

AIADMK General Council ousts Sasikala, Dinakaran, rejigs party structure

Chennai, Sep 12 : The ruling AIADMK's General Council on Tuesday annulled the appointment of V.K. Sasikala as the party's General Secretary and also struck down the appointments made by her before going to jail, including making her nephew T.T.V. Dinakaran the party Deputy General Secretary.

In other major decisions, the General Council altered the party's organisational structure to a collective leadership structure. It amended the party rules whereby none will be elected or nominated to the post of General Secretary - a position held by party supremo and late Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha till her death.

The General Council also decided that party Coordinator (now held by Deputy Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam) and Joint Coordinator (held by Chief Minister K. Palaniswami) will oversee the party affairs.

The General Council also introduced a rule whereby the party's Coordinator and Joint Coordinator would be elected by the General Council, and they would hold the post for five years. With the annulment of the appointment of Dinakaran as Deputy General Secretary, the appointments made by him are also struck down.

Sasikala was appointed interim General Secretary last December following the death of party supremo and Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha. Sasikala had appointed Dinakaran as Deputy General Secretary before going to jail. The council also ratified the recent merger of the two factions led by Palaniswami and Panneerselvam. One of the basic demands of Panneerselvam camp for the merger with Palaniswami was the dismissal of Sasikala and her family members from the party. Party officials said the power to admit or dismiss a member rests with the party General Secretary. This power has

been now transferred to party Coordinator and Joint Coordinator following the amendments to the rules.

Party officials said the dismissal of Sasikala and her family from the party may happen now - under the new organisational structure.

The General Council also resolved to restore all those who were party office bearers appointed by Jayalalitha. They will continue to hold office now, it said.

A total of 14 resolutions including the ones hailing the merger of two factions; the government for celebrating the birth centenary of late Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran and AIADMK Founder; the decision of the government to build a memorial for Jayalalitha and others were passed at the General Council meeting that was attended by

Loyalists of Dinakaran, including law makers and members of General Council, boycotted the meeting. Reacting to the General Council resolutions Dinakaran said the Madras High Court on Monday has said the decisions of the meeting are subject to its final judgement in a case filed against the holding of the meeting.

Dinakaran, who is leading 21 party legislators, on Tuesday said he would work towards bringing down the K. Palaniswami government. "You (Chief Minister Palaniswami) and others have no moral right to sit in positions of power that was once wielded by Jayalalitha. We will send this government home," Dinakaran told a press conference later.

Citing the resolution that states that the party members cannot visualise anybody else as General Secretary other than the late Jayalalitha, he wondered whether the same logic would also apply to the Chief Minister's post?

"As per the party rules, the General Secretary will be elected by the primary members of the party if there is an election.

'Absolutely ready' to be PM candidate for 2019: Rahul Gandhi

New Delhi, Sep 12 : Choosing foreign soil, Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi has declared he is "absolutely ready" to be the party's prime ministerial candidate for the 2019 general elections.

However, he made it clear that the decision has to be finally approved by the party. Often under attack from the BJP, especially Prime Minister Narendra Modi and party President Amit Shah, over dynasty politics, Gandhi said it "is a problem in all political parties in India" but that was how "most of the country runs like".

"I am absolutely ready to do that," Gandhi, who is widely tipped to succeed his mother Sonia as party President, said when he was asked during his talk on Monday night at a university here if he was ready to be the prime ministerial candidate of the Congress for the next Lok Sabha elections.

This is for the first time the Gandhi scion has publicly affirmed his readiness to be the Congress choice for the top post.

Gandhi, who is on a two-week US visit to interact with political

leaders, global thinkers and overseas Indians, was speaking to students at the university where his great-grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru delivered his speech in 1949.

In reply to the question about Congress' prime ministerial choice, Gandhi said it was not fair on his part to go public with that because the party has to approve it.

"...the way our party works. We have an internal system where we elect certain delegates who make that decision. We have an organisational election process that decides, and the process is currently ongoing.

"For me to say that the decision is mine would not be fair. That is the decision the Congress party has to make," the 47-year-old said.

Probed further by the moderator if he was open to the idea, Gandhi nodded his head in affirmation and said: "Yeah, sure." Gandhi said dynastic politics "is a problem in all political parties in India" but that was how "most of the country runs like".

He said former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister



Akhilesh Yadav, son of Mulayam Singh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party, M.K. Stalin, son of M. Karunanidhi of DMK, BJP leader Prem Kumar Dhumal's son Anurag Thakur, Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan's son Abhishek Bachchan, Dhirubhai Ambani's sons Mukesh and Anil were all examples of dynastic legacy in India.

