

I'm on sidelines: Singhdeo remarks spark fresh political buzz in C'garh

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Raipur: A purported comment made by Chhattisgarh health minister **T S Singhdeo** that he is on the "sidelines" (kinara) triggered a buzz in the Congress circles on Sunday, nearly a month after his remark that he will be "only a voter in the next election" in the state which are due later this year.



Singhdeo made the comment on Sunday when some agitating daily wage employees had gone to his residence in Ambikapur, seeking an audience with him on regularisation of their jobs. Singhdeo, who was not there, spoke to the employees on phone. One of them recorded the

video of the phone conversation, which went viral within hours. In the footage, Singhdeo is heard saying: "I cannot promise something that I cannot fulfil. I will not commit the mistake I made earlier. I can only convey your message to the CM and I am not capable of doing more than this."

"Nyay to mukhyamatri se hi mil payega. Hum to khud hi kinara pe hain, aap to jante hain (You will get justice only from the CM. I am on the sidelines, as you know)," he says, adding: "Only the CM will be able to answer your questions."

Hundreds of daily wage employees of the horticulture department had taken out a rally

and reached the residence of the minister, demanding that he take up their cause. They have been fighting for regularisation for four and a half years, they said.

Singhdeo did not react to the reports on his statement in the viral video. The Congress veteran had earlier hinted that he wouldn't contest the 2023 assembly election, and on March 4, said that his "status in the next polls will be that of a voter".

In mid-2021, he was locked in a tussle with Bhopesh Baghel for the CM's chair over a purported formula for a mid-term change of guard. It petered out in a few months. Since then, Singhdeo has given up the panchayat portfolio, but he has categorically said that he won't join BJP.

Cong brass steers clear of Pilot's outburst, heaps praise on Gehlot

Neta May Have Made Up His Mind About Next Step By Going Public Against CM

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New Delhi: The Congress leadership's strained ties with Sachin Pilot appeared to have reached a critical point with the party rebuffing his public outburst against chief minister Ashok Gehlot, and announcing that it will seek a fresh mandate in the end-year elections on the achievements of the Gehlot administration.

A brief statement from Congress steered clear of Pilot and lavished praise on Gehlot for implementing schemes and taking initiatives which have "profoundly impacted" the people of the state. "This has given the state a leadership position in governance in our country. The Bharat Jodo Yatra in Rajasthan was an outstanding success, made possible by the dedication and determination of the party organisation in the state. Later in the year, Congress will seek a renewed mandate from the people on the strength of these landmark achievements and the collective efforts," AICC spokesman Jairam Ramesh said.



There may be an outreach to Pilot to convince him to drop the ante, say sources

The categorical statement was issued after clearance from top Congress leaders, but sources said there may be an outreach to Pilot to convince him to drop the ante and focus on future.

Pilot told TOI, "I have spoken against corruption and Congress has always stood against corruption. It is about action that should be taken on allegations we levelled against the previous BJP regime led by Vasundhara Raje."

If the party appeared to have made its choice in the "Gehlot vs Pilot" clash, it is because sections within believe that Pilot may have made up his mind about his future course of action by going public against his bete noire.

The Rajasthan Congress drama has lingered since Pilot, in mid-2020, revolted with a pack of MLAs, and the state government barely survived after a month-long stalemate. Since then, the young leader ap-

peared to have attempted to mend fences with the AICC brass, but failed to extract a compromise with Gehlot.

AICC Rajasthan in-charge Sukhjinder Randhawa told TOI that Pilot did not give any hint of unrest in his discussions with him, and that the Rajasthan leader should have spoken to him about the issues he raised on Sunday. "If I had not acted, then he could have nursed a grievance," he said.

Well-placed sources said Pilot's "frustration" appeared to go deeper, as he repeatedly conveyed to the party that he wanted Rahul Gandhi to personally mediate between him and Gehlot. The message was conveyed on multiple occasions, but ignored. At the same time, Randhawa too had earlier submitted a report to Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, in which he recommended that the party chief call Gehlot and Pilot for three-way discussions to sort out their differences.

With the issue moving nowhere, Pilot appeared to have concluded that the leadership was not keen to put him on par with Gehlot.

Pilot on Gehlot: No action taken on BJP-era graft even after suggestions

Jaipur: Former Rajasthan deputy CM Sachin Pilot renewed his attack on CM Ashok Gehlot with months to go for polls. "When the facts and evidence (about the alleged corruption) were coming to us while we were in opposition, I think they are present even after we came to government," Pilot told a presser here.

