



Prospects of mid-term poll!

WHAT does the sudden announcement by government to introduce FDI in retail and to raise the diesel price signify — concern with policy or with politics? The Cabinet had cleared the FDI policy almost a year ago but political considerations delayed its implementation. Now have political considerations forced it to suddenly announce its implementation? Miss Mamata Banerjee, the UPA's most powerful constituent after the Congress, has served notice to roll back FDI in retail before Tuesday or face the consequences. She recently conferred with Samajwadi Party leaders who threw dark hints of an early poll and the emergence of a Third Front government after it. The government would be fully aware of the possible consequences of suddenly introducing reforms. Why, then, did the government go ahead without informing its key regional allies?

A hint is provided by what the Prime Minister reportedly remarked: "It is better to go down fighting." In other words it is better to go down fighting for reforms than to go out in disgrace due to corruption. At one stroke the Congress in the event of a mid-term poll has shifted the main attention from corruption to the debate about economic reforms. But was a mid-term poll inevitable? Perhaps

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the government had sensed that it was. The net of corruption was rapidly closing in on the top Congress leadership. If indeed Miss Banerjee withdraws support after Tuesday and Mr Mulayam Singh does not fill the breach, the government would lose majority to force a mid-term poll.

In the event the entire national buzz would dwell on poll alignments and economic reforms. Who would immediately talk of corruption, of Coalgate, or whether coal minister Mr Shripakash Jaiswal should resign? The Opposition has predictably risen to the bait. It has characterised the reform movement as a sellout to foreign powers and of betraying the

common man. It is doubtful if the opposition would debate the conditionality required to make FDI in retail successful. Electoral fever would persuade it to vehemently oppose the measure wholesale. That would provide a window of opportunity to the Congress. The government could focus on the policy and its beneficial impact.

If Congress leaders successfully articulate FDI in retail policy there are segments that could support them in the polls. The corporate segment which wields considerable influence on polls is one. The farming community is another. If appropriate and innovative preconditions

are introduced in FDI in retail policy even small retailers could be attracted. Most important of all, the government would talk of change and a new global India in which corruption cases would be expected to fade away in distant memory. The Opposition dwelling on the sellout to foreign powers should know that politicians cutting across parties are viewed with such disdain by the public that foreigners are no longer seen as the threat they once were. This is the hard truth. The Opposition should reflect.

Despite its best efforts and the opposition's follies the poll prospects of the Congress continue to remain of course very dim. Its recent record of governance was simply too horrid to be glossed over by any diversion. But, conceivably, the Congress could soften the blow. And most importantly, it could successfully divert attention sufficiently to continue protection of the guilty corrupt among its top leadership. The next few days should tell us whether we are headed for a mid-term poll.

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