

Parties unite, sweep away election clean-up clauses

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New Delhi: The political establishment, including the ruling BJP-led alliance, closed ranks on Friday unanimously to reject controversial clauses in the draft bill on electoral reforms, the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill.

The government had earlier circulated the draft bill that proposed to disqualify candidates who had been chargesheeted for "two heinous crimes". But an all-party meeting here decided that only those candidates who had been convicted for an offence punishable with two years' imprisonment could be disqualified, law minister Jana Krishnamurthy announced after the meeting.

Although the draft bill did not take cognisance of the supreme court order of May 2 asking candidates to declare their assets and liabilities, Friday's meeting decided that elected candidates should disclose their assets and liabilities in an affidavit before the presiding officers of legislative bodies. However, the law minister added that rules regarding disclosure would be framed by the ethics committee of the central legislature and state assemblies.

He said the government would bring in a new bill on the basis of these amendments

and get it passed during the current parliament session. About the earlier draft, the minister said, "I can't say that the draft was rejected. All parties felt that disqualification should be on the basis of conviction and that nomination papers should be simple."

The BJP also sought the removal of the clauses pertaining to disqualification on the basis of a chargesheet. The party was represented by Sunil Shastri and V.K. Malhotra. The Congress, represented by Pranab Mukherjee and Hansraj Bharadwaj, said returning officers should not have the power to reject nominations on the basis of a chargesheet and that conviction should be the only criterion.

Emerging from the meeting, Mr Bharadwaj said the Congress opposed the clause because "there could be no disqualification without a person being held guilty by a court of law".

CPM leader Somnath Chatterjee said his party favoured early implementation of the recommendations of the Indrajit Gupta committee, the Dinesh Goswami committee and Law Commission reports in the matter and wanted the government to keep the essence of these recommendations in mind while drafting the bill.

Gujarat the spur for Paswan to quit, UP the clinching factor

■ Feared BJP-BSP deal would sideline him

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NEW DELHI, APRIL 29

UTTAR Pradesh signalled his marginalisation within the NDA as a dalit leader of consequence and Gujarat provided a defining moment for Ram Vilas Paswan to make a break with the ruling combine in order to safeguard his long-term politics.

The timing of his resignation, which caught the ruling combine by surprise, had a touch of political genius. Even though he was the first among the NDA members to call for Narendra Modi's resignation, Paswan is too much of a political animal to do anything on the spur of the moment or without hard calculation.

That Paswan's resignation should come a couple of hours after Mayawati staked her claim to form the government in Lucknow was more than symbolic. Though his Lok Jan Shakti was set to support her government till yesterday, the writing on the wall had been clear for some time.

The BJP's tie-up with Mayawati would have lessened considerably his importance

within the NDA in the months to come. The fact that Mayawati was not prepared to give the Lok Jan Shakti — which had decided to support her government — a ministerial berth was only a straw in the wind to indicate the shape of things to come.

As it is Paswan had been smarting from his demotion a year ago, when he lost the Communications portfolio and was given Coal and Mines. At the time, though, there was precious little he could do about it.

Now, Paswan stands to lose more than he will gain by continuing with the NDA. The large Muslim population in his constituency, Hajipur, must have had him worried after Gujarat erupted and after the BJP seemed to be going back to its aggressive Hindutva line.

He will now try and forge a dalit-Muslim combination in Bihar, which Mayawati targeted successfully in the last two elections.

In the short run, Paswan's decision to quit because of the failure of the BJP to send Narendra Modi packing will naturally put pressure on all the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2