

India's Left Front withdraws from government over US nuclear deal

Kranti Kumara
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After four years of loyal support for the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, the four-party Left Front political alliance led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI(M), has withdrawn its parliamentary backing from the UPA.

The Left Front made its move on July 8 after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made a provocative remark in Japan, where he attended the G-8 summit as an observer. Singh stated that as part of the nuclear deal with Washington, the UPA would submit a recently finalized India-specific "safeguards" agreement to the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) board "very soon" for approval, despite the Left Front's opposition.

The Left Front formally submitted a letter of withdrawal to President Pratibha Patil on Wednesday, July 9 and requested that she direct the UPA government to seek a vote of confidence in the parliament. The coalition has now been reduced to a minority government without the support of the 59 members of parliament (MPs) belonging to the four constituent parties of the Left Front.

Meanwhile, the Samajwadi Party (SP), based in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, also submitted a letter to President Patil pledging that its 39 members of the Lok-Sabha (India's lower house of parliament) would support the UPA alliance. The Congress party secured the support of the SP, which previously had allied itself with the Left Front, by offering it a series of backroom deals, as yet unpublicized, over the past two or three weeks.

When the UPA was first formed after the last general elections in May 2004, it comprised 14 parties, but now it has been reduced to a mere seven because of the withdrawal of half its original constituents. In its current incarnation, the UPA commands a mere 216 MPs, far short of the 272 required for a majority in the 543-member Lok-Sabha.

Although there has been no formal announcement as to when a confidence vote will be held, India's corporate daily *The Indian Express* reported the most likely dates to be July 21 or 22.

The Congress Party is making frenzied attempts to rope in a sufficient number of MPs to secure its majority. Congress is publicly expressing supreme confidence in its ability to reach this goal.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Vayalar Ravi was quoted as saying: "I am very confident that in any test on the floor of the House, we will come out with flying colours."

"Flying colours" may be achieved by the Congress Party using

every dirty trick in the book, including outright bribery. In fact, several of the sitting MPs upon whom it is counting have either criminal backgrounds or are of the most unsavoury character. One of them, Ateeq Ahmed, who supposedly has promised his vote, is currently languishing in jail in Uttar Pradesh, having been indicted on over 150 criminal charges, including murder.

Meanwhile, the UPA government has requested that the IAEA circulate the draft of the agreement that New Delhi finalized with the UN's nuclear watchdog agency in great secrecy a little over a month ago to the 35 members on its board. The UPA has refused to reveal the contents of the IAEA agreement either to the Indian Parliament or even to their former Stalinist allies, revealing its contempt for basic democratic norms.

This move by the UPA directly contradicts the public pledge made by External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukerjee immediately following the Stalinists' withdrawal of support. He had stated that the government would proceed to the IAEA only after winning a confidence vote in the parliament.

It is not entirely clear if he was consciously lying or if he was bypassed in this decision by Manmohan Singh and/or Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi.

Manmohan Singh, who attended the G-8 meeting in Japan from July 8-10, met with US President George Bush separately there for close to an hour, giving him a report on the "progress" the UPA has made in pushing forward with the Indo-US nuclear agreement. Apparently pleased with what Manmohan Singh had to say, Bush made the following remark:

"It was a really good meeting amongst two friends. And so, Mr. Prime Minister, thank you for joining us today, and congratulations on your leadership at home."

The break-up of the coalition is the culmination of a protracted political struggle between the Left Front and the UPA government over the latter's determination to push ahead with the Indo-US nuclear agreement, which was first made public in July 2007.

The current crisis emerged a few weeks ago when the UPA announced its intentions to press ahead, in defiance of the Left Front's objections, with the Indo-US nuclear treaty by submitting the recently finalized India-specific "safeguards" agreement to the IAEA board for approval.

Under the terms of the Indo-US 123 nuclear agreement (so named as it is negotiated under section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act), the Indian government is mandated to negotiate a so-called safeguards agreement with the IAEA that would submit a

list of Indian civilian nuclear reactors, which would be subject to a continuous inspection regimen by the nuclear agency.

In addition, India is also to obtain the approval of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) that controls world nuclear trade. The NSG comprises of a group of 45 countries including the U.S., Russia, Britain, France and India's archrival China.

