



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

THE JOB profile of the Union home minister has never included the word "diplomacy". Palaniappan Chidambaram knows it better than any of his predecessors, including that old hawk Lal Kishen Advani. When Prime Minister Manmohan Singh decided to send Chidambaram to Pakistan to do some plain speaking to his counterpart, Rehman Malik, the idea was to convey the message that henceforth, at least as far as Indo-Pak ties were concerned, domestic politics would dictate diplomacy.

After the fiasco of foreign minister S.M. Krishna's Islamabad visit last week, in hindsight, it appears that whoever advised Manmohan Singh to draft Chidambaram in the new diplomatic offensive must be an expert in innovative disruptions. After all, never before has a visit by the home minister preceded that of the foreign minister as part of confidence building measures. North and South Blocks stand barely 100 metres apart on the Capital's Raisina Hill, but it appears that the disconnect between the two imperial era buildings that house the foreign and home offices is too wide.

Dealing with a hostile and ever unpredictable neighbour like Pakistan would tax the most suave of diplomats. Seasoned foreign office mandarins have told me that to be part of a dialogue team with Pakistan is akin to inviting distress.

This was quite evident last week when officers on either side of Rajpath were engaged in blame game for the disastrous visit of foreign minister Krishna to Pakistan. Bureaucratic turf fights are nothing new but at issue now is the conflict between diplomacy and domestic politics which is now fodder for the media.

Chidambaram's trip to Islamabad was disruptive innovation at its best, aimed at bypassing the conventional dialogue mechanism which was stuck in the past.

The home minister landed in the Pakistan capital with a mandate from the government to address the concerns of the home constituency. What he told them was bitter, yet true, of the clear involvement of their defence officials in the many terror attacks on India, particularly 26/11.

These weren't just dossiers compiled by the investigating agencies but revelations made by David Headley to Indian investigators in the presence of FBI officers in Washington. Chidambaram's plainspeak had put the Pakistan establishment on the defensive and interior minister Malik was condescending enough to tweet that "Chidambaram was a very intelligent politician". It was widely believed that Chidambaram's triumphant return to New Delhi would be followed by a final assault on the Pakistan establishment.

So were home secretary G.K. Pillai's comments on the day



G.K. Pillai

when Krishna was to leave for Pakistan part of the disruptive agenda?

Shortly before Krishna arrived in Islamabad, the Indian media quoted Pillai saying that from the confessions of Headley, it was clear that Pakistan's ISI was behind the 26/11 attack. His remarks are now said to be the reason for the talks getting stalled even before they could begin. Back in India, a red-faced Krishna says that everything Pillai said was right, but its timing was the reason the talks failed.

Pillai, an upright civil servant whom any bureaucracy would be eager to embrace, is now said to be so downbeat that he contemplates putting in his papers.

Why didn't the mandarins in the

foreign office pick up the signal — that his exercise was meant to bring Pakistan back to the unfinished agenda of the home minister's visit? But our diplomats refused to pick up the signals. They converted Krishna's visit into just another aimless bilateral engagement.

It gave Pakistan a chance to pay back by disrupting the conventional dialogue. Pakistan foreign minister S.M. Qureshi even questioned Krishna's authority to take decisions. Krishna's humiliation was complete.

It is the first time that there have been two high profile ministerial visits to Pakistan. It is also the first time it has led to domestic political crises of such magnitude and divided the cabi-

net and the bureaucracy right down the middle.

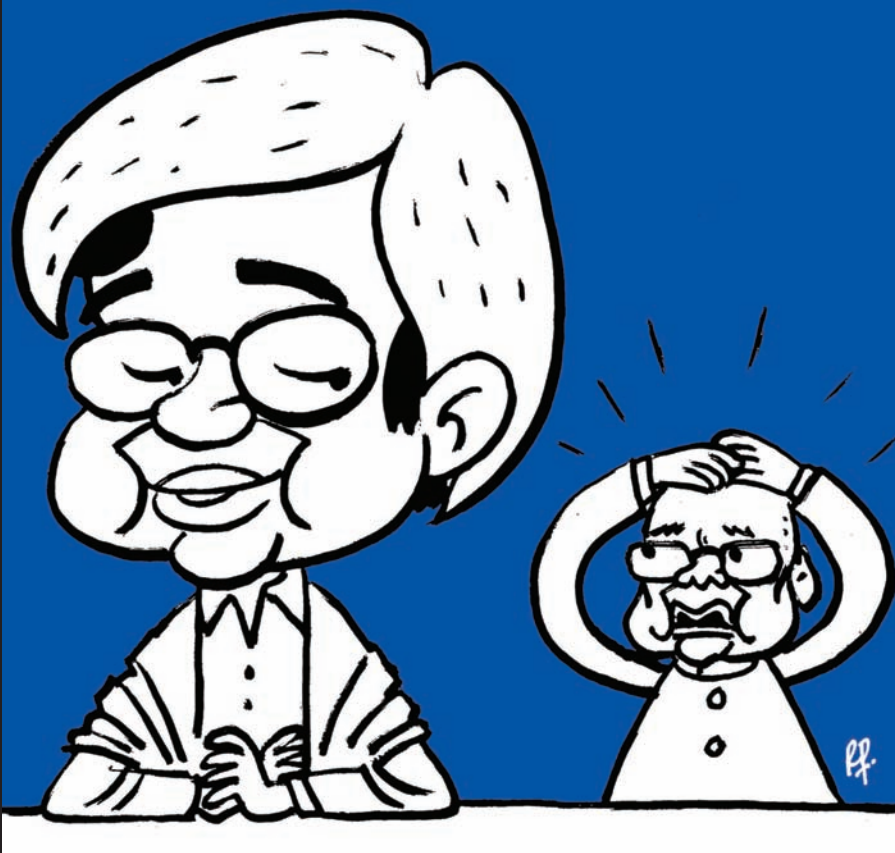
The decision to send Chidambaram to Islamabad cannot be faulted and is among the boldest and most innovative steps that this government has taken. But it failed because one side kept up the pressure while the other preferred the status quo.

