

India's government plots break with Left Front to implement Indo-US nuclear treaty

Keith Jones
21 June 2008

Bowing to pressure from Washington and from India's corporate elite, India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government has launched a new drive to implement the Indo-US civilian nuclear treaty.

The leadership of the Congress Party, the dominant partner in the UPA coalition, or at least a section of the Congress Party leadership gathered around Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, has signaled that it is ready to risk losing the government's parliamentary majority and precipitating early elections to advance the nuclear deal.

Such a course would involve high risks for both the UPA and the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government. Food and fuel prices have risen sharply over the past six month months, pushing inflation to a 13-year high of more than 11 percent. Meanwhile, economic growth has slowed. In recent state elections, the Congress has suffered a string of defeats. Precipitating early elections would increase frictions within the UPA, since many of its constituents are known to oppose and fear early elections.

Nonetheless, there are reports that Manmohan Singh has threatened to resign as prime minister should the Congress and its UPA allies buckle before threats from the Stalinist-led Left Front to withdraw support for the minority UPA government if it proceeds with the nuclear treaty. (Although Singh heads the government, he holds his post as prime minister at the pleasure of Sonia Gandhi, the Congress Party President and current head of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty.)

An article posted late Thursday evening on *rediff.com* reported Congress insiders as saying that "Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is putting the maximum pressure possible on Congress party president Sonia Gandhi to go ahead with the India-US nuclear deal."

It continued, "The tussle between Dr. Singh and some party leaders, who do not want an early general election provoked by the withdrawal of Left support, is *on* and far from over... Congress sources added."

"Dr. Singh would like to resign as prime minister if the Congress party does not back him on the deal. However, negotiations between Dr. Singh and the party continue and the final verdict is not out yet."

This report, as would be expected, has been vehemently denied by the Congress Party leadership.

What is incontrovertible is that recent pronouncements from persons in and around the Bush administration that the Indo-US nuclear is close to death and that it is time for India to, in the words of US commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, "make some tough choices" have thrown the UPA government into crisis.

The past week has seen a flurry of meetings between top leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM], the principal component of the Left Front, and the UPA government and Congress Party. The point-man for the government in these negotiations has

been External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, generally considered to be the government's second most powerful minister.

The UPA-Left Co-ordination Committee was to meet last Wednesday to consider the government's request that it be allowed to ask the International Atomic Energy Agency to ratify an agreement worked out between the government and the IAEA to place India's civilian nuclear industry under IAEA supervision. Because the Indo-US civilian nuclear treaty would create a special status for India within the world nuclear regulatory regime—a nuclear-weapons state outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty, but allowed to engage in civilian nuclear trade—its coming into force requires, among other steps, the negotiation and ratification of agreements with the IAEA and the Nuclear Supplies Group.

But preparatory discussions for the Co-ordination Committee meeting made clear that the government and Left Front were at loggerheads. The Left Front leaders said they hadn't yet been able to properly evaluate the "India-specific IAEA safeguards agreement" and weren't going to follow a timetable dictated by the Bush administration.

Although the government claims to have extensively briefed the Left Front leadership on the "safeguards" agreement, it is refusing to allow them to actually see the text of the agreement.

Only hours before the Co-ordination Committee meeting, the government cancelled it on the pretext that Mukherjee's presence was required elsewhere due to a visit by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The real reason for the cancellation is that the government, or rather the cabal of Congress ministers who lead it, and Sonia Gandhi and the Congress Party leadership are frantically exploring their options.

Four questions are central to their calculations.

First, can they force the Stalinists to the back down with the threat of early elections?

After all, the Left Front leaders are themselves not anxious for elections, both because they could deprive them of the influence they now wield as a result of the UPA's dependence on their parliamentary support, and because they fear a popular backlash in their West Bengal bastion due to their pursuit of pro-investor policies. Last fall, just days after CPM goons mounted a murderous attack on peasants in Nandigram who had resisted the West Bengal Left Front government's policy of expropriating land for Special Economic Zones, the Left Front abandoned its opposition to the UPA government initiating negotiations with the IAEA.

Second, if the Left Front, whose credibility would be further undermined were it to again facilitate the adoption of a treaty it has condemned as a US imperialist trap, continue to oppose submitting the safeguards agreement to the IAEA, should the Congress ignore their

opposition? Should it dare the Stalinists to bring down the government?

