

Mounting press speculation India will face early elections

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22 September 2007

Recent weeks have seen mounting speculation in the Indian press that the rift between the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and the Left Front over the proposed Indo-US nuclear trade treaty will result in early or “mid-term” elections.

Since May 2004, the Stalinist-led Left Front has been providing the UPA, a dozen-party coalition anchored by the Congress Party, with the parliamentary votes to cling to office, although the UPA has pursued neo-liberal socio-economic reforms and a “strategic global partnership” with the US.

Most opposition parties are now said to be in election mode. Leaders of the official opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose opposition to the Indo-US accord is driven more by factional hostility to the Congress than differences over the treaty’s terms and India’s geo-political strategy, have declared early elections inevitable.

Leaders of the twin Stalinist parties that dominate the Left Front—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM—have repeatedly disavowed any intention or desire to bring down the government. But they have also warned the government that should it proceed with operationalizing the treaty, it will be breaking the Common Minimum Programme, the agreement that underpins the UPA coalition and its alliance with the Left, and that such action could determine the government’s fate. “We won’t be there to help this government conclude this agreement,” declared CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat, September 12. “That’s final.”

In the first week of September, the Left Front mounted a mass agitation denouncing the treaty and the five country (India, US, Japan, Australia, and Singapore) naval exercise then underway in the Bay of Bengal as two prongs of a US effort to ensnare India in a pro-US, Asian-Pacific strategic bloc.

To mollify the Left, the government agreed in late August to set up a 15 member UPA-Left committee to consider the objections raised to the treaty by “experts”, i.e. members of India’s nuclear and geo-political establishment, the Left, and others.

However, it rapidly emerged that the Left and the government have a very different understanding of the committee’s mandate. UPA cabinet ministers and Congress Party leaders have insisted that the committee is only an advisory body and that, in any event, the treaty cannot be renegotiated.

Under India’s constitution, parliament does not ratify treaties. Rather they are proclaimed by the government. But with the BJP, the Left Front, and most of the other opposition parties, including

those that are part of a newly-formed “third” (i.e. anti UPA, anti-BJP) alliance of regional parties, having declared their opposition, there is a clear parliamentary majority against the treaty, undermining its legitimacy, and raising the possibility that the government could face a successful non-confidence motion should the treaty be made operational.

“We do not want a political crisis,” Karat told a rally in Delhi last Tuesday. “But in a democracy, the opinion of the people is what counts, and we represent the third biggest party in Parliament. We have been fighting against both communalism [i.e., the Hindu supremacist BJP] and imperialism, which pose a threat to our country. The government is fully aware of our political stand on the issue, and the stand-off should be resolved through dialogue.”

Karat called for the government to wait six months before taking any further steps to operationalize the treaty, which would terminate a 33-year US-led embargo on the transfer of civilian nuclear fuel and technology to India.

Before the treaty can come into effect, India must negotiate “safeguard agreements” with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the 45-country Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG). Only then will the Indo-US nuclear treaty—known as the 123 Agreement, because US nuclear treaties are negotiated under section 123 of the 1954 US Atomic Energy Act—be placed before the US Senate for ratification.

IAEA and NSG approval is far from guaranteed, since, with this treaty, the US is effectively creating a unique status for India within the world nuclear regulatory regime—a self-proclaimed nuclear-weapons state that has refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty but would nonetheless be freely able to purchase civilian nuclear fuel and technology on the world market.

Pakistan has strongly objected to the special status being given India, warning that it will alter the balance of power in South Asia. China, whose approval is required, since decisions within the NSG are by consensus, has questioned whether granting an exemption for India will not undermine efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Members of the Chinese elite speaking in an unofficial capacity have not been so circumspect. They have condemned the Indo-US nuclear treaty as a calculated move by Washington to build up India as a strategic counterweight to China and as evidence have point to the many statements made along such lines by leading figures in the Bush administration and the US geo-political military establishment.

In deference to the Left's wishes, India did not begin the process of negotiating IAEA safeguards when the UN agency met in Vienna in September. The Indian press, however, is reporting that the government does intend to initiate talks with the IAEA next month.

