

Manmohan Government's Second term : Early Signals and New Rhetoric

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PRESIDENT Pratibha Patil's address to the joint session of the two houses of Parliament has outlined the priorities and direction of the second term of the UPA government. While the government has listed ten points as priority areas, the basic thrust is essentially three-pronged : an unfettered pursuit of the agenda of privatisation, commercialisation and globalisation ; intensification and legitimisation of repressive measures in the name of national security ; and strengthening of Indo-US partnership as the cornerstone of India's foreign policy.

The President's speech underlined the UPA government's commitment to attracting « large foreign investment flows ... through an appropriate policy regime, » ensuring systematic removal of "bottlenecks and delays in implementation of infrastructure projects" taking public-private partnership as the key, and granting "fellow citizens ... every right to own part of the shares of public sector companies." It is not difficult to figure out the "fellow citizens" the government has in mind ! Combating monopolisation and concentration of wealth in private hands was one major declared objective of public sector units ; today the UPA government is advocating wholesale disinvestment of PSUs precisely to promote corporate consolidation.

The 'bottlenecks and delays in implementation of infrastructure projects' mentioned in the President's address can hardly be a reference to bureaucratic or procedural issues - because on the level of policies and procedures, the framework has already been sufficiently liberalised. The bottlenecks must refer primarily to either popular opposition to land acquisition plans or environmental objections raised by the people and concerned experts. Clearly, the Congress now believes that it has got the strength to bulldoze all such objections and impose all these mega projects in the name of infrastructural development.

It is instructive to note in this context the poll results from West Bengal and Maharashtra. The electoral upheaval against the ruling Left Front in West Bengal can only be described as a popular backlash against the government's arrogant move to treat popular objections as 'bottlenecks' and remove them by force. In Maharashtra too, the Congress lost the Raigad seat, the site of the Reliance's proposed massive Mahamumbai SEZ - the Congress lost its seat in the Lok Sabha polls. In fact, the Congress-led State Government had held a referendum on the issue of land acquisition for SEZ in some villages of Raigad in 2008. But, flouting the promise of declaring the outcome within a week, the Government never declared the result even as reportedly 92% local people voted against the proposed SEZ.

By refusing to allow any further extension to the deadline for land acquisition for this SEZ, the Supreme Court has now set the stage for possible scrapping of the Mahamumbai SEZ project. While the government talks of bulldozing all objections, democratic forces must exert pressure on the government to scrap the SEZ Act and put a complete halt to corporate landgrab.

In most parts of the country, a massive fraud is being perpetrated on the rural poor in the name of NREGA and the jobless in rural areas have massive complaints regarding the extremely tardy implementation of this so-called employment 'guarantee' Act. This has however not stopped the

President from lauding the NREGA as the world's largest ongoing rural reconstruction programme. The government has also gone on to promise a slum-free India within the next five years by introducing a Rajiv Awas Yojana on the lines of the corruption-ridden Indira Awas Yojana. Going by past experience the Congress can only try to achieve a slum-free India by organising massive evictions of slum-dwellers. While the Congress beats its drum, the people's movement will have to boldly confront the government on issues of jobs, housing, health and education for all.

The question of national security and a zero-tolerance approach to terrorism figure on top of the ten priority areas underlined in the President's address. The phrase 'zero-tolerance approach' is borrowed from the American lexicon of "war on terror", and it essentially seeks legitimacy for all sorts of infringement and assault on democracy and human rights, whether directly by the state or through some Salwa Judum kind of public-private partnership. Draconian laws like AFSPA, Chhattisgarh's Public Security Act, or the recent amendments to UAPA and affronts to peace and democracy like the Salwa Judum have all been justified by the UPA Government in the name of countering terrorism and Maoism.

Such draconian laws have not only been opposed tooth and nail by the democratic opinion in the country, the judiciary too has occasionally questioned the validity of such moves. The Supreme Court which had earlier made adverse remarks regarding Salwa Judum, recently granted bail to Dr. Binayak Sen, indicating in the tone of its brief order that the last two years of his incarceration in jail was a serious travesty of justice. This order is a reprimand, not just for the BJP Government of Chhattisgarh but also for the UPA Government which also actively backed the Salwa Judum and the jailing of Dr. Sen under Chhattisgarh's draconian anti-terror law. In the name of countering terrorism, the Congress cannot be allowed to ride roughshod on basic democratic rights and norms.

The Indian diaspora and India's "restless" young population find prominent mention towards the end of the President's speech. The speech talks of the strength and power of the Indian diaspora, but remains blissfully oblivious of the growing uncertainty and racist assaults that Indian students, workers and professionals abroad are experiencing in today's recession-marred milieu. There is a glowing mention of how our "young people are tearing down the narrow domestic walls of religion, region, language, caste, and gender that confine them," but not a word about the new walls that are daily being erected, whether by a paranoid US desperate not to lose jobs to India and Indians, or a sectarian Raj Thackeray and his men who would like to drive away North Indian students and workers from President Patil's own home state of Maharashtra.

Promises for the poor and performance for the rich ; rhetorical commitment to secularism and political concessions to communalism ; lip-service to empowerment and democracy, and doles, batons and bullets in practice - such has been the characteristic track record of the Congress. For all the new phrases and ambitious pronouncements, it is not difficult to discern the familiar trappings in the initial steps and declarations of the new Congress-led regime.

P.S.

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