Once these agreements are in place, the treaty has to be submitted to the US Congress for a final approval.

Since the US Congress has barely enough sessions remaining before the onset of the US presidential elections, and because the Indian government and the Bush administration are desperately seeking to seal the deal before Bush leaves office, the UPA feels it needs to move with great haste now to overcome the Left Front's opposition.

For the past four years, the Stalinist-led Left Front has consistently sustained the UPA in power, claiming that it has to support the Congress Party in order to fight the communalist danger from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While it is true that the communalist policies of the BJP pose great perils, the Congress Party is hardly a vehicle through which such political hazards can be fought, since it too utilizes caste and communal politics to make electoral gains.

The Congress Party organized a ferocious pogrom against innocent Sikhs in 1984 after the assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by a Sikh bodyguard.

As the traditional political representative of domestic and foreign capital in India, the Congress Party has pursued economic policies for the benefit of capital and to the detriment of an already poverty-stricken population.

The Stalinists only took the decision to withdraw support when it became clear that the Congress Party was shunting them to the side, apparently confident that it could live without the Stalinists' support. Once it obtained the support of SP, the Congress Party treated the Stalinists with open contempt.

There have also been strong internal differences within the CPI(M) over the wisdom of withdrawing support for the UPA and potentially precipitating an early election. The West Bengal state unit of the party has been strongly opposed to withdrawal of support for two main reasons.

The first is that the party is itself afraid to face elections. It is in organizational disarray due to a series of political crises it precipitated over the past couple of years as part of a drive to impose industrialization in the state through private capital. As a result, there are widespread morale problems in the party. The party leadership feels that many months are required to rebuild the party organization in West Bengal before risking its fate at the polls.

The party also suffered a serious setback in the recently held Panchayat (local council) election in that state. Opposition has grown especially due to the massacre that the Left Front government carried out against the peasants in Nandigram in March of last year. (See: "West Bengal Stalinist regime perpetrates peasant massacre")

The West Bengal section of the party is also afraid that it will pay a heavy political price because of its unreserved support to the UPA for the past four years. The UPA's economic policies have

created an economic disaster for India's masses, with inflation rising to 12 percent and soaring prices of basic food stuffs resulting in widespread hunger for India's toilers.

The second reason is that the West Bengal CPI(M) spearheaded by its Chief Minister and politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, has unrelentingly pursued an economic policy to make the state a magnet for international and domestic capital. Buddhadeb has led a drive to transform West Bengal into a cheap labour haven, going so far as to promise big business that it will end the "menace" of strikes in the state.

Consequently, powerful links have been established between the West Bengal party leadership and India's biggest businesses, such as Tatas. A significant section of Indian big business strongly supports the Indo-US nuclear treaty, calculating that it will profit immensely from the expected increase in trade—estimated at over \$100 billion over several years—in military and nuclear material, if the Indo-US nuclear deal is consummated.

As a result, Buddhadeb and his ilk are also afraid of antagonizing these business interests by withdrawing political support from the UPA.

Buddhadeb has only continued and intensified the policies first implemented by his predecessor and CPI(M) politburo member Jyoti Basu. Both of them have opposed the move by party general secretary Karat to withdraw support for the UPA. The Stalinist patriarch Jyoti Basu was quoted as saying:

"I want our comrades to protest against the deal and the way the Congress is pushing for it, but I don't want them to vote the government out of power,"

For the Congress Party, however, the support of the Left Front was a necessary evil it had to endure. As a party that represents powerful right-wing pro-US sections of the Indian elite, the time has now come to jettison the relationship. It sees the Indo-US nuclear treaty as a passport to the big power league, and it is not about to allow the Stalinists to stand in the way.

Despite apparently having staved off any immediate threat to its political existence, the UPA government is hardly assured of sustaining itself in power for the remaining 10 months of its term. It is, after all, discarding the dependable support of the Stalinists in exchange for the unreliable and thoroughly opportunistic support of the SP and other smaller parties that are notorious for jumping ship at the slightest change in the political winds.

The Congress Party's political fortunes could just as quickly change given the thoroughly rotten and unprincipled backroom deals that pass for bourgeois politics in the so called "largest democracy" in the world.



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