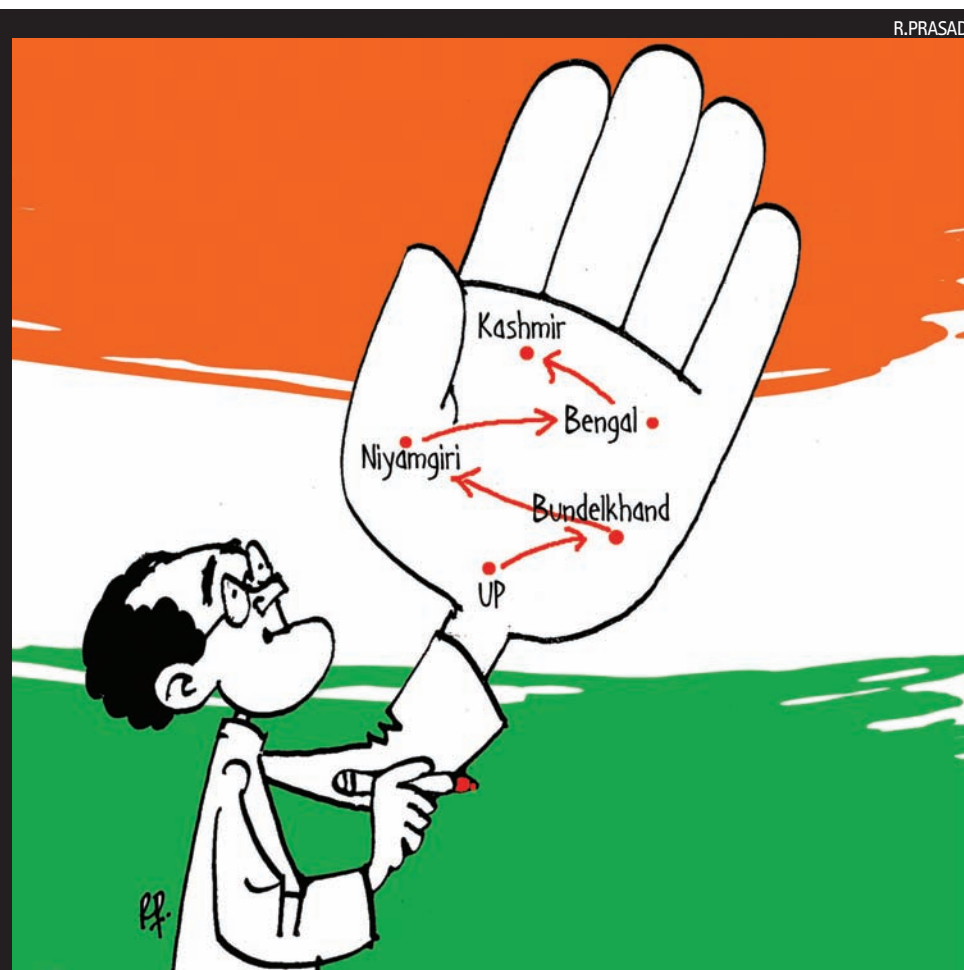
that "allies we may be but some home truths need to be told". Retribution was swift as Mamata compared him to a "cuckoo" whose visits are seasonal. Instead of retorting in the same language, Rahul expressed his respect for Mamata while reiterating that the Congress would not bend before her. The party cadres in West Bengal could not have asked for a better booster shot.

The "environment versus development" debate that had been raging in the government and the Congress for some time now seems to have been put to rest after Rahul's visit to the Niyamgiri hills earlier this month where he battled for the rights of the tribals.

The seal of authority was rub-

ber stamped when Sonia Gandhi, in her letter to Congressmen in the party mouthpiece *Sandesh*, wrote: "The Congress party's commitment to the welfare of the underprivileged and weaker sections was reinforced after the decision to protect the Niyamgiri region from mining by party general Rahul Gandhi, who assured the tribal people that their fundamental interest would not be sacrificed in pursuit of development of natural resources."

I don't know if synchronised swimming is included in Commonwealth Games aquatics but if they were handing out medals for synchronised politics, we know around whose necks the medals will hang.



A FRIEND INDEED

Big B angle to Ambika's absence

EVERYONE knows that Ambika Soni takes her job very seriously. Eyebrows, therefore, went up when the minister for information and broadcasting (I&B) was absent at the conference last week where the 57th National Film Awards were announced.