The US meanwhile is pushing for India to seek swift IAEA-NSG approval. "Time is of the essence," the US Ambassador to India, David Mulford, told an Indo-American Chamber of Commerce summit this week. In an interview with the Press Trust of India, Richard Stratford, the director of the US State Department's Office of Nuclear Energy Affairs, said Washington "wants to meet the entire pre-requisites for operationalization this year."

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other top Bush administration officials have touted the Indo-US nuclear treaty as having a transformative impact on Indo-US relations, adding that they believe an Indo-US partnership will be pivotal for the US in the decades to come.

Hence the anxiety not to allow time for opposition to the agreement to grow in India. But there is another pressing reason, Washington is so anxious to lock-in the treaty: its preparations for a possible showdown with Iran.

The Bush administration and the US Congress have repeatedly used the nuclear pact as a means of bullying India into lining up behind the US in IAEA discussion over Iran's nuclear program. The Hyde Act, the US legislation authorizing the Bush administration to undertake nuclear trade negotiations with India, requires the US president to annually certify that India is complying with US anti-nuclear proliferation efforts against Iran.

In an appearance on Capitol Hill Tuesday to rally US Congressional and business support for the Indo-US nuclear treaty, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Richard Boucher, called on India to "explain what is and what is not going on in its relations with Iran, as we are upfront in our relations with other countries like India."

The Indian government has sought to counter criticism of several of the provisions of the Hyde Act—including the stipulation that the US will cease all nuclear cooperation with India in the event India stages a nuclear weapons test and has the right to demand the return of all nuclear fuel and equipment supplied under the treaty—by suggesting that the 123 agreement supersedes the Hyde Act. In his remarks Tuesday, Boucher said such a claim "is not a meaningful statement one way or another. ... The 123 agreement is completely consistent with US law ... which includes the Hyde Act."

The UPA government and the most powerful sections of the Indian elite are strongly supportive of the Indo-US nuclear treaty because they believe it represents a huge step toward India winning the status of a world power and that it will enable India to both reduce its dependence on foreign oil and natural gas and to further develop its nuclear weapons arsenal.

Their hope and wish is that India can exploit the US's desire to partner with India without being rendered a subordinate US ally.

The Stalinists champion an alternate strategy for the Indian elite that includes building on India's decades long close relations with Russia and expanding ties with China.

Opposition to the US is also crucial to the Stalinists' efforts to

portray themselves as a party of the working class and oppressed—today, more than ever, given their imposition of neo-liberal reforms in West Bengal and the two other states where they hold office.

Nevertheless, in the face of the government's determination to push through the treaty, the Stalinists may yet settle for a formula which allows them to "oppose" the agreement, while allowing the UPA to implement it.

Speaking Friday, CPM elder statesman and Politburo member Jyoti Basu indicated that the Stalinists are anxious to avoid a showdown with their UPA allies. The CPM has rightly argued that the Indo-US nuclear deal must be seen within the context of burgeoning Indo-US military and geo-political ties. But on Friday, Basu adopted the language of the Congress leadership, saying that the "Indo-US nuclear deal is for nuclear energy. Nuclear energy is necessary and there is need for nuclear power plants. With new industries mushrooming, the demand for power will increase."

Basu then added, "There could be some easing off of the situation. We are against US imperialism but we need foreign capital for industrialization. They are not coming for charity but for profit. We will also get benefit out of it. This would be on the basis of mutual interest."

The CPM and its Left Front allies have played a pivotal role in containing the mass opposition within the working class and rural poor to the social incendiary impact of the UPA's agenda of privatization and deregulation. Nevertheless, important sections of big business are urging the Congress to break with the Left Front and precipitate an early election in the hopes of bringing to power a government unencumbered by the need to give sops to the Left Front.

There are strong indications that the Congress is actively considering this course. The BJP is riven by crisis and has alienated important sections of capital by pursuing an unrelenting policy of obstruction, meaning that the Congress would be well-positioned to rally big business behind it.

Those within the Congress advocating a break with the Left Front are also calculating that the UPA will be able to exploit growing popular opposition to the West Bengal Left Front government, which has faced mass popular protests against its policy of expropriating peasant land for big business. Toward that end, the Congress has moved to form an alliance with the Trinamul (Grassroots) Congress of Mamata Banerjee. A right-wing, populist split-off from the Congress, the Trinamul Congress has hitherto been aligned with the BJP's electoral coalition, the National Democratic Alliance.



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