



Power & Politics

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WHEN IN doubt, set up a panel. Earlier this month, the UPA government constituted the BN Srikrishna panel on Telangana and last Friday, the Union home ministry announced its terms of reference. If the UPA government hoped these were enough to lull the Telangana agitationists back to sleep, its calculations have gone terribly awry. The TRS which is spearheading the agitation has already rejected the government's initiatives and I suspect that the budget session of the Andhra Assembly which begins today will be stormy, even violent.

Governor EML Narasimhan is to make his maiden address to the assembly but, last heard, wasn't sure what he would say on behalf of the state government since the state cabinet headed by K. Rosaiah, which has to approve his speech, has nothing to say on the Centre's moves. I cannot recall another occasion where the deliberations of the Union Cabinet or central government formed part of the Governor's address in a state which has a duly elected government. Normally, the gravity of the situation would have demanded that the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs be called to discuss the matter, but the central political leadership, which has been feeling the heat from Telangana for about four months now, tossed the ball into P. Chidambaram's court. The home minister's firefighting skills are legendary but there is only so much that even wizards can do and I fear that what the mandarins have devised is not a clear road map to settle the issue but a formula for more political acrobatics.



P Chidambaram

The seven point terms of reference is a classic example of both legal and bureaucratic creativity that totally lacks conviction. The official statement vaguely defined the work of the panel headed by the former judge and four other wise members. Former home secretary V.K. Duggal, who is member secretary in the new panel, discussed with Chidambaram five crucial aspects concerning the title, headquarters, accommodation, administrative and financial allocations for the panel. Two joint secretaries have been assigned to assist Duggal. They are faced with an uphill task. To start with, they have not been able to decide if the office of the panel will be in Mumbai where Srikrishna resides or Hyderabad, the city where the fire rages. There is some "progress" though. The panel has decided to take "blanket permission" from Union Ministry of Personnel, to recruit 15 Research Fellows who will be the main link between the issues and the committee. The panel has also decided it will need a conference hall, 15 stenographers, 50 computer terminals, 10 landline phones with STD con-

nections, fax machines, internet connections, chairs, tables and video and slide projector equipment. If you think this a joke, consider the next one which is hilarious, to say the least. "Clause (4) of the Terms of reference will identify the key issues that must be addressed while considering the matters mentioned in Clauses (1), (2) and (3) above."

It is bureaucratic gobbledegook at its best and betrays the confusion that reigns at the top levels in the Congress party over the creation of the new state. Congress insiders tell me that it was due to pressure mounted by its allies like the DMK and Trinamool Congress that the government didn't take a final call. Top

central leaders such as law minister Veerappa Moily, finance minister Pranab Mukherjee and Chidambaram are all in favour of the government using the Telangana issue to set the tone for the creation of smaller states in due course, but the Congress leadership in the states stands divided on the issue. In almost all big states, the Congress faces the real threat of losing power to regional rivals which could in turn pose a threat to the government at the Centre itself.

Justice Srikrishna and Chidambaram are among the sharpest legal brains in the country and it is the Congress' hope that between them, they will work out something that will

find cross party acceptance. My own hunch is that whatever they come up with will not be enough to get the Congress out of trouble. The TRS has already rejected the panel and is expected to intensify the agitation in the coming days. This in turn will prompt Mayawati to renew her demand for the division of Uttar Pradesh to put the Congress on the defensive during assembly elections in 2012. Ultimately, the government will have just one option left: set up a Second States Reorganisation Commission. It will buy some time as well as help the party make up its mind. Till then, they should milk the political situation for all it's worth.



No end to this crisis

Why did Pranab meet Patil?

EVER so often, we read in the newspapers about the prime minister calling on the president at Rashtrapati Bhavan. Such meetings are described either as mere "courtesy calls" or sometimes more serious interactions where the prime minister and the head of state discussed more vital political issues. But it is seldom that cabinet ministers, however senior they are, meet the president individually. That is why eyebrows shot upwards last weekend when within the space of less than 12 hours, both Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pranab Mukherjee called on President Pratibha Patil. Apart from being finance minister, Pranab also heads the Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs.