Instead, she deputed the director general of film festivals, S.M. Khan, to do the honours. So what held Soni back?

Unlike the Oscars, where winners are voted by members of the Motion Picture Academy of America through secret ballot, there is no secrecy surrounding the selection of national film awardees. Winners are selected by a jury consisting of known filmmakers, film historians, critics and others. The final list is then sent to the ministry which announces the winners at a press conference addressed by the jury chairman, in this case Ramesh Sippy, where the I&B minister is also present.

Soni kept a distance from national awards

The National Film Awards have seldom been free of controversy and politics. It is well known that when M.G. Ramachandran broke away from the DMK to form the AIADMK, the Indira Gandhi government wooed him with the national award for best actor.

Ministry officials say pressing engagements kept Soni away while some others attribute her absence to the fact that Amitabh Bachchan was picked for the best actor award. Soni, who has been dragged into many controversies in recent times, didn't want to get embroiled in another one.

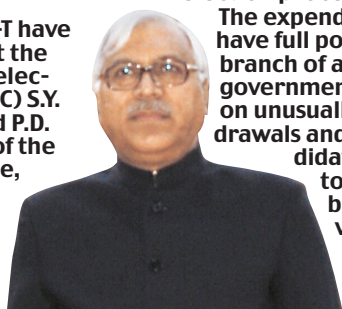
Her detractors, it was feared, could cite her presence as an endorsement of Bachchan whose acceptability in the Congress Parivar is not clear. Last year, Maharashtra chief minister Ashok Chavan had to apologise to the high command after the actor was invited for the inauguration of the Worli-Bandra sea link. It's easy to see why Soni washed her hands off the awards.

MONEY and politics are an explosive mix. Politicians will soon discover that the Election Commission (EC) and the income tax (I-T) department can also be a lethal combination.

The two have decided to work together to track the use of money power during the many rounds of elections that are due in the next few months. It is no secret that candidates of all parties and even independents spend far in excess of the prescribed limits: ₹15 lakh for a Lok Sabha constituency and ₹6 lakh for an assembly seat.

Now the EC and the I-T have got together to detect the inconsistencies. Chief election commissioner (CEC) S.Y. Quraishi has appointed P.D. Dash, a senior officer of the Indian Revenue Service, as director general expenditure to monitor the flow and block

CEC S.Y. Quraishi



CEC Quraishi's battle against black money in elections

the influence of black money. The CEC has also decided to appoint 150 expenditure observers during next month's assembly elections in Bihar. This will be in addition to a similar number of general observers who will monitor the election process in the state.

The expenditure observers will have full powers to visit any branch of any bank — private or government-owned — to check on unusually huge cash withdrawals and tally it with the candidate's own campaign to see if the money is being splashed for votes.

This strategy of the CEC will have far-

reaching consequences, the results of which will be visible within the next year when Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, two states where money power plays a big role during elections, go for polls.

The EC is now in the process of drafting a circular that will be sent to all chief election officers and district elections officers in the states.

Sometime later on Sunday, the three member commission will meet to approve the draft and get it notified. With the finance ministry also lending full support to Quraishi, it is to be hoped that the many loopholes in the laws which were being exploited by unscrupulous politicians will be well and truly sealed.

WITH political parties in Tamil Nadu preparing for next year's assembly election and DMK chief M. Karunanidhi handing his eldest son M.K. Alagiri charge of all southern districts, you'd think the portly Union minister for chemicals and fertilisers would be a very happy man. Far from it. He is actually sulking and sources say he is so upset that he has not attended office for more than a month and a half. The reason for this is the government's refusal to oblige him by appointing his chosen one for the post of secretary, fertilisers.

It seems that the Prime Minister had agreed to appoint M. Raman, a Tamil Nadu cadre IAS officer to the position. The PM and his minister even had an exchange of letters on the matter after which Manmohan Singh deputed his principal secretary, TKA Nair, to discuss it with Alagiri. After the meeting, Alagiri was absolutely certain that Raman would be posted as the fertiliser secretary. Later, cabinet secretary K.M. Chandrasekhar also called on Alagiri after which he was convinced that Raman's appointment would come through.

But it was Sutanu Behuria, a Himachal Pradesh cadre IAS officer, who got the job and Alagiri is furious. Papa Kalaignar has allocated about 100 assembly seats to him for his followers. Ensuring their victory is a costly and time consuming business which would have been easier to handle with chosen ones around to look after the ministry in his absence.