

WEDNESDAY, MAY 11, 2011

Indian Politician Says Sonia Gandhi Has Rigged M-MRCA Deal for Rafale

If the Indian M-MRCA fighter competition wasn't quite surreal enough, in comes an Indian politician-economist, notably re-energized by his current association with India's "anti-corruption" movement and India's monumental telecom scam investigation, to stir the pot some more. A known fire-bomber with an unabashed antipathy to India's ruling Congress party, Subramanian Swamy has now apparently trained his ire at the IAF's \$12-billion M-MRCA fighter deal.

Swamy, officially leader of the Janata Party, but best known for years as a voluble and dogged government baiter on all matters graft, says he has written to Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh making some very dramatic allegations. The letter (full text in image above) was written on April 29, two days after the dramatic M-MRCA elimination. Like all his letters, this one says that it draws on "inside information" from within the government. Let's get to the contents:

Swamy writes: "My sources indicate that the pre-determined decision to favour the French aircraft [Dassault's Rafale] was the outcome of several conversations between the wife of French President Ms. Carla Bruni and the Chairperson of the National Advisory Council Ms. Sonia Gandhi, and surprisingly also with two foreign nationals who are the sisters of Ms. Sonia Gandhi."

It is not clear what information Swamy has based his allegations on.

At the very least, it should be said that Subramanian Swamy was once quite aptly described by a leading news weekly as "the Professor Moriarty to Sonia's Sherlock Holmes", so there shouldn't be any real surprise that the target of his letter is specifically the Congress Party president. That said, the allegations he makes are indubitably explosive. Swamy's letter refers to "credible information" in his possession, but says nothing about what this credible information is. It is not clear if he has shared any further information with the Prime Minister apart from this letter.

The operative part of his letter goes: "Based on some credible information given to me on the conversation between Ms. Carla Bruni and Ms Sonia Gandhi's sisters, there has been an agreement of the French to pay a hefty bribe for favouring the purchase of French aircrafts."

Interestingly, a popular Indian military commentator has made a slightly backhanded allusion to pretty much the same thing today. In this column published in today's Pioneer, Maj Gen (Retd) Ashok Mehta writes, "The IAF favours the Rafale not the least because the French are promising the moon. There is also a high level back channel Italian connection, they say." So either the columnist has read Subramanian Swamy's letter, or has his own "insiders", in which case, as you've no doubt guessed, we have two prominent Indian figures

saying that the Rafale has already been chosen to win the M-MRCA competition, and that it took a high-level government connection -- Swamy names Sonia Gandhi, the Maj Gen her nationality -- to work it through.

It should be reiterated that neither of these controversial assertions has been backed in substance -- at least as far as I know -- in either the letter or the column. We'll have to see where this goes.