



POWER & POLITICS

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MANMOHAN Singh must have known it was coming and it has come earlier than he expected. There have been deep divisions within the union cabinet before, but now for the first time, these are on public display. Ministers of the pro and anti caste census lobbies appear at each other's throat and neither wants to be the first to ease off. Three weeks ago, in its hurry to have the cut motions on the finance bills defeated in Parliament, the government struck private deals with some of the regressive opposition parties. I had in these columns said that the finance bill victory was likely to come with a heavy price tag.

That has happened much earlier than expected.

The divide in the party was evident early this month when barely hours after the Home Minister P. Chidambaram told the Lok Sabha that he was against caste based enumeration as "many members felt caste is a divisive factor", the prime minister said his government would give it "serious thought and take a decision shortly". They were again in the open at last week's Cabinet meeting where senior ministers like Chidambaram, Anand Sharma, Kapil Sibal and others clashed with those like Veerappa Moily who took up the cause. And now we have Ajay Maken writing an open letter to young MPs terming the caste census as a "regressive measure". Maken is not known for his flamboyance or is the kind to talk out of turn. As a junior minister, he has never joined debate on any political issue. That's why his letter last week to young and like-minded members of the Lok Sabha belonging to different political parties came as a surprise.

His letter was sent out to 67 MPs aged between 25 and 45 years. They aren't ordinary MPs either. The recipients include Rahul Gandhi, Akhilesh Yadav, son of Mulayam Singh, BJP MP Dushyant Singh, Ajit Singh's son Jayant Chowdhury, Union minister Dayanidhi Maran, Supriya Sule, Milind Deora and all young ministers in the government.

Being a very unlikely source for controversy, the question naturally arises: did Maken act on his own? Or was he speaking for the new Congress which has a stake in the future that its current leadership evidently doesn't? I have known Ajay from the days he was a student leader at Delhi University and can say with a great degree of confidence that he is a stickler for rules. It was something of a sur-



Ajay Maken

prise therefore to see him releasing his letter just a day after the prime minister warned the many warring members of his cabinet not to air their personal opinions in public and limit these to appropriate party forums. The issue must have been playing in mind for long, but the May 27 cabinet decision to appoint an Empowered Group of Ministers to decide about the timing and contours of the caste based census was the last straw. What now comes across loud and clear is that Maken was not speaking for himself alone. He represents the voice of GenNext who have been either kept away from the political decision making process or given such raw deals that they have chosen to stay away. It appears to me that they have

decided to retaliate by working as a pressure group that will dictate political agenda from outside. Arrayed against them is the entrenched Congress that continues to subscribe to the politics of convenience. Though the Congress party as a whole was opposed to the idea of caste based census, with their survival at stake, they unashamedly compromised with the Yadavs.

Now the liberal elements in the Congress have chosen to strike back. Historically, the Congress has always split into ideological factions every time a new emerging generation sought to assert itself. During the late 60s, it was the Syndicate vs Indicate represented by Indira Gandhi. In his short political career, Sanjay showed

signs of raising an army to take on the old guard. Rajiv thundered about "power brokers" and "cabals" but fell victim to their machinations. The professorial Manmohan would be the last man you would expect to succumb to such low level politicking but even he chose the politics of convenience over conviction. Win is what counts, no matter what the cost of the trade-off is.

But the many young ones like Maken, who have a much longer political shelf life seem bent on setting the tone for future politics. If Maken's voice is not muzzled by the Congress old guard, it will certainly signal the drawing of new battle lines. And Maken may have very powerful supporters within.