"That's how the entire country is running. So don't just go after me.... That's what happens in India." Speaking at the event 'India at 70: Reflections on the Path Forward', Gandhi talked about a range of issues including the Congress' loss in the 2014 general elections in which his party slid to its lowest tally ever in the Lok Sabha.

He admitted that "in around 2012 arrogance crept into the Congress and we stopped having conversations with people" that led to the party's loss in the last poll.

"For rebuilding the party, we need to design a vision that we can use moving forward. Most of what the BJP (government) is doing, is what we once said," Gandhi said citing the examples of the UPA government's MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) and the GST.

Gandhi criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi's demonetisation and the "hastily implemented" Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime that he said caused "tremendous damage to the Indian economy".

Gandhi also said that the government's decision to scrap Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 currency notes has led to decline in economic growth that "cost us two per cent loss in the GDP".

He accused Modi of controlling and managing an online machine of over a thousand trolls whose purpose is to destroy Gandhi's credibility and call him "stupid and incompetent". "There is a BJP machine. A 1,000 guys sitting on computers telling you about me. It's a tremendous machine, all day they spread abuse about me, say that I'm a 'reluctant politician...' and the operation is run by the gentleman who is running our country," said Gandhi.

He, however, acknowledged that Modi was a "better communicator" than he is.

"Modi has certain skills, he is a very good communicator, he's much better than me. He knows how to give a message to 3-4 different groups in a crowd, so his messaging ability is very effective and subtle."

Gandhi said the BJP's vision was flawed because it came from "top to bottom" while as the

Congress constructed "a bottom-up vision". He gave an example of dealing with the Kashmir issue and alleged that the government had opened up the space for terrorism in the state.

"When we started, terrorism was rampant in Kashmir. And when we finished by 2013, we basically broke the back of terror, I hugged (then) Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and told him it was one of the biggest achievements."

"For nine years I worked behind the scenes with PM Manmohan Singh, P. Chidambaram, Jairam Ramesh and others. He also slammed the BJP-led central government over the incidents of mob lynching and cow vigilantism that damaged India's image.

"I understand what violence does, violence against anybody is wrong. Hatred, anger and violence can destroy us, the politics of polarisation is dangerous," he said, adding "liberal journalists were being shot (referring to Kannada journalist-activist Gauri Lankesh's murder), people are being lynched.

Thousands protest Lankesh murder in Bengaluru

Bangaluru, Sep 12 : Thousands of social activists, journalists, people's forums and various political party workers from across the country on Tuesday held a protest meet at Central College Grounds here to condemn the murder of journalist-activist Gauri Lankesh.

A 'resistance meeting' was held here where renowned journalists, activists and thinkers from demanded that the Karnataka government "hastens" the Special Investigation Team's (SIT) probe into the murder.

The 55-year-old editor of Kannada weekly tabloid by her name "Gauri Lankesh Patrike" was gunned down by unidentified men outside her home in the city suburbs on September 5. Those present at the protest venue included CPI-M General Secretary Sitaram Yechury, noted social activist Medha Patkar, journalists P. Sainath and Sagarika Ghose and civil rights activist Kavita Krishnan among others. Lankesh's family members, mother Indira Lankesh and brother Indrajit Lankesh were also present.

A commemorative edition of the Kannada tabloid "Gauri Lankesh Patrike" was launched at the venue.

Addressing the gathering, Patkar questioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi's silence on the killing.

"Why is the Prime Minister of the country silent on Gauri Lankesh killing even after a week?" she asked.

Sainath said: "The killings aren't over. There will be more, unless we stop them. What we're up against is the largest machine of hate." Protesting journalists, activists and thinkers came out with a list of demands/decisions pertinent to Lankesh's killing through a statement.

"The inquiry which is underway through the SIT formed by the state government should hasten and com-

plete its enquiry and identify the powers behind the murder," said the statement.

"We are all witness to how several organisations and individuals affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Hindu Jagarana Vedike, Vishva Hindu Parishad et al have been celebrating Gauri Lankesh's murder," the protesters said.

"We at the resistance meeting condemn this inhuman behaviour, which is not supported by any religious teachings." Gauri Lankesh was murdered only to silence the voice of humanity and democratic struggles that she represented," the statement said.

"Those of us here would like to tell her murderers loud and clear: 'I am Gauri, we are all Gauri'," it added.

Wearing black head bands that read "I am Gauri", the protesters took out the march from the city railway station to the Central College Grounds.

