

CHARANJIT SINGH CHANNI TO BE FIRST DALIT CM OF STATE

Channi to Steer Cong in Punjab

Our Political Bureau

New Delhi: The Congress leadership has deftly played the politically delicate Dalit card in Punjab by picking the 58-year-old traditional Congress person Charanjit Singh Channi to be the new Chief Minister, the first ever from the Dalit community to hold the post in the State. Besides sending a pre-poll message to around 34% Dalit population of Punjab, the highest concentration of the community in an Indian State, the Congress leadership is hoping to use the Dalit CM plank to counter Captain Amarinder Singh's post-resignation plots besides having already deployed it as a compromise to defuse the internal rat race and clashes among senior leaders for the chief ministerial chair. There will be two Deputy CMs, representing Jat Sikh and Hindu communities.

Channi, Sukhinder Randhawa and Tript Rajinder Bajwa, all original supporters of Amarinder Singh and his Cabinet colleagues, formed a formidable trio who led the revolt against Singh before Navjot Singh Sidhu jumped in to market himself before the Gandhis as the face of rebellion anti-Singh rebellion. Ironically, Jat Sikhs, Sidhu and Randhawa opposed each others' chief ministerial pitch and cancelled each other on Sunday. Channi is known to be personally close to senior leader Ambika Soni - who earlier in the day ruled herself out of the race by asserting Punjab should have a Sikh CM, a comment that also nipped the chances of Ex-PCC chief Sunil Jakhar, whose claim was also reportedly pushed by his relative and AICC functionary Randeep Surjewala. Channi had recently embroiled himself in a controversy over an alleged text message he sent to a woman officer, some thing his supporters claimed was part of Ex-CM Singh targeting him. He was leader of Opposition in the Assembly 2012-17.

A Congress leader said "After BSP's Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan's former CM Jagannth Pahadia (again of Congress), Channi is the only third Dalit Chief Minister so far in the North Indian States". Congress' propping up Channi also meant to counter AAP's promise to make a Dalit CM after the Punjab polls and Akali Dal's own promise to make a Dalit Deputy CM besides the party forming an alliance with Mayawati's BSP. All these amid growing demands from the Dalit community of Punjab to have one among them in the coveted post in the State, that has been so far mostly monopolised by the influential and resourceful Jat Sikh. Similarly, Congress has tactically made Kumari Selja as PCC chief of neighbouring Haryana which has over 20% Dalit community



After deferring CLP meetings and combafulations among MLAs and with high command, AICC general secretary in-charge Harish Rawat tweeted the selection; "It gives me immense pleasure to announce that Sh. Charanjit Singh Channi has been unanimously elected as the Leader of the Congress Legislature Party of Punjab".

After Staking claim before the Governor, Channi told he media, "We have presented our stance, unanimously supported by party MLAs, before the Governor. Oath taking ceremony to take place at 11 am tomorrow (Monday)".

Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, K C Venugopal and Ambika Soni discussed and took the final call after inputs Rawat and his AICC colleague Ajay Maken sent from Chandigarh after one-on-one meet with MLAs. Venugopal told ET; "The Congress Party has always heralded social reforms and revolutions in the governments and establishments. The Congress Party made Zail Singh Ji, India's first President from the Sikh community, Manmohan Singh Ji the first PM and Buta Singh Ji Union Home Minister from the Sikh community. Today the Congress leadership has responded to the aspirations of the people of Punjab by making Charanjit Singh Channi Ji as the first Dalit CM of the State. No other political party can match Congress' commitment to social justice and empowerment". Maken told ET from Chandigarh. "The appointment of Charanjit Singh Channi Ji is yet another demonstration of Rahul Ji's commitment to social empowerment of the deprived sections".

Rahul Gandhi tweeted; "Congratulations to Shri Charanjit Singh Channi Ji for the new responsibility. We must continue to fulfill the promises made to the people of Punjab. Their trust is of paramount importance".