



# POWER & POLITICS

## PRABHU CHAWLA

**E**VEN as you are reading this, Manmohan Singh is probably preparing for what is only his second formal press conference after assuming office as the Prime Minister in May 2004. Undeniably, there is much that he can be proud of, not the least of which is the fact that he is the only Congress Prime Minister from outside the Nehru-Gandhi clan to occupy office for six years. That's an achievement that would have called for raucous celebrations but the unfortunate death of over 160 people in the plane crash on Saturday morning means all revelries now stand cancelled.

Yet, the government is treating the press meet as a very special event. More than two months ago, in these columns I had written about the Prime Minister's decision to shelve the dour "Report to the People", which had marked his first five anniversaries and instead meet the press. I had then said that in keeping with the coalition spirit, Manmohan would invite senior ministers from the major alliance partners to share the dais with him. The plan has now been shelved.



A. RAJA

His cabinet colleagues have been requested to sit in the front row, ahead of the over 900 journalists from the print and TV media. While the ostensible reason for the change of plans is that the government wants the focus to be on the Prime Minister, the real reason is the fear in the establishment that journalists may choose to train their guns on the likes of controversial ministers such as A. Raja and Mamata Banerjee who would have flanked him on the dais.

The barrels of midnight oil being burnt would suggest that babudom is putting more effort into the event than it would for, say, the joint session of Parliament or the Union budget. Cabinet secretary K.M. Chandrashekhara and the PM's principal secretary TKA Nair have personally been monitoring the run-up. The former had issued a circular to about a dozen select secretaries asking them not only to update the PMO on the latest developments and decisions relating to their ministries but also be present at the press conference while Nair held a review meeting with senior secretaries last Thursday at the conference venue, Vigyan Bhavan. Secretaries of key ministries are busy updating on the main talking points such as internal security, Maoists, Pakistan, proposed amendments to the Right to Information Act, the many inter-ministerial tussles, etc.

Bureaucratic and political circles are united in their belief that the success of the press conference will lie not in the answers that Manmohan will give to the tough questions but

by the number of leaders from alliance parties who will be present in the special enclosure. The Congress cabinet contingent will be there in full strength and I am sure the A-Team of Pranab Mukherjee, P. Chidambaram, A.K. Antony, Kamal Nath, Kapil Sibal, Anand Sharma and S.M. Krishna will be occupying the front row. Sonia Gandhi is unlikely to attend though the PMO expects the AICC office-bearers to be present in full strength to show that the PM has the full backing of the party. As a coalition, UPA ministers from all alliance partners are expected to be present just to show that they stand united.

But I have reason to believe that the government will be left red-faced due to the absence of several senior leaders from alliance partners.

Agriculture minister Sharad Pawar is abroad and may not make it back in time to attend the show. Mamata Banerjee has said neither "yes" nor "no" to the invitation. Of the DMK's three ministers, Dayanidhi Maran is abroad. The other two are an embarrassment to the government; Raja, for the clouds of dust that he kicks up at every step he takes and M.K. Alagiri for his inability to comprehend anything that is remotely connected with his job as Union minister for

chemicals and fertilisers.

Manmohan should be glad if they don't turn up even if the message that goes out from Vigyan Bhavan will be of a Prime Minister who is wary of keeping the company of his own cabinet ministers.

Their absence may even be a blessing in disguise for Manmohan to blunt the BJP charge that his government is characterised by 3C's — corruption, conspiracy and contradictions. Whether he can turn the tables on the Opposition by offering his own 3C's — clean, credible and commendable — will depend to a large extent on the display of candour from Manmohan.

## Cleaning up the civil services

**WITH CORRUPTION** rising and babudom showing scant regard for ethics, the government has decided to crack the whip. Earlier this year, the cabinet secretary had sent notes to secretaries of all ministries at the Centre and chief secretaries in the states to take strict action against officers charged with corruption, indiscipline or actions that tarnished the image of the civil services. The CabSec's missive was timely. Vigilance cases were registered against 54 all-India service officers in 2009, of whom 35 were from the IAS, 10 from the IPS and nine from the IFS. The corresponding figures for the previous year was 38, eight and four respectively.

