



POWER & POLITICS

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WHAT do you do when things are not going as planned, or worse, show signs of falling apart? Order a cabinet reshuffle. That's what Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh seem to have decided and I understand that once the current session of Parliament is over, they will order a reconstruction of the Union cabinet to show that there is a lot left in the UPA tank.

By any yardstick, this has been one of the most embarrassing Parliament sessions that the UPA has faced in its second term, where not even one major legislation has been passed. The Sania Mirza saga and the IPL drama have turned out to be blessings in disguise for the government. But for these events, the morning headlines and prime time entertainment after sundown would have been all about the government being mercilessly hauled over the coals. The unexpected reprieve saw Sonia and Manmohan undertaking a review of all the ministers and the functioning of their departments. Their conclusion, I gather, is summed up in one word: pathetic.



Sonia Gandhi

In a minority government like the UPA, any reshuffle can involve only ministers belonging to the Congress, since Sonia and Manmohan can barely risk rocking the boat by tossing around ministers from alliance partners like the DMK, Trinamool, NCP and others. M.K. Alagiri may not come to his office, the Parliament or meetings of the Union cabinet, but his truancy has to be tolerated. Changes must therefore be limited to the Congress. Of the 33 ministers of cabinet rank, 27 are from the Congress, as are six of the seven ministers of state with independent charge and 25 of the 37 junior ministers, so there's lots of scope for chopping.

The rationale for the impending exercise cuts both ways. There are too many ministers who are quite unhappy with their portfolios, while a whole lot of others have plum assignments but don't have the calibre or the dedication to do justice to their jobs. In the first category fall Ambika Soni, Jaipal Reddy, Subodh Kant Sahay, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Vayalar Ravi, G.K. Vasan, all of cabinet rank, Dinsha Patel (MoS-Ind) and Harish Rawat, who is one of the senior party men but sadly enough, serves as a minister of state.

Then there are ministers like K.H. Muniyappa and Sachin Pilot who are so stifled, they feel it's better being jobless than work under the likes of Mamata and A. Raja. The ebullient Ambika Soni who did an admirable job as tourism minister in UPA(I) somehow seems out of sorts in the information and broadcasting ministry and is said to be looking for a change, preferably to the party,

where she has already had stints as the AICC general secretary. Overseas Indian affairs minister Vayalar Ravi, still recovering from a nasty road accident in Liberia, is said to be looking for a less gruelling assignment. At the other end are a handful of ministers on whom the party is likely to wield the axe.

Topping the list is Pawan Kumar Bansal from Chandigarh. Otherwise an efficient administrator, it is his misfortune that he is saddled with the parliamentary affairs portfolio at a time when ties between the treasury and opposition benches are at their frostiest. I understand that

Bansal will be relocated to the party. The only non-Congressman who is likely to come under the purview of the reshuffle is E. Ahamed, the MoS, railways, who has always kept an eye on his former job at the ministry of external affairs which has now fallen vacant after the exit of Shashi Tharoor.

After its seamless victory in last year's elections, the UPA has of late begun to resemble a rudderless ship. Ministers like Pranab Mukherjee, P. Chidambaram, Kapil Sibal, Kamal Nath and Anand Sharma and a few others have brought innovative ideas into administration,

but the rest have been like wind-up toys, doing merely what they are programmed to do by their bureaucrats.

Many of the latter are likely to be shifted and who gets what portfolio will depend more on performance in the ministry and implementation of promises made in the UPA manifesto and less on winnability, factional clout or parliamentary histrionics. Manmohan realises that his government needs a new face and for that he will need many more Pranabdas, Chidambarams and Sibals. From the talent available at his disposal, it is a tough task.



Reshuffle on the cards

The case of the missing ministers

THERE are some people whose actions — or lack of it — never cease to amaze. M.K. Alagiri, the Union fertilisers' minister and the DMK supremo M. Karunaidhi's son is one such. He is an embarrassment to the UPA government, but since he has a doting father, there is nothing Manmohan Singh or Sonia Gandhi can do but grin and bear the nuisance. Last week, he again caused red faces in the government by failing to turn up in Parliament for the question hour. That he doesn't attend cabinet meetings, even when matters concerning his department are up for discussion, is well known. Alagiri of course is not the only one. Mamata's truancy is legendary as is A. Raja's and so many other ministers, all belonging to alliance parties.

Some months ago, the India Today magazine had invoked the RTI to find out the attendance record at cabinet meetings after we learnt that at some sittings, it was less than 50 per cent. Our request was thrown out, almost as if we were seeking a state secret. In December, Sonia Gandhi had sent a missive to Congress MPs after the question hour in the Lok Sabha fell through one morning because of lack of quorum. Delinquency among ministers and MPs is nothing new but is rising alarmingly by the day. The latter can be dealt with by their respective party chief whips, but who is to rein in delinquent ministers? In the current coalition setup, the Prime Minister does not have the power to change even a junior level assistant to a minister from an alliance partner. What is worrying in all this is that in a parliamentary democracy, collective responsibility reigns. What happens to the concept of collective responsibility if half the cabinet is on perpetual leave?

The people have a right to know what their ministers are up to. The cabinet secretary would do the country a great favour if, after every cabinet meeting, his secretariat issues a circular that tells us who attended and who did not. The people will then know about the rotten apples.

Lotus fails to bloom in the Delhi heat

SINCE its ouster from power six years ago, the BJP has been bumbling from one blunder to another. The election of its youngest president hasn't changed its fortunes and the litany of disasters continues. Last week's anti-inflation rally in the Capital was the latest. It was to have been the party's biggest rally in the Capital in more than a decade and was meant to signal the main opposition party's new found vigour and a fresh offensive against the government.

That it turned out to be a damp squib was partly because it was ill-timed and partly because the well-planned but badly



The heat proved to be too much for Gadkari.

executed event was overtaken by other events. The party had threatened to unleash one million protesters on the Capital's streets, but on the day, less than two lakh turned up. The reason was that in its catchment areas of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, the

party faithful were too busy harvesting. The oppressive heat in Delhi ensured that barring the hardcore, its substantial middle class supporters in the Capital stayed indoors. The party had hoped that the rally will monopolise TV airtime and print space, but

thanks to Lalit Modi, the only pictures that newspapers carried and the only clips news channels showed were that of the party chief Nitin Gadkari, unable to bear the scorching sun, fainting towards the end of his speech and being helped to his feet by party colleagues who put wet towels on his overheated head.

The Delhi summer could take its toll on the fittest of men. But the sight of the man, who was brought in to inject fresh life into the party, collapsing, while others around him including 83-year-old Advani braved it out, has done no good to the morale of the party.

IN NORMAL times, the visit could have been dubbed as just one more foreign jaunt by another bunch of babus. But next week's tour to Australia by a team led by Arun Mathur, director (Enforcement) at the department of revenue, has attracted unusual attention from both the top echelons of the government and the corporate world. For the record, they will be participating in a meeting organised by the Financial Actions Task Group (FATG) to monitor real-time money laundering by suspected terror outfits and drug smugglers. India is just an observer for such meetings and has been lobbying hard for formal membership of the FATG.

For the past week, the ministry of finance has been in a tizzy over Mathur's agenda at the FATG. The government is already under attack for not making serious efforts to track the black money which is stashed in Swiss banks. The goings on in the IPL has added another dimension to the visit. The government is mulling over whether IPL should be added to Mathur's agenda. It fears that if it does and gets a negative report, the entire investigative process will collapse. Thus, there is a suggestion for detailed but informal discussions with the top brass of the FATG before proceeding further. The government wants to be cautious now rather than regret later.