



# POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

**D**ESPITE being Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy for more than six years now, Manmohan Singh is yet to make the transition from economist to politician. But there is no doubt that he has taken several important steps on his way to becoming an international statesman. Global leaders have been fulsome in their praise for the manner in which his government steered the economy at a time when most developed countries were reeling under the worst economic downturn in over 40 years.

At the last G-20 meeting in the United States, Barack Obama led the tributes, hailing the Prime Minister as a "visionary and a marvel". Of course he doesn't get, nor does he expect, such praise back home, where Sonia and Rahul Gandhi and the many senior ministers take care of the rough and tumble of domestic politics. The contrasting images could not have been more stark and that perhaps explains why Manmohan is devoting a disproportionate amount of time to international diplomacy as compared to domestic issues. So what does Manmohan really want?



Hamid Ansari

My hunch is that by the time he finally demits office at the end of the current term, he wants to leave a mark on two issues that are dearest to him: Indo-Pak relations and India's deserved seat on the high table that is the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

The first has always been on blow-hot-blow-cold mode. When things go from bad to worse, symbolic initiatives are taken. The visits of P. Chidambaram later this month for the SAARC interior ministers' meeting in Islamabad and foreign minister S.M. Krishna to Pakistan in July are to be seen in this context.

But it is the UNSC seat that Manmohan eyes as the prize catch and he is leaving nothing to chance. From President Pratibha Patil who recently toured China, to vice-president Hamid Ansari, Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar and many sundry ministers, they are all flying around the world to seek support for India's bid.

It may be a coincidence that two retired IFS officers are now presiding officers of the two houses of Parliament. But it is no coincidence that the combination has been chosen to champion India's cause. The tours undertaken by the two since UPA2 came to power over a year ago gives us an indication.

The Lok Sabha speaker has been to New York, Rome, Geneva, Hungary, Luxembourg and Bhutan as head of parliamentary delegations where she tapped her hosts to support

India. Ansari has been even more active. He has been to Kuwait, South Africa, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan with the same objective. Back home, Ansari has been in touch with many heads of states and governments whom he knows personally. In Delhi, he has also been meeting the local heads of the foreign missions in the presence of the secretary concerned in the foreign office.

Finance minister Pranab Mukherjee travels to the United States next week and is taking with him a large contingent from among the titans of industry who are scheduled to take their minds off business matters for a while to

indulge in matters of diplomacy with their American counterparts. That apart, the government has launched a new offensive in economic diplomacy with commerce minister Anand Sharma leading from the front.

With the post-meltdown scenario still worrisome and much of Europe caught in a fresh financial crisis, the Middle east, Africa, Latin American and the CIS countries are the places where India is seeking increased trade and investments. The commerce ministry recently did a road show in Dubai in which most of the top 100 companies in India participated, and I am told it was such a big hit that the ministry is now planning more such road shows in the

months to come.

India will almost certainly become a non-permanent member and chairperson of the UNSC for 2011-12, for which elections will be held this October after the two other candidate countries, Thailand and Kazakhstan, withdrew and India's candidature was endorsed by the Asian group.

Chinese president Hu Jintao told Pratibha Patil last month that Beijing was committed to India's bid for a non-permanent seat in the UNSC for 2011-12 and there was hope that this would lead to Chinese backing for a permanent seat.

If the government can win that, Manmohan will leave office knowing that he deserves greater credit than he has got.



R. PRASAD

## Fly and mighty

## The UPA's southern discomfort

*RELATIONS between the Congress and the DMK have always been tenuous despite the leaders of both sides going to great lengths to send out signals of unparalleled solidarity.*

*The latest display of this was a fortnight ago, when Sonia Gandhi sent a hand-written message to DMK patriarch M. Karunanidhi on his 87th birthday. But the bonhomie is not shared down the line and DMK leaders feel that a section of Congress leaders are as vociferous in demanding communications minister A. Raja's resignation as the opposition is.*

*The fissures are now out in the open and at the DMK headquarters in Chennai, party leaders speak of a conspiracy by a section of the state Congress to cut the DMK to size. If reports are to be believed, this group wants the high command to put pressure on the DMK leadership for a 50-50 share of the 234 assembly seats when the state goes to the polls next year.*

*However, the DMK wants to contest at least 140 seats and at best is ready to leave 70 to 80 seats for the Congress. The differences are not irreconcilable as yet, but could turn out to be if the group led by G.K. Vasan, Union minister and son of the late Congress heavyweight G.K. Mooppanar, chooses to be unrelenting.*

*Yet another twist was added to the tale recently when a powerful group within the Congress, led by former minister K.V. Thangakabalu, floated the idea of aligning with Jayalalithaa's AIADMK once again.*

*Thangakabalu has already sounded out the high command about this and is believed to have told them that Jayalalithaa was ready to give the Congress 120 seats.*

*The Congress and the BJP have been in the habit of swapping partners every few years and it would be no surprise if the Congress once again joins hands with the Iron Lady of Poes Garden, leaving the DMK to embrace the BJP-led NDA once again.*

**CHIEF Election Commissioner Naveen Chawla is due to retire next month and the UPA government has a tough task filling the vacancy, considering that there is a torrent of names being forwarded to the powers that be. Until T.N. Seshan came along in 1990 and started a badly needed clean-up of the electoral system, the office of the CEC was just like any other constitutional office. Since then, it has acquired a higher profile and is now among the most coveted jobs.**

**While S.Y. Quraishi, the Haryana cadre IAS officer who joined as a commissioner in 2006, will take over as the new CEC, V.S. Sampath, a 1973-batch IAS officer of the Andhra cadre, will remain commissioner. There is much speculation about who will fill the third slot and regional and gender pressures are being mounted on the Congress leadership, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and law minister Veerappa Moily.**

**Among the front-runners are finance secretary Ashok Chawla and**

## The jostle for the third EC slot begins



agriculture secretary T. Nanda Kumar, while an officer from the North East is said to be a dark horse. But there is an influential section in the UPA which feels that it is time for

a woman to be appointed to the high constitutional office.

If this opinion prevails, the choice could be between Shanta Sheela Nair, a former home secretary of Tamil Nadu and currently secretary in the ministry of mines, and Sushma Nath, expenditure secretary.

As UPA chairperson, Sonia Gandhi has helped smash several glass ceilings by giving the country its first woman president as well as the first woman speaker of the Lok Sabha. If Sonia puts her might behind either Nair or Nath, the Election Commission, considered to be the last of the male bastions, may fall and get its first woman commissioner. If that happens, in about four years time, the country will have its first woman CEC.

I AM NO football fan. But for the past week and the next three, I am one. Like millions around the world, I have been glued to the TV. There are countries out there participating that a lot of us can't locate on a map. Others have suspended their fratricidal wars and united, if only for a month.

Immensely gifted players who seemingly make the ball talk and whose names I did not know until last week now dominate the front pages. After a week of this new addiction, I realise now why they call it a beautiful game. It is truly a world-class game played for a worldwide audience where Cinderella nations take on the mighty — and win. When you watch Serbia (population 7 million, half of Delhi) defeat three time world champions Germany, it makes you sit up and wonder: Why can't India with a billion-plus population produce 11 players who have the hunger and passion to, if not dazzle, at least play on the world stage.

The bane, I am told, is again the politician. In the 1950s and 60s, India were on top of Asia, routinely beat the Koreans and the Japanese, won several Asian Games golds and were even an Olympic semifinalist once. The downhill slide began with politicians taking over the game's administration in the mid 80s. It has been a downhill slide since. Sports minister M.S. Gill should take that extra step and tell the politicians: stay away from sport altogether.