

Five old-new faces in the Union Cabinet

A look at the Congress veterans who have been inducted into the Government.

Harish Khare

A. R. Antulay is a quintessential Congressman of the Indira Gandhi days. He was one of the general secretaries at the All India Congress Committee at a time when Mrs. Gandhi was in political purgatory (1978-1979). He was an aggressive organiser and a passionate advocate on her behalf. In those younger days, he practised a kind of rougher partisanship and was credited with the authorship of the controversial proposal to write a presidential form of government into the Constitution.

When Mrs. Gandhi returned to power in 1980, he was rewarded for his loyalty. He became the first — and the only — Muslim Chief Minister of Maharashtra. His appointment was a statement of her assertive secular politics. However, as Chief Minister Mr. Antulay quickly overstepped the norms of fair play and had to step down when it was reported that he was collecting 'donations' by cheques in the name of an 'Indira Gandhi Prathisthan.'

In Maharashtra, for the most part he aligned himself with anti-Sharad Pawar forces, a stance that earned him a Cabinet slot in the Narasimha Rao dispensation. Mr. Antulay might have mellowed, but he is a hundred per cent 'political creature.' He can be expected to use his new position of Minister for Minority Affairs to rival Arjun Singh as the UPA Government's least ambivalent champion of secularism.

Murli Deora: As in the case of Mr. Antulay, the political baptism of Murli Deora took place in the Indira Gandhi era. A leader in the manner of S. K. Patil and Rajni Patel, 'Murli Bhai' is a 'friend of friends.' He can claim to be a man with only friends and no known detractors. He also has a reputation as a man of known and confirmed loyalties: to the Nehru-Gandhi family, the Reliance group, the rest of the corporate sector, and the American establishment. But no one can assert with any certainty the order of these loyalties.

It was Indira Gandhi who appointed Mr. Deora president of the Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee, a position he held for nearly 20 years. He was and remains a loyal partisan of the family. His friendship with the other family, the Ambanis, also dates back to the late 1970s. When after Dhirubhai Ambani's death the two Ambani brothers — Mukesh and Anil — fell out, Mr. Deora perceptively chose the winning side. A genial host, at 'Chambers' (at the Taj Mansingh) he regularly brought Congress politicians face to face with the corporate set. He can be expected to use his charge of the Petroleum Ministry to deepen communication between the party and business leaders. He is also a self-confessed friend of the Americans. He will happily chaperone any visiting American of some consequence around town. When in a relaxed mood, he can catalogue various doors he can get opened in

Washington D.C., irrespective of the White House's political colour.

Before May 2004, Mr. Deora's house at Lodi Estate was the place where Manmohan Singh, Natwar Singh, Ahmed Patel, Ambika Soni, and a few others would gather for an agreeable lunch and a spot of bonding.

The first thing **Sushil Kumar Shinde** will do is give Shivraj Patil, the most nattily dressed man in the Union Cabinet, a run for his money. This weakness for fine dressing in no way distracts from Mr. Shinde's well-deserved respect as party *apparatchik*. As a general secretary, he was always willing to put in long hours at 24 Akbar Road, the party's headquarters. He knows legions of Congressmen and Congresswomen across the country by name. He is the party's most best-known Dalit face. A party establishment man to the core, he cheerfully went to Mumbai to take over as Chief Minister when Vilasrao Deshmukh fell out of favour with the high command; and gamely made way for Mr. Deshmukh when the party leadership decided to back him to head the Congress-Nationalist Congress coalition.

Being an out-and-out political activist, Mr. Shinde was distinctly uncomfortable in the Hyderabad Raj Bhavan. He beseeched party managers to allow him to re-enter the hurly-burly of the political arena. Like Mr. Antulay, he adds to the political persona of the Union Cabinet.

Ambika Soni had her primary education

in the Sanjay Gandhi school of politics, and went on to finishing school as a self-advertised Sonia acolyte. The new Minister for Tourism and Culture takes great pride in this fact. The very first appointment Ms. Gandhi made as Congress president was Ms. Soni as head of a front organisation. Since then, 'Ambika-ji' has steadfastly served Ms. Gandhi. Notwithstanding this personalisation of loyalty, Ms. Soni is joyfully combative when it comes to projecting the Congress point of view. As the head of the media department at the AICC over the past few years, she has been the party's public voice and is respected for her unapologetic advocacy of the party's leadership and its priorities.

