

Power & Politics

PRABHU CHAWLA

THERE'S considerable speculation surrounding the longevity of the government following the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha last week and almost overnight, the UPA regime is seen to be as shaky as an alcoholic's fingers. By steamrolling the Bill through after evicting belligerent MPs from the SP and the RJD, the government is said to have annoyed "allies", leaving the minority regime weaker now than ever before. True, in purely numerical terms, the argument holds water even though the support of the SP and the RJD, led by Lalu Yadav, was at best symbolic. Together, the two account for 24 Lok Sabha MPs and 16 in the Rajya Sabha. The latter will come down drastically further once the biennial elections to the Upper House are held in the next two months.

I don't think such considerations were swirling in the minds of either Prime Minister Manmohan Singh or Congress chief Sonia Gandhi when they decided to end 14 years of procrastination and push through the Women's Bill. A government is judged by the determination with which it pursues its agenda and delivers on its promises. But what we have seen in the last six months is the UPA-II abandoning many of its initiatives under pressure from unpredictable allies like the DMK, Trinamool Congress and others.

Several big ticket reforms on labour and land acquisition and disinvestment in Public Sector Undertakings are on the backburner. The Women's Reservation Bill was neither the most difficult nor the most contentious of the many pending legislations. But tactically, it was the most potent weapon in the government armoury to bulldoze the opposition outside and tame the unruly ones inside. It is no secret that the BJP was a house divided on the issue. The opposition to the Bill in its present form within the Congress was no less

as were the reservations of some of the alliance partners. But for Sonia, the bill was an article of faith and therefore, non-negotiable. Once the government made clear its intention to introduce the Bill last Sunday, some Opposition leaders as well as sections of the Congress sought more time to discuss the Bill in meetings with senior ministers.

When the message was conveyed to Sonia, her reaction was said to have been: "What were they doing for 14 years? How much more time do they need?" Once the message percolated down that it was the High Command's wish, reluctant party-men and alliance partners kept

their reservations under wraps and came out in wholehearted support of the Bill.

For much of its first term and indeed in the eight months of its second term, UPA-II has been hounded by fear and pressure. For the first time, we now see a government saying that we will not negotiate out of fear, or rule under pressure. By pushing the Women's Bill through, both Manmohan and Sonia have sent out a clear message that henceforth, governance will be on the Congress's terms. Thus, technically it is the UPA Government that is in power; the agenda will be that of the Congress. The allies should be happy with little

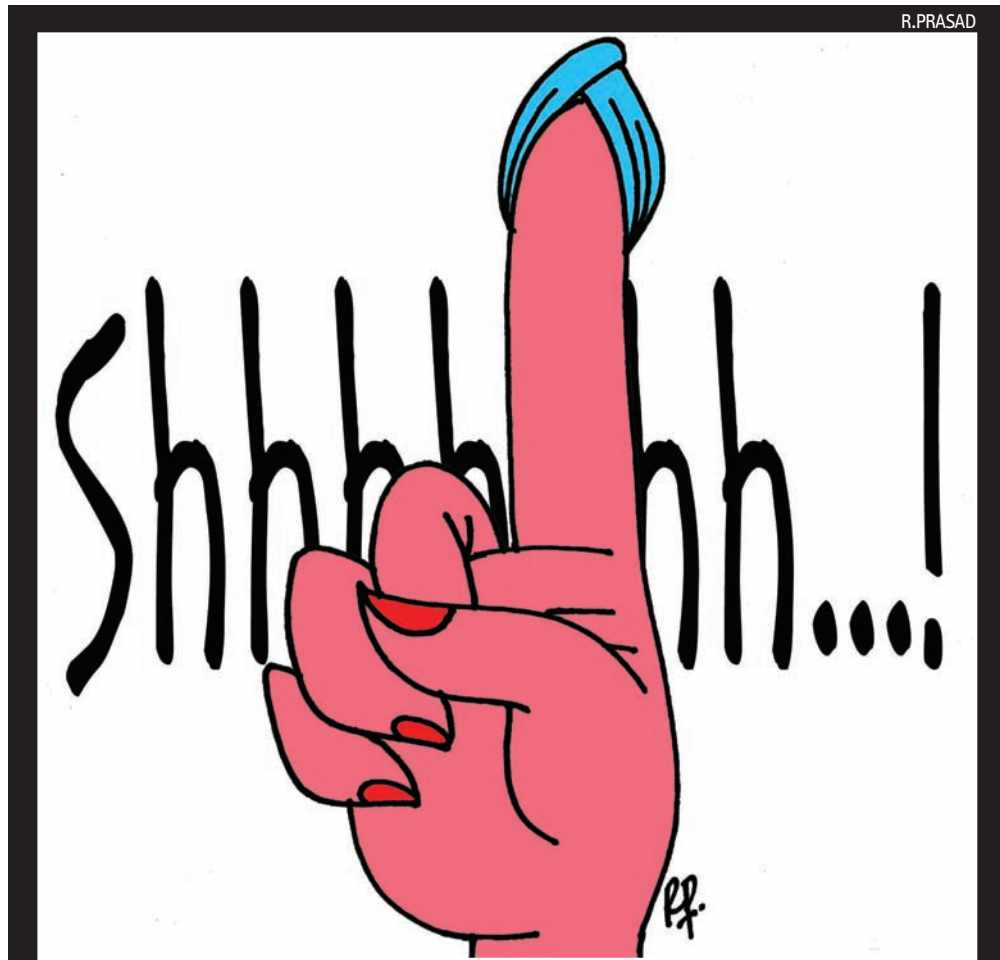
slices of the power cake. Such arrogance would seem misplaced considering that the Congress has no more than 204 members in the 544-member house and withdrawal of support by one of the big alliance partners is enough to bring the government down. But the Congress also knows that the political contours of the 15th Lok Sabha rule out the formation of an alternate government. The BJP just doesn't have the numbers to even make a claim. The alternative is fresh polls, which of course nobody wants.

