

Indian PM threatened to resign to ensure success of Indo-US military exercise

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According to recent press reports, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made a series of extraordinary threats to secure a guarantee from the Left Front government of West Bengal that a joint Indo-US military exercise would proceed unimpeded. The threats included Singh resigning as head of the United Progressive Alliance coalition government and the placing of West Bengal under “presidential” or central government rule.

Manmohan Singh is reputed to have made the threats in a telephone conversation with West Bengal Chief Minister and Communist Party of India (Marxist) Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee in early November, just days before the Indian and US air forces were to begin a joint exercise in West Bengal. Bhattacharjee had urged the central government to change the exercise venue from West Bengal, warning that he could not guarantee security for the exercise because of popular opposition to US imperialism within Left Front-ruled West Bengal.

Manmohan Singh reportedly gave no quarter to Bhattacharjee. He insisted that under India’s constitution the central government has complete authority over defence and military matters, then told Bhattacharjee that if the West Bengal government would not bow to the Union government’s wishes he would either resign as prime minister or dismiss the state government and impose central government rule.

Either action would have precipitated a major political crisis. The UPA government, which is led by the Congress Party, is a multi-party coalition, dependent on the parliamentary support of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front for its parliamentary majority. Manmohan Singh’s resignation would have thrown the government’s continued existence into question.

By the same token, any attempt by the central government to dismiss West Bengal’s Left Front government, which has been returned to power in six successive elections since 1977, and with the aim of fostering closer cooperation between the Indian and US military establishments, would have made it impossible for the Left Front to continue

sustaining the UPA in office. Even more importantly, it would have been interpreted by tens of millions of Indian workers and toilers as an attempt to use authoritarian means to overcome popular opposition to the Indian elite’s neo-liberal economic reform programme and burgeoning strategic partnership with the US.

Given the explosive character of Manmohan Singh’s threats, there is good reason to believe that he was bluffing. Nevertheless, that he would even threaten to take such extreme steps underscores the Congress leadership’s determination to press forward with closer military cooperation with the US. Singh also probably wanted to send a clear signal to his Left Front allies that his government will not shy away from confrontation with them over key matters of government policy, including its neo-liberal programme of privatisation, disinvestment, deregulation, and the re-channeling of state expenditure from income support programmes to the military and to infrastructure projects aimed at attracting foreign capital.

Whether bluff or not, Manmohan Singh’s threats had the desired effect. The CPM-led West Bengal government completely caved in. Bhattacharjee extended his full cooperation, placing the state machinery at the disposal of the centre and providing all requisite security measures to ensure the success of the military exercises.

Even more significantly, neither he nor any other CPM leaders breathed a word to the working class about Manmohan Singh’s threats, above all his threat to impose presidential rule. To have done so would have raised what are for the Stalinists embarrassing questions about the character of the government they are sustaining in power in New Delhi on the grounds that it can be pressured into pursuing pro-people policies.

The Stalinists’ capitulation to the central government is not simply a matter of cowardice, although the Stalinists are certainly wedded to the perks and privileges that have come their way as a result of their managing Indian capitalism in West Bengal for the past 29 years. Defenders of the existing political order, they are terrified of the mass opposition an

attempt to impose presidential rule on West Bengal would provoke in the state and across India.

Staged from the Kalaikunda air force base in the West Midnapore district of West Bengal for 12 days beginning from November 7, the joint Indo-US air exercise was billed as the largest ever mounted by the two countries. The exercises involved a full squadron of US Air Force F-16s and an Airborne Warning and Control System(AWACS) plane.

Since the end of the Cold War, military cooperation between India and the US has grown tremendously. Last June, the US and India signed a new defence agreement that is meant to pave the way for significant Indian purchases of US-made weapons and weapons systems and provides for possible joint Indo-US operations in foreign countries without United Nations' authorisation. Geopolitically, India has also moved much closer to the US, supporting the US invasion of Afghanistan, recognising the US-installed puppet regime in Iraq, and voting with the US and European Union against Iran at last September's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meeting.

Alarmed by these developments and eager to refurbish their leftist credentials in light of the coming West Bengal state elections, the Indian Stalinists made an issue over last November's exercise. But they ended up having to execute a humiliating climb-down.

Large number of CPM activists, workers and other leftists did participate in protests against the Indo-US air force exercise and, in so doing, many of them voiced their anger over the state government's support for the exercise. Under the terms of Bhattacharjee's agreement with the central government, these protests were heavily policed so as to ensure that the air force exercise could go off without a hitch.

Despite the seriousness of Manmohan Singh's threats, his conversation with Bhattacharjee has received scant coverage in the Indian press. The *Hindu*, which has close ties to the Left Front, made only oblique references to the affair while reporting on the visit of CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat to Tripura on January 8. According to the *Hindu*, Karat, when questioned about Manmohan Singh's threat to resign, said "This is for the first time, I am hearing such news that the Prime Minister had offered to quit."

Never did the newspaper follow this up by asking Karat how it was that his fellow Politbureau member Bhattacharjee failed to inform him of Singh's threat or why the CPM leadership so suddenly dropped their opposition to the staging of the air exercise in West Bengal. As for the West Bengal Chief Minister, he appears to have avoided all comment on the affair.

In a short piece titled "PM's left hook," the *Indian*

Express, a leading proponent of neo-liberal reforms and closer ties to the US, expressed great satisfaction not only at the outcome but also at the ability of the "soft-spoken" Singh to talk tough to the Stalinists when required.

The most prominent report on Manmohan Singh's conversation with Bhattacharjee appeared on Rediff.com. On January 7, it carried an article titled "Manmohan offered to quit over CPM protest to India-US exercise." It reported that "Very few people in government know the prime minister had offered to resign, but only after sending a message that in India's federal structure a commitment given by the Centre is binding on the states."

The article also noted that Manmohan Singh had underlined his determination to ensure the air exercise went ahead unimpeded by having the cabinet pass a resolution reaffirming the central government's sole constitutional authority in military matters and the obligation of the state's to respect defence agreements made by the centre.

The only other news website to prominently report on the resignation threat was the regional daily *Kashmir Times*, although its report has now been deleted. Quoting news agencies, the *Times* article said a senior official had boasted about Manmohan Singh's readiness to use threats to coerce the Left Front into doing the government's bidding: "The prime minister shows guts when a major issue related to America comes up."

The Indian press's failure to probe this affair reflects the extreme sensitivity of both the Indian ruling elite and their Left Front allies about what it reveals about class relations in India: the extreme weakness of the government; its readiness to use provocative and authoritarian threats in pursuit of closer cooperation with the US; the political subservience of the Stalinists and their complicity in hoodwinking the masses as to the nature of the UPA government and in covering up the ruling class's readiness to resort to draconian measures if it believes its fundamental interests are at stake.



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