

Given aged & tainted team, young chief minister charts road map to deliver on poll promises

Style set, Akhilesh gears for challenges

TAPAS CHAKRABORTY

Lucknow, April 9: Some things have been easy for Akhilesh Yadav.

When he stepped into his chief minister's bungalow on March 25, ten days after being sworn in, the first thing he did was walk up to the security guards and strike up a conversation.

The gesture, unthinkable during his predecessor's time, went down very well.

Also popular has been his decision to allow traffic on Kaildas Marg, the 200m avenue that houses his and two other ministers' residences and which had been open only to Mayawati's cavalcade these past five years.

But the 38-year-old Akhilesh knows that the "winds of change" he has promised will not be such a breeze as these style statements.

Some of the challenges he faces, ironically stem from the legacy that has lifted him to the hot seat.

Akhilesh has inherited not only his chair from father Mulayam Singh Yadav but also the former chief minister's team of ministers, whose failures during the Samajwadi Party's previous stint in power had led to its electoral rout in 2007.

Many of these ministers are twice his age and are said to be more loyal to the father than the son.

"With Mulayam Singh Yadav around, I was a comrade in arms. I had an emotional bond with him," sports and youth welfare minister Kameswar Upadhyay, who at 79 is the oldest member in Akhilesh's cabinet, told The Telegraph.

But he added: "A generational shift has made young Akhilesh my new leader. The age gap between us will not create any disconnect with him. I will wait for instructions from him and follow them."

Ahmed Hasan, another minister, is 75. But more than his members' age, it's Team

LOW PROFILE, LONG HOURS

How Akhilesh Yadav spends his weekdays

SAM/5.30AM

Rises from bed at family home in Vikramaditya Marg

EARLY MORNING
Joins father Mulayam (who gets up at 4.30) on morning walk on premises

8.30AM

Leaves for official residence, 5 Kaildas Marg

8.45-10AM
Has breakfast, goes through files, checks email and two Facebook accounts — his own and the party's — watches TV news and reads newspaper clippings

10.10AM
Reaches secretariat

2PM

Returns to official residence for lunch. Goes back to secretariat only if there's a cabinet meeting

AFTERNOON/EVENING

Works from 5 Kaildas Marg, meets officials and business delegations

10-10.30PM

Leaves for family home for dinner

10.45-11PM

If there's work pending, returns to official residence and slogs till after midnight

DAY OFF

Spends the whole of Sunday with his family at Vikramaditya Marg, where he lives in one wing and Mulayam in another. Does not work or meet people on Sundays

STYLE

Travels in a five-car convoy, as opposed to Mayawati's 40-car convoy. He rides a white Ambassador whereas Mayawati rode a Tata Safari

Has got all his cut-outs and pictures removed from Lucknow's streets

Does not bring work home



parts and electric fans.

He also wants to provide a "healing touch" to Muslims — an important vote bank — by releasing a few blast accused who media reports say were tortured by police despite the absence of evidence against them.

Has Akhilesh begun delivering? "Not yet," says senior BJP leader Vijay Pathak. "What he has delivered are just minor concessions. He should focus on vigorous programme implementation."

The new chief minister has already constituted his brains trust. Its members include chief secretary Javed Usmani, state planning board deputy chairman N.C. Vajpayee, principal secretary (law) Z.V. Khan and protocol minister Abhishek Misra, a former IIM Ahmedabad professor and PhD from Cambridge University.

Akhilesh says a change will be perceptible in governance very soon.

"People were dismissive about me in 2010 when I took over as state (Samajwadi) president but now they find me acceptable. I shall prove I can deliver here (in governance) too," he has told journalists.

The new chief minister, however, has already begun hedging his bets by publicly declaring that he has to work with a bureaucracy that is full of corrupt officials — for which he has conveniently blamed Mayawati.

During a recent visit to Lakhimpur Kheri to inspect an irrigation project, he suspended six engineers for allegedly siphoning off funds meant for dredging silt. He has also projected himself as a tough leader by suspending 12 Samajwadi officials for anti-party activities.

A senior Samajwadi leader said: "Akhilesh is on the right track. He should not be underestimated. He first lays down the rules of the game and then works by those rules. He is not afraid to risk confrontation."

Samajwadi's reputation that's a bigger problem.

The Opposition has been gleefully citing a list released by advocacy group Association for Democratic Reforms: it says that at least 12 of Akhilesh's ministers face criminal cases, some relating to murder and attempted murder.

Among the tainted is Raghuraj Pratap Singh aka Raja Bhatia, a don-turned politician who is now prisons minister after having been in and out of prisons himself these past 10 years in connection with more than a dozen cases.

Forced to pick Raja Bhatia, apparently against his wishes, Akhilesh has weakly attributed the cases against him to a political "vendetta" by Mayawati. Since then, how-

ever, some of his MLAs' antics have left the new chief minister red-faced.

As Akhilesh was huddled in Lucknow with an IT honcho in mid-March, Samajwadi MLA Shakir Ali was riding a horse through the platform of Deoria railway station to celebrate his poll victory. The chief minister's embarrassment showed as TV channels splashed the news, insiders said.

Low-profile CM

So, for now, Akhilesh is trying to set an example before his team with his deliberately low-profile style before he gets down to the brass tacks of administration, sources said.

One of the sharpest changes since Mayawati's days has come about in the

composition of the chief ministerial convoy.

The Bahujan Samaj Party leader's motorcade was made up of 40 cars — five bullet-proof Tata Safaris, one of which carried Mayawati; two Toyota Fortunes; two dozen white ambassadors that carried doctors, officials and security guards; a mini-emergency pharma unit with nurses; and eight police and security vans. Some 400 security personnel protected Mayawati by rotation.

The new chief minister's convoy has just five cars: four white ambassadors, one of them carrying Akhilesh himself, and the mandatory medical van.

Akhilesh has also got his cut-outs and pictures, put up during the election campaign,

removed from Lucknow's street crossings.

He has combined the low visibility with long hours at work. Akhilesh often slogs past midnight at his official bungalow but returns to the family home to spend the night. He gets up early in the morning and is at 5 Kaildas Marg by 8.30. (See chart)

Beginning April 17, he may have to further advance his morning schedule once a week because he plans a "Janata durbar" at his official residence from 8am till 11am every Tuesday.

For all this, Akhilesh remains a devoted family man, spending Sundays at home with wife Dimple and their two daughters, aged 11 and 7, and five-year-old son.

"On other days, he is at the

secretariat by 10.10am, dressed in white kurta-pyjamas and a black waistcoat, to discuss the road map for the state's development and implementation of the projects pledged in the Samajwadi poll manifesto.

He knows that a key test would be his ability to raise the resources for the big promises such as the Rs 1,000 monthly unemployment dole and the free computer tablets and laptops for high school and Plus II students.

Tasks in hand

For now, Akhilesh is focusing on handling people what government sources describe as "small relief", such as reduction of taxes on wheat, rice, pulses and other foodstuff as well as bicycles, bicycle