Members of the Communist Party of India-Marxist-Leninist-Liberation, Karnataka Janashakti, Aam Aadmi Party and several student groups were also part of the rally. Those protesting were seen singing protest songs, raising slogans like "Gauri Lankesh Amar Rahe" (Long live Gauri Lankesh) and demanding that Lankesh's assailants be brought to book.

The progressive forum "Gauri Lankesh Hatya Virodhi Vedike" took out the rally. "The forum of progressive thinkers, writers, social activists, artistes and intellectuals was formed last Friday to fight against Lankesh killing and decided to hold the national-level 'resistance convention' here," the forum convenor K. Leela had told reporters on Monday.

Priest's rescue shows growing respect for India: Minister

New Delhi, Sep 12 : The rescue of a Catholic priest from Kerala, Tom Uzhunnallil, from captivity in Yemen displays the growing respect for India internationally, Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said on Tuesday.

Prasad was asked about the release of the priest who was abducted by terrorists in Yemen's Aden in March last year and was rescued from an undisclosed location in Yemen after intervention of the Oman government.

"We are very happy. The details will be disclosed by the Ministry of External Affairs," Prasad said, adding: "There was serious concern... the father hailed from Kerala."

"Now we are told that he has been released. The

government of India undertook serious diplomatic steps. It only shows rising political respect that India commands," he said.

Uzhunnallil, who belongs to Kottayam district, was brought to Muscat, the capital of Oman, on Tuesday morning.

Later, the Indian priest left Muscat on board an Oman Air aircraft for an audience with the Pope in Vatican.

Uzhunnallil is an employee of the Vatican, which has been engaged in talks with various quarters for his release.

The Oman government took the lead in getting him released after a papal representative visited Oman last month and had an audience with the King of Oman

INTERNATIONAL

Brexit bill clears first parliamentary hurdle

London, Sep 12 : British Prime Minister Theresa May's landmark bill to pave the way for the UK's exit from the European Union (EU) cleared its major hurdle in the House of Commons in the early hours of Tuesday.

MPs backed the EU Withdrawal Bill by 326 votes to 290 despite critics warning that it represented a "power grab" by ministers. The bill, which will end the supremacy of EU law in the UK, now moves onto its next parliamentary stage. May welcomed the Commons vote, saying the bill offered "certainty and clarity" -- but Labour described it as an "affront to parliamentary democracy", the BBC reported.

Seven opposition Labour MPs defied Jeremy Corbyn's order to oppose the bill -- Ronnie Campbell, Frank Field, Kate Hoey, Kelvin Hopkins, John Mann,

Dennis Skinner and Graham Stringer. None of the Conservatives voted against it. Having cleared the second reading stage, the bill will now face more attempts to change it with MPs, including several senior Conservative backbenchers, publishing a proposed 157 amendments, covering 59 pages, the report said. Previously referred to as the Great Repeal Bill, the EU Withdrawal Bill overturns the 1972 European Communities Act which took the UK into the then European Ec

It will also convert all existing EU laws into UK law, to ensure there are no gaps in legislation on Brexit day. Critics' concerns centre on ministers giving themselves the power to make changes to laws during this process without consulting MPs.

The government says it needs to be able to make

minor technical changes to ensure a smooth transition, but fears were raised that ministers were getting sweeping powers to avoid parliamentary scrutiny.

More than 100 MPs had their say during the two-day second reading debate. Labour, which denounced the "vague offers" of concessions, mostly voted against the bill.

Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer said the bill was a "naked power grab" by the government, adding that "this is a deeply disappoHe said: "Labour will seek to amend and remove the worst aspects from the bill but the flaws are so fundamental it's hard to see how this could ever be made fit for purpose." Liberal Democrat Brexit spokesman Tom Brake said MPs who backed the bill should feel "ashamed". "This is a dark day for the mother of parliaments," he added.

French President visits Caribbean island flattened by Irma

Paris, Sep 12: French President Emmanuel Macron arrived in the Caribbean on Tuesday promising to rebuild the French territories ravaged by Hurricane Irma.

Speaking on the tarmac of the airport at Pointe a Pitre in Guadeloupe, one of France's overseas territories, Macron defended criticism that France was not prepared to deal with the situation. CNN reported. Macron pointed out that at the last minute the Category 3 storm they were expecting to land on Guadeloupe

turned into a Category 5 and rammed St. Martin instead, 260 kilometres away.

The French President plans to visit that beleaguered island later in the day. "I am here to talk about reconstruction," he said. "When such a thing happens, life is never the same again. I want to rebuild not just a new life but also a better life."