Although she can be deemed to have been rewarded for seven long years of organisational work, she can be relied upon to play her role as the watchdog of 'Congress interests' in the Union Cabinet.

Vayalar Ravi, let it be put on record, was a member of the Congress Working Committee as far back as 1974-75, and has a reputation of being a bit of a 'socialist.' Like Mr. Antulay, he represents the Congress old guard. He is well versed in the grammar of coalition working. In his various innings as general secretary of the party, he has consistently questioned the neo-liberal shift in economic policies. He is not known to be enamoured of the creeping pro-American bias in India's foreign policy.

Heavy shuffle with light results

RADHIKARAMASESHAN

New Delhi, Jan. 29: The Manmohan Singh government's second cabinet shuffle and expansion was billed as an overhaul to set in course the "direction of the ruling coalition", but looks like an exercise with many changes without too much of a direction.

The Prime Minister had apparently wanted to rid his team of members who were either unwilling to accept his authority or were incompetent, weed out those against whom there were repeated complaints of misuse of office, create a stronger government-Congress link and bring in youth.

Nineteen inductions and a few changes later, Singh said: "We wanted to ensure proper regional representation and give importance to young and talented people."

Did the exercise reflect this intention?

First, "proper regional representation". Four of the 19 new members are from Andhra Pradesh and three each from Maharashtra and Punjab. From the five poll-bound states of Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Assam, Bengal and Kerala, there are only two: Vayalar Ravi of Kerala and G.K. Vasan of Tamil Nadu.

The logic for the heavy intake from Andhra was that it had returned as many as 29 MPs in the 2004 elections of whom only three — Renuka Choudhury, S. Jaipal Reddy and Dasari Narayana Rao — were made ministers. Choudhury and Reddy came to the Congress from the Telugu Desam and the Janata Dal, respectively, while Rao was a Rajya Sabha member.

Sources argued that "justice" had to be done to the Lok Sabha members.

In Maharashtra, the Con-



Ambika Soni speaks to Sonia Gandhi during the swearing-in at Rashtrapati Bhavan. Picture by Rajesh Kumar

BALANCE OF POWER

Winners

Sushil Kumar Shinde
Wanted to quit as Andhra Pradesh governor and return to politics. Got his way

Murli Deora
Got petroleum and natural gas

Shibu Soren
Reinstated, even after he lost Jharkhand for UPA

Prem Chand Gupta
Promoted to cabinet rank on Lalu Prasad's insistence

Anand Sharma
Junior minister for external affairs, a portfolio he was eyeing for long

Jairam Ramesh
May get rural development or commerce

Ahmed Patel
Political secretary to the Congress president will hold sway over party, with sole "competitor" Ambika Soni out of the way

Janardhan Dwivedi
Congress general secretary might head media cell in Ambika's place

Losers

Mani Shankar Aiyar
Lost petroleum and natural gas

Ambika Soni
Didn't get portfolio of choice, I&B

Vayalar Ravi
Kerala veteran given overseas Indian affairs, an inconsequential portfolio

Kapil Sibal
Promoted to cabinet rank, but with same portfolios. Wanted law or petroleum or power

gress felt, it had to consolidate the "gains" made in the recent bypolls while for Punjab, no rationale was provided save to say the party had to retrieve its lost base before the next elections. However, of the three from Punjab, two — Ambika Soni and Ashwani Kumar — are Rajya Sabha members.

The Hindi heartland was given the short shrift with Akhilesh Das, a former Lucknow mayor, being the lone induction from Uttar Pradesh.

The expectation was that

Mohsina Kidwai would get a berth to fill up the minority quota, but she was passed up for A.R. Antulay, who has been plucked out of wilderness.

Today's exercise fulfilled, to an extent, the latter part of the Prime Minister's statement — bringing in "young and talented" persons. P.K. Bansal, Anand Sharma, Jairam Ramesh and Ashwini Kumar could qualify in the "talented" category. Whether or not they have talent, the quartet is at least articulate. The same goes for

Soni and Vayalar Ravi, both veterans, too.

Sharma was the party spokesman on foreign policy while Ramesh's expertise lies in economics. As the convener of the National Advisory Council, headed by Sonia Gandhi, he is expected to be the interface with the government on social sector initiatives that are meant to promote the interests of the common man.

The "youth" brigade enhanced its presence with three representatives: Ajay Maken,

D. Purandareswari and M.M. Pallam Raju. Maken brings some experience with him because he was a minister in the Delhi government and was the Speaker in the Assembly. Raju, an engineer by training, was a member of the AICC's training cell on policy issues.

Experience is at hand also in the shape of Sushil Kumar Shinde and Antulay, both former chief ministers, though some might argue they have too much of it.

If the exercise fell short of

the Prime Minister's expectations, sources said, it was mainly because he wanted to wield the broom at the top.

"In a monolith like the Congress that is not possible because there are checks and balances. Within the parameters, this will be considered a huge shuffle," a functionary said.

With the allies, he could do nothing. While he did not wish to give Prem Chand Gupta, the minister for company affairs, a promotion, Lalu Prasad had his way.

THE TELEGRAPH

30 JAN 2006

PM plans big party gets cold feet

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Jan. 28: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's intention to carry out a cabinet overhaul has run up against the Congress leadership's inclination to play safe.

As a result, what was planned as a major expansion and shuffle of the ministry might be reduced to a "fill-in-the-blanks" exercise when it takes place at noon tomorrow.

Sources said the top posts — external affairs, finance, home, defence, law and human resource development — are likely to remain untouched despite the Prime Minister's wish to make changes.

The cut-and-paste job that

might take place instead is expected to affect the ministries of petroleum and natural gas, power, science and technology, chemicals and fertilisers and steel, and environment and forests and wildlife.

The only significant change being discussed is the likely appointment of general secretary Ambika Soni as information and broadcasting minister in place of Priya Ranjan Das Munshi, provided she wants to leave Sonia Gandhi's side.

Mani Shankar Aiyar, the petroleum minister, could turn out to be big loser.

The sources said though Singh had wanted to divest himself of external affairs, at the end of three long meetings with Sonia, the head of the United Progressive Alliance,

APPOINTMENTS

- **Sushil Kumar Shinde**, Andhra governor
- **S.M. Krishna**, Maharashtra governor
- **Karan Singh**, Rajya Sabha MP
- **Veerappa Moily**, chairman, administrative reforms commission



➤ **Ambika Soni**, close to Sonia

ALSO IN LINE

- Shibu Soren, Muri Deora, Giridhar Gamang, Mohsina Kidwai, N. Janardhan Reddy

it was felt he should keep the ministry until at least President George W. Bush's visit in March.

At least three names were

DEMOTION

- Ram Vilas Paswan** may lose one of three: chemicals, fertilisers and steel
- Mani Shankar Aiyar** may lose petroleum and natural gas



Kapil Sibal

Petroleum is a toss-up between him and Kamal Nath. Sibal may get commerce if Nath is given petroleum

Prithviraj Chavan may get S&T and ocean development

shortlisted for the job: Karan Singh, Andhra governor Sushil Kumar Shinde and Maharashtra governor S.M. Krishna. But there was no consensus on any of them.

The Prime Minister had wished to bring in C. Rangarajan, the chairman of his economic advisory council and

former RBI chief. Such a high-profile entry would have suggested a change in the finance ministry, occupied by P. Chidambaram.

A plan like this was said to be on the Prime Minister's mind, despite the fact that the budget is a month away. Rangarajan was to be taken into the Rajya Sabha as a presidential nominee.

But an influential section in the party cited the former Andhra governor's closeness to N. Chandrababu Naidu, the Telugu Desam leader who was then chief minister.

Chidambaram was to have gone to home or external affairs. The plan was to move home minister Shivraj Patil to Bihar as governor but, counted as a Sonia loyalist, he is un-

likely to be touched.

Aiyar, also a Sonia loyalist, may not be as fortunate. The claimants for petroleum that he holds now are Muri Deora, Kamal Nath and Kapil Sibal. If Nath, who has commerce and industry, were to get petroleum, Sibal would be elevated as a cabinet minister and given his portfolios.

It seems almost certain Jharkhand leader Shibu Soren, dropped after a court case, will be reinstated in the coal ministry.

That leaves three vacancies in the power, sports and overseas affairs ministries, but the contenders are several — Vayalar Ravi, Veerappa Moily, Giridhar Gamang, Ajay Madhav, G.K. Vasan and Mohsina Kidwai.