That's why I see the passage of the Women's Bill as a milestone for the UPA. It has helped the

Sonia-Manmohan duo stamp their authority on the alliance. The unpredictable allies, who have in the past held a pistol to the government's head, will now think deeply before setting out to indulge in political blackmail. It is to be hoped that the confidence does not get converted into arrogance. If the good doctor can continue with his trademark humility, the remaining four-and-a-half-years of the UPA will be quite different from the first five-and-a-half. Plans kept in deep freeze are likely to be revived, big ticket reforms will be back on the agenda. And four years on, it may be time for UPA-III.



Lalu Yadav



Finally in the driver's seat

Gadkari gives up on radical change in BJP

IT'S been nearly three months since Nitin Gadkari replaced Rajnath Singh as the BJP president and almost a month since his appointment was ratified by the party's national executive that met in Indore, but there is still no sign of the new "captain" putting in place his new team of office bearers which is meant to take the BJP back to its glory days. It appears that the BJP's youngest ever president has taken very little time to realise that the party is full of old warhorses who simply refuse to fade away. He has also learnt to his horror that there are more factions in the BJP than there are political parties represented in the Lok Sabha.

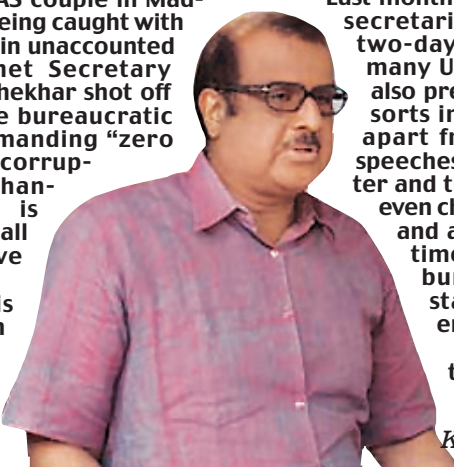
I know him well enough to realise that he has little faith in numerology, astrology and such occult sciences, so what's holding him up? Last I heard, he was advised by someone to let the Ides of March pass, and I gather from very reliable party sources that on Tuesday, March 16, he will announce the new team. Lest you think he was simply whiling away time, forget it. I gather that he has held consultations with more than 120 former and current office bearers of the party, ranging from presidents and general secretaries to RSS bosses, state satraps and others.

At the end of the long exercise, Gadkari seems to have realised that it would be an uphill task to shake off the old ghosts, making his plans to usher in a new team a virtual non-starter. If current indications are anything to go by, no more than 30 to 40 per cent of the incoming team will be new faces, which means that the majority will be the old guard. They may not be able to remote control him the way his predecessor was, but it is evident that Gadkari's wings will be clipped, while the powers of the cabal that runs 11 Ashoka Road continue undiluted.

CORRUPTION in bureaucracy is as old as the hills. But the reports coming in from states in recent times about bureaucrats being caught with their hands in the till are enough to make the few good men and women among them contemplate voluntary retirement. That perhaps explains why after newspapers carried reams and reams about a few bureaucrats, including an IAS couple in Madhya Pradesh, being caught with tens of crores in unaccounted money, Cabinet Secretary K.M. Chandrashekar shot off a letter to the bureaucratic fraternity demanding "zero tolerance on corruption".

Chandrashekar is what I would call a proactive bureaucrat.

Earlier this year, I had in these pages written about his plans to bring babu-



K M Chandrashekar

Cabinet Secy warns babus on corruption

dom in tune with the government's policies in these fast-changing times.

Last month, he had invited chief secretaries of all states for a two-day conference where many Union ministers were also present. It was a first of sorts in many respects, for apart from the mandatory speeches by the prime minister and the cabinet secretary, even chiefs of the army, navy and air force for the first time directly addressed bureaucrats from the states on the security environment.

His latest missive therefore comes as no surprise. "Of late,

there have been some disturbing incidents which call for serious introspection by civil servants. It is important that we ponder over the manner in which we discharge our duties and fulfil our responsibilities and what we need to do to refurbish our image," he wrote while reminding them that though they were appointed on the basis of a fair and open competition, they must respond to the faith that citizens "have reposed in us and meet their hopes and aspirations of good governance. The government's policy of zero tolerance on corruption must be implemented fully and effectively".

It is of course too much to hope that the bureaucrats will start putting the country above their own self-serving interests.

THE recent reconstitution of the various committees of the Union Cabinet gives an indication of the ministerial pecking order. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh chairs eight of the 10 committees which were recast to "lessen the workload burden of the Cabinet". Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Home Minister P. Chidambaram figure in eight of them, followed by Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar who has a seat in seven, followed by Defence Minister A.K. Antony who sits on four committees. Manmohan predictably heads all the key committees including those on prices, economic affairs, infrastructure and matters related to the WTO.

The Prime Minister has had to do a fine balancing act in dealing with the DMK ministers while recasting the committees. M.K. Alagiri, DMK chief Karunanidhi's son and the Union minister for fertilisers and chemicals, finds a place in the committee on prices, while textile minister Dayanidhi Maran is in the committee on political affairs as well as in that of parliamentary affairs. The pride of place goes to A. Raja, who is in three important committees of infrastructure, economic affairs and Unique Identification Authority of India. The placement of three DMK ministers in so many crucial committees leaves one with the feeling that the entire exercise was undertaken just to placate an ally.