So what prompted this unusual meeting? Did the finance minister meet Patil to brief her about the budget that he will present on February 26? Or was a crisis of unmanageable proportions brewing that the president had to be kept in the loop? Or, as is being speculated, did the twin meetings have to do with the judgment in a case in Amravati in Maharashtra, Patil's home district, where the president's husband Devi Singh Shekhawat, a man who has courted much controversy, was found guilty by a subdivisional magistrate's court of usurping two acres of land belonging to a poor local farmer. Mukherjee met the president over an hour-long breakfast, after which he drove across to brief Manmohan Singh about his talks with Patil.

Later, in the same day, Manmohan Singh also went to Rashtrapati Bhavan and the fact that the visit lasted more than an hour suggests it was no mere courtesy call. Rumours swirling around the Capital suggest that the Opposition parties are planning to mount an offensive against the presidential spouse in an effort to embarrass the government. If these turn out to be true, the poor farmer may get his land back.

EVEN more than a week later, the smoke shrouding the secret meeting between Shiv Sena's Bal Thackeray and Union agriculture minister Sharad Pawar is yet to be clear. While Pawar asserts that he had only IPL3 in mind when he drove to Matoshree, the Thackeray residence, the Congress party believes it just wasn't about cricket.

The BCCI president Shashank Manohar accompanied Pawar to meet the senior Thackeray though Pawar is not a member of the IPL board which is an autonomous body, while Manohar is an ex-officio member, being the cricket board chief. If indeed, as Pawar claims, it was IPL3 that he wanted to save from the Sena's army of vandals,



Pawar's tete-a-tete with Balasaheb still a mystery

why didn't he take along any of the IPL team owners or the tournament commissioners?

The Congress-NCP coalition government in the state has taken a strong stand against the Sena and the Home portfolio is with R.R. Patil of the NCP. If indeed it was the IPL that Pawar wanted to discuss with the Sena boss, why was Patil kept out? We all know that Pawar

wears many hats; what is not known is which one he wore on this occasion. That he is a personal friend of Bal Thackeray is also well known. That's why many, especially in the Congress, have concluded that the meeting was not about saving IPL3 but about embarrassing the Congress. After all, among the major political parties, the NCP alone has not come out in defence of Pakistani players while Pawar launched an offensive against team owners for their omission.

While Pawar keeps the Congress on the backfoot with his deadly googlies, the state home minister has shown whose side he is on. On the day the Shah Rukh starrer My Name is Khan was released, he went to the INOX multiplex in Nariman Point, bought a Rs 350 ticket and watched the film for precisely 10 minutes before getting back to office. Not that he found the movie a bore; more likely he just wanted to prove a point.

SECULARISM, it seems, is something to wax eloquent about, but not practise. Taslima Nasrin's case proves just that. When she fled Bangladesh in 1994 after her book *Lajja* inflamed Muslim fanatics, she was hailed as a crusader against fundamentalism. The Marxist government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kolkata gave her abode, New Delhi assured her all protection. But now she has become a victim of competitive vote bank politics.

The darling of the secular chatteratti classes is now searching for a place to hide and platform to speak. Last week, she flew into the Capital from New York where she has been living since she was asked to leave India last August. Due to the many "fatwas" from Islamic fundamentalists everywhere, the security agencies in Delhi have taken Taslima into protective custody but officials handling her are at a loss about her repeated demands to go to Kolkata.

But the same government which once gave her a home now doesn't want her to step into its territory. She came to India to renew her residence permit, something she has to do every six months. Indeed, it was extended but on condition that it must not be used by her to reside in this country and that she leaves immediately thereafter!!! It's as heartless as telling a poor villager: Here's your ration card. You are entitled to keep it as long as you don't draw your rations.