



POWER & POLITICS

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THERE is a fear of the unknown that is stalking the UPA-II which now threatens to cripple the government. In a week that saw Narendra Modi's right hand man Amit Shah being arrested and newspapers carrying banners about the possible interrogation of the Gujarat chief minister himself, the UPA government should have been sitting pretty.

Not quite. If indeed it were so, the government would have taken on the might of the combined Opposition and defended itself on its performance in Parliament. True, there is a catalogue of disasters which the government cannot disown and just as it is the opposition's job to gun the treasury benches, it is the latter's duty to hold the opposition by the scruff. Instead, the government is seeking shelter behind the safety of legalese and parliamentary procedures.

What is the government afraid of? That the Congress does not have a majority by itself is no state secret. But by playing hokey in Parliament, the government is also exposing a lack of courage. Its spirit to fight has been numbed by the lack of numbers. Even if the entire Opposition votes for a censure motion against the government for its failure to control prices, the government is unlikely to fall.

It will suffer a jolt but at least it will get an opportunity to rebut its critics point for point. Yes it is dependent on the support of non-UPA parties, but equally certain is the fact that there is a TINAMAN factor (There Is No Alternative to Manmohan) at work.

Sonia Gandhi realised the perils of heading a minority government six years ago and opted out and Rahul Gandhi, who will surely take over, is waiting for the day when the Congress has a majority of its own. But look at the flip side.

The NDA does not have the support of more than 150 MPs. Even together, the confused BJP and the bruised Left would have had a tough time cornering the Congress, which alone has over 200 MPs and would have slaughtered its opponents numerically and on scoring brownie points.

There are at least half a dozen cabinet ministers who are itching to take on the Opposition. Ministers like Pranab Mukherjee, P. Chidambaram, Kapil Sibal, Anand Sharma, M. Veerappa Moily and Jairam Ramesh would have made the current crop of Opposition "stalwarts" look like lambs to the slaughter, while the Opposition old guard, the likes of L.K. Advani and others, are fading into political sunset faster than their mindsets.

The arithmetic and the ideological composition of the 15th Lok Sabha is such that no alternate government can be formed without the Congress. Barring,

of course, the unlikely eventuality of the joint Opposition discovering yet another V.P. Singh to bring the Left and the Right together to lend support.

It is the constitutional responsibility of the government to face Parliament and seek approval for its performance. But in the first week of the monsoon session, the government appeared to be running away from this responsibility.

Manmohan Singh has only to look at the recent past to see the number of times he gambled and won decisively. The civil nuclear energy Bill of UPA-I, the women's reservation Bill

and cut motion on the finance bill are strong examples of the minority UPA dividing the Opposition to rule.

I cannot recall another occasion in the recent times when the government looked shaky as early as in its 15th month in office. It is an ominous sign as it could cripple the government and allow the bureaucracy to run riot.

With many important issues waiting to be attended, it was hoped that the Prime Minister would lead from the front. He is the first non-Gandhi family political leader to complete six years in office and there's nothing

to stop him completing a full 10 years. He has nothing to lose. He has the credibility, as of now. But he has to gather the courage. It's time he called the Opposition bluff and restore his and the government's credibility and authority.

Public perception is somewhat fickle. The same people who admire him for his honesty and integrity will begin to abandon him when they realise that he lacks the courage. He has to take a call now on whether he wants to be a PM for the record books or be known as one who was both in power and in control.

Even temples not spared by politicians

ALL POLITICIANS swear by secularism, Narendra Modi being a notable exception. Even the Marxists who swear by it cannot keep their hands off some of the rich temples whose managements they try to seize every time they come to power in Kerala.

The state's Marxist-led government even has a minister for temples whose job presumably is to grab a share of the hundreds of crores of rupees that comes into the coffers of nearly 5,000 temples in the state. It is all about money and patronage.

Something similar happens in Tirupati every two years. On August 24, the chairmanship of the Tirupati Tirumala Devasthanam (TTD), which manages the famous temple devoted to Lord Balaji, falls vacant. There is hectic lobbying by politicians and businessmen now going on for the post. The Balaji temple is India's richest.

Its annual budget is in excess of ₹2,000 crore and income from the sale of laddoos alone account for over ₹110 crore every year. The outgoing chairman, D.K. Adikesavulu Naidu, was a Telugu Desam MP who saved UPA-I by cross-voting for the government in the vote on the nuclear Bill in July 2008.

