



POWER & POLITICS

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MAKING political predictions is a difficult task. Ask the psephologists. The task gets even tougher should you be brave or foolish enough to predict the moves of the Gandhi family. Last week, in Parliament and the corridors of power, inside TV studios and in newsrooms across the country, one question was being hotly debated by politicians, journalists, opinion makers and those who like to be known as just analysts: Why were the Gandhis keeping a stoic silence when the government was being hauled over the coals by the Opposition which suddenly seems to have discovered a spring in its step?

While the Prime Minister and his A-team were under fire for multiple failures on the price front, Kashmir, Naxalism and now the Commonwealth Games fiasco, both Sonia and Rahul were nowhere to be seen. Even Prime Minister Manmohan Singh refrained from making a symbolic intervention. The Gen Next, once the Congress's in-house shout-down-the-enemy brigade, kept a low profile while the UPA ministers and AICC functionaries, rather than taking on the Opposition, were busy settling scores with each other.

A brief interaction with the ruling party's many Mr Know-all in the central hall of Parliament last week has now convinced me that the Gandhis are aiming to make drastic changes both in the government and the party establishment. The dilemma that faces them is: How to wield the axe without spilling much blood.

The exercise is expected to start next month with the re-election of Sonia as the Congress President, a mere formality. She would then become the first Congress leader to hold the post for over a decade without a break. After Indira, Sonia remains the only Congress leader in more than four decades to steer the party to a second consecutive victory in the general elections.

In the party, she shares with Rahul, now the most popular leader in the Congress if not the country, a veto power that no other Congress functionary has. I understand that they are giving finishing touches and waiting for Parliament's monsoon session to get over to effect a massive shake up aimed at revitalising the party and the government.

The objective is clear: Four years from now, the Congress must win a majority on its own. To raise its current tally from the current 206 to 272 plus, the party has no option but to concentrate on Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Karnataka and choose leaders who can make a difference.

Experience has taught the leadership that it is not the performance but a perfect connect with the local leaders and voters that is vital to ensure victory. At the moment, there is an utter lack of compatibility between high-profile ministers and senior party functionaries.

Party leaders have for long lamented that, with the disconnect that exists between the government and the organisation, it is difficult for the latter to carry the message across to the grassroots. I am told some of the senior ministers who command respect may be moved over to the organisation with a view to make Congress ministers

accountable to the party. Arm-chair strategists who wax eloquent at seminars and TV debates may have to give way to those with a readiness to face the heat and dust and take the rough and tumble of Bharat.

So far, Rahul has studiously stayed away from the politics of the parent organisation even as he energised the Youth Congress to make it a parallel power centre. The genuine competitive elections for Youth Congress officebearers that were held across the country at Rahul's directions were, in reality, talent scouting exercises that brought thousands of new workers into the party's fold and threw up

hundreds of hugely talented men and women who have both the drive and vision.

While a shake-up in the party was never expected to pose much of a problem, getting rid of the many non-performing ministers was not that easy. Plans earlier for a purge of the old order were met with stiff resistance from the well entrenched. This time, they may not have an option. Congressmen in general know that they have a lot of broken promises to keep. But it is perhaps only Rahul who acknowledges that it is probably the last chance to convince voters that they are worthy leaders ahead of 2014.



Manmohan Singh



Out with old in with new

Sanjay gets a rare mention in Parliament

FOR THE five years that he was in active politics — which include the Emergency, the Janata wave of 1977 and Indira's triumphant return in 1980 — Sanjay Gandhi remained the most controversial political figure in the country.

He was opposed and despised so much that since his death in an air crash exactly 30 years ago, even his most committed former followers, some of whom are powerful ministers in the UPA government, dare not take his name. It therefore came as a surprise to me last week when during a debate in the Lok Sabha on population growth, the JD(U)'s Sharad Yadav praised Sanjay to the skies.

Remember, Yadav was at the forefront of Jaiprakash Narayan's Total Revolution movement which led to the Emergency, during which he was jailed. Surprise, surprise, but this is what he said last week: "Some people blame San-

His efforts on birth control were praised

jay Gandhi. But I feel something has to be done to arrest the spiralling population. Sanjay felt issues such as population should be dealt with a strong hand. I feel that along with incentives there is a need for harsh measures and only then can a solution be found."

And this is what health minister Ghulam Nabi Azad, a member of what was then known as the Sanjay brigade, had to say: "There is a difference between Sanjay Gandhi's days and now. We are not going to force anything. Everything has to be done through awareness and voluntarily." Though it was just a reiteration of oft-stated government policy, it was amusing to see the eagerness of some leaders to show that they are already practicing what the government is preaching.

Mulayam Singh Yadav vouched he had only one son, Sushma Swaraj said she had just one daughter and Maneka Gandhi also said she adhered to the one-child norm. It was just as well that Lalu Prasad, a father of nine, was not present. On a more serious note, it was heartening to see our elected representatives give the subject the attention it deserves.

WHILE the old guard in Parliament kept up their favourite pastime of hammering away at each other, there was an unexpected and upbeat message of hope and reassurance when young MP's cutting across party lines came together and put up an unprecedented display of solidarity over the troubled paradise that is Kashmir.

A joint statement they released suggested they were appealing to the youth in the Valley to shun violence and settle for dialogue, but Parliament's youth brigade left no one in doubt that they were rallying around Omar Abdullah, who at 40, is India's youngest chief minister.

Considering the deep divide in Parliament, the cross party concern for one from their own generation should serve as a powerful symbol of what can be achieved if the national

A lesson in national interest by GenNext

interest is put before partisan political interest. In Parliament's central hall, I saw Priya Dutt and Deependra Hooda going around enlisting support for the statement and the 38 signatories represented the entire political spectrum. There is speculation about the brain behind the show and the list of signatories indicates that it was the Rahul Hand that took the initiative for this morale booster for common friend Omar.

Akhilesh Yadav (SP), Anurag Thakur (BJP), Dushyant Chowdhary (INLD), and other Oppo-

sition scions who signed the statement are all Rahul's political rivals, yet share a close personal rapport with him. More importantly, like Rahul, they believe that for the larger good, it is important that politicians set aside their narrow partisan interests.

The scenes inside Parliament where the old guard was busy pointing fingers and outside where the young MP's jointly addressed the media showed just how wide the chasm has become.

So, was the joint show intended to tell the grand old men and women that they don't intend to follow in their footsteps? For the country's sake, I hope so. At least we can be sure that the future is in safe and capable hands.

WATCHING the powerful Yadav troika in Parliament reminds me of the British MP who was in the habit of intervening in every debate and after waxing eloquent for six hours or more would conclude by saying "Mr Speaker Sir, with these brief words, let me conclude". Mulayam Singh Yadav, Lalu Prasad and Sharad Yadav are among the senior most members of the Lok Sabha who know their rights but seem blissfully unaware of their responsibilities.

If Lok Sabha speaker Meira Kumar had acted like the school marm that she was reputed to be, they wouldn't have been allowed to waste the precious time of the house as they do now. The trio don't even wait for the end of question time for zero hour to begin before launching their daily assaults. Backbenchers are irked to see the three raising their hands in unison with a supplementary for every question raised in the house. What's more, many of the junior ministers seem intimidated by their aggressive postures. Last Friday, Lalu was at his aggressive worst trying to corner the government on the non-performing assets of public sector banks. But he chose the wrong target, as finance minister Pranab Mukherjee told him bluntly that he will not reveal the names of the industrialists who are in the NPA list. The scathing putdown nearly set off a round of loud desk thumping, but by then Lalu had made his customary walkout.

