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The 2010 Commonwealth Games: Will India Pull It Off?

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Abstract

With less than two months to go to the nineteenth Commonwealth Games (CWG), it seems increasingly unlikely that India will be able to stage the event successfully. Inundated with reports of inefficiency and corruption, the Central Government has now stepped in to supervise the preparations. However, there are fears that these moves may be rather late. Even if the preparations are finally completed on time, the Games, which were to demonstrate India's arrival on the world stage, may serve as an embarrassing reminder of governance problems plaguing India.

With less than two months to go to the nineteenth CWG, it seems increasingly unlikely that the Indian government will be able to pull off a successful event given that major venues and related infrastructures are still under construction. New Delhi has been racing to complete preparations for the CWG with deadlines repeatedly being missed and revised. Just last month, New Delhi Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit, set 31 August 2010 as the deadline for the completion of all projects related to the CWG.² However, reports now indicate that major projects like the renovation of Yamuna Sports Complex, works at the Talkatora indoor boxing

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² 'Sheila Dikshit says she's nervous about C'wealth Games preparations', *DNA: Daily News & Analysis* (18 August 2010), www.dnaindia.com/india/report_sheila-dikshit-says-she-s-nervous-about-c-wealth-games-preparations_1425367. Accessed on 18 August 2010.

stadium, and roads connecting important sites, amongst others, are, according to top officials like the Delhi Government's Chief Secretary Rakesh Mehta, 'unlikely to [be] finished by August-end'.³

The current state of affairs highlights the problems of governance in India.⁴ Corruption, in particular, has led to mismanagement of funds, budgetary problems and inefficiency. According to a preliminary Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) report released in late July 2010, inspections of the CWG preparations have revealed 'use of sub-standard material, rigging of bids, sanctioning of projects which were not needed, favouritism in selection of contractors and private bidders being allowed to tamper with figures post-auction'.⁵ While the CWG preparations in India have been drowning in allegations of corruption and mismanagement for some time,⁶ matters have now come to a head, with opposition members of parliament (MPs) accusing the government of misappropriating funds from other (unrelated) projects to make up the shortfall caused by the rampant corruption surrounding the Games.

According to the opposition MPs such funds as those that had been earmarked for Scheduled Castes have been diverted to meet expenditures associated with the CWG.⁷ The former are also protesting a host of questionable deals, such as the US\$3,989,000 deal with London-based companies, AM Films and AM Car Hire, to rent vehicles, video screens and other equipment and amenities for the Queen's Baton Relay in London on 29 October 2010, 'without proper contracts or documents'.⁸ Thus, according to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders like Arun Jaitley, the CWG has come to signify the 'generation of personal wealth rather than common wealth'.⁹ At the same time, the legitimacy of the Chairman of the CWG Organising Committee (OC), Suresh Kalmadi, who is also president of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA), is being questioned. According to reports, in the original bid submitted in 2003, the IOA president was

³ Ibid., Sunrita Sen, 'Scams, shoddy works cloud India's Commonwealth Games', *M&C: Monsters and Critics News* (10 August 2010), www.monstersandcritics.com/news/southasia/features/article_1576616.php/028-Scams-shoddy-works-cloud-India-sCommonwealth-Games-News-Feature. Accessed on 16 August 2010.

⁴ For more details, see Syeda Sana Rahman, 'The 2010 Commonwealth Games: India's Triumph or Disaster?', *ISAS Insights* 106 (9 July 2010). Available at: www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Insights_106_-_Email_-_The_2010_Commonwealth_Games_12072010184341.pdf.

⁵ 'Major irregularities in 2010 Games projects: CVC Report', *NDTV* (30 July 2010), www.ndtv.com/article/india/major-irregularities-in-2010-games-projects-cvc-report-40977. Accessed on 16 August 2010. For the full report, see 'Common Wealth Games Inspected' (India: Central Vigilance Commission, last updated 18 August 2010), available at <http://cvc.nic.in/>. Accessed on 19 August 2010.

⁶ Syeda Sana Rahman, 'The 2010 Commonwealth Games: India's Triumph or Disaster?'.

⁷ 'Uproar in Parliament over Belgaum, Commonwealth Games', *The Times of India* (3 August 2010), <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Uproar-in-Parliament-over-Belgaum-Commonwealth-Games/articleshow/6250892.cms>. Accessed on 16 August 2010. 'Commonwealth Games Corruption', *DNA: Daily News & Analysis* (07 August 2010), www.dnaindia.com/sport/report_commonwealth-games-corruption-rocks-parliament_1419926. Accessed on 16 August 2010.

⁸ Sunrita Sen, 'Scams, shoddy works cloud India's Commonwealth Games'.

