



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

SPIRALLING prices, the Maoist menace, the Bhopal tragedy compounded, the fiasco in Islamabad, feuding ministers. The list is long enough to make anyone think that there is trouble lurking around the corner for the government as Parliament prepares to meet for the monsoon session. Perish the thought.

The government has already drawn up plans to keep the Opposition wolves at bay and senior ministers of UPA II exude confidence as they say that they will tide over the severest of challenges with the least effort. Towards the fag end of the budget session, the government seemed to be teetering on the brink as the Left and the Right closed ranks and moved cut motions on the finance bill.

Since then, the Opposition has flexed its muscles on more than one occasion, the latest being the all India bandh on July 5 against rising fuel prices. Though the BJP and the Left parties gave separate calls for the bandh, it brought the country to a standstill, even triggering speculation that the two had worked in unison. Having seen the wrath of the combined Opposition, the government is least inclined to take chances.

The Opposition has an embarrassment of riches as far as issues are concerned to pillory the government, but the latter is not so lucky. But it has one trump card: the ideological card that will make it difficult for the non-NDA Opposition to rally around the BJP either on the floor of the house or outside.

The emphasis will be on dividing the Opposition by raising issues that would isolate the BJP and make it ideological untouchables. Governor H.R. Bhardwaj's offensive in Bangalore typifies this in many ways. Occupants of Raj Bhavans are supposed to be impartial and apolitical and expected to play strictly by the book that is the Constitution. But governors have seldom been able to hide their political past. Bhardwaj is probably the only one who openly flaunts it.

As the mining scandal threatened to sink the Yeddyurappa government, Bhardwaj was brazen enough to say, "I am proud to be a Congressman." His statement makes it abundantly clear why the ace lawyer who got so many Congressmen, including some VIPs, off the hook in many serious cases, was sent to the Bangalore Raj Bhavan.

The same tactics are evident in Gujarat where the Centre is trying to pin down Narendra Modi by targeting one of his closest aides, the minister of state for home Amit Shah. Sohrabuddin Sheikh was killed more than five years ago by Gujarat's Anti-Terrorism Squad in an alleged encounter and now the CBI says there is evidence to show Shah's involve-

ment in the fake encounter. It doesn't require special investigative skills to realise that the real target is the Gujarat chief minister who is perhaps the only one in the whole country who evokes similar sentiments in the Congress and the non-NDA Opposition parties. So they will target Modi to weaken the BJP.

It's almost a week since Nitin Gadkari made the intemperate remarks about Afzal Guru's relatives in the ruling party and the Congress seems in no mood to forgive. How can it, when the JD(U), the BJP's coalition partner in Bihar, has slammed the BJP president? The 50-year-old fight between Karnataka

and Maharashtra has surfaced once again and the Centre is watching with considerable glee as the Shiv Sena in Mumbai raises its pitch against Karnataka where a BJP government is in power.

The Congress strategy is working and consequently, the frustration in the Sangh Parivar is boiling over as was evident on Friday when hoodlums vandalised the office of the Headlines Today TV channel in Delhi. Such reactions are normally associated with those who have lost the common touch. And the Right has clearly lost it.

Just two months ago, it was all so different. With everything

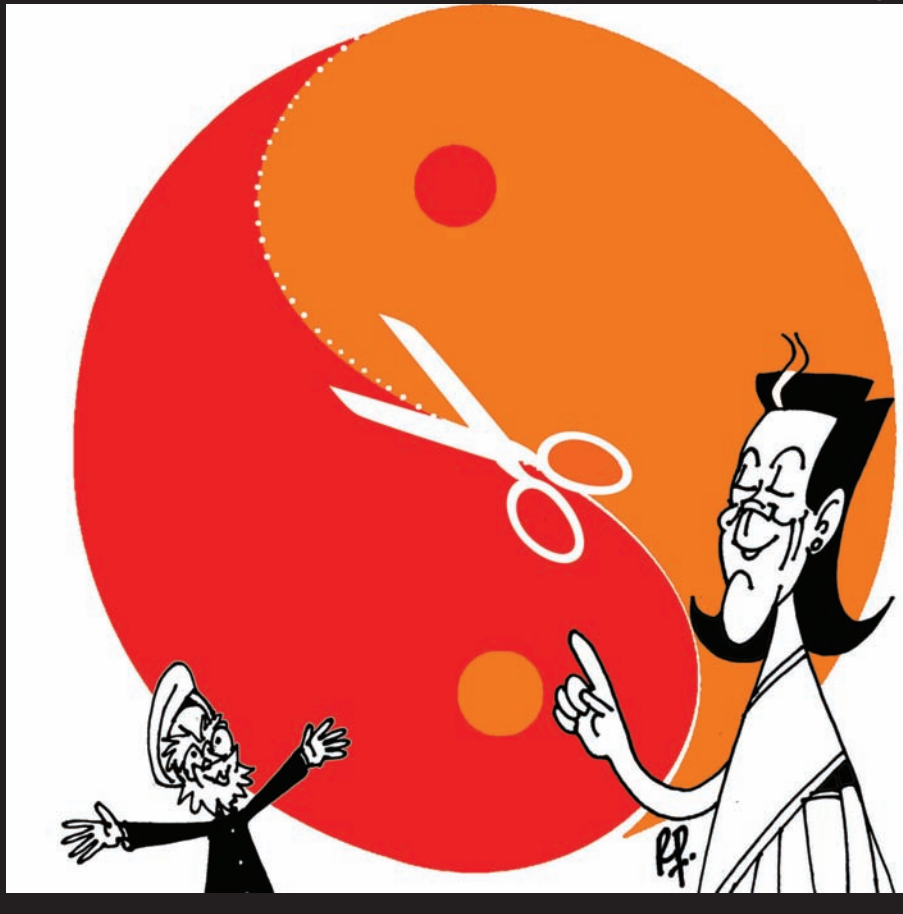
that could possibly go wrong indeed going that way, the government looked vulnerable and even the government's spin doctors admitted the future looked bleak. But almost overnight, the doubts have vanished and there is a spring in the establishment's step.