Pilot was the state Congress chief when he and Gehlot raised the bogey of alleged corruption, including a "Rs 45,000-crore scam" in mines allocation by the then BJP government. He recalled that Congress had declared "zero tolerance" against graft and promised a crackdown after coming to government, only to keep delaying it over the past few years. "No action was taken even after my suggestions," he said.

Reeling off instances, Pilot claimed that the Gehlot government had failed to act against the excise, mining and land mafia in the state, and in the Lalit Modi affidavit case—related to alleged Raje investments in the ex-IPL chief's ventures.

"In the absence of any action, our rivals may say that both parties are hand in glove. I do not believe in revenge politics. However, we had some credibility as the opposition and that's why we came to power," Pilot said.

The Tonk MLA said he wrote to Gehlot twice in the past few months to fulfil the commitment but claimed the CM did not pay any heed.

"I am not waking up suddenly. I wrote and said the elections are coming, and we must show the public that there is no difference between our promises and work. But I have not received any answer from the CM yet," the former deputy CM said.

Pilot accused the BJP-led Centre of "misusing agencies including CBI, ED" to target Congress leaders, while fretting that the Congress government in the state was not moving against graft at all. "In Rajasthan, we are neither using them nor misusing the probing agencies. Our workers and public should not think that we don't fulfil our promises," Pilot said.

No cracks in MVA over Adani issue: Ajit Pawar on NCP chief's stand

Kolhapur: The recent difference of opinion among the MVA partners on the Adani issue is no threat to the coalition, leader of the opposition in the Maharashtra assembly **Ajit Pawar** said Sunday in Satara, reports **Abhijeet Patil**. "Till the three architects—Sharad Pawar (NCP), Sonia Gandhi (Congress) and Uddhav Thackeray (Shiv Sena UBT)—support each other, nothing can harm MVA," he said.

Last week, in what is being seen as a deviation from the MVA stand on the issue, NCP chief Sharad Pawar said that targeting Gautam Adani was not good. The comment did not seem to go down well with Congress, which has been trying to corner the Centre in Parliament over the Hindenburg report that has accused Adani of stashing away Rs 20,000 crore in tax havens.

Congress functionaries had targeted the NCP patriarch on his pro-Adani statements by posting photos of the two on social media. Ajit Pawar responded to Congress's swipes: "The photos are with Adani and not with a terrorist. What is wrong with clicking a photo? I have known him for a long time. As the Tatas and the Birlas have done in the past, the Adanis and Ambanis are providing jobs and helping the economy." He said the Supreme Court is looking into the allegations against the industrialist and it is not correct to put him on a public trial.

State BJP chief Chandrashekhar Bawankule rubbed it in, saying at a meeting in Ahmednagar that cracks are showing in the opposition and many politicians from that camp will join the Shiv Sena-BJP alliance within a year. But he made it clear that Uddhav Thackeray isn't welcome.



Young leaving Cong due to Rahul's lack of leadership and direction, says Azad

Rahul has ties with 'undesirable bizmen': Azad

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Kochi: Rahul Gandhi has links with "undesirable businessmen", former Congress veteran **Glulam Nabi Azad** said on Sunday in reply to the Wayanad MP's allegation in a tweet that named Azad among others of having ties with industrialist Gautam Adani.

"The entire family has associations with businessmen, including him (Rahul). I can give 10 examples of where he would go, even outside the country, to meet people who are undesirable businessmen," said Azad in an interview to Malayalam news channel Asianet News.



Young leaving Cong due to Rahul's lack of leadership and direction, says Azad

Former J&K CM and ex-Union minister Azad had severed his five-decade association with Congress in August last year and floated his

own party, Democratic Progressive Azad Party.

Rahul had criticised Saturday Congress functionaries who had moved out of the party, or joined BJP later, by dragging them into the Adani controversy he had been drawing on to target the Centre since American research firm Hindenburg reported that the industrialist had stashed away Rs 20,000 crore in tax havens.

Azad said there's no Congress party left in India and only a few individuals remain. The current Congress leadership, including Rahul, has no influence, he said.

"A lot of people say Rahul's

clout has increased after Bharat Jodo Yatra. I realised he has no clout. Not a single youth or farmer from Gujarat joined Rahul when he went to the Surat court," he said, referring to Rahul's recent court appearance over his disqualification from Parliament for defaming PM Narendra Modi in an election speech.

Azad the younger generation is 10 times more frustrated with the leadership and that's why Congress veteran AK Antony's son Anil quit the party recently. "Anil's exit is unfortunate. Most young leaders, aged below 50, have left Congress because of Rahul's lack of leadership and direction," he said.