9 comments to this article

Minorities get a bigger voice

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 29 JANUARY

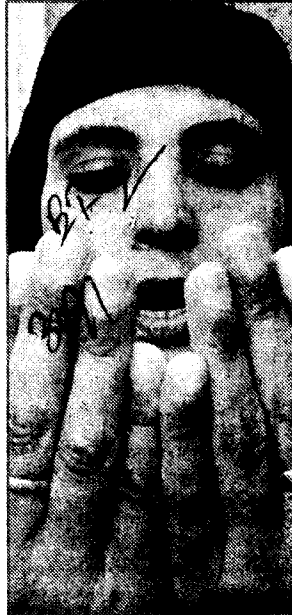
IN an effort to build bridges with the minority communities, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Sunday constituted a ministry for minority affairs and handed over its charge to former Maharashtra chief minister AR Antulay.

The decision was not totally unexpected as the Congress leadership knew its revival in north India was dependent on regaining confidence of the minority community. The Muslims, who once formed part of the party's core constituency, are now backing regional players such as Mulayam Singh Yadav. Even new entrants like Mayawati have been successful in establishing contacts with the community.

The party's anxiety to be on the right side of the minority opinion stems from another reason. In poll-bound Assam, the party is facing the disaffection of the minority community. Its efforts to endear itself to the community, like the promise to revive the IMDT Act in another form, running into judicial trouble, the party wants to send out a firm message to the community.

But the latest effort could become yet another tokenism if the government failed to define the ministry's work. In the event of the ministry being tasked with formulating "an agenda for the minorities", there could be demand for more tangible measures.

The development is sure to give the Opposition, particularly the BJP, an opportunity to revive the appeasement slogan against the ruling side. With the competition hotting up for the majority sections in the Hindi heartland, badly divided after



the advent of affirmative action, the BJP can be expected to further raise the political temperature over the issue. The government is now facing a lot of attack over its attempts to carve out communal quota in states such as Andhra Pradesh as well as the HRD ministry's efforts to accord minority status to the Aligarh Muslim University.

Both the moves were rejected by the judiciary. However, the government is in no mood to give up and leaders like Arjun Singh are promising ways to overcome troubles from the court. The new department's first task would be to address the two key issues.

Politically, the moves on the part of the Congress is certain to be a source of unease for "the Sultans of appeasement" like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Lalu Prasad Yadav. The two Yadavs, in the coming days, can be expected to devise ways for frustrating the Congress' efforts.

আইনমন্ত্রীর যুক্তি ওড়াল সিবিআই এখনই ইস্তফা নয়, সনিয়া রেহাই দিলেন ভরদ্বাজকে

নিজস্ব সংবাদদাতা, নয়াদিল্লি, ১৪ জানুয়ারি: বফর্স-কাণ্ড নিয়ে দীর্ঘ আলোচনার পরে কেন্দ্রীয় আইনমন্ত্রী হংসরাজ ভরদ্বাজকে আপাতত 'রেহাই' দিলেন কংগ্রেসের শীর্ষ নেতৃত্ব। ভরদ্বাজের পদত্যাগের দাবিতে রাজনৈতিক মহলে শোরগোল উঠলেও এখনই ইস্তফা দিতে হচ্ছে না তাঁকে। আদৌ দিতে হবে কি না, তা নির্ভর করবে আগামী কয়েক দিনে জল কোন দিকে গড়ায় তার উপরে।

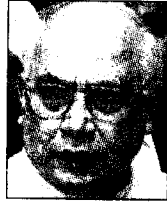
প্রধানমন্ত্রী মনমোহন সিংহ অবশ্য চাইছিলেন, ভরদ্বাজ এখনই ইস্তফা দিন। তাঁর সচিবালয় থেকে কালই জানিয়ে দেওয়া হয়েছিল, ওস্তাভিও কুত্রোচ্চির ব্যাঙ্ক অ্যাকাউন্টকে ছাড়পত্র দেওয়ার ঘটনায় মনমোহন রুপ্ত। কংগ্রেসের একাংশও ভরদ্বাজকে বিদায় দেওয়ার পক্ষেই ছিলেন। তাঁদের বক্তব্য ছিল, তা হলে বিজেপি'র প্রচারকে ভোঁতা করে দেওয়া যাবে। কিন্তু ভরদ্বাজ আজ ফাইলপত্র দেখিয়ে সনিয়া, মনমোহন ও অন্যান্য কংগ্রেস নেতাদের বুঝিয়ে দেন, তিনি বেআইনি কিছুই করেননি। বিষয়টি প্রধানমন্ত্রীকে জানাননি বলে দুঃখপ্রকাশ করেন তিনি। সে ক্ষেত্রেও অবশ্য তার সাফাই ছিল যে প্যাসেনেল মন্ত্রকের প্রতিমন্ত্রী সুরেশ পট্টোরিকে গোটা বিষয়টা জানিয়েছিলেন। পট্টোরি আবার এই বলে হাত ধুয়ে ফেলেছেন যে, এ ব্যাপারে তিনি কিছুই জানেন না।