For that, they must thank the BJP. Democracy works not just because of the elected government but also because of a rigorous Opposition that scrutinises the government's every step and seizes its chances. By that yardstick, the BJP's performance has been a disgrace.

The punishment for that will be a much longer wait in the wilderness.

Divide and rule tactics

R. PRASAD



Spare some thought for the victims

LEFT to me, Afzal Guru, whose death sentence was upheld by the highest court in the land, would have been blindfolded and led to the gallows a long time ago. All due processes have been completed and the Delhi state government and the home ministry have cleared the technical logjams for the natural process of law to be served.

Yet, President Pratibha Patil has dittoed the government stand that the clemency petition of the Parliament attack convict, a Kashmiri, cannot be fast-tracked as mercy petitions are disposed of in "sequence". This is hogwash. Once the technicalities are completed, the president should either accept it, or reject it, not sit over it.

But in a reply to a query from RTI activist Subhash Chandra Agrawal, the Rashtrapati Bhawan secretariat said: "Sequence is followed in deciding mercy petitions." At present, there are 21 petitions for clemency pending before the President and these precede the petition of Afzal.

His petition moved back and forth in the Congress government in Delhi for four years and now is sought to be made out as if the home ministry is sitting over the state government's recommendations. Insiders tell me the ministry has already recommended that Afzal's petition be rejected and he be hanged. But like her predecessors, Pratibha Patil appears reluctant to sign the death warrant.

Last month, she commuted death sentences in cases of two sets of convicts while sending back for review three other petitions to the home ministry. One of them dates back to November 1997 while Afzal's petition came as late as October 2006. Justice should be served on the basis of the heinousness of the crime and not on a first come first served basis. Politicians should begin to shift their compassion to the victims and leave the judicial system to deal with criminals like Afzal.

FINANCE minister Pranab Mukherjee is at the end of his tether and it is easy to understand why. As each of his cabinet colleagues tries to outspend the other on populist schemes, Pranab's office is choked with requests for funds. But he has few options to raise money: He is not allowed to raise direct or indirect taxes or cut subsidies.

I am told that at the last meeting of the Union Cabinet, Dada lost his cool when some senior ministers demanded their ministry's budget estimates be revised while seeking approval of supplementary demands to the tune of over Rs 25,000 crore.

The demands cut across the cabinet spectrum: home ministry wanted funds to buy the latest firearms for the police and



Pranab tightens the cabinet's collective belt

paramilitary forces; there were demands from others for moolah to deal with the Bhopal gas victims, floods in Haryana, for special packages for Kashmir, Bihar and one southern state that is particularly pampered by the UPA government.

At one point, Pranab is said to have shouted down a colleague while reminding him that his job was to run the government and

Pranab Mukherjee

not indulge in fancy self-serving policies. With inflation crossing double digits, excessive spending will cause massive inflationary pressures. Already, the budgetary deficit has crossed the five per cent mark and even the large bonanza expected from the 3G spectrum sale is unlikely to help him.

Worse, the government's, flagship social sector scheme, the NREGA is attracting attention to its loopholes than for its implementation.

What started with a Rs-11,000 crore outlay in 2006-07 has crossed the Rs 41,000 crore this year. And instead of improving the lives of the poor, NREGA is now being increasingly tagged for mismanagement and corruption. We have for long paid the price for the politicians' greed that has thrown the country from one crisis to another. Pranab appears to have decided to put an end to their recklessness. More power to his elbow.

THE KERALA government apparently believes in the old dictum "set a crook to catch a crook". Nothing else would justify the nomination of a politician as one of the state Information Commissioners. Sony B Thengamam is no ordinary politician. He is a state committee member of the Communist Party of India, which of course means that in Left-ruled lawless Kerala, he can be a law unto himself. His nomination makes a mockery of the Right to Information Act 2005 which has clearly laid out parameters for the appointment of the State Information Commissioner and ICs.

According to Chapter Four, Sections (5) and (6) of the RTI, the SIC and the ICs shall be "persons of eminence in public life with experience in law, science and technology, social service, management, journalism, mass media, governance and administration..... and shall not be an MP or MLA or be connected with any political party, hold an office of profit or carry on any business and pursue any profession".

The SIC and ICs are appointed by a three-member committee comprising the chief minister, one of his cabinet colleagues and the leader of the Opposition in the state assembly. The last named in this instance is Oommen Chandy, a favourite of 10, Janpath. How ironic that he should be a party to making a travesty of an idea which is the brainchild of none less than Sonia Gandhi.