



Power & Politics

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MONEY and power have always been an explosive mix. Politicians use their unbridled powers to spin rags to riches tales while the rich have used the clout of money to make the political establishment dance to their tune. For far too long, this deadly mix, has darkened our political system and turned our politicians into objects of national suspicion. Ordinary people often wonder if there is one law for the rich and another one for the rest. The debate has reached official circles and the provocation for this is a chance scrutiny of the income tax returns of some ministers that revealed huge discrepancies between their affidavits filed before the Election Commission at the time of the last general elections and their declarations before the tax authorities.

It has resurfaced after affidavits filed during last year's elections revealed that nearly half of the candidates had not filed their PAN details and many among those who had filed returns saw their assets increasing five fold, even ten-fold in some cases. Tax authorities have discovered after initial scrutiny that politicians are being wooed with gifts in cash and kind, that money is pouring into ventures floated by their family members and political scions who have graduated from some of the 'doomed universities' are easily finding jobs in the very MNCs that were handing out pink slips to the far more gifted graduates of our best B-schools.

Let's start with our ministers. There is a code of conduct in existence since 1964 applicable to ministers both at the Centre and in the states. Though it has no legal backing, all ministers are expected to scrupulously adhere to it, with the authority of ensuring its observance resting on the prime minister in the case of union ministers and chief ministers and with the chief ministers in respect of his or her cabinet colleagues. As government documents go, it is amazing for its brevity: it runs into less than five pages and lists all the do's and some don'ts for ministers.

Among the do's are that all ministers disclose to the PM or the CMs, as the case may be, details of assets and liabilities, business interests of himself and family members, sever all connections with any business in which he had an interest before his appointment and furnish annually by August 31 declarations to this effect. The don'ts say that ministers must not start or join any business, ensure members of his family don't engage in business with the government, not accept contributions, political, charitable or otherwise, not accept costly gifts, avoid ostentatious parties etc.

How many of our ministers actually adhere to these guidelines is anyone's guess. Mine is that it is less than a handful, at the Centre and the states put together. Is it any wonder then that MPs and MLAs are following the same path. About a year ago, following reports which suggested that several union ministers were not filing their returns despite clear orders from the PMO, I had in these columns written about *India Today* magazine, where I am Editor, invoking the RTI to find out the truth. Our applications kept bouncing between the Central Information Commission, the PMO and the Cabinet

Secretariat for over a year, at the end of which we were none the wiser.

The disease is not new, it is at least two decades old. Even during the NDA regime, there was not a single year in which all ministers submitted details of their wealth to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. But during this regime, whose brainchild is the RTI that allows ordinary citizens to seek financial accountability, truancy has reached new heights. The Prime Minister's office sends its annual missive which are dealt by ministers with a punch of two keys—"control delete". And I am told in the states the situation is far worse.

Why are our Ministers, chief ministers, MPs and MLAs so brazen about violating the code? One of the reasons could be the advent of coalition governments and consequent weak leadership where even a one MP party thinks it can do as he wishes because the government dare not raise a finger. In the UPA, this seems to have become the norm, thus making a mockery of the concept of transparency. The right to know what the government and ministers are doing is fundamental to a democracy. Our political class seems to think that while democracy is a good idea, transparency is not.



Much to hide, lots to gain

Distributing the loaves and fishes is not easy

FINANCE MINISTER Pranab Mukherjee is a harried man these days and the impending budget is not the only reason for this. Also weighing him down is the impending appointments to fill the posts of about 70 non-official directors in nearly two dozen public sector banks. In the past, the prime minister used to have the final say in the matter, but now the job has been left entirely to Pranab, the UPA's man for all seasons and all reasons. There are more applications pending on his table for these jobs than there are petitions from corporate and political lobbies for budgetary concessions and Pranab has shortlisted about 200 candidates from which the final 70 will be chosen.

As usual there is the political lobby of retired or "lost" politicians who are leaving nothing to chance not only to make sure they find a place but find one on the board of one of the top five public sector banks like the SBI or Canara Bank. As Finance Minister in the Rajiv Gandhi government, VP Singh had banned politicians from being appointed to these posts, but after saboteurs had their way, the rule was later reversed.

Apart from politicians, there is another lobby comprising "professional" directors. They are also known as "permanent" directors because of their ability to stay put in their seats despite the many changes of regimes at the Centre. They are about 60 in all spread across different banks but have formed a cosy little club where everyone works in tandem to ensure the benefits are spread evenly. Pranab has plans to screen every applicant and seems determined to keep those directors who have formed a "permanent habitat centre" out. Even if he meets with success there, one final hurdle remains. Those selected by him will finally have to be vetted by the Home Ministry. That's where the indomitable P Chidambaram comes in.

THAT she is unique was never in doubt. But Mayawati's distinct, some would say bizarre, administration style baffles most politicians. As chief minister, she has set her own rules, created new precedents and a new administrative culture itself that could be the envy of most of her peers. Protocol, she thinks, is someone else's problem.

Though she has been in power for almost three years she has hardly attended a meeting called by the Centre on any issue. She doesn't deign to meet visiting central leaders which also serves as a deterrent against the Prime Minister or other central ministers visiting the state. Her boycott of



Maybe she doesn't really care at all

the Chief Ministers meet called by the Prime Minister to discuss price rise and the Naxal menace is only the latest example. Her logic: she will not budge until agriculture minister Sharad Pawar is sacked for attacking her government. She didn't reply to the many letters written to her by Pawar on the sugar crisis and instead directed one of her junior officers to respond to Pawar's secretary to merely state that Pawar's

letter had been noted.

The lady obviously has her own logic. She is convinced that it is not the number of functions she attends in Delhi or the high level delegations from industry, trade or civil society that she receives which will decide her future but her own connect with administration as well as her people. But can a Chief Minister, and one as charismatic as Mayawati stay away from national dialogue?

Uttar Pradesh is not merely the country's largest state but a potential catalyst for overall economic development. Her concentration is on her pet projects like the Ganga and Taj Expressways which she thinks will change the face of her state. Her standoffishness means that the state which elects every sixth MP and has given the country eight of the 13 prime ministers will not be able to tap the benefits of collective national wisdom. Or may be Mayawati doesn't care.

NOT for the first time have Indo-Pak relations fallen victim to the contradictions within the UPA. Politicians and diplomats in the capital were taken by surprise at last week's unilateral announcement by New Delhi about resumption of Indo-Pak talks and it can be safely assumed that this has a lot to do with the recent shake-up at high levels in the government. MK Narayanan, the former National Security Advisor, as is well known, is a hawk, anti-Pak and anti-dialogue and had stalled all efforts aimed at resumption of talks after 26/11. His successor, the former Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon is comparatively a dove. The announcement, so soon after he took over as NSA, indicates that he wants to make up for his botched efforts in Sharm El Sheikh.

Nothing has changed in Indo-Pak ties since those dreadful days in Mumbai and while India may have found international sympathy and support, it's Pakistan's treasury that the Americans are pouring their money into. So it has boiled down to the personal agendas of two Mallus, born within a few miles of each other in that bureaucrat's nursery called Ottapalam in Kerala's Palghat district. Knowing the pressure the Americans are putting on the prime minister, Menon's initiative, I am sure, has Manmohan Singh's blessings. What remains to be seen is: what kind of dialogue are they going to have? Composite? Complete? Civil? Or Chaotic?