

Despite telecom minister Kapil Sibal's brave attempt to argue that the government never lost even a single paisa in his predecessor A Raja's famed 2G scam (as compared to the CAG's Rs 1.76 lakh crore estimate), the UPA is taking no chances. The 8-member Group of Ministers formed last week has an impressive plan to scam-proof the government. This includes a transparent public procurement policy (presumably this means the auctions Sibal rejected for telecom), fast-tracking of investigations and prosecution of civil servants accused of corruption, curbs on the discretionary powers of ministers (Sonia Gandhi has asked Congress chief ministers to give up their discretionary land-allocation powers), taking a view on state funding of elections (the high cost of funding elections is trotted out as the standard justification of corruption), among others.

It's difficult to say whether this will work but National Advisory Council member Aruna Roy had an interesting take on the subject at a seminar in the capital last week. When asked if linking payments under various social sector schemes to the unique ID card would help cut corruption, she said it would raise transparency. As for whether it would cut out corruption, well that depended upon the government's political will. The A Raja case bears this out. Even if you assume Sibal is right in saying the CAG's estimate is completely wrong, the other aspects of the Raja scam were known way back in January 2008, or three years ago. This is when Raja changed the rules of the game to decide who would be first in the queue to get licences/spectrum, this is when Raja and his band of trusted bureaucrats allowed firms that never even met the required criteria to get licences. Yet, nothing happened till the CAG report came out; the CBI investigation that started after huge media outrage did not make any headway till a public interest petition was filed in the Supreme Court and the Court lost its cool. Till then, neither Raja nor ministry officials had been interrogated. The fate of various prosecutions of politicians like Lalu Prasad and Mayawati are well known, as are the various twists and turns in these cases, mirroring their promise of support to the ruling coalition or the threat to withdraw it. If the proof of the pudding lies in its eating, the proof of the government's sincerity lies in seeing some top politicians and bureaucrats getting convicted.