

No more alibis

The presidential polls are also over. Now will the UPA please get down to governance?

IN THE end, Mulayam Singh Yadav's near-vote for Purno Sangma — the SP leader reportedly realised his mistake, tore up the ballot paper and voted afresh — could well compete for the most scintillating moment of the day. With the outcome foretold, the presidential contest had lost its edge long ago. In fact, ever since the UPA deftly countered Mamata Banerjee's preemptive strike on the issue of Pranab Mukherjee's candidature with its own firm declaration of intent and by winning over Yadav to its side, the contest was interesting only for its sideshows. Remarkable, then, that a contest such as this one has had the nation holding its breath. Not since V.V. Giri's election in 1969 — in which he won as Indira Gandhi's candidate against N. Sanjiva Reddy, the official Congress choice — has a presidential contest held so many in such thrall. Partly, this has been because the poll run-up showcased realignments that provide a glimpse of the political layout in 2014. More than that, however, the impression of a nation standing still till its next president is elected was encouraged by the virtual halt in normal policy and governance in the name of the presidential polls. The Congress and the UPA have now lost their ex-

cuse for inaction, and this alibi.

In fact, steadily, the UPA has been losing its fig leaves. There was Banerjee's U-turn on Mukherjee, which means that in the foreseeable future, the UPA would find it difficult to blame her for its own lack of clarity and conviction. Now, even Rahul Gandhi has officially indicated that he may have finally decided to decide. The government knows what it has to do. To begin with, to revive and stabilise the economic environment, it must ensure the autonomy of the regulatory structure from political meddling, it must signal that laws will not be changed at will and assure investors, domestic and foreign, of strict time-frames for clearances of proposals and projects.

There is also work to be done in laying out a political vision and a hierarchy of objectives for the government's remaining term. It must decide whether it will continue to be buffeted by storms — the continuing global economic plunge or the corruption scandals, real and presumed — or seize the initiative. Will it remain preoccupied with itself, or communicate with those who voted it to power, in the villages — but also in the cities? Those are the questions and the UPA has no excuses left to give on the answer sheet.