⁹ Ibid.

to be the Vice Chairman of the CWGOC.¹⁰ However, since then, changes appear to have been made to the updated bid that allowed Kalmadi to hold both the presidency of the IOA and the Chair of the CWGOC concurrently.¹¹

The flurry of accusations has led the Central Government – which hitherto had stayed in the background – to intervene and oversee the CWG preparations in a bid to complete all projects on time. Since the debate erupted in parliament, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress leaders have promised action against those responsible for the mismanagement. In a recent press statement, Singh directed ministries to investigate the various complaints of irregularities and said that ‘those found guilty should face severe and exemplary punishment’.¹² Heads have already started rolling. The CWGOC’s Joint Director General, T. S. Darbari, who had been implicated in the irregularities surrounding the London relay, has been sacked.¹³ Additionally, treasurer A. K. Khanna resigned after reports surfaced that ‘his son’s firm had been awarded a contract to lay the tennis surface at a games venue’.¹⁴

Singh also set up a Committee of Secretaries, led by a Cabinet Secretary, to ‘review implementation...will have the status of an Empowered Committee... [and] have jurisdiction over matters relating to the Organising Committee’.¹⁵ He also authorised the Group of Ministers (GoM), headed by the Urban Development Minister Jaipal Reddy, to supervise all CWG projects and to take ‘all decisions necessary’ to ensure the readiness of venues and related infrastructure in time for the Games.¹⁶ This effectively brings the CWGOC under the purview of the Cabinet, which will also receive weekly updates on the status of the preparations.¹⁷

¹⁰ Digvijay Singh Deo, ‘CWG bid tampered to let Kalmadi be chairman?’, *CNN-IBN* (18 August 2010), <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/cwg-bid-tampered-to-let-kalmadi-be-chairman/129121-3.html?from=search>.

Accessed on 17 August 2010; ‘CWG documents were tampered with to make Kalmadi OC chief, says report’, *DNA: Daily News & Analysis* (19 August 2010), www.dnaindia.com/sport/report_cwg-documents-were-tampered-with-to-make-kalmadi-oc-chief-says-report_1425510. Accessed on 19 August 2010.

¹¹ Digvijay Singh Deo, ‘CWG bid tampered to let Kalmadi be chairman?’.

¹² ‘Kalmadi sidelined, secretaries’ panel to supervise CWG’, *The Times of India* (14 August 2010), <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/sports/events-tournaments/commonwealth-games/top-stories/CWG-glitches-Guilty-to-be-severely-punished-says-PM/articleshow/6311630.cms>. Accessed on 16 August 2010.

¹³ ‘Commonwealth Games like Big Fat Indian Wedding without a groom’, *NDTV* (10 August 2010), <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/commonwealth-games-like-big-fat-indian-wedding-without-a-groom-43198>.

Accessed on 19 August 2010; ‘Kalmadi aide Darbari, earlier suspended, now sacked’, *NDTV* (9 August 2010), www.ndtv.com/article/sports/kalmadi-aide-darbari-earlier-suspended-now-sacked-43103. Accessed on 19 August 2010.

¹⁴ Sunrita Sen, ‘Scams, shoddy works cloud India’s Commonwealth Games’; Anil Sharma & Mayank Aggarwal, ‘Heads roll as Commonwealth Games organizers try to save face’, *DNA: Daily News & Analysis* (5 August 2010), www.dnaindia.com/india/report_heads-roll-as-commonwealth-games-organisers-try-to-save-face_1419304. Accessed on 19 August 2010.

¹⁵ ‘Kalmadi sidelined, secretaries’ panel to supervise CWG’.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

While these recent moves are promising, they may be too late. With just a few weeks left, New Delhi will need a herculean effort to pull off the Games successfully. According to news reports, the ‘construction quality certificates of several projects have turned out to be ‘fake or suspect’ and many newspapers have featured pictures of purportedly completed stadia with ‘seepage, hanging wires, broken tiles...[and] piles of rubble...outside games venues and across the city’.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Singh, has struck a reassuring note, and said that almost all venues are in advanced stages of preparation and should be ready in time.¹⁹ Still, safety may be an issue. In a Times of India interview, CWGOC Secretary General, Lalit Bhanot, admitted that regulatory clearances had still not been obtained, but added that he expected the requisite clearances to be obtained by end of August.²⁰ Meanwhile, heavy rains have also retarded the already rushed preparations for the Games.²¹

Although leaders like Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi, Congress Party spokesman Manish Tiwari and Sports Minister M. S. Gill continue to exhort people to ‘pull together’ and keep faith in India’s ability to pull off the costliest CWG in history,²² it appears more likely that the CWG, which was meant to herald India’s arrival on the world stage will only serve to highlight the issues of governance that continue to plague the South Asian giant.

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¹⁸ Sunrita Sen, ‘Scams, shoddy works cloud India’s Commonwealth Games’.

¹⁹ ‘All venues to be ready by August 25, promises OC’, *The Times of India* (17 August 2010), <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/All-venues-to-be-ready-by-August-25-promises-OCHEAD/articleshow/6321861.cms>. Accessed on 20 August 2010.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ravi Nessman, ‘Weeks out India’s Commonwealth Games in crisis’, *Salon.com* (20 August 2010), www.salon.com/wires/world/2010/08/20/D9HNNANO00_as_india_games_crisis/. Accessed on 20 August 2010.

²² Sunrita Sen, ‘Scams, shoddy works cloud India’s Commonwealth Games’; ‘Commonwealth Games: Sonia Gandhi says those guilty will not be spared’, *DNA: Daily News & Analysis* (19 August 2010), www.dnaindia.com/india/report_commonwealth-games-sonia-gandhi-says-those-guilty-will-not-be-spared_1425561. Accessed on 20 August 2010. Note: Currently the official budget estimate for the CWG stands at US\$2 billion, with some unofficial estimates predicting that the final costs will be at least triple. ‘Commonwealth Games: India PM intervenes to rescue Delhi Games’, *Channel NewsAsia* (15 August 2010), www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/view/1075322/1/.html. Accessed on 20 August 2010.