Rahul unruffled, but key Cong paper flags defection concerns

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New Delhi: In the wake of exodus from the party post-2019, Rahul Gandhi may have developed the stock phrase that those who want to leave the fold should go, or rather be encouraged to quit. But an internal Congress document has raised concerns that defections at grassroots level weaken the party and should be checked.

On the contrary, Congress would like to keep an eye on the rival parties for their important leaders at district and block level, who can be ensnared into crossing over, notes a key AICC paper on "leadership development mission"—the new Congress scheme to bolster organisational presence in 56 SC/ST parliamentary constituencies for 2024 elections.

The document has noted that Congress has been plagued by "evil of defections for various reasons", which may not necessarily be about MPs and MLAs, but concern an extremely local level like panchayat. The worry flagged is that defecting leaders take their "voter base" to the par-



The AICC paper flags concerns that defecting take their 'voter base' to the parties they move to

ties they move to, directly hurting the Congress strength and resulting in electoral reverses.

With the party launching the "leadership development mission" (LDM) across the country, the managers would want that the designated field officials maintain "a connect and understanding" of the developments on the ground and also keep a tab on the local leadership that the party is relying on to take forward the initiative in the constituencies. The party believes that this can be ensured if enough trust is instilled in the local leadership and among the people Congress is working with. In fact, by establishing greater communication and nurtur-

ing new leadership at the bottom rungs of organisation and constituencies, the party believes the "leadership development mission" can help in curbing defections.

The loud thinking on "pre-empting defections" was part of the guidelines prepared for the mission. But it has remained confined to internal discussions and, sources said, was not included in the crisp version that was circulated to the field teams in-charge of LDM constituencies, and to Congress state units.

Still, the concern discussed over defections and sought to be addressed through the LDM, shows that intermittent exodus in recent years has left the party managers rattled.

Ever since Congressmen started leaving at all levels, Rahul Gandhi took to saying that those quitting were unwilling to fight the ideological fight with the BJP-RSS and should be encouraged to leave, while outsiders willing to take on the ruling establishment should be brought in. However, others have repeatedly argued that defections are hurting Congress and its winnability on the ground.

Disappointing to see Cong netas going to 'dark side': Tharoor

Bengaluru: Congress MP **Shashi Tharoor** on Sunday expressed his disappointment at the defection of Congress leaders like Anil Antony, CR Kesavan and Kiran Kumar Reddy to BJP and wondered how they could cross over to the 'dark side'.

"I have always believed that politics is based on principles. While I believe each person has a right to change their mind and their party, there must be some principles. I do have a problem with people going to an ideology which is the opposite of what they have always practised and believed in," he said at an event here. "My disappointment is for the simple reason for them being secular-minded people who will not find a welcoming home in a party which is fundamentally committed, unfortunately, to a particularly communal agenda. Therefore, I believe they have committed a mistake."

Elaborating on a possible opposition unity, Tharoor said that AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge has taken a lead in this regard.

Now, Cong alleges Adani Group's 'China links', targets govt

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Despite divergent voices emerging from within the opposition ranks on the issue, Congress on Sunday doubled down its attack on Modi government's alleged links with embattled conglomerate **Gautam Adani** and asked why security concerns were set aside and the business house allowed to operate ports in India despite its well-known links with the Chinese.

Citing an Economic Times reports from June 2022, Congress's **Jairam Ramesh** said the government had acted against its own policy to prevent Chinese firms and entities with China connections from operating ports and terminals in India on security grounds. "Why is it (Adani Group) being permitted to buy up port after port, in some cases after raids on previous owners, with no thought to the serious security implications?" he questioned.

The Economic Times report has said security clearance was denied to a consor-

tium of APM Terminals Management and Taiwan's Wan Hai Lines after agencies discovered a tie between a Wan Hai director and a Chinese firm. This blocked the consortium's bid to operate a container handling terminal at Jawaharlar Nehru Port Authority.

Drawing parallels with the prevailing situation, Ramesh pointed to Chinese national **Chang Chung-Ling's** close association with the Adani Group. Chang's son, **Ramesh said**, owns PMC projects, a firm that has constructed ports, terminals, rail lines, power lines and other infrastructure assets for the Adani Group.

"The Adani Group and PMC were alleged to be involved in a 5,500-crore power equipment over-invoicing scam by the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence," he said, adding that the Adani Group has been known to have operated at least two Shanghai-based shipping companies, one of which was involved in the "illegal sale of petroleum products to the close China ally, North Korea".

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