



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

A MONTH ago, when in the wake of the 2G spectrum scandal, rumours swirled about the possible axing of A. Raja. A Congress spokesperson said, "It is the Prime Minister's prerogative to decide who stays in his cabinet and who stays out." That Raja is still in office says much not only about the limited prerogative of the incumbent PM but also of the limited powers that the Congress enjoys in the government that it heads.

Sharad Pawar has been around so long that he can give a few lessons in the art of politics to all in the UPA, barring perhaps Pranab Mukherjee. Like the Spaniards and Germans on a grass pitch, the Maratha is the master of counter attack in the field of politics. When the pressure mounts, he switches strategy, marshals his resources and blunts his opponent's attack before launching a counter offensive that changes the course of the game.

For the past few months, both he and his NCP colleague Pratul Patel have been under the scanner for their roles in the IPL. Pawar has been particularly targeted by the Congress for the uncontrolled inflation which the party believes will cost it dearly.



A. Raja

When the Left and the Right joined hands to bring the country to a halt last Monday to protest price rise, Pawar was in Singapore for his coronation as chief of cricket's world body, the ICC. No sooner had he landed in New Delhi, he drove to the Prime Minister's house and requested that some of the workload be taken off him. You can't but sympathise with him. At 70, even a Grand Maratha cannot be expected to carry multiple burdens. And Pawar carries so many: minister of agriculture, food and civil supplies, consumer affairs and public distribution.

It's a well-calibrated strategy, the kind that has served him well for the nearly 40 years he spent in public life. It has put the Congress on the defensive. Pawar wants his workload to be lightened, but is adamant about not yielding agriculture. That leaves Manmohan with the limited option of handing food and civil supplies and public distribution to someone else.

The question is: with inflation running in double digits, who would want to hold the hot potato? The real motive behind Pawar's request was to force the Prime Minister to effect a cabinet reshuffle, something he knows the Congress is not ready for. At 77, this is the largest ever cabinet in independent India, with 58 from the Congress alone and Manmohan is not inclined to add to it.

Besides, he never tinkered with portfolios in UPA 1, so it would be out of character to expect him to do so within fourteen months of UPA 2. Within

the Congress, there is considerable anger at the inefficiency and the many charges of corruption hurled at alliance ministers, particularly from the DMK and the NCP.

While Pawar constantly revises strategy to counter the Congress, the DMK is typically brazen and rubbishes demands for Raja's ouster saying that it can happen only if he is found guilty by the courts in the 2G spectrum allocation case. With the Prime Minister looking on like a helpless spectator, senior Congress leaders are putting pressure on Sonia Gandhi to put the house in order. The internal bickerings in the UPA would

have been fodder for the media if Kashmir had not flared up and hogged the headlines. Still the Congress strategists continue to ply their trade, with motivated leaks of an impending reshuffle and TV channels predicting, like Paul the Octopus, the names of new ministers.

A mid-term reshuffle is a normal course correction strategy that governments routinely undertake to repair their battered image. But by taking the initiative for a reshuffle, Pawar has effectively stalled one. It's not the first time he has resorted to such chicanery. After 26/11, when Vilasrao Deshmukh refused to resign as

Maharashtra CM and Union home minister Shivraj Patil continued to spend more time in front of the mirror than looking at files, Pawar got R.R. Patil of the NCP, the deputy CM and home minister to step down owning moral responsibility.

Both Deshmukh and Shivraj saw the writing on the wall and quit. And now comes the news that the NCP will contest next year's assembly polls in Kerala in alliance with the Marxists. No one knows the black arts of the political trade more than Pawar. The NCP may have only nine MPs in the Lok Sabha, but Pawar will continue to strut around as if he has 90.



Pawarful counter attack

The endless cycle of committees

LAW MINISTER Veerappa Moily has headed numerous commissions and submitted so many reports that I suspect even he may have lost count.

As chairman of the Administrative Commission, he has submitted 15 reports over the last five years on subjects ranging from good governance to ethics in government to conflict resolution and corruption in the bureaucracy.

