

Next Set of Reform Bills may Spark Political Fireworks

by Santwana Bhattacharya

New Delhi: The Land Acquisition Ordinance may not be the only issue over which the Centre and the Opposition may cross swords. With the government lining up the next batch of reform Bills – GST, the Forest Rights amendment and the Nuclear Safety Regulatory Bill – for the second half of the Budget session, fierce fireworks are likely.

Of these, the amendment to Forest Rights Act which the government says, is needed for “ease in doing business”, in other words for quick environment clearance for projects, will certainly come up against the Opposition wall. Not just the Congress and the Left, the regional parties in power in the states, like the AIADMK, are upset with the Centre’s move to water down the Bill.

While for the Congress and the Left, the opposition to any move to dilute the provisions of the Forest Rights Act – passed during UPA-I tenure – is political, “snatching of tribal rights”, the AIADMK and the BJD feel it usurps the state governments’ powers over its respective forest cover and environment.

The GST which Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said on Monday “is ready” for introduction in the second half of the session, may come with less resistance as the Congress sees it as “the UPA’s unfinished agenda”.

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“As long as the interests of the states are taken care of, we have no issues. They (the BJP-NDA) are in a majority, we’ve to respect that mandate. Unless, a Bill is against the interests of the people and the country, we’ll not oppose it.”

However, on the Nuclear Safety Regulatory Authority Bill, also ready for the tabling once the session reconvenes, the Opposition is not so sure. The NSRA will be replacing the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board. It lapsed during the UPA tenure and is a crucial piece of legislation.

The independence of the nuclear regulatory authority has to be embedded in the law and this is also an International Atomic Energy Agency(IAEA) requirement.

These Bills apart, the Congress is deeply upset with the government decision to defer the implementation of the Food Security Act, which has been adopted only in seven states.

Surjewala said, “We see a clear design on the part of the government, it has stopped procurement, enhanced minimum support price in very meagre terms, consequently postponing the FSA which has not come into effect even after the Modi Govt has been in power for one-and-a-half years.”

This is likely to be linked to the fight against the Land Acquisition Bill and could well become another major bone of contention between the Congress and the BJP.