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Govt in a bind over SC tag for converts

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NEW DELHI: The Centre is likely to come under intense political pressure over religious quota as it tables the Justice Ranganath Misra Commission report in Parliament which seeks an extension of Scheduled Caste status to Hindu converts to Christianity and Islam and calls for carving a sub-quota for minorities within the 27% OBC quota.

UPA government is learnt to be considering the option of asking a new commission to study the demand of SC tag for minorities besides the alternative of not taking a stand on it. The issue is being heard by Supreme Court where Centre has to file an affidavit.

Sources said while there was a strong view to reject the demand outright, the circuitous route of study may be politically correct. Social justice minister Mukul Wasnik is to decide on it.

As Misra commission has said that SC status be made "religion neutral" and extended to minorities beyond Sikhs and Buddhists, the reluctance of UPA to move accordingly may expose Congress to attacks from "secular" outfits.

SP and JD(U) are keenly watching Congress's difficulty over minority quota to counter its outreach among Muslims in UP and Bihar. Congress is looking to revive itself in its twin fallen forts, with revival of appeal among Muslims top on its agenda. The Misra report has been pending with minority affairs ministry for around two years and the Centre has now decided to table it in Parliament. Summing up the predicament, a senior UPA minister said there was tremendous political pressure to move on SC status for minorities but it was a decision with "far-reaching consequences".

This is the first big quota question for UPA-2 after PM Manmohan Singh's first tenure was saddled with many, leading to repeated political stalemates and in-house sparring, as on OBC education reservation. Instead, the minority affairs ministry is working to "refine" affirmative action for minorities by creating sub-quota within 27% OBC quota. Minority affairs minister, Salman Khurshid, said, "This is the promise we have made in the manifesto on the lines of Karnataka, Kerala and AP model."

The move, however, is fraught as the OBC champions have been reluctant to implement sub-quotas, which they feel would shrink the share of their constituents. While they advocate an increase in the quantum of reservation, its possibility is remote since it would push the total reservation quantum beyond the Supreme Court mandated upper limit of 50%.

Misra panel has favoured the OBC sub-quota route, realizing the difficulty a move to give SC status to minorities can run into. Creation of sub-quota would give a dedicated quantum to each minority. It is aimed to address the grievance that minorities are unable to benefit from their inclusion in OBC list.

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Govt set to reopen quota can of worms

New Delhi December 10, 2009

The UPA government on Wednesday opened yet another can of worms by committing to the tabling of the Ranganath Misra Commission report in the ongoing session of Parliament.

The Commission, which submitted its report two years ago, had strongly recommended reservation for Muslims and Christians under the SC and OBC quota.

Though all the quota- supporting entities such as the Left parties, Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Janata Dal (United) and a section of the Congress are putting pressure on the Centre to implement the report, government sources acknowledged that implementing the Ranganath Misra Commission report could be the toughest task ahead of the Centre.

"This involves the most crucial aspect of quotas, which is the reservation under religious lines," a senior minister said.

The Ranganath Misra Commission report - now widely available due to media leaks - recommends reservation for Muslims and Christians from among the quota to SCs (15 per cent) and OBCs (27 per cent). Citing the under- representation of minorities, especially Muslims, the commission noted that minorities should be regarded as backward. It said 15 per cent of posts (10 per cent for Muslims and 5 per cent for Christians) in central and state governments - that is, 15 per cent of the 27 per cent OBC reservation - should be earmarked for minorities.

For the first time in the country's history, the commission, which was set up in 2005 and submitted its report in 2007, had also agreed that the concept of caste is very much prevalent among Muslims and Christians. It recommended that Dalits among Christians and Muslims should also get the benefit of reservation and that the Dalits among Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists should be included in the central or state Scheduled Caste lists.

The main Opposition party, the BJP, has already opposed reservation on the basis of religion, and the absence of senior Congressmen like Arjun Singh in the cabinet could make implementation of the report a lot tougher.

On the other hand, the Left parties argue that the issue is not reservation on religious lines, but providing a quota for the Dalit segment of the Muslim and Christian communities who, according to them, were denied the benefit of reservation quotas for decades.

Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav raised the issue in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday. Recently, JD(U) MP and leader of Pashminda Muslims Anwar Ali brought the matter in the Lok Sabha.

In a desperate effort to gain centrestage and bring quota politics back in the mainstream, all the " Mandal parties" - SP, RJD, JD(U) and Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) - overtly support the recommendations of the Misra panel. The Bahujan Samaj Party and the Left parties have also offered their support.

During the previous UPA regime, the decision to implement the OBC quota in centrally sponsored educational institutes was backed by all parties, including the BJP. In that sense, the commission's report has brought quota veterans like Sharad Yadav, Lalu Prasad and Mulayam Singh Yadav together. And this is one issue on which their arch rival, BSP supremo Mayawati wholeheartedly supports them. The Congress, however, is ambiguous.

A day after the Opposition parties - except the BJP and the Shiv Sena - created a ruckus in the Rajya Sabha over the non- tabling of the report, SP leader Mulayam Singh Yadav demanded the Prime Minister's response over the issue during zero hour in the Lok Sabha.

"We will place the report on the table of the House in this session," Prime Minister Manmohan Singh responded. The Prime Minister, however, did not make it clear that whether the Centre would also table the Action Taken Report (ATR) on the Commission's findings.

The ATR on the recommendations would be interesting as the government is supposed to make public its ideas on how the reservation for Muslims and Christians would be implemented. Quota supporters argue that the Centre can easily find out the SCs in Muslims and Christians from their professions.

The chairman of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) Buta Singh has made public his differences over giving reservation to minorities from the SC quota. States like Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka provide reservation for Muslims from the OBC quota.

The Congress manifesto had promised that reservation for minorities would be implemented along the Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka models.

After being questioned earlier on the report's implementation in the Rajya Sabha, Union minority affairs minister Salman Khurshid was to make a statement in the Upper House. BJP members questioned Khurshid for allegedly telling a television channel that the government was going to implement the report within six months.

"Is it fair on his part, when the session is going on, to make this kind of a policy statement on a TV channel? This is a fundamental issue," BJP MP Ravi Shankar Prasad said.

Khurshid, however, categorically denied the charge and asserted he said nothing about the report's implementation.

Experts said on Wednesday that any move to provide reservation to religious minorities is unlikely to be opposed by those in the general category as reservation of seats for Dalit Christians and Muslims within the existing quota for Dalits will not affect them.

The National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM) has recommended a quota within the quota to accommodate non- Hindu SCs and OBCs within the existing reservation of 15 per cent and 27 per cent reservation respectively.

The NCRLM report, which followed the Sachar committee report on Muslims, was, however, rejected by the Buta Singh-led NCSC.

(With inputs from Gyanant Singh)

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