Most of these are gathering dust as the government has neither the will nor inclination to tinker with the status quo. Sometime back, Moily handed a copy of the report on corruption in the bureaucracy to the Prime Minister.

After going through its contents, the PMO passed it on to the Committee of Secretaries who after due deliberations, suggested that a high-power committee be set up to further look into the matter. And so a committee of experts comprising P.C. Hota, former UPSC chairman, P. Shankar, former chief of the Vigilance Commission and A.K. Verma a retired UP cadre IAS officer was constituted in May.

Unlike most committees that sit on their jobs and seek extensions in order to continue enjoying the perks, this committee completed its work in two months flat. Though he was offered a secretariat and all other perks that go with such a job, Hota rejected these and opted to do the job himself, working out of his own house and keying in everything on his computer himself.

Last week, when Prithviraj Chavan, Union minister of state for personnel, called on Hota at his residence he was in for a surprise. Not only had Hota completed the task assigned to him well in time, he had put copies of his work on CD as well as on pen drives and sent these across to fellow members. He gave a copy to Chavan too, who needless to say was taken by surprise at the doggedness and tenacity of the 75 year-old retired officer. May his tribe increase. But on the flip side, I have the feeling that the government will set up another committee to study Hota's report.

NOT A day goes by without TV channels flashing visuals of the young and dapper Omar Abdullah in designer attire but you can see that the man is anything but relaxed. Kashmir is on the boil like never in recent times and last week, after 10 years, the army held flag marches.

There is a National Conference-Congress coalition government in place in Srinagar, but the deputy chief minister Tara Chand of the Congress is so busy inaugurating buildings and bridges that he hasn't found time to form an opinion on the violence. Ditto for the state Congress president Saifudin Soz and former CM Ghulam Nabi Azad. But what really raised eyebrows was the absolute silence of Dr Farooq Abdullah. When his beloved Kashmir was burning, Farooqsaab



Omar Abdullah

Abdullah father and son set to play musical chairs

was much of the time in London. And when he surfaced last Sunday in Srinagar, Omar added another twist to the burning tale by saying that Papa Doc was "here to advise me and not to intervene".

It is worth recalling that Farooq was projected as chief minister last year, but an overnight coup by Delhi's babalog saw son take over

and father settling for Union ministership. Omar's problem is that he understands the peer crowd in Delhi but not in Srinagar and has scant regard for the political and bureaucratic set up in Kashmir which his Papa nurtured and respected.

With every brief respite from violence resembling the lull before the storm and Omar feeling totally isolated and helpless but since he was the choice of the Congress Gen Next, senior leaders are in a bind. But a whisper campaign is now on within sections of the Congress and the NC leadership that the father-son duo be persuaded to swap jobs. No one will be hurt, Omar who is clearly uncomfortable in Srinagar's hot seat, may welcome a return to Delhi. As junior external affairs minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, he did an excellent job. For the sake of Kashmir, it is to be hoped the father and son duo comes to an agreement on a job trade off.

THERE are few who are not genuinely impressed by the way Home Minister P Chidambaram goes about his job. His dogged pursuit of terrorists, Naxals and other extremists has impressed even the BJP that the main opposition party demanded that PC be given a free hand to do his job. The trouble with PC is that he is as irritating as he is honest and well intentioned. That puts most of his colleagues off.

Much of what he does are unilateral decisions, the Khap bill aimed at tackling honour killings being the latest. He came up with the idea without consulting his colleagues or the state governments in the North where the Khap Panchayats are very powerful.

Predictably, he met with stiff opposition. Ministers from the North ganged up against him and the cabinet meeting last Thursday witnessed frayed tempers as PC was accused of ignoring regional sensitivities and pursuing a legislation that could be an emotional minefield for the Congress, particularly in Haryana, which apart from Delhi is the only Northern state where the party is in power. Though PC would settle for nothing less than a free hand as long as he is North Block and prime minister will gladly grant him his wish, the majority opinion in the Cabinet was that the issue needed further discussions at multiple levels. So they have constituted another Group of Ministers and its back to the red tape brigade.