

BJP's Shekhawat crisis has its origins in Rajasthan

Although an embarrassed Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) tried to brush off the controversy created by veteran leader Bhairon Singh Shekhawat's virtual challenge to the party's prime ministerial hopeful L.K. Advani, it has brought to the fore the internal strife in the party, although the origin of the problem seems to lie in Rajasthan.

Shekhawat, 86, created a flutter by announcing Tuesday that he will contest the Lok Sabha elections and backed it up Thursday saying that he was the senior most leader of the party.

'Age-wise, I am senior most. I am 86, (Atal Bihari) Vajpayee is 83 and Advani 80,' the former vice president declared.

Many in the party believe that Shekhawat's defiance has primarily to do with the tussle between him and former Rajasthan chief minister Vasundhara Raje and his voice is the face of the anti-Advani lobby.

The former vice president, party sources claim, represents the Atal Bihari Vajpayee camp. Shekhawat Thursday also suggested that former prime minister Vajpayee should contest the general elections, causing further embarrassment to the BJP.

'Shekhawat believes that like Vajpayee, he has more acceptability among the allies of the National Democratic Alliance (which the BJP heads), than Advani,' confided a senior leader from the Vajpayee camp.

'And he is not wrong; he is a moderate leader with acceptability across the political spectrum,' said the leader.

He said the NDA had ratified Advani as the prime ministerial candidate out of political compulsion since Vajpayee was not in good health and out of active politics.

'He is just trying to create a storm in the tea cup. He is trying to parachute himself into electoral sweepstakes and position himself for a bigger role. He cannot succeed and is spoiling the party's campaign,' political analyst G.V.L. Narasimha Rao told IANS.

Rao believes Shekhawat can create only temporary trouble, but not beyond that. 'He can't influence events even in Rajasthan, what will he do at the national level,' he said.

However, another view in the party is that Shekhawat is essentially cut up with Raje and wants to see her out of Rajasthan politics.

A party insider delineated this argument. 'You must have noticed that he invariably says he will contest elections only if his health permits,' he said.

According to the source, Shekawat's comment was a 'signal to the party that some action must come against Raje and he will not embarrass Advani anymore'.

The former vice president, who belongs to Rajasthan, was among those instrumental in projecting

Vasundhara Raje for the chief ministerial post in 2003.

'But after becoming chief minister, Raje started ill-treating him. She once asked Shekhawat's son-in-law (Narpat Singh Rajvi) to step down from a podium during a function and later suggested to him that he should always sit in the audience when she is there,' said a party source in Rajasthan.

Shekhawat was not consulted even during distribution of tickets for the recent Rajasthan assembly elections, while his son-in-law Narpat Singh Rajvi had to change his constituency on the insistence of Raje.

Rajvi's name was announced only in the fourth list of candidates, and all the while Shekhawat kept on waiting with his fingers crossed.

After the BJP lost the polls, Shekhawat opposed naming Raje as Leader of Opposition in the new assembly, but the high command went with her.

During the last three days, the 86-year-old leader levelled allegations that huge money changed hands in the distribution of tickets.

He also wrote to Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot of the Congress to conduct a probe into the Rs.32,000-crore (Rs.320 billion) corruption allegation the party had levelled against the Raje government during the run up to the polls.

'He started feeling he was walking into political oblivion as even someone like Raje gave him short shrift. That is why he came out with those assertions,' said political analyst Vijay Sharma in Jaipur.

The BJP, in the meanwhile, continues to be in a tizzy over the issue and is yet to firm up its strategy to handle the octogenarian leader.

'I won't be able to comment,' said BJP vice president Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi.

Party spokesperson Rajiv Pratap Rudy said: 'We have already said what we have to... he is the party's senior leader and well-wisher.'

Sources claim the party has little option but to hammer out some formula of compromise between Shekhawat and Raje, for no firm action can be taken against either of them in the run up to the Lok Sabha elections.

'He is being ungrateful to the party, which rallied behind him for the presidential elections,' analyst Rao said. Shekhawat was the National Democratic Alliance candidate during the 2007 presidential elections.

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