আজ সন্ধ্যায় কোর কমিটির বৈঠকে এ নিয়ে আলোচনা হয়। সনিয়ার সঙ্গে কথা বলেন মনমোহন। প্রতিরক্ষামন্ত্রী প্রণব মুখোপাধ্যায়ের সঙ্গেও তাঁর কথা হয়। শেষ পর্যন্ত ঠিক হয়, ভরদ্বাজ এমন কোনও অন্যায় করেননি, যার জন্য তাঁকে ইস্তফা দিতে হবে। ইস্তফার পক্ষে না থাকা কংগ্রেস শিবিরের যুক্তি হল, ভরদ্বাজ সরে দাঁড়ালে বিজেপি'র পালের বাতাস ফাড়া তো যাবেই না, বরং মনে হবে যে সরকার চাপের কাছে নতিস্বীকার করল।

কিন্তু তার মানেই যে গোটা বিতর্কে ইতি পড়ল, এমনটা মনে করার কোনও কারণ নেই। বফর্সের ব্যাপারে ভরদ্বাজের সিদ্ধান্ত নিয়ে সোমবার সুপ্রিম কোর্টে একটি জনস্বার্থ মামলার শুনানির কথা রয়েছে। সেই শুনানির প্রেক্ষিতে যদি সুপ্রিম কোর্ট কোনও সিদ্ধান্ত নেয়, তবে তা গোটা পরিস্থিতিটাই পাল্টে যাবে। সে ক্ষেত্রে হায়দরাবাদে এআইসিসি-র পূর্ণাঙ্গ

অধিবেশনের পরে কেন্দ্রীয় মন্ত্রিসভায় রদবদলের সময় ভরদ্বাজের উপর কোপ পড়বে বলে রাজনৈতিক সূত্রের খবর। তাঁর রাজ্যসভার সদস্যপদের মেয়াদ আর খুব বেশি নেই। তখন ভরদ্বাজকে ফের মনোনয়ন দেওয়া হবে না বলেই জানা গিয়েছে।

সিবিআইয়ের পক্ষ থেকেও আজ ভরদ্বাজের সিদ্ধান্তকে আদৌ আমল না দিয়ে জানিয়ে দেওয়া হয়েছে, কুত্রোচ্চির যে দু'টি ব্যাঙ্ক অ্যাকাউন্ট মুক্ত করে দেওয়া হয়েছিল, সেগুলি কোনও ভাবে বফর্স-কাণ্ডের সঙ্গে জড়িত কি না, তা আবার খতিয়ে দেখা হবে। সিবিআই মুখপাত্র জি মোহাস্তি আজ জানিয়েছেন, এর জন্য প্রয়োজনে নতুন করে অনুরোধপত্রও পাঠাবে সিবিআই। তাঁর বক্তব্য, ইতালির সঙ্গে ভারতের বন্দি প্রত্যর্পণ চুক্তি



ভরদ্বাজ

না-থাকা সত্ত্বেও, বফর্স মামলায় শুনানির সময় কুত্রোচ্চিকে উপস্থিত করানোর জন্য সিবিআই আইনি এবং কূটনৈতিক পথে যথাসাধ্য চেষ্টা করবে। বফর্স দালালি কাণ্ডে কুত্রোচ্চির কোনও ভূমিকা ছিল না বলে কাল ছাড়পত্র দিয়ে দিয়েছিলেন ভরদ্বাজ। অথচ সিবিআই কর্তারা বলছেন, কুত্রোচ্চির বিরুদ্ধে এখনও চার্জশিট রয়েছে। সে ফেরার। তাকে প্রত্যর্পণ করে এ দেশে নিয়ে আসার চেষ্টা চলছে।

