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Electing the Next Vice-President of India – A Unanimous Choice

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The name of Hamid Ansari has been announced as the unanimous choice of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-Left combined for the post of the Vice President of India. The position becomes vacant on 10 August 2007 when the existing incumbent, Mr Bhairav Singh Shekhawat, completes his five-year tenure.

A scholar and statesman, Mr Ansari joined the Indian Foreign service in 1961. Born on 1 April 1937, his family belongs to Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1984, and he is the grand nephew of Dr Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari who was President of the Indian National Congress in 1927. He was India's Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as India's High Commissioner to Australia. He served as India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York. After retirement, he has served as Vice Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University and as Visiting Professor in Jawaharlal Nehru University. He has a deep interest in West Asian Affairs, and has edited a book "Iran Today". He was appointed the Chairman of the National Minorities Commission in March 2006. He was the Chairman of the Working Group on Confidence Building Measures in Jammu and Kashmir, a group established by the Prime Minister in 2006.

The Vice President of India is elected in a manner similar to the President, by an electoral college that consists of the sitting Members of Parliament of both houses of the Parliament as well as the members of the state legislatures. There is a weightage system that determines the value of each vote, and bears a proportion to the population that member represents. The Vice President holds office for a period of five years.

The Vice President is the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, and presides over this Upper House of Parliament. In this capacity, he is responsible for the smooth functioning of the upper house. The government can introduce all legislative matters in either of the two houses, other than money bills, and governments in power strategically use the Rajya Sabha to push through selected areas of legislation. This is because, traditionally, representation in the Rajya Sabha has consisted of eminent, articulate,

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senior persons drawn from politics, civil society as well as industry, and the levels of debate are, therefore, likely to be more informed.

Increasingly, there is a presence of senior leaders, including the Prime Minister, Mr Pranab Mukherjee of the Congress as well as Mr Yashwant Sinha, Mr Jaswant Singh, Mr Arun Jaitley and Mr Arun Shourie of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and stalwarts of the Left like Mr Sitaram Yechuri of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Mr D. Raja of the Communist Party of India in the Rajya Sabha. The Upper House today has many more renowned names than the Lower House, the Lok Sabha. Several politicians, who are not confident of the rough and tumble of elections, seek to use the Rajya Sabha route to parliament. For the first time, the Prime Minister is from the Rajya Sabha. This increases the responsibility of the Chairperson, as several issue-based debates take place in the Rajya Sabha.

The Left parties have been strongly advocating that the candidate that would not be a politician, and Mr Ansari qualifies. The concern of the Left has been that, if the Chairperson belongs to either of the two major parties, the Congress or the BJP, it is likely that the Chair may lean on one side or the other. Further, with the Speaker of the Lok Sabha from the CPI(M), there is little chance for them to get a candidate from their own party selected to Chair the Rajya Sabha. The Left has also been concerned that the present incumbent, Mr Shekhawat, has been a staunch BJP supporter, and though he has conducted himself above partisan politics during the five years that he has been Vice- President and Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, his political associations have not been forgotten.

Finally, the Left parties and, indeed, the Congress as well have been keen to find a name that has no controversy attached to it, having suffered the allegations against the nominee for the post of President. As a result, the name has been announced as UPA-Left candidate, a 'unanimous choice' unlike the nomination for the Presidential candidate, that was nominated as a 'UPA candidate, supported by the Left', a distinction that the Left has emphasised in the past few weeks as controversies arose in the media about the Presidential candidate. The candidature of Mr Ansari seeks to avoid all these embarrassments.

Other hopefuls included Mr Gopal Gandhi, the present Governor of West Bengal and his brother, Mr Rajmohan Gandhi, both grandsons of Mahatma Gandhi. Mr Gopal Gandhi annoyed the CPI(M) by making some strong remarks against the administration at Nandigram in West Bengal, where the police fired at farmers protesting the take over of their lands for a Special Economic Zone.

Mr Ansari has also the advantage of being a Muslim, a client group that all parties are eager to woo in the run up to the 2009 elections. It is unclear whether the Muslim voters would be wooed by these symbolic gestures, for the common citizen would know considerably little about Mr Ansari's achievements, or indeed the relevance of the Vice President.

However, the recent Uttar Pradesh elections have shown that the Muslim voter cannot be taken for granted by either the Congress or the Left parties, and there are likely to be sustained efforts in the ensuing eighteen months to woo the Muslim voter. This has even gone to the extent of the Prime Minister expressing that he shares the anguish of

the parents of those arrested in the United Kingdom and in Australia for the Glasgow Airport blasts, a comment that has earned him considerable criticism. The UPA and the Left want to desperately appease the Muslims before the next elections.

Shorn of all these calculations, Mr Ansari's candidature is a good one, for he is regarded as a fair minded moderate who understands international issues and would be a very useful link in dealing with West Asia. It is a candidature that has a reasonable chance of being acceptable to all the parties.

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