Now the government plans to get tougher. Last week, the government set up a committee headed by P.C. Hota, former chairman of the UPSC, to suggest measures to expedite punishment in cases involving corruption and disciplinary proceedings.

One of the recommendations that will be considered is dropping compulsory retirement as a major penalty for errant civil servants and instead handing down the penalty of demotion or dismissal from service. The Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) feels that an officer who is penalised with compulsory retirement will continue to get all his retirement benefits.

Noting that compulsory retirement does not actually work as a deterrent, the DoPT says: "In this way, such government servants may feel a sense of comfort even while indulging in wrongdoings because they know that even if they are compulsorily retired from service, they would get full pension benefits." Instead, demotion or dismissal from service would send a clear message to all government servants of the severe consequence of wrongdoing, the note said. The DoPT has sought comments from all secretaries and state chief secretaries by June 5 after which the Hota Committee will review and fix new and tougher punishments.

# PM meets the press



**KASHMIR** has always occupied a special place in Sonia Gandhi's heart and the Congress President will keep her date with the Valley later this month. Though it's a purely private visit, she is expected to check on efforts being made by the state government to clean up the Dal Lake on seeing which she is reported to have been "shocked" when she took a shikara ride last October while on an official visit.

The lake cleansing plan, being personally looked after by deputy chief minister Tara Chand, includes shifting some 11,000 families living around the lake and rehabilitating them on the outskirts of Srinagar. Sonia Gandhi will lay the foundation stone of the new colony for the Dal dwellers.

The Centre has been quite liberal in funding the clean-up operations and last year, at Sonia's request, the Prime Minister sanctioned Rs 356 crore for the project. Only last month, Priyanka Gandhi, Robert Vadra and their two children flew away from the dirt and

## Kashmir's date with a high-profile visitor



grime of New Delhi to celebrate the birthday of her husband at a five star hotel that overlooks the world famous lake. It was a private visit and even state Congress leaders were not given access to the family whose only social engage-

ment was a lunch hosted by chief minister Omar Abdullah at the Dachigam National Park.

Priyanka's was the first private visit by a Gandhi family member in almost a quarter century. Indira Gandhi was a frequent visitor to Kashmir as was Jawaharlal Nehru, a Kashmiri, who grew up in Allahabad, but went back as often as he could. Rajiv had made a couple of visits in an official capacity or to campaign during elections as has Rahul who campaigned during the last elections. Now that Sonia is on her way, Omar Abdullah should take a leaf out of Narendra Modi's book. If Amitabh Bachchan can be persuaded to become brand ambassador for Gujarat Tourism, why not Sonia for Kashmir?

**AS A** community, Sindhis account for less than 0.3 per cent of India's population. It is, thus, surprising to see everyone from President Pratibha Patil to the UPA chairperson lining up to woo such a negligible vote bank. Late April, Patil released a postal stamp to honour Kanwar Ram Sahiba, a leader of the Sindhi community, at a function at the Rashtrapati Bhavan where L.K. Advani was also present. The function was held at the Durbar Hall, usually reserved for major events such as cabinet swearing in.

In a break from protocol, the President also asked Advani to speak. Advani sought hard to make some connection between Ram Sahiba and the Lotus, which of course is the symbol of the BJP. Today, Sonia Gandhi is being felicitated by a delegation of Sindhis after which she will host a dinner for them. Sonia is, of course, a politician and needs to keep everyone on her side. But what explains President Patil's overdrive to woo the community? Someone in the know tells me that in Maharashtra's Amravati constituency which Patil once represented and is now held by her son Rajendra Shekhawat, Sindhis account for over 60,000 voters. Considering that Shekhawat won the last election only after a recount, the President's eagerness to keep Sindhis happy is understandable.