Third, can the Congress' allies in the UPA be persuaded of the necessity of such a gamble?

And fourth, if the Stalinists formally withdraw their support for the government, will they nonetheless refuse to join forces with the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to vote non-confidence in the government? Left Front leaders have hinted that they might follow such a course, which would enable the government to cling to office and to retain the initiative in fixing the date for next year's elections.

It is expected that the Congress will have to show its hand at or shortly after the next UPA-Left Coordination Committee meeting. That meeting is now rescheduled for the middle of next week.

India's corporate elite has left no doubt where it stands. The press has been full of editorials urging the Congress-led UPA to call the Left Front's bluff, even if it results in the fall of the government.

Much of the editorial commentary has drawn attention to the fact that under India's constitution the government need not submit treaties to parliament for approval. This means that the process of securing agreements with the IAEA and NSG, and even the ultimate proclamation of the civilian nuclear treaty with the US, could be carried out by a minority or even a caretaker (election) government.

In its lead editorial Friday, the *Times of India* strongly urged the Congress-led UPA to press forward with implementing the Indo-US nuclear accord: "Now that the US administration has indicated that it will continue to push for the nuclear deal in the US Congress till January 19—its last day in power—the UPA government can't prevaricate in sync with the Left because timelines are short. ... "The Left would like to kill the deal, but it wouldn't like to be seen doing it. And it hasn't said, in so many words, that it's going to bring down the government immediately. "That's an opportunity the government must use. The Left is not a working partner of the government; it only claims to support it from the outside while opposing most of its actions. ..." The *Economic Times* titled its Friday editorial, "Time to call Left's bluff." It began, "Both Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi have spoken strongly in favour of going ahead with the nuclear deal even at the cost of losing the Left's support. We welcome this attempt to call the Left's bluff on the nuclear deal, which is entirely in India's interest."

The editorial concluded on a like note, "The Congress has an opportunity to demonstrate its resolve to stand by what is in India's interest. The government must go ahead with the nuclear deal and send a signal that it will not compromise on core issues which further national interests. If the Left withdraws support, so be it. Even if general elections are held a few months ahead of schedule, it is a risk worth taking."

India's corporate and military-foreign policy elites are strongly supportive of the Indo-US nuclear deal for several reasons. It will give India a unique status within the world nuclear regulatory regime and de facto recognition as a nuclear weapons state. Access to advanced civilian nuclear technology will allow India to lessen its dependence on imported oil and natural gas, pave the way for military and other high-technology trade with the US, and enable India to concentrate the resources of its indigenous nuclear program on the development of its "strategic deterrent," i.e. its nuclear weapons program.

Last but not least, the Indian elite sees the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord as cementing a privileged relationship—a "global strategic partnership" with Washington. Certainly, the Bush administration has sought to woo India with such claims, US Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice famously saying that the US wants to help India become a world power.

To the chagrin of the India's corporate elite, the country's official opposition, the BJP, has refused to support the accord, although when it was in office as the leader of the National Democratic Alliance coalition, it proposed to the US an accord very similar to that negotiated by the UPA and the Bush administration. The BJP's opposition to the nuclear treaty is in keeping with the highly provocative, confrontational stance it has assumed throughout the UPA's tenure in office.

The BJP has centered its opposition to the agreement on the grounds that it would limit India's ability to develop its nuclear weapons program, since the US legislation authorizing the treaty (the Henry Hyde Act) asserts that Washington could cancel the agreement and demand the return of any US-supplied nuclear technology and fuel should India stage further nuclear weapons tests.

The Left Front, for its part, has charged that Washington's aim is to harness India to its predatory global ambitions and that the treaty must be placed within the context of burgeoning Indo-US military and strategic cooperation—co-operation Washington is using to make India dependent on the US.

The Left Front leaders also point—in answer to those who claim the India is not threatened with becoming a tool of Washington's policies to contain and, if need be, confront China—to the manner in which the Bush administration and US Congressional leaders have sought to use the Indo-US nuclear treaty to bully India into toeing Washington's line in regards to Iran.

But otherwise, the Left Front remains strongly supportive of the UPA government, even while conceding it is pursuing a socially incendiary, neo-liberal agenda.

Said CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat at the end of this week, "I am ... hoping that the government will continue its full term. We are trying to make serious efforts. Sometime back, the prime minister has said that we are not a one-issue government. ... We hope that the government will fulfill its commitments."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact