

ಪತ್ರಿಕಾ ತುಣುಕುಗಳು
PAPER CLIPPINGS

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ಇಲಾಖೆ / ವಿಷಯ : DEPARTMENT / SUBJECT: *Other State matters*

ಪತ್ರಿಕೆಯ ಹೆಸರು : NAME OF THE NEWS PAPER: *The Hindu*

ದಿನಾಂಕ : DATE *13/11*

Strained ties

The Puducherry Lt Gov. should heed the legitimate demands of the elected govt.

The recent three-day-long protest, led by Puducherry Chief Minister V. Narayanasamy, under the banner of the Secular Democratic Progressive Alliance, against Lieutenant Governor Kiran Bedi came as no surprise, given the strained ties between the two constitutional functionaries. They have been at loggerheads over many matters, most recently on the appointment of the State Election Commissioner, an office critical to holding elections to local bodies in the Union Territory. But the principal issue of contention is the implementation of direct benefit transfer in the public distribution system using cash, instead of free rice, being given to beneficiaries. The agitation was meant to highlight the demand of the Congress and its allies for the recall of the Lt Governor. As a prelude to the stir, the Chief Minister presented memoranda to President Ram Nath Kovind and Union Minister of State for Home Affairs G. Kishan Reddy, accusing Ms. Bedi of "functioning in an autocratic manner" and adopting an "obstructionist attitude" in ensuring the progress and welfare of people. On her part, Ms. Bedi has advised him to refrain from misleading the public about the Centre and her office. She has even attributed his "anguish and disappointment" possibly to the "diligent and sustained care" exercised by the Lt Governor's secretariat "in ensuring just, fair and accessible administration following the laws and rules of business scrupulously".

With the Assembly election likely in April or May, the Chief Minister leading the protest against the Lt Governor was clearly an act of political mobilisation, even though the Congress's major ally, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, chose to stay away from it. The agitation should be seen as a reflection of the political reality in the Union Territory as Mr. Narayanasamy does not have any effective Opposition. This allows him to turn all his energy and time against the Lt Governor instead of on his political adversaries at a time when the election is near. And this seems to be his strategy to ward off any criticism against his government's "non-functioning" by laying the blame at the doorstep of the Lt Governor. On her part, Ms. Bedi should take into account the legitimate requirements of an elected government and try to accommodate Mr. Narayanasamy's views on important matters such as the free rice scheme. After all, the Centre itself did not see any great virtue in the DBT mode when it decided to give additional food grains (rice or wheat) free of cost at five kg per person a month to ration cardholders during April-November last year – a relief measure during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the near breakdown of communication between the Lt Governor and the Chief Minister, the Centre should step in, in the interest of smooth administration.