



# POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

**P**OLITICS is about the unpredictable. Except when it involves an election in the Congress party where a member of the dynasty is in the fray. In which case, it becomes a no-contest. Last Friday's election for the Congress president's post falls in this category. Sonia Gandhi won the election for the fourth consecutive term, making her the longest serving party chief in its 125 year history. It's a moment worth noting, because neither her husband, nor her mother-in-law or her husband's grandfather, all prime ministers, stayed at the helm for as long. It's all the more creditable because, unlike them, she was not born into politics. Yet she has shown that she alone is the party's saviour.

The BJP showed a total lack of grace by terming her election as proof of the family's "monopoly" over the party. A Congress spokesman's retort was that Sonia could be party chief "not for four terms but even 40". However, the possibility of that happening can be safely ruled out for two reasons: Sonia is 63 and may not want to go on and on. More importantly, though young Rahul shows no signs of being in a hurry, his coronation cannot be that far away.



Sonia Gandhi

When Rahul finally takes over, he will find himself in charge of a party that is much healthier and more robust than when his mother took over. The party has had 71 presidents in the last 125 years, only five of them women. Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu and Nellie Sengupta headed the Congress when it was at the forefront of the freedom struggle. Indira Gandhi took charge when the party was beset with internal strife, while Sonia became chief when it was virtually struggling for survival.

Both women adopted different strategies but the goal was the same: to take it back to its glory days. With the entire North slipping out of the Congress's grasp in the 1967 assembly elections and prospects loomed large of the Congress ceding power in Delhi, Indira took bold steps like bank nationalisation and abolition of privy purses, fought the powerful "Syndicate" comprising the entrenched old leaders, split the party and then split Pakistan, all of which contributed to her huge majority in the 1972 elections. After she was ousted from power in 1977, it took her just two years to come to power with a two-thirds majority.

Sonia became Congress president under somewhat similar conditions. Her husband had come to office with over 400 MPs but was forced out five years later as the Congress won under 200 seats. When Sonia became the party chief in 1998, the figure had shrunk to 112. She did not, like Indira, indulge

in theatrics like sitting on a dharna in Connaught Place or riding an elephant to Belchi.

Yet in her 12 years as Congress chief, she has done enough to rout and eclipse her rivals both within and outside her party. When Sharad Pawar broke ranks in 1999, a powerful block was believed to have been lost, but she played her cards right and just five years later, the Grand Maratha was back in the fold.

What's astonishing is that she manages to do all this even as she keeps her cards close to her chest. Even most top flight Congress leaders do not know her mind because she seldom says

anything. In the Lok Sabha, she occupies the seat next to the prime minister but is never known to participate or even intervene in debates.

On inflation, the Maoist menace, terrorism and so many issues of concern, Sonia can rarely be accused of over speak. Yet, Congress leaders acknowledge she is the best thing to have happened to the party.

No leader can be so enigmatic and enduring at the same time unless she represents some deep national feelings. After six years in power, the alliance may be facing the anti-incumbency wind but Sonia's rating have never been higher. Just two

years ago, the Congress was at the mercy of its many allies in the UPA. Today, she has the allies eating out her hands.

I don't expect Sonia to be as ruthless as her mother-in-law and discard her friends once she realises she has no further use for them. But having taken the Congress from the 112 seats when she inherited it in 1998 to 206 in 2009, she is clearly working to a plan that sees the Congress crossing the parliamentary halfway mark by the time Rahul is ready to take on the mantle. If she succeeds, it will be further proof that, in the Congress party at least, women are better at fixing problems.