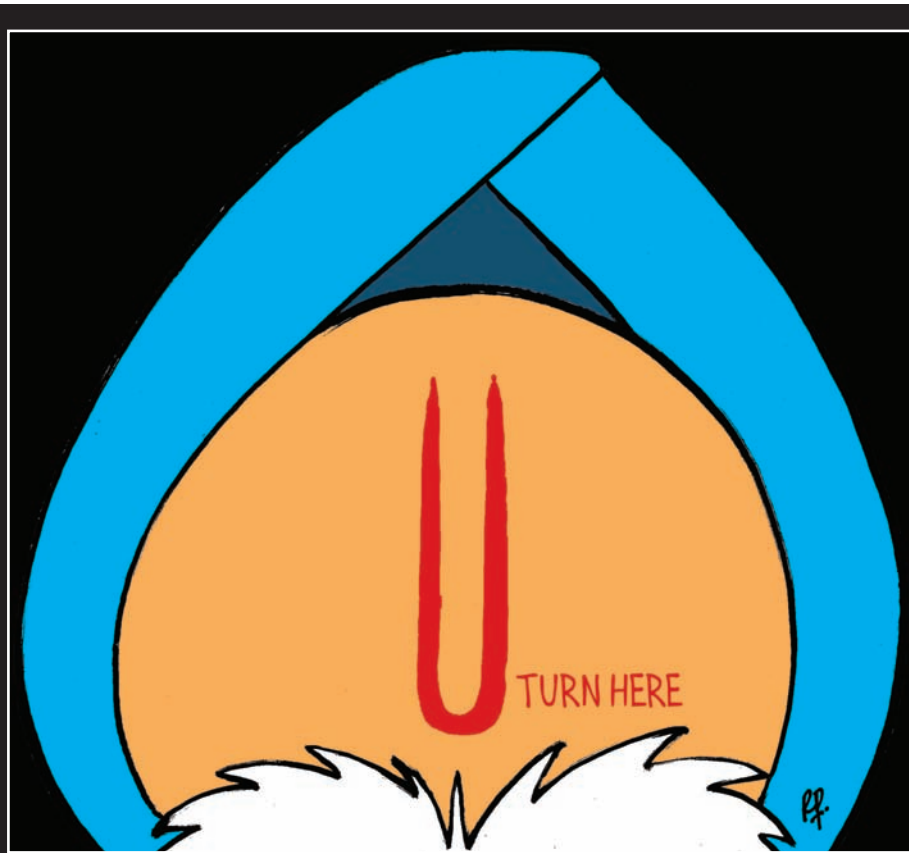
Trouble in store for YSR's son

HELL hath no fury like a politician scorned...by fellow politicians. YS Jaganmohan Reddy, the Congress MP who thought the chief minister ship of Andhra Pradesh was his birthright after the unfortunate death of his father YSR in a chopper crash last September, and his party are on a collision course which could end up with the state Congress splitting and the rise of another regional party in the next few months. Jagan believes that he has been handed the wrong end of the deal every time: no chief minister ship, no cabinet berth at the Centre, not even a job at AICC.

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that his impending padayatra onslaught is aimed at the party leadership. During his state wide padayatra, he is to visit the families of the hundreds—the numbers seem vastly exaggerated—who had committed suicide on hearing of YSR's death. But he does not have 24 Akbar Road's sanction and the AICC wants Jagan to call off the padayatra. That Jagan has already hit the road, disregarding veiled threats from the AICC, is indication that he doesn't see a place for himself in the Congress set up and has made up his mind to set out on his own.

The padayatra may seem a masterstroke, considering that it was a sustained and highly popular mass contact programme that enabled his late father to oust the Telugu Desam's Chandrababu Naidu in the assembly elections in 2004. He is counting on the support of the Reddys who, though only a little over ten percent of the state population, form about 40 percent of the MLAs.

But trouble lies in store for Jagan. Supporters of the Telangana Rashtriya Samiti that is spearheading the cause of a separate state do not want him to enter the Telangana region. Last heard, the Congress is tapping Praja Rajyam Party leader and actor Chiranjeevi to come to its aid. He will arrive in Delhi this week to meet both Sonia and Rahul Gandhi. There is never a dull moment in Andhra politics.



GenNext hits back

THE WHEELS of justice grind exceedingly slow, but grind they do. Last week brought bad news for unscrupulous rich Indians who stash away black money abroad after the IT department served notice on fifty Indians whose names the German authorities passed on to the Indian government as having accounts in that country. During the last election campaign, BJP veteran Lal Krishna Advani had raised the issue and demanded that the money, which he claimed was about US\$ 1.2 trillion, or the equivalent of India's annual GDP, be brought back. Advani's argument was that, the money was enough to fund hundreds of hospitals, thousands of schools and lakhs of primary health centres across the country.

In the heat of the election campaign, Manmohan Singh scoffed at Advani's charges but found the matter serious enough to ask finance minister Pranab Mukherjee to take a closer look. He did. Well begun, but will the job be left half

Cheats with money abroad feel the heat



done? My hunch is that. Because the tax cheats consisting mostly of politicians, businessmen, powerful bureaucrats, real estate sharks and others form a cosy club where everyone takes care of everyone

else. Already, many rich Indians have got wind of the crackdown and are queuing up to pull their money out. Governments in the past too have tried and failed, but mostly because of a lack of will.

The UPA government would do well to borrow a leaf from the Obama administration which ordered a crackdown on American tax dodgers late last year. Within a fortnight after President Obama asked them to come clean, 7500 such cheats who had kept amounts varying from as little as \$10,000 to as much as \$100 million applied for amnesty. The amounts appear puny compared to the booty that Indians have hidden away. It's time the UPA government shows the same resolve.

IT'S THAT time of the year when the heat wave takes its toll on the toughest of men, but the worst affected seem to be our ministers: the heat simply scares them away from Delhi. That many union ministers fix long official tours during the summer months is well known. Many of them take their families along, all of whom are looked after by the Indian embassy in the concerned country, though technically, ministers are supposed to pay for the expenses of relatives. While the government sometimes looks the other way on minor transgressions, ministers are strictly forbidden from accepting hospitality from private individuals or firms on such tours.

But recently, a senior diplomat wrote to the Foreign Office about a conflict of interest involving a senior Union Cabinet minister. The minister who was travelling with his family members flew in a private aircraft within the US and accepted the hospitality of several American hosts. The deputy chief of mission brought this to the notice of the Foreign Office as well as the joint secretary in the PMO who is the coordinating officer for foreign office. It is not the first time ministers are blatantly flouting rules. I am told that in the UPA's six years rule, the government has reports of about 25 to 30 ministers transgressing rules, but this one was so blatant, the PMO has decided to soon crack the whip.