

INDIAN ELECTIONS

Coalition partners may be a thorn in the side for Congress

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FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

WITH its numerical strength of 206 seats in the Lower House of the Indian Parliament, and with the Left out of the way, the Congress may have thought that it would be smooth sailing for the ruling coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), over the next five years.

However, the recent haggling over Cabinet posts among coalition partners was the first sign that this is far from the truth. The new Cabinet has several personalities who could make life difficult for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the third-largest constituent of

the UPA with 18 seats, was not happy with the Congress' offer of six ministerial berths. It demanded seven seats and threatened to walk out of the coalition. The Congress relented and the seven DMK members were sworn in as ministers.

The Congress should perhaps have expected this from the DMK. After all, it was not an easy coalition partner in the earlier UPA government, having threatened to walk out over the Sri Lankan crisis.

With the assembly elections in Tamil Nadu due in 2011, the DMK will certainly threaten the UPA government with more walkouts should the Congress-led government not do enough on the Sri Lankan front.

The Trinamool Congress, headed by

Ms Mamata Banerjee, is also likely to be a thorn in the side of Dr Singh's government. An unpredictable ally, Ms Banerjee was the railway minister in the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. She walked out of the NDA in 2001, citing a lack of transparency and probity in public life, and corruption among senior government and political functionaries. However, three years later, she was back in the NDA fold.

Now the second-largest partner in the UPA coalition with 19 seats, the Trinamool Congress has already shown that it can create mischief. When the DMK asked for seven Cabinet posts, it demanded one more ministerial berth than the DMK on the grounds that it had won one more seat than the DMK. But perhaps the plump Railway Ministry portfolio will sat-

isfy Ms Banerjee for the time being.

Ms Banerjee has also made it clear that her focus as minister will be on West Bengal. Her plans to spend five days a week in Bengal and two days in New Delhi could impact the overall functioning of her ministry – an important one, needing a national vision and perspective. In the long run, this could lead to friction between the Congress and her party, particularly if she does not perform as well as outgoing railway minister Lalu Prasad Yadav.

With an eye on West Bengal's assembly elections in 2011, Ms Banerjee is likely to opt for populist measures such as travel passes at nominal rates and not increasing rail fares. At a time when the central government intends to push for reforms, her plans are likely to clash with its broader economic agenda. The Congress will need to match the Trinamool Congress' populist initiatives with its own social-sector reforms, both of which are likely to add to India's growing fiscal deficit.

The Kashmir issue is also set to dominate the UPA government. And the protagonist is likely to be Dr Farooq Abdullah of the National Conference, a first-timer in the UPA Cabinet. The maverick former chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir strongly favours a resumption of

the India-Pakistan dialogue. This will strengthen his position in Kashmir.

While the Indian government is not opposed to resuming the dialogue in principle, the newly appointed Foreign Minister, Mr S.M. Krishna, has made it clear the dialogue can resume only if Pakistan adopts a tough posture vis-a-vis terrorist groups on its soil. Dr Abdullah is not for any pre-conditions for the dialogue.

If history is a guide, the Congress will face resistance from its coalition partners during the UPA's second term. Perhaps, this time round, it will be able to take heart from the fact that it can count on the support of such parties as the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Samajwadi Party and several other small parties, as and when its larger allies create problems.

Hopefully, Congress will follow a policy of zero tolerance towards blackmailing by its allies or the opposition. It needs to be strong and decisive. The people of India have given it a strong mandate for the next five years. It is important that the grand old party lives up to the high expectations of the Indian electorate.

The writer is a research associate at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore. This is the fifth in a series ISAS has produced for this newspaper on the Indian general elections.