

India: Government crisis deepens over US nuclear deal

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India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government has been thrust deeper into political crisis over its determination to push through the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal. The agreement has run into objections from the Stalinist-led Left Front, upon which the UPA has relied for political support since the Congress Party-dominated coalition came to power in 2004.

The current crisis arose a few weeks ago, after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and a coterie of pro-US officials surrounding him mounted a political offensive by insisting on submitting the India-specific "Safeguards" agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency to the IAEA board for approval.

The Congress party, with the approval of Sonia Gandhi, the party's president and ultimate authority, has precipitated this crisis, risking its own political survival.

The Stalinist-led Left-Front was somewhat taken aback initially by the Congress party's determination to proceed with the Indo U.S. nuclear treaty, despite having promised the Left Front that it would not do so until a consensus was reached between the two sides. The Stalinists made a concerted attempt to prevent a political break with the Congress Party by having a series of meetings between the two leaderships, all to no avail.

The so-called UPA-Left Committee on the Indo-US Nuclear Deal met on June 25 in an attempt to iron out some sort of agreement, but instead the meeting broke up acrimoniously. The political impasse between the two sides now appears unbridgeable.

The politburo of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPM, met in New Delhi on Sunday June 29 to discuss the ongoing political crisis. Following the meeting, the party issued a bitter statement accusing the Congress Party of political betrayal.

The statement said : "The Polit Bureau wishes to point out that going to the Board of Governors of the IAEA for approval of the Safeguards Agreement will be a flagrant violation of the understanding arrived at in the November 16, 2007 meeting of the UPA-Left Committee on the nuclear deal. The UPA had pledged not to proceed till the Committee arrives at its findings, which includes the conclusions to be arrived at on the text of the Safeguards Agreement."

The statement threatened to withdraw Left Front support for the UPA if it proceeds to implement the treaty over the

Stalinists' objections.

"In case the government decides to go ahead with such a harmful agreement, which has no majority support in parliament, the CPI(M) will withdraw support to the UPA government in concert with the Left parties. "

The Left Front vehemently opposes the nuclear deal with the US on the grounds that the treaty is being used by the Congress Party as camouflage for aligning India's foreign policy with that of Washington. The Stalinists instead favor an alignment with Russia and China to counterbalance US influence.

The opposition communalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) claims to oppose the deal over a provision in the treaty that threatens to demand the return of all equipment and fuel supplied by the US if India tests any nuclear weapons.

The nuclear agreement makes a special exemption to India from the strictures of both US nuclear statutes and world nuclear treaties to which all other countries are subjected. Currently only countries that are signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and who neither possess nor have tested a nuclear weapon, (excluding the five nuclear powers US, Russia, Britain, China and France) are permitted to purchase nuclear technology, equipment and fuel for civilian power production under the strict supervision of the IAEA.

Under the Indo-US nuclear agreement, however, India, despite being both a possessor of nuclear weapons and a non-signatory to NPT, will be allowed to purchase advanced nuclear equipment and fuel that India desperately needs for its ambitious nuclear power program.

In return, India has to separate out its military-oriented nuclear facilities from civilian and place those identified as civilian nuclear reactors under the inspection regime of IAEA by reaching an India-specific safeguards agreement with the UN agency. India also has to negotiate with the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) that controls world nuclear trade.

The current political drive by the Congress Party to push the Indo-US nuclear deal is prompted by a confluence of several factors.

The first is the enormous pressure the Bush administration has brought to bear on India's UPA government. This is prompted by the fact that with the onset of presidential elections in November, the current US Congress has barely

enough time to approve the 123 agreement—as the US-India civil nuclear cooperation pact is called—in a special session scheduled in October.

Even in the current US Congress, there is still lingering opposition to granting special status to India, especially given the Bush administration's offensive against Iran's civilian nuclear program, despite that country being a signatory to the NPT.

