

It's Mayawati's chance to reform police

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There isn't a day the police are not in the news and most of the time it is negative. Like in the double murder Aarushi case, the Uttar Pradesh police irresponsibly decided who killed who and why on national television, even when the investigations had hardly begun; also the investigations were so flawed that the CBI had to take over. Elsewhere, the police subculture of denial and delay got a poor constable killed. A Dalit girl had been raped but the UP police refused to lodge an FIR. Agitated mobs led by an MP stormed the police station, shots were fired and a constable was shot dead. Again the pattern repeats itself — delayed FIR and delay in arresting the accused MP.

At the end of it all, Mayawati is fed up of her police. She publicly admitted — yes my police are corrupt. She has asked them to shape up or ship out. One month is all she has given them. Whether she is serious about doing something about it is to be seen but the scolding is refreshingly forthright. It's a call to them to put their house in order whatever the odds.

They chose to lead the police and they must take up the challenge and clean out the Augean stables, whatever the difficulties. But is there the capability or even the will? We all know police reform is needed. The National Police Commission (NPC) said it in eight comprehensive reports 25 years ago. The law commission said implement the recommendations of the NPC if you want any real change in policing. The prime minister has said it nationally and internationally in reports he has made before he became the PM and afterwards at the highest level annual meeting of chief ministers and chiefs of police. In the last decade, top cop Ribeiro, Padhmanabiah, and Soli Sorabjee have — at the behest of government — joined the legions shouting for reform and now most recently no less than the chief of the central bureau of investigation (CBI) Vijay Shankar has again pointed out that it's too important to neglect, too urgent to delay.

There is consensus that the police need to be pulled away from the clutches of politicians of the day and made much more accountable to the law. Police need operational responsibility, an unbroken chain of command, fair internal procedures, performance indicators that show whether public money is buying it public safety and better conditions and status for the constabulary. Everybody agrees but no one is willing to do anything about it. But the Supreme Court seems to have realised the need. After ten years it has given clear directions to the states and Central government to get on with it. The court understood that the two things police need most is to be insulated from illegitimate political control and be made accountable to the law and crafted its orders accordingly.

Mayawati may have read out the riot act but she has not read the Supreme Court judgment. The judgment gives her the means to set right her police. It would be the most important legacy of her rule and would ensure its longevity. Nothing could have made a better beginning.

Public admonition may look good but it cloaks the UP government's resistance to do anything to change its police and unless that changes Mayawati's statements don't bode well for honesty of purpose.

Despite a series of deadlines set up by the court, every state and certainly the Centre, which could make instant radical changes in policing, is dragging its feet and resisting all change even two years on. Uttar Pradesh in its affidavit of compliance has raised strong objections to the court's directives and along with others, actually filed an unsuccessful review petition. Two years since the judgment, it has failed to substantively comply with virtually any of the court's directives.

Instead the reform process is hostage to the political powers that find the police just too useful to let go of. The public that is being crushed in this process is nowhere consulted about what kind of policing they would like.

This is Mayawati's chance to reform her police; to set her house in order whatever the odds. Giving the police one month to shape up without any clear direction or assistance is not going to solve a problem that commission after commission, individuals, governments, civil society and more have been at a loss to remedy. If Mayawati is serious, here is her chance.

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