## It's all about the money for politicians

*THE political class, across party lines, know how to look after themselves. Recently, our honourable MPs voted a massive hike in salaries and perks for themselves. There is more glad news for our politicians. A parliamentary standing committee has recommended raising the limit of donations that a company can make to political parties in any given year from the existing five per cent to 7.5 per cent of the company's average net profits in the three preceding financial years.*

*The committee headed by Yashwant Sinha justified the increase on the grounds that "the number of political parties in the country have increased and such donations are not made every financial year". This suggestion has come in a report submitted to Parliament on the last day of its monsoon session.*

*Some years back, the government had enacted laws that made it mandatory that all contributions be made by cheque and parties maintain a list of donors who give in excess of ₹20,000 and submit the list to the Election Commission. It is a moot point how many parties would have complied. Last year, finance minister Pranab Mukherjee had announced a 100 per cent tax deduction for companies and individuals contributing to electoral trusts.*

*Many big corporate houses have already floated trusts to make donations to parties on the basis of their strength in the Lok Sabha or state assemblies. Most politicians I know feel even the hiked rates aren't good enough. There's a point there. Today, upto ₹5 crore is spent on each Lok Sabha seat. Take all assembly seats in India and you will realise that the election industry is worth at least ₹20,000 crore.*

*Where does the money come from? So far, business houses privately passed on money to their favourites without any fear of retribution. Though the government believes the new move will bring in transparency, my own belief is that it will have exactly the opposite effect.*



## Woman of substance

**THE government and the opposition have had right royal tussles on several issues. The most recent happened last Friday during informal discussions at a meeting held to select the new Central Vigilance Commissioner. The present incumbent Pratyush Sinha's four year term ends on Tuesday, so a successor has to be in place by Monday.**

The CVC is selected by a panel comprising the prime minister, the leader of the opposition and the Home Minister. Seven names had been shortlisted, which after vetting was pruned down to four after preliminary round of discussions between Prithviraj Chavan, the Minister of State in the PMO who is also Minister (Personnel), and opposition leader, Sushma Swaraj.

The list was down to Finance Secretary Ashok Chawla, Telecom Secretary PJ Thomas, Nand Kumar, ex-Agriculture secretary and Shantanu

## Kerala bureaucrats continue to rule the roost

**Consul, Secretary DoPT. Who becomes the next CVC is as crucial to the government as it is to the main opposition party since the Chief Commissioner along with the Secretary (Personnel) and the Union Home Secretary play a decisive role in the selection of the new CBI director. At the Friday meeting, the government added two fresh names to the panel, while dropping two existing ones, which took**



P.J. Thomas

**Sushma by surprise.**

The BJP leadership had already raised some technical objections over two names. One, on grounds that he was involved, though finally absolved, in controversial cases.

The party was also miffed that one of the shortlisted candidates belonged to the Gujarat cadre where the CBI is doing its best to crucify Narendra Modi and says it may even be compelled to consult the Gujarat Chief Minister if the government pressed his candidature.

The opposition backed Consul, an officer from Karnataka, which is BJP ruled. Finally, when the government zeroed in on Thomas, the opposition objected saying an officer whose name had figured in controversy could not be made the CVC. But the government stuck to its guns and rammed the decision through. With officers from Kerala taking over as Director General of the National Security Guard and Joint Secretary, Capital Markets in the last two weeks, it is clear that the Mallu Brigade marches on.

**WE ALL** know that with double digit inflation, our money fetches us less and less. But now it seems it's not just the value of currency that's shrinking, even its size will. So don't be surprised if sometime in the near future, your friendly neighbourhood grocer hands you back the change and you are left with the feeling you have been shortchanged. Fear not.

It's just that those little coins that most of India has forgotten about will get smaller if the government accepts the recommendations of a Reserve bank panel which has suggested that the 50 paise, ₹1 and ₹2 coins be made smaller. The new 50 paise coin could become the size of the existing 25 paise, the ₹1 coin will be sized that of the current 50 paise and ₹2 coin will be the size of the existing ₹1.

To ensure that the public does not get confused, the panel has recommended that clearly distinguishable serrations be made on the edge of the coin blank to differentiate them from earlier coin blanks of same sizes. The recommendations to downsize the coins comes in the wake of the increase in the price of ferrite stainless steel (FSS) used for manufacturing these coins. Since the 25 paise coin is loose change even for the poorest of the poor, it has recommended that these may no more be minted.