The Indian elite is well aware that if the government doesn't complete the IAEA Safeguards agreement by July and the approval of NSG by September at the latest, this treaty could face an uncertain future under a new US administration.

The second reason is that there is a pro-US cabal around Manmohan Singh that craves a strategic relationship with the US, calculating that this will aid India in gaining big-power status. Given that the current UPA coalition's term has barely 10 months left, this group feels that it has to throw down the gauntlet now to the Left Front in order to consummate the deal.

There is also a significant section of the corporate elite that has profited from trading with the US and sees this treaty as in its interest, as it has the potential to enormously increase the amount of trade in nuclear technology and military hardware between the two countries. Such trade, it has been estimated, could reach more than \$100 billion over the next several years.

Last but not least, there is a substantial section of Indian elite which resents the repeated obstacles, as they see it, that the Stalinists have erected to the UPA's implementation of even more draconian pro-business policies. This, despite the fact that Congress Party, for all its populist sloganeering, has single-mindedly pursued pro-business and anti-working class policies since it came to power in April 2004. These policies have brought nothing but social disaster to the lives of the majority of India's toilers.

This group refuses to see the yeoman service the Stalinists have rendered to the Indian bourgeoisie by acting as a loyal "popular" opposition. The Stalinists are thoroughly integrated into bourgeois politics and, in fact, carried out a massacre in 2007 to overcome peasant opposition to their attempt to seize agricultural land for industrial use in their political bastion, West Bengal. (See: "West Bengal Stalinist regime perpetrates peasant massacre")

Whatever opposition they have offered to the UPA's right-wing policies, such as partial privatization of government pensions, has at best slowed them down. It has not succeeded in reversing any of the investor-friendly policies that the UPA has relentlessly pursued since 2004. In spite of their opposition, the Stalinists have publicly and repeatedly stressed their fealty to the UPA coalition by pledging to sustain the UPA in power until the end of its term in April 2009.

The Stalinists have also acted as a brake on the development of any independent political movement of the Indian working class, by calling for harmless protests and by tying the workers firmly to the Indian bourgeois state.

Despite this, the extreme right wing of the Indian ruling elite is hostile to even such nominal Stalinist opposition and wishes to discipline this political irritant once and for all.

The current political turmoil is unfolding in the midst of a serious economic crisis, in the form of inflation that is having a devastating impact upon the lives of wide sections of the population. According to government figures, inflation has reached over 11 percent, including a sizable increase in the prices of basic food staples such as rice and wheat.

The fact that the Congress party led by Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi decided to precipitate this crisis during such a critical time demonstrates the priorities of this traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie.

The Congress Party has decided to court the regional Samajwadi Party (SP), whose political bastion is in northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The SP is part of the so-called United National Progressive Alliance (UNPA)—an amalgam of regional parties formed in opposition to the two major political alliances, one led by the Congress Party and the other by the communalist BJP—that had previously allied with Left-Front in opposing the Indo-US nuclear agreement.

It has been widely reported in the Indian press that the SP is leaning towards ditching its previous opposition in return for political favors. The party has been non-committal publicly, despite a flurry of meetings between the leadership of SP and the Congress Party. The SP claims that it will make its stand public after a scheduled July 3 meeting of the UNPA.

From all indications, the SP will abandon the Stalinist CPM, with which it has had cordial relations for many years. The Congress Party hopes to obtain the support of the SP's 39 members in the lower house, plus a number of other smaller parties to obtain a bare 272-seat majority.

Obtaining such a bare majority by making fresh political deals is by no means guaranteed. If the requisite majority cannot be obtained and the Congress Party persists in pushing the Indo-US nuclear deal, it may be forced to dissolve its government and call for early elections. Anticipating such an outcome, the BJP has already named several candidates to its slate, some of whom are current members of parliament.

Nevertheless, the Congress Party is determined to pursue this high-stakes game, revealing its single-minded pursuit of a strategic alliance with the US.



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