



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

THERE is a raging existential crisis in the Congress that threatens to cripple the government and the party. UPA ministers feuding openly at cabinet meetings are now passé; now the government and the party that's leading it are at war and it's an ideological war. One thinks global, talks about FDI, wants greater economic interaction with the West, is grateful for Barack Obama's occasional kind words and gloats over strategic initiatives with the United States. The other thinks local, its leaders talk of *aam aadmi*, routinely visit *jhuggi jhopris* and never take their eyes off the next elections. Digvijay Singh is among the senior-most Congress leaders. Far from being a loose cannon, he is among the most responsible Congressmen. Yet, he has said and done enough in the last two months to show up the glaring differences in the ruling establishment.



Digvijay Singh

Two months ago, he embarrassed the government by publicly slamming P. Chidambaram for the home ministry's policy on handling Maoist extremism. Now, Digvijay has gone and done it again, this time over the Bhopal gas leak tragedy. His statement that Union Carbide chief Warren Anderson was allowed to go scot free under pressure from the US has once again embarrassed the government and underscores the depth of the divide. The frequent salvos from Digvijay — never mind if once in a while he retracts his statements — are signs of two wings of an establishment pulling in opposite directions. One that wants development at any cost and the other that believes in the Congress of old times — left of centre.

After the massacre of CRPF jawans in Dantewada, Chidambaram talked tough but was met with scathing criticism from large sections of the party. Surface transport minister Kamal Nath is in a hurry to acquire land for roads but environment minister Jairam Ramesh wants the impact on local habitats to be assessed before clearance is given.

The same Jairam had embarrassed the government by attacking the home ministry while on an official visit to China. He was duly censured by the Prime Minister and there was even speculation over his continuation in the ministry as rumours did the rounds that he would be denied a renomination to the Rajya Sabha. His re-entry into the Upper House last week, which could not have come about without clearance from the highest party levels is, if anything, proof that for all the admonitions, he continues to

have the full backing of the few who matter in the party.

Last week, the newly reconstituted National Advisory Council with Sonia Gandhi as chairperson held its first meeting. Readers will recall that the NAC was set up weeks after the UPA-I took office and, before it became defunct in 2006, had played a key role in the enactment of two of the government's showpiece achievements — the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Right to Information Act.

In its first avatar, there were charges that the NAC was being some sort of a "Super Cabinet" but the government was quick to deny these. The charges are likely to resurface now after the NAC, at its meeting last Thurs-

day, made known its displeasure over the implementation of flagship schemes.

The members are said to have insisted on scrutinising the progress of the programmes. One even pointed to the incongruity of the government pushing the Nuclear Liability Bill at a time when the nation is reeling in horror at the Bhopal gas tragedy verdict.

Everyone seems to have taken positions, but the two who must be holding their cards close to their chest. So far, neither Sonia Gandhi nor her son has said anything of significance on the Naxalite menace, terrorism, the economy or foreign relations. Their motto seems to be: talk less, work more. So Rahul spends nights in the interiors,

sharing *dal-roti* with impoverished villagers in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Sonia's helicopter makes day trips to similar locales in other parts of the country. Both mother and son ignore the bitter recriminations in the UPA cabinet and carry on with their work, knowing that issues such as the Nuclear Liability Bill or increased FDI have nothing to do with getting votes.

The first test of this strategy will be the elections next year in states such as West Bengal and Kerala, where the Left has already ceded space. If they succeed, by the time Rahul's coronation comes up in 2014, it will be a different Congress that marches to the polls. And many of the ministers now strutting around will have no place in Rahul's team.



R. PRASAD

Silence is golden

Modi not welcome in Bihar

THE BJP, which tried to score a point by holding its national executive (NE) in Patna last weekend, seems to have ended up scoring a self-goal. The battle of political wits that began in Patna last weekend between chief minister Nitish Kumar and his Gujarat counterpart Narendra Modi triggered events that could end up in a messy divorce between the JD(U) and the BJP who are in coalition in the state that is up for polls. So far, Nitish has done a fine balancing act as a secularist who finds nothing wrong in sharing power with the BJP.

