

A.K. Antony

Votaries of clean politics there are many, but very few have the credibility that A.K. Antony has maintained in his long years in politics. This was also Antony's main problem, though many people. As one sympathetic commentator put it many years ago, "The trouble with Mr. A.K. Antony is that he wants to project his image as a saint in a business that does not allow saintliness."

In the kind of politics that he has been engaged in, saintliness is definitely an anathema, but to give full marks to A.K. Antony he has still not allowed his image to be dragged in the mud. And this despite the fact that he has been up against unscrupulous rivals in his own party, the foremost being his wily predecessor, K. Karunakaran. Akkaraparambil Kurien Antony was born in a large, lower middle-class Christian family in Alleppey district. He graduated in 1963 from Ernakulum and then did his law degree. In his student days, Antony was a fiery agitator and led numerous agitations against the CPM government led by E.M.S. Namboodiripad. At 36, he became the youngest chief minister in Independent India. Even at that point, he had built for himself a reputation for his idealism and his spartan lifestyle.

What he did not seem to have were the qualities of a good courtier, which were essential in Indira Gandhi's party. At the Gauhati session of the AICC during the Emergency, Antony was openly critical of the manner in which Sanjay Gandhi was lionised by par tyemen. His comments were frowned upon by the powers that be, and of course the newspapers could not publish them.

Antony had of course miscalculated about Indira Gandhi's political future, like many other politicians of the day. He too thought that it would not be possible for her to make a comeback after the shattering defeat she had suffered in 1977. Antony and some of his friends decided that this was the time to establish their independence. He opposed Indira Gandhi's attempt to get back into the Lok Sabha through the byelection in Chikmagalur. He won't much acclaim for refusing the political support of mullahs, priests, pujaris and refused to accompany Mrs. Gandhi when she went to meet a bishop. In a highly communal state this secular approach was praiseworthy but it was no something that Indira Gandhi relished.

Antony had also been one of the first to request Indira Gandhi after the Allahabad High Court judgement to resign from the Prime Minister's post. "Congressmen and the people at large would stand as firm as a rock behind you," Antony had told her in a telegram. Antony had been first elected to the Kerala Assembly in 1970 from Chertalai, his home town, on the

Congress ticket. It was a great victory, as the area was well known as a Marxist bastion. At 32, he became president of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee. He did not contest the 1977 elections in which the CPI (IV) was routed in Kerala. Following the Rajan case, K. Karunakaran had to resign as chief minister and a reluctant Antony was asked to head the government.

In 1978, Antony's was one of the decisive voices to clinch the second split in the Congress Party. When he resigned from the chief ministership, towards the end of 1978, he rose in stature as a politician of principles.

Though Antony was always averse to the politics of Sanjay Gandhi, he was somehow able to build up a very harmonious relationship with Rajiv Gandhi. In fact, Antony surprised many by becoming an admirer of Rajiv. Antony allowed himself to be persuaded to become one of the general secretaries of the Congress(I) after Rajiv became the party president.

In 1991, Antony became a minister in the Rao government, and was also elected to the Congress Working Committee at Tirupati. When Rao faced dissidence from men close to Arjun Singh and the rift between them widened, Antony kept up a neutral stance. He was against a split in the party; for he believed that the advantage of any decline in the party would go to the communal forces which were on the rise in the country. "Groupism at the national level," he kept saying, "will amount to collective suicide." Antony consistently accepted Narasimha Rao as the party leader, but at the same time he believed that Congressmen should have the right of dissent. Even after the revolt of Arjun Singh and Narayan Dutt Tiwari, Antony was against any party action against them, and kept working for a rapprochement, which of course did not succeed.

He took over a coalition that had lurched from bad to worse under the leadership of K. Karunakaran. Most observers consider the Karunakaran-led government to be the most corrupt that the state has ever seen. They literally bled the exchequer dry, before Karunakaran was forced out of office by the infamous Palm olein import scandal. Congressmen hoped that Antony's taking over would result in a much more transparent administration.

Antony might have a reputation for 'clean' politics, but his critics often accuse him of being terribly ineffective, lacking the political sagacity to make the right decisions. Too often, Antony has made emotional decisions that are totally out of tune with ground realities. The move to impose Prohibition in the state was one such move. While the UDF might have lost the 1996 elections anyway (thanks in no small measure to Karunakaran's misrule), it is doubtful whether the Marxist Party led LDF would have come to power with such a thumping majority the decision to impose. Prohibition tilted the balance firmly in the LDF's favour. Antony

failed to realise that the citizens in the country's most literate state objected to having someone dictate to them how they should lead their lives. No Big Brother can survive in Kerala; the highly politicised public will just wait for the next election to throw him out.

Since that defeat in 1996, Antony has by and large kept a low profile. The elections in 1998 were marred by intense squabbling over seat allocation between the two rival camps led by Antony and Karunakaran. Finally, Sonia Gandhi had to intervene to ensure that the Congress campaign was not completely sabotaged.

Antony is reputed to have the attentive ear of Sonia. His was a lone voice calling for calm in the wake of Pawar's move to leave the party. Antony urged that the decision to expel the three 'rebel' leaders be reconsidered. Perhaps he was just harking back to his own experience of two decades ago.

While Antony may not enjoy the grassroots support that a Karunakaran or a Nayanar enjoys, there is no doubt that he commands a large following amongst the Congressmen in the state. If Sonia's bid to capture power succeeds, Antony could well have a crucial role to play at the Centre. Sonia will find it hard to ignore him, surrounded as she is by so many unscrupulous men.