

No light, only noise

On AgustaWestland, three questions
for the Modi government



RANDEEP SINGH
SURJEWALA

MUCH HAS been said on the subject of AgustaWestland. Unfortunately, very little has actually been heard. Armed only with loud rhetoric, the BJP government has sought to convince the nation of a crime that, at best, is one in which they are grossly complicit or at worst, fabricated to divert attention.

But however ludicrous, it becomes imperative to place the facts before the people. Unlike the unquestioning bhakts that swell the ranks of the BJP, people must be allowed to draw their own conclusions. To this end, we believe that three questions must be answered by the BJP government.

One, why was the work done by the UPA government in taking action against AgustaWestland disregarded? Proceedings against Agusta began in April, 2012. The UPA government turned over the investigation to the CBI (February, 2013), ED (July, 2012) and the income tax department (January, 2013) and even wrote to the prosecutor's office in Naples (July, 2012) to acquire evidence. As a result, Agusta's contract was cancelled on January 1, 2014 by the ministry of defence. In fact, when the UPA moved for a joint parliamentary committee (of which the BJP would have been a part) to investigate the issue, the BJP opposed it, demanding instead that a Supreme Court-monitored investigation should take place.

Never mind the fact that the UPA — in a move to ensure that the public exchequer was not compromised — encashed the bank guarantees given by AgustaWestland and recovered Rs 2,068 crore plus three helicopters as against the original payment of Rs 1,586.66 crore, thereby eliminating any scope for financial loss to the government.

If all of the above was a meaningless or perfunctory exercise, the BJP must say as to why it undid the work done by the UPA and is now forced to clutch at straws by misquoting the judgment of an Italian court without even placing a certified copy thereof on the floor of Parliament. The BJP must also tell us why it did not supply the documents to the Italian court for nearly two years. Or will it hide behind the excuse given by Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar in the Rajya Sabha that the documents could not be supplied as they were with the CBI and not defence ministry?

Two, can the BJP explain what appear to be measures taken by them to protect AgustaWestland in their first year of governance? The process for the banning of Agusta was initiated by the UPA in

February, 2014 and the final order passed by then defence minister, A.K. Antony, on May 12, 2014. Strangely, the order remained pending on file and was belatedly issued on July 3, 2014.

Simultaneously, in July 2014 itself, the current attorney-general gave an opinion which effectively undid the banning process. Within 40 days, that is, on August 2, 2014, Agusta was allowed backdoor entry as a sub-contractor and vendor in all defence contracts despite the corruption charges and CBI enquiry. Subsequently, the Modi government allowed AgustaWestland to participate in the PM's flagship 'Make in India' programme and even granted FIPB approval to it for setting up joint venture in defence production. This hardly seems like the conduct of a government determined to bring the violators to book.

Three, do the standards put in place by the Vajpayee Government represent a dilution? In November 2003, the office of the then prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee proposed to limit the operational requirement of a flight ceiling for helicopters at 4,500 metres (against a stated requirement that the ceiling should be at least 6,000 metres). The current government followed the same ceiling. The standards the UPA government followed had been put in place by a BJP government. This included the requirement of field trials being conducted abroad. When the author of both requirements is their own political predecessor, can they then rightfully suggest that a dilution has taken place? If a dilution did take place, the BJP must question its own leadership as to the grounds on which it was predicated.

The initial evidence points to a crime having been committed. That is why the UPA registered a corruption case, ordered a CBI enquiry, cancelled the contract, banned the company and encashed the bank guarantees. However, the BJP is suggesting that the UPA government covered up a crime to protect the Congress leadership. They provide no evidence other than a rabid hatred for the leaders of the Congress party. If they truly wished to catch the perpetrators (as do we), then should they not opt for a time-bound conclusion of the investigation instead of a televised barrage of charges? The BJP has reduced Parliament to a theatre for grandstanding. There is no answer as to why the CBI and ED have not acted for two years under the current government.

With a prime minister bent on diminishing the sacred office he holds, it becomes imperative that he answer these questions. Closing in on the second lacklustre year in government, the BJP must turn its gaze to salvaging its abysmal record. Modi must understand that attacking the principal opposition party on issues that are embarrassingly hollow is no substitute for good governance. It is a sad commentary that he simply won't stop campaigning for an election that concluded two years ago.

*The writer is communications incharge,
All India Congress Committee*