At the SAARC heads' meeting in Bhutan a couple of months ago, the prime minister, in hindsight it appears, rather unwisely said that we will continue to talk no matter what happens.

The foreign office seems to have adopted that credo and chooses to walk the talk all the time, unmindful of the vast quantities of yolk that accumulates on its face.

Innovative disruption

R. PRASAD



About time govt started headhunting

THE GOVERNMENT is forever so busy firefighting that most would think it has little time for anything else. Wrong. Even as a civil war rages in the establishment, the government is doing some serious headhunting.

There are vacancies in the Central Vigilance Commission, the anti-corruption watchdog, but the government seems in no hurry to fill these — something that runs against PM Manmohan Singh's policy of transparency in government.

The three-member CVC has been reduced to single member since last November, when commissioners Ranjana Kumar and Sudhir Kumar retired.

Chief commissioner Pratyush Sinha is due to retire in September. Vigilance commissioners are appointed by a panel consisting of the prime minister, the Opposition leader and the home minister.

In the Vineet Narain case of 1993, the Supreme Court had directed that the responsibility for efficient and non-partisan functioning of the CBI be transferred from the government to the CVC, which reviews all cases under the CBI that involve public servants.

Herein lies the catch. In the absence of a full-fledged CVC, its work is suffering — files involving corruption and action against many senior officers are kept on hold.

The standoff has resulted in some multi-crore defence deals, which are normally vetted by the CVC, being put in cold storage. Strangely, while the Election and Information Commissioners have fixed tenures of five years, the VCs is just four.

The government now plans to amend the CVC Act to increase the commissioner's tenure to five or 65 years of age, whichever is earlier.

Sinha will turn 65 only next July. The Opposition has a chance to drive a hard bargain and it is to be seen if the government will yield.

If it does, Sinha will stay on for another year.

IN HIS nine months as BJP President, Nitin Gadkari promised so much and delivered so little. His sudden eagerness to prove his credentials, therefore, can't be faulted. The party chief took office promising to take the BJP back to its roots, but chose to sit back in the hope that everything will fall into place, eventually.

Though officebearers were appointed more than six months ago, none was assigned duties. When he finally got down to it last week, the exercise turned out to be a damp squib. The allocation of duties is emblematic of the confusion that reigns in the party.

The usual suspects responsible for dragging the party from its commanding heights of a decade ago find themselves on



Hema is the only good choice in Gadkari's team

the rewards list.

Heading the list is Bangaru Laxman, who is in charge of the election cell in poll-bound Tamil Nadu. He is the former party chief best remembered for his role in a sting video, taking money from an undercover journalist. He was forced to resign in disgrace.

Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi said recently, on record, that Tamil Nadu was one state where money

power played a big role in elections.

Old habits die hard, more so in politics. It is to be hoped that in his eagerness to raise election funds for the party, Bangaru will every now and then look over his shoulder to make sure the cameras aren't running.

Ananth Kumar is in charge of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, both states where the party is in power, with the latter also being poll-bound. With Nitish Kumar upping the ante, I expected Gadkari to send someone with the common touch to deal with the delicate JD(U)-BJP relations. Gadkari is nothing but naive if he thinks that Ananth is the man to repair the bruised relations.

Venkaiah Naidu gets charge of Maharashtra and Delhi though try as I can, I am unable to figure out what exactly is expected of him. One appointment, however, cannot be faulted. There's none more suited than Hema Malini to head the culture cell.

IT'S NOT just the government that is having trouble filling key vacancies. Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar and the chairman of the Upper House, Vice-President Hamid Ansari, are faced with a similar dilemma.

Secretary-generals PDT Acharya of the Lok Sabha and Vivek Kumar Agnihotri of the Rajya Sabha are due to retire soon and there is no shortage of feelers from retired and retiring secretaries to the two presiding officers offering their services.

Acharya, who took over on August 1, 2005, has just turned 65 while Agnihotri, a former secretary in the parliamentary affairs ministry who took over as Rajya Sabha SecGen in October 2007, has also reached the age of superannuation.

Meira Kumar, a former Indian Foreign Service officer, is said to be keen on inducting a diplomat into the key slot, while Ansari, also a former diplomat, has no such leanings. But minister of parliamentary affairs Pawan Kumar Bansal will also have a say in the appointments and the grapevine has it that he is keen on bringing a retired Punjab cadre IAS officer to the Lok Sabha. The gentleman is said to have been the minister's English professor.

While Bansal's eagerness to honour his "guru" is to be lauded, it remains to be seen if the three-member panel consisting of Speaker Kumar, the leader of the Lok Sabha, Pranab Mukherjee and the leader of the Opposition, Sushma Swaraj, will be equally enthusiastic.