Macron said 11 people were killed in the French territories of St. Barts and St. Martin. That brings the death toll of Irma in the Leeward Islands and Cuba to at least 38.

Hasina: Myanmar should take Rohingyas back

Dhaka, Sep 12 : Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Tuesday urged Myanmar to take back the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims who have fled violence in Rakhine state to her country.

Speaking as she visited Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar district, Hasina urged Myanmar to view the situation with humanity, saying innocent people were suffering. Hasina accused the Myanmar military of committing atrocities and said its actions were in "violation of human rights", and added that Rohingya refugees are Myanmar's nationals and it must take its citizens back.

"Bangladesh wants to maintain peace and good relations with its neighbouring countries, but it cannot accept 'unjust acts' the Myanmar government is committing," the Prime Minister was quoted as saying by the Daily Star newspaper. "Still, the fire is burning there... people can't find their family members... the bodies of infants and women are floating on the Naf River... these go completely against humanity and are violations of human rights," Hasina said.

Some 370,000 Rohingyas have crossed the border since violence began in August, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said on Tuesday. Myanmar's military says it is fighting Rohingya militants and denies it is targeting civilians. But many of those who have fled say troops responded to attacks by Rohingya militants on August 25 with a brutal campaign of violence and burning of village aimed at driving them out. "My personal message is very clear, that they should consider this situation with the eyes of humanity," the Prime Minister told the BBC.

"Because these people, innocent people, the children, women, they are suffering. So these people, they belong to Myanmar. Hundreds of years they are staying there. How they can deny that they are not their citizens?"

Hasina said her country would offer Rohingyas shelter until Myanmar took them back. She also condemned the militants for their role in the violence, but said Myanmar's government should have dealt with the situation more patiently. She said Bangladesh protests this injustice and inhumane attitude towards Rohingyas in Rakhine state, and renewed her call to the international community to mount pressure on the Myanmar government to take back their nationals. "Myanmar has to take back their nationals, give them a safe place to live in their homeland. The international community should put pressure on Myanmar... this has to be stopped," she added.

Abducted Kerala Catholic priest rescued in Yemen - with Oman's intervention

Oman, Sep 12 : A Catholic priest from Kerala, Tom Uzhunnallil, abducted by terrorists in Aden in March last year, has been rescued from captivity from an undisclosed location in Yemen, thanks to the intervention of the Oman government.

Uzhunnallil, who belongs to Kottayam district, was brought to Muscat, the capital of Oman, on Tuesday morning. Later, the Indian priest left Muscat on board a Royal Oman Air force aircraft for an audience with the Pope in Vatican.

Uzhunnallil is an employee of the Vatican, which has been engaged in talks with various quarters for his release.

The Oman government took the lead in getting him released after a papal representative visited Oman last month and had an audience with the King of Oman.

According to a statement of the Sultanate of Oman, "In response to the Royal Orders of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said and as per a request from the Vatican to assist in the rescuing of a Vatican employee, the concerned authorities in the Sultanate, in coordination with the Yemeni authorities, have managed

to find a Vatican government employee. He was transferred this morning to Muscat in preparation for his return home."

According to a Times of Oman report, Uzhunnallil expressed his thanks to God and to Sultan Qaboos, and wished him good health and wellness.

"He also thanked his brothers, sisters and all relatives and friends who prayed for his safety and release," the statement added.

External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj tweeted about the release of the Catholic priest, who was abducted in March last year.

"I am happy to inform that Father Tom Uzhunnallil has been rescued," she said.

The media in Oman confirmed the news of the release of the priest and posted a picture of him -- standing in a room with the picture of the Oman king in the background.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan expressed happiness at his release. "The Kerala government will now extend all the help that is needed for his treatment and other things," said Vijayan in a Facebook post.

Former Chief Minister Oommen Chandy said the

abduction took place while he was in office in 2016.

"We did everything possible and the efforts of External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj is laudable, who was always willing to give her best. The Abu Dhabi diocese of the Church of the priest also took huge interest. We are all really happy at his release," said Chandy.

Newly-sworn in Minister of State for Tourism, IT and Electronics K.J. Alphonse, from whose district the priest hails, said the release became a reality because of concerted team effort.

"Special thanks to Prime Minister Modi and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj has to be said, said Alphonse.

Expressing happiness at the news, the priest's brother Mathew Uzhunnallil said their prayers have been finally answered.

Uzhunnallil's ancestral home in Ramapuram in Kottayam district is presently shut as two of his brothers live abroad, while another lives in Gujarat. Hearing the news, relatives of the priest gathered at the home of a relative who lives close by the ancestral home.