



# POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

**O**N JULY 15, foreign minister S.M. Krishna will leave for Islamabad for bilateral talks with his Pakistani counterpart. Krishna says he is going for talks that will “bring our two countries closer together. Let us hope that our efforts will be fruitful”. Back in Islamabad, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Krishna’s host, says Pakistan will raise the issue of “human rights violations and army excesses” in Kashmir. If ever there was a case of the pot calling the kettle black, this is it. But leave that aside for a moment. On an average, about 50 security personnel die every month fighting enemies who draw their inspiration from abroad and within.

And this figure does not include the alarming recent rise in deaths of the paramilitary personnel at the hands of the Maoists and other insurgents. In the last 15 years, more than 10,300 security personnel have been killed by terrorists, but their martyrdom is soon forgotten.

On the other hand, a single case of human rights violation by the army is “breaking news” for days together on TV and fodder for writers. The situation is so shameful that a couple of months ago, the Supreme Court chided the government for treating army men like “beggars”.

The apex court was referring to the pitiable emoluments and pensions of the brave men in uniform who routinely lay down their lives so that we can live, but the honourable judges may well have been talking about their morale.

The armed might of any nation is meant to defend the country against threats, both internal and external. Our services personnel have time and again showed their power and responsibility while dealing with enemies within or outside and, barring a few aberrations, have never exceeded the briefs given to them and have always accepted the supremacy of civil authority. There are in-built systems like the court-martial to deal with the errant. Unfortunately, a section of the civil society and the political leadership is now beginning to question its mission and doubt its integrity, leading to demoralisation.

Cases are sought to be reopened and decorated officers dread the ignominy of facing trial years after retirement and being stripped of gallantry medals in front of their grandchildren. There seems to be a motivated and preposterous vilification campaign against the army as a congenital violator of human rights and not fit to settle civilian problems. Worse is the hypocrisy. Nobody



A.K. Antony

seems to bat an eyelid when troops are rushed to quell violence in Gujarat but they all baulk when it comes to sending the same men to Kashmir or to the Maoist-infested areas.

What all this leads to is confusion at the political level which percolates down to the services. Home minister P. Chidambaram wants the army’s help to flush out and, if necessary, liquidate the Maoists. But votebank watchers in the ruling dispensation have nightmares of impending human rights violations but overlook the fact that there is a Human Rights Commission and similar outfits in every state for redressal.

The cabinet is divided on the

question of sending in the army to trouble spots. Chidambaram wants to rope in the army to take on the Maoists alongside the police and central paramilitary forces, but defence minister A.K. Antony has reservations and says his men should be used as the last resort. The home minister wants army help to demine forested areas infested by the Maoists to carry out surgical strikes and wants Indian Air Force helicopters to be deployed for logistical purposes. Antony says nothing doing and the majority view is with him.

I am therefore not surprised that after a recent fiery and heated cabinet meeting, Chidambaram came out and told the

media that he had only a “limited mandate” from the cabinet to fight Left-wing extremism.

Admittedly, the use of the army should be a last resort but as far as Kashmir and the Maoists go, we crossed that point a long time ago. The army’s role shouldn’t be a subject of controversy.

It is accountable to the system and its intervention should be based on need and not on politics. The brave soldiers fight in some of the most dangerous theatres of war and the political establishment must take its eyes off the votebank and let the boys do their job. Those who attack the soldiers do no more than shame themselves.



## Honour the brave

## Politicians’ race to the Big Apple

*THERE is something about New York that fires the traveller’s instinct among our MPs and once again it is that time of the year when our honourable representatives get the itch to travel to the Big Apple for the annual sojourn at the United Nations. The UN General Assembly meets only in September but the Prime Minister’s Office is already under immense political pressure from Congressmen as well as UPA allies to have their members included in the delegation. A bureaucrat friend said in jest that the lobbying was somewhat like what is witnessed on the eve of a cabinet session.*

*It’s easy to see why they are all clamouring to fly to New York. The Indian delegation normally consists of 30 to 35 people. Sixteen of them are MPs who join the delegation in two batches of eight each and the rest are ministers and diplomats. For 45 days, all of them get to hole up in one of the best Manhattan hotels at the taxpayers’ expense. The stay is long enough for those afflicted with minor and major health problems to hold consultations with some of the best physicians in the world.*

*In normal circumstances, the selection is entirely the prerogative of the Prime Minister, but in a coalition like the UPA, as we have so often seen, the unusual is the rule rather than the exception. So the final choice may not be Manmohan Singh’s alone. In a few days, we will know who have made the grade, but there is a record that will be hard to beat and it belongs to Atal Bihari Vajpayee. He first attended the UNGA in 1977 as foreign minister in the Morarji Desai government when he famously addressed the assembly in Hindi.*

*Between 1988 and 1994, India had four prime ministers. That all of them chose the BJP veteran is perhaps a measure of the deep admiration they shared for a political adversary.*

**CONSIDERING** all the praise that heads of states and governments lavish upon him, it’s easy to see why Manmohan Singh needs only the slightest of excuses to take to the skies. “When the prime minister of India speaks, the world listens” or something to that effect, US President Barack Obama said in Toronto last week.

How Manmohan would wish his own ministers also listen to him with similar earnestness. Kashmir was in flames even as Manmohan was rubbing shoulders with the G-20 leaders, so it was understandable that as soon as he returned, he wanted to take stock. So he decided to hold an emergency meeting of his cabinet on his return to the Capital on Thursday, which coincided with the day of the weekly cabinet meeting.



## Absentee ministers make cabinet meetings a no-show

Incidentally, during the Vajpayee days, the cabinet used to meet on Tuesdays but this was shifted in the UPA era to Thursday, following requests from some of the powerful alliance ministers from the South. They said they wished to be home with their families during the weekend.

A five-item agenda paper was drawn up for circulation among all cabinet ministers and, as is procedure, the deputy secretary in the cabinet secretariat in charge of cabinet meetings rang up the private secretaries of all ministers to find out the “availability” of their masters. Only 15 of the 33 full fledged ministers

were available in the Capital. Among the notable absentees were the three DMK ministers, who were enjoying a well-earned rest after the exertion at the highly publicised World Tamil Congress in Coimbatore.

Sharad Pawar was in Singapore getting himself embroiled in yet another cricket-related controversy, while other worthies cited prior commitments to excuse themselves from the emergency meeting.

Finally, the scheduled cabinet meeting was converted into a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security, with the PM chairing the session attended by four of his senior-most colleagues — the ministers of defence, home, finance and external affairs.

**STRANGE** things are happening in Jharkhand. Barely 10 years into its inception, the state has already seen six changes of chief ministers and two spells of president’s rule, including the current one which began on June 1 after chief minister Shibu Soren resigned on the eve of a trust vote.

The assembly is under suspended animation since then and with no party in a position to form the government, the BJP has demanded fresh elections. But the Centre seems in no mood to oblige. Usually, immediately after President’s rule is imposed, the Centre appoints advisers to assist the governor, but even this has not been done though a month has gone by.

Worse, governor MOH Farooq, who is the de facto chief minister, is hardly ever in Ranchi. The 73-year-old former Pondicherry chief minister is said to be not in the best of health and spends half his time in Chennai for medical treatment. But the UPA’s proxy rule in Ranchi is unlikely to last long since it has to get the presidential proclamation ratified by Parliament, which is not an easy task since the UPA is woefully short of the majority in the Rajya Sabha.

Last heard, the Centre is contemplating withdrawal of president’s rule before Parliament’s monsoon session begins later this month.

For whose benefit and under what conditions remains to be seen.