



# WAKEN & STIRRED

government began strongly enough, it was soon bogged down by scams, scandals and deficit that made it look helpless and directionless towards the yearend

onia Gandhi anti-corruption Centre at its first session, but the fog of corruption had engulfed the government in the last few months, leaving the coalition, as it were, at large, in a state of confusion. And there can be no doubt that the UPA government had lost its direction for the last few months of the year. It had to refurbish its image and off the charge of corruption government a victorious decision to liberalise retail trade. And, the government's backtrack in its own words, Minister Manmohan Singh's statement that it presented a hopelessly outmoded economic framework. It also conceded to the continued to haunt the government through the year. Even as it was struggling to dispel this public perception, the government's problems were further compounded with the arrival of the anti-graft crusader Anna Hazare, whose unrelenting movement for a strong Lokpal Bill captured the nation's imagination and won him an unimaginable fan following. The Congress' isolation was complete when opposition parties rallied behind Anna Hazare and endorsed his proposals on the Lokpal Bill, happy to concede their political space to the social activist.

It is not that the government did not follow up on its promise to initiate concrete steps on tackling corruption. It did bring in a slew of measures. These included doing away with discretionary powers of ministers, setting up of fast-track special CBI courts, laying down a three-month timeframe for sanctioning prosecution, strengthening the Central Vigilance Commission and a Bill to make procurement by government agencies more transparent. At the same time, the government worked feverishly on the Lokpal Bill, the Judicial Accountability Bill and the Whistleblowers Bill to present a comprehensive anti-graft legislative framework. It also conceded to the

ter, were put behind bars, which would, otherwise, have been unheard of, as the UPA government depends on the DMK for its survival. And yet, the government failed to convince the people that it was serious about combating corruption. Instead, the overwhelming perception was that all this had been made possible because of the active intervention by the Supreme Court.

The government did not exactly cover itself in glory by its shoddy handling of the Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev movements. As surging crowds joined Anna's anti-corruption crusade, a panic-stricken government conceded the activist's demand for a joint drafting committee on the Lokpal Bill. When talks broke down and Anna decided to undertake another indefinite fast, it launched an unnecessary attack against him and later arrested him. Roundly lambasted for using repressive methods to deny a citizen his fundamental right to protest, the government will find it difficult to live down this folly for years to come. In another flip-flop, the government subsequently surrendered to the social activist.

In case of Baba Ramdev, the government deputed four senior ministers to negotiate with him, and when their talks

ment does function, Bills are routinely stalled on some pretext or the other, while the standing committees headed by opposition leaders are in no hurry to submit their reports on time, holding up the government's legislative agenda.

While the Opposition can be faulted for being obstructionist, the government also needs to make a special effort to reach out to it, as it needs the Opposition's cooperation in the passage of key Bills, especially since the UPA does not have majority in the Rajya Sabha. Not to forget the long-pending demand for a separate state of Telengana, which has also cast a long shadow over the government.

The developments in the government have not left the Congress party untouched. The government has to deal with the fallout of the scams and scandals, which besieged the UPA, the Congress party, and faces the prospect of Anna campaigning against it in next year's Assembly polls in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Uttarakhand. These elections are critical for the Congress, as it desperately needs some reassurance that it will be able to compensate for its losses in the South. It registered a humiliating defeat in the Tamil Nadu and Puducherry polls, and managed a wafer-