দেশের প্রধান তদন্তকারী সংস্থার এই সিদ্ধান্তের মধ্যে দিয়ে ভরদ্বাজের সিদ্ধান্তের সামনে বড় ধরনের প্রশ্ন চিহ্ন ঝুলিয়ে দেওয়া হল। সিবিআই প্রধানমন্ত্রী মনমোহন সিংহের এজিয়ারের মধ্যে পড়ে। রাজনৈতিক সূত্রের খবর, ভরদ্বাজের সিদ্ধান্তে প্রধানমন্ত্রীর উম্মা এই ঘটনার মধ্যে দিয়ে স্পষ্ট হয়ে গিয়েছে।

ওস্তাভিও কুত্রোচ্চির ব্যাঙ্ক অ্যাকাউন্টকে ছাড়পত্র দিয়ে চক্রবৃহের মধ্যে পড়ে গিয়েছেন কেন্দ্রীয় আইনমন্ত্রী হংসরাজ ভরদ্বাজ। শুধু ছাড়পত্র দেওয়াই নয়, গত দু'দিনে বিভিন্ন জায়গায় সাক্ষাৎকার দিয়ে নিজের সিদ্ধান্ত ব্যাখ্যাও করে চলেছেন। ভরদ্বাজ বলেছেন, এই সিদ্ধান্তের সঙ্গে সিবিআই তদন্তের কোনও সম্পর্ক নেই। লন্ডনের ব্যাঙ্ক থেকেও চাপ আসছিল যে, আর কত দিন এই অ্যাকাউন্ট 'ফ্রিজ' করে রাখা সম্ভব।

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Our Political Bureau
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WITH the CBI making it clear that it had opposed the defreezing of Italian middleman Ottavio Quattrocchi's UK bank accounts, an embarrassed government and the Congress were today scurrying for cover. While the prime minister's establishment took the by-now-familiar position that it was "kept in the dark", the Congress claimed that it had no role in the government's decision.

But with the Opposition casting stones at Sonia Gandhi, whose connections with the Quattrocchi family began much before Rajiv Gandhi became the prime minister and Sonia Gandhi entered politics, the party was veering round the view that law minister HR Bhardwaj should be made the scapegoat.

This convenient scapegoat, however, may not end the troubles for the prime minister as the decision not to send a CBI official along with additional solicitor general B Dutta was taken by the DoPT. The ministry of personnel is directly under the charge of the prime minister and that "he-didn't-know-about-the-Quattrocchi case" will not find any takers.

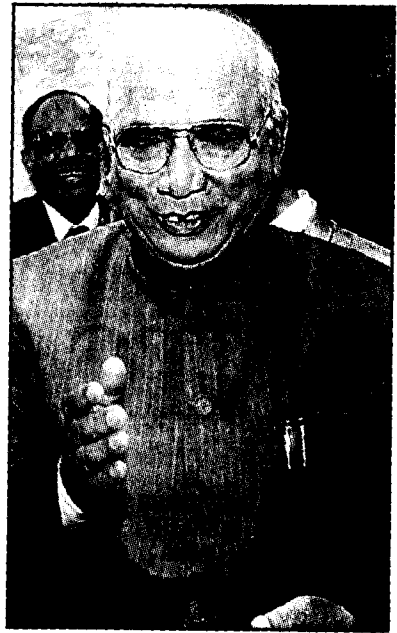
That the ruling party and the government were finding themselves in an embarrassing corner was evident when leaders of the party and the prime ministerial establishment quietly abandoned "it's-just-another-legal-opinion" view that both sides

connect to
Bhardwaj
May Follow
Natwar

had been pushing for the past two days.

The two establishments were, till last night, parroting the Bhardwaj line that there was no case against Quattrocchi and that the Opposition was "flogging a dead horse". But with the CBI's stand pointing to the fact that the government indeed intervened for helping the Italian middleman, there was realisation that a "we-will-fight-it-out" position had become untenable.

There was also acknowledgement that the brazen effort to help Quattrocchi has further depleted the moral authority of the regime. With the Iraq oil scam charges against the Congress and Natwar Singh giving the impression that the party and its leaders were on the take, the Quattrocchi charges will only complicate matters for the ruling regime. The allies have made it plain that the regime cannot count on their support for protecting the interests of unwholesome elements like Quattrocchi. The regime changed tack after the Left came out with a strong indict-



ment of the government's decision. While the CPM asked the government to explain the reasons for giving the "questionable legal opinion", the CPI has asked the government to institute a probe into the entire episode.

There is also fear that the resurfacing of the Bofors issue will give the Opposition parties, which are divided, to come together against the government.