He was duly rewarded by the then Andhra chief minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, who made him chairman of the TTD, a post which carries cabinet status in the Andhra government. Adikesavulu now wants another term, but there are other moneybags who are in the fray, including five-time Guntur MP, Rayapati Sambasiva Rao, industrialist G.M. Rao, owner of the GMR group that built the new terminal at the Delhi airport, and Indira Reddy, two-term TTD board member and wife of former Union minister T. Subbirami Reddy, who was known best for the flying darsans he organised for the rich during his tenure as chairman of the TTD.

It's a battle royale. Unfortunately, it has nothing to do with piety. It's all about patronage.



Attack is the best defence

HOW IRONIC that in the week that India hosted British Prime Minister David Cameron, it also welcomed General Than Shwe, the despot from Myanmar. The man is regarded as among the world's worst dictators, but that did not prevent the government from rolling out the red carpet. And if some warped minds in the foreign office are to be believed, this was aimed at countering the increasing Chinese influence over Rangoon.

As befitting a tyrant, Shwe came in through a side door — he flew from the Burmese capital to Gaya in Bihar and then proceeded to the Bodhi temple. All along the way, he was booed by hundreds of protesters waving black flags. His five-day tour included a visit to Hyderabad where, at a dinner hosted by Andhra

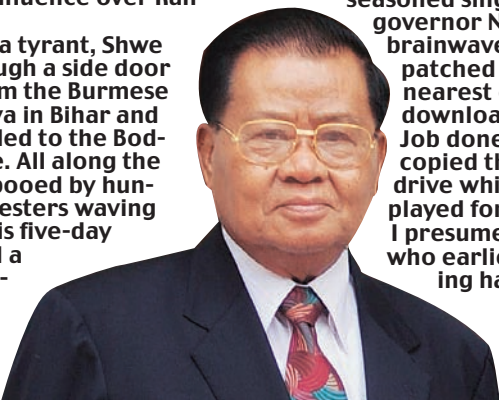
Playing host to our 'friendly neighbourhood dictator'

Pradesh governor ESL Narasimhan, he is said to have expressed a desire to listen to songs from *Mother India* and *Aawara*.

Unfortunately, there were no seasoned singers around but governor Narasimhan hit a brainwave. He dispatched his ADC to the nearest computer to download the songs. Job done, the ADC copied these to a pen drive which were then played for the audience. I presume the dictator, who earlier in the morning had visited some

of the IT hubs in Hyderabad, was so impressed by the technological marvel that he began to clap and sing along.

At a banquet that followed hosted by the governor, the menu consisted of some of the mouth-watering non-vegetarian dishes that the city is famous for. The dictator was surprised to see the governor and chief minister K. Rosaiah sticking to veggie fare. He was told that both were vegetarians and listened patiently when someone told him about the benefits of vegetarianism and the cruelty involved in killing animals. The despot is said to have settled for pesarattu dosa and upma. It is to be hoped that the words ring in his ears the next time the junta orders troops to shoot down innocents in Myanmar.



General Than Shwe

JUNIOR ministers at the Centre are most known for constantly carping about being ignored by their seniors and delegated little or no work at all. An exception is four-term MP from Kerala Prof. K.V. Thomas, the minister of state for food and agriculture, who is not just gainfully employed but actually multitasking. Long before his senior Sharad Pawar met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to demand a lesser workload, Thomas had his hands full. Thomas says he was lucky because Pawar gave him a lot of space and on occasions, even files relating to very important subjects were first sent to him for his comments before they reached Pawar. Thomas is a 10, Janpath, loyalist which makes Pawar's total faith in him even more complex.

A chemistry professor at the Sacred Heart's College, Cochin, he is also a prolific writer and has authored nine books in Malayalam, including one on Sonia Gandhi. His tenth is out next week and is titled *Order, Order, Order*. It is an anthology of the Lok Sabha under different presiding officers where he has reportedly spared none. There is a message in this for all stifled junior ministers. If you are frustrated that there is no work, give vent to it by writing a book, instead of writing to the Prime Minister, which is what Gurudas Kamat and K. Muniappa did. Only to find that Mamata Banerjee and A. Raja took away whatever was left on their plates.