It may be recalled that during the last Lok Sabha elections, he campaigned for BJP candidates but made sure the minorities weren't lost by keeping Modi away from poll platforms. With Modi arriving in Patna for the NE, the expected and much worse has happened. A public rally scheduled under the NDA banner with senior leaders such as L.K. Advani, Nitin Gadkari, Narendra Modi along with the fiery Varun participating ultimately became a BJP rally after Nitish refused to share the stage with Modi.

A dinner that Nitish had planned at his residence for all NE members was cancelled after Nitish made known his distaste for supping with Modi. But the unseemly row touched a new low when Nitish objected to ads that the Gujarat government had taken out in Patna papers which had pictures of Modi and Nitish together and extolled the generous grants the Gujarat government had provided to Bihar after the 2008 Kosi floods. So offended was Nitish that he called it "uncivilised" and threatened legal action against those behind the ad. He also said Bihar would return the money the Modi government had given.

The JD(U)-BJP alliance has been under strain for long. And my instinct tells me it will not last long. Sooner or later, the BJP will decide to go on its own, knowing that in a polarised polity, Nitish will have to vie with Lalu Prasad and the Congress for the minority and backward votes while hoping to cash in on the rest.

EVEN four weeks after the Prime Minister announced the decision to appoint an Empowered Group of Ministers to discuss and resolve the conflicts stemming from the decision to hold the controversial caste-based census, Manmohan Singh seems to be in no particular hurry to honour his pledge. Ever since he said in Parliament that his government will give the idea serious thought, he has been under immense pressure from civil society leaders as well as large numbers of young MPs to keep the decision on hold. Even during the past few cabinet meetings, the idea was opposed by few senior ministers.

The opposition within the council of ministers, however, came into the open only when minister of state for home affairs Ajay Maken wrote a letter to all young MPs cutting across party divisions, asking them to oppose the move. It was his contention that a caste-based headcount will trigger another aggressive and divisive agitation for enhancing reservations in gov-

Congress ambiguity on the caste census



ernment jobs and educational institutions, leaving the upper castes and even the meritorious among the poor with nothing but crumbs. The Prime Minister's promise to take a serious look at the demand for a caste-based census

was made merely to placate the powerful Yadav duo in return for their support to get cut motions moved by the BJP and the CPI(M) on the finance bill defeated.

Bizarrely, he did so just a few hours after home minister P. Chidambaram told Parliament about the inherent difficulties and dangers of holding such a census. It now appears that with the cut motion now out of the way, the government is having second thoughts and there are rumours that it was the party leadership that encouraged its Gen Next MPs to speak up. Now, with the massive divisions within the BJP also coming into the open, Gen Next seems to have won round one in dictating the political agenda.

□ **GOPALKRISHNA** Gandhi's C.V. could make anyone turn green with envy. An IAS officer of the Tamil Nadu cadre, he served as secretary to the President, director of the Nehru Centre in London and as India's envoy to Norway, Iceland, Sri Lanka, South Africa and other countries, and also had a five-year stint as governor. He is also the grandson of C. Rajagopalachari and Mahatma Gandhi.

At the age of 65, you'd expect him to look back in satisfaction at a long and distinguished innings and spend a quiet life in Chennai. But is the former governor — among the most activist that any Raj Bhavan has seen — missing the trappings of the gubernatorial mansion? His backers are doing the rounds in Delhi seeking another stint as governor for him, preferably in the Raj Bhavan in Panaji, Goa.

Gandhi has enough powerful backers in the government, yet there are hurdles. The current incumbent in Goa is S.S. Sidhu, who is known to be close to the Gandhi family from the mid 1980s when he was the secretary in the civil aviation ministry and pilot-turned-politician Rajiv was the Prime Minister.