



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

THE MESSAGE to both the Congress and the Prime Minister appears to be stern, loud and clear: your foes are known, now choose your friends. Last week when the railway minister, Mamata Banerjee, directed her 19 MPs, six of them ministers in the UPA government, to avoid sittings of the Lok Sabha and return to their constituencies, she was merely reiterating what she had all along been saying: political friendship is not a one-way street.

With the government appearing to be faltering on several fronts, the Congress will have no option but to reciprocate. And Mamata wants the Congress to respond not by merely handing out a few cabinet berths to her party but standing shoulder to shoulder with her in her 'bloody' battle against the Marxists. She has made it clear that the MPs from her Trinamool Congress will return to Parliament only if the Centre serves an ultimatum to the Left Front government to improve the law and order situation in West Bengal and refrain from attacking her ministers and cadres.



Buddhadeb

Her latest ire against the UPA leadership was triggered by violent attacks on Union ministers Mukul Roy and Sultan Ahmed. A senior TMC Lok Sabha member asked me: "Will the Congress leadership keep quiet if a Congress minister is attacked in Uttar Pradesh or Gujarat? Why hasn't the Centre sought an explanation from the state government so far?"

The Trinamool feels that the Congress is using its allies to stay in power but is not joining the battle of the regional parties against their common enemies in the states. Since her eyes are set on occupying Writers' Building after the assembly elections that are due next year, Mamata has been mounting pressure on the UPA government to keep a wide distance from the West Bengal government. She is particularly upset with both the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, and home minister P. Chidambaram, who, for maintaining cordial relations with the state government, have done nothing more than observe protocol in their dealings with the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government.

Mamata's antics after Jyoti Basu's death last year, which left even her ardent supporters red-faced, were shameful. She boycotted the funeral because she thought Manmohan Singh was getting too close to Buddhadeb when all that happened was that the two stood next to each other at the state funeral for the late leader. Protocol dictates that when the Prime Minister visits a state, the chief minister be present at all public functions. Yet Mamata seemed

convinced that the Prime Minister and the chief minister were hatching something.

What Mamata fails to understand is that in a federal set up such as ours, both the Centre and the state governments have to operate within the Constitutional framework. Mamata nevertheless wants the Modi treatment to be extended to the Marxists too. Shun them, shame them, call them all things vile for their anti-poor policies. She routinely boycotts the visits of senior Congress leaders to the state and even as she stays in the Union cabinet, has been opposing most of the policies of the UPA. So obsessed

is she with dislodging the Marxists from Writers Building that she has not attended even 25 per cent of the cabinet meetings held so far. Asked once about her chronic absenteeism, she retorted: "I am not Delhi-based, am I?"

Her habitual absence from cabinet meetings poses no danger to the stability of the UPA. But her defiance could turn out to be ominous for the Manmohan regime. Other UPA allies such as the NCP and the DMK are already upset because they suspect that the Congress is unleashing various central government agencies to keep a tab on them. The NDA and the non-

UPA parties in the Lok Sabha have decided to move a cut motion on the Finance Bill during the current session and the Congress will need the collective strength of all its allies to defeat it as well as to ensure the safe passage of important government Bills. True, at this point, none of the allies would want to topple the government. But Mamata's posturing has sharpened the debate within the UPA. If the Congress wants the government to be strong, safe and stable, it must lend strength to its allies, give them the feeling that it values their support and will in turn stand by them.

Give allies their due

Now tatkal clearance for Games

IN THE old days when a telephone was a luxury and owning one involved a waiting period that often took years, you could opt for a Tatkal scheme and acquire a connection. Ditto for the railways where if you had to travel and didn't have a reservation, you could opt for a ticket under the tatkal scheme. But ever heard of a tatkal clearance for the cause of sport? With the 19th Commonwealth Games now less than 200 days away, among the many things that cause headaches to cabinet secretary K.M. Chandrasekhar is the woeful shortage of accommodation for the thousands of visitors who are expected to visit the Capital for the 11-day event.

Delhi, rising India's shining Capital, has fewer hotel rooms than many small cities in the US or Europe. The government came up with a scheme to bridge this shortage by offering fully furnished DDA flats at reasonable rates for visitors. Plans were afoot to offer about 2,700 such flats, but there were hitches. Green activists planned to petition the environment ministry against clearance for the flats. In Jairam Ramesh, they saw a friend who would sympathise with their cause and give the government a thumbs down.

Last week, the matter came up for discussion during a meeting of the standing committee of the CWG, chaired by the cabinet secretary. Faced with several imponderables, Chandrasekhar called Ramesh who promised to get back later in the day. The minister promptly reviewed the situation with the mandarins of his ministry and within hours called back the CabSec to assure him that clearance for the project had been okayed and the necessary notifications would soon be issued. Like everyone else, Chandrasekhar knows that Ramesh is a very efficient minister, but the minister's lightning reflexes have now prompted the CabSec to rechristen Ramesh "the Tatkal Minister".

NITISH Kumar may have failed to get special status for his state from the Planning Commission, but during his tenure, the socialist-turned-free-marketer chief minister has himself acquired a special political status in the state that goes to polls in a few months' time. In the once lawless state, now there is more than a semblance of law and order. Yet, Nitish's political arrogance and highly individualistic rule has not only created mayhem in his own party, the JD(U), but has paralysed the BJP, its ally.

On the eve of elections, the divide between the two is widening by the day and there is no clear agenda or chain of command to steer the NDA. While Nitish cocks a snook at his



Nitish Kumar

Nitish could mar prospects of BJP, Cong in Bihar

"high command" in Delhi, the local BJP appears to be a house of cards which could collapse any moment. Five months after his appointment, BJP chief Nitin Gadkari has not chosen a state party president nor named a central leader to oversee the party's election strategy. This is crucial, because the Bihar polls

will be the first after Gadkari's elevation and therefore could make or mar his own career.

The state BJP is being managed and manipulated by Friends Of Nitish Kumar (FONK) based in Delhi and Patna. The Congress seems to be in a deeper crisis as state chief Anil Sharma is unable to carry the cadres with him. Jagdish Tytler, the AICC's point man for Bihar, is spending sleepless nights in the heat and dust of the backward state, but his efforts may come to nought because the caste and community-ridden party consists of many invisible Nitish admirers.

Rahul Gandhi's resolve to revive the party in the state is unlikely to yield dividends unless he takes direct command. The only beneficiaries of the confusion are the regional satraps such as Lalu Prasad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan. The fate of the two national parties will depend on how quickly their central leadership rids their respective parties of the virus called FONK.

THE CURRENT BJP leadership may believe that there is no matter of national importance more pressing than the shenanigans of Lalit Modi and Shashi Tharoor, but the parent RSS obviously thinks otherwise. A resolution passed by the Akhil Bharatiya Prathiniidhi Sabha of the RSS, which met last fortnight, was as much an indictment of the Centre and the state government in Jammu & Kashmir for the drift in the state as of the BJP leaders for nitpicking over trivial issues. The resolution was passed just a few days before Manmohan Singh left for the United States where he had a scheduled meeting with his Pak counterpart.

In the past, before any such meeting, the BJP president or the Leader of the Opposition called on the Prime Minister to convey the Opposition's mood on important bilateral issues. No such meeting was sought this time, which the RSS feels, is an indication that the BJP had got its priorities all wrong. The new party president who hasn't allocated work responsibilities to his office bearers despite being at the helm for nearly six months now, is busy hiring second grade management doctors to cure the party's ills. Nitin Gadkari came to office promising to take the BJP back to its roots. So far, he has nothing to show and time may not be on his side for long.