

Indian parliament gives green light to Indo-US nuclear treaty

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After an acrimonious debate punctuated by opposition charges of intimidation and vote buying, India's parliament reaffirmed its confidence in the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government Tuesday.

Two hundred and seventy five members of the Lok Sabha—the directly-elected and more important house of India's bicameral parliament—voted in favour of a one sentence motion expressing confidence or “trust” in the four year-old UPA government. Two hundred and fifty six MPs, including some 60 members of the Left Front who up until the beginning of this month had been providing the minority UPA with its parliamentary majority, voted to bring the government down. Ten MPs either abstained or failed to present themselves for the vote.

The constitutionally-binding “trust vote” was precipitated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi's decision to defy their Left Front allies and take the next step in implementing the Indo-US civilian nuclear cooperation treaty.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front had repeatedly said it would withdraw support for the government if New Delhi sought International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) approval for the Indo-US nuclear deal. The Left Front opposes the nuclear treaty with the US on the grounds that it represents a break with India's traditional “non-aligned” foreign policy and has been fashioned by Washington with the aim of harnessing India to its imperialist ambitions in Asia and the Middle East.

For months, the Congress Party leadership manoeuvred and equivocated. But under heavy pressure from the Bush administration and corporate India, which is strongly supportive of the nuclear deal and a closer partnership with Washington, the Congress leadership made it known earlier this month that it will be seeking approval for an “India-specific” safeguard (or nuclear non-proliferation) agreement when the IAEA meets at the beginning of August.

The Left Front then sent a letter to the Indian president formally withdrawing its parliamentary support for the UPA, thereby compelling the Congress-led government to call yesterday's “trust vote.”

The Bush administration lost no time in expressing its delight at the outcome of the Lok Sabha vote. “The US welcomes the support in Indian Parliament for the US-India civil nuclear cooperation initiative,” declared David Mulford, the US ambassador to India. “We will work closely with Government of India in days ahead for rapid completion of the ratification process through IAEA, Nuclear Suppliers Group and US Congress.”

Earlier Tuesday, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino had lavished praise on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, telling reporters, “Obviously, the politics in India have been tough to deal with, but he's been soldiering on and trying to build a consensus.”

India's corporate-owned, English-language press was also ecstatic at the outcome of Tuesday's vote, terming the UPA-margin of victory “emphatic.”

The Stalinist-led Left Front has played a critical role in smothering popular opposition to the UPA and its neo-liberal program of

privatisation, deregulation and marketisation—a fact well-recognized by Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi, and the Congress leadership. But over the past two years, Indian big business became increasingly angered by the sops and concessions the Congress had to make to the Left Front to maintain its parliamentary support.

In the wake of Tuesday's confidence vote, big business is looking to the UPA to accelerate the pace of neo-liberal “reform.” Speaking only minutes after the “trust vote” result was proclaimed, Finance Minister Chidambaram pledged the government would do just that. “With 275 votes,” said Chidambaram, “this government has an absolute majority and ... confidence to go forward. ... We have crossed a major bridge that is the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal. Now we will move ahead on economic and social reforms.”

The strategic implications of the Indo-US nuclear treaty

Prominent members of the Bush administration have repeatedly termed the civilian nuclear cooperation treaty with India the most important foreign policy initiative undertaken by George W. Bush during his second term.

Washington conceives of the treaty and associated military cooperation and arms deals as a means of cementing an Indo-US “global, strategic partnership” that will tie India to US strategic objectives, especially in countering a rising China, extending US influence in oil-rich Central Asia, and isolating Iran.

US business, for its part, is highly supportive of the nuclear deal. It calculates that the deal will pave the way for tens of billions of dollars worth of Indian contracts to buy US civilian nuclear reactors, armaments, and hitherto restricted military-security technology.

From within the US political and strategic establishment there have been some, among them former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who have criticized the nuclear deal with India on the grounds that it undermines the US-led world nuclear regulatory regime by rewarding India—a state that developed nuclear weapons in defiance of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—with full access to civilian nuclear fuel and technology. US opponents of the deal also note the incongruity in Washington facilitating the de facto international recognition of India as a nuclear-weapons state at the same time as it is seeking to deny Iran the right to develop a civilian nuclear energy program, which is fully within its rights as an NPT signatory.

The Democratic Party leadership, however, has swung solidly behind the Indo-US nuclear treaty under the same predatory geo-strategic and profit compulsions that led the Bush administration to negotiate it. Joe Biden, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, recently pledged to fight “like the devil” to ensure the Indo-US nuclear treaty is

ratified by the Senate before the current Congress expires. And the Democratic Party's presumptive presidential nominee, Barack Obama, recently reaffirmed his support for the treaty.

France and Russia have both come out strongly in favour of ending the international embargo on nuclear trade with India and will argue in favour of the Indo-US nuclear treaty within the IAEA and Nuclear Suppliers Group. This is because both countries believe that they stand to profit handsomely from the expansion of India's civilian nuclear program.

China has expressed reservations about the Indo-US nuclear treaty, but is unlikely to attempt to veto the deal at either the IAEA or NSG for fear that such action would only push India into the US's embrace.

India's corporate elite and most of its strategic, nuclear and military establishment strongly endorse the nuclear deal. This is because they believe it goes a long way to recognizing India as a nuclear-weapons state and granting India the "world power" status they covet, will provide India with much-needed access to advanced nuclear, military and other technology, and will allow India to concentrate the resources of its indigenous nuclear program on developing its nuclear-weapons arsenal.

Neither the Congress Party leadership, nor the Indian bourgeoisie seek a confrontation with China. The hope of the Indian ruling class is that it can profitably exploit the offer made by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice of US help in making India a world power, while continuing to pursue close relations with Russia, China, Japan, and the European Union.

But straddling the growing fissures in world geo-politics will undoubtedly prove a formidable, if not impossible, challenge.

In the three years since Manmohan Singh and George W. Bush reached agreement in principle on Indo-US civilian nuclear cooperation, India's foreign policy has undergone a marked shift. Washington has not shied away from bluntly using the nuclear deal to pressure New Delhi to do its bidding. Under US pressure India has towed the Bush administration's line in the IAEA's deliberations over Iran's nuclear program and dragged its feet on the proposed India-Pakistan-Iran natural gas pipeline. So as not to rile Washington, the UPA government issued only the most perfunctory protests over the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

Charges and counter-charges of corruption

In the days running up to yesterday's "trust vote" the UPA's majority appeared far from secure.

As the vote approached opponents of the government—including the Left Front, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)—and the Congress and its UPA allies traded allegations of unprincipled manoeuvres, inducements, intimidation, and vote-buying, BSP supremo and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati charged that the government had instructed the Criminal Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to revive several cases against her as retaliation for her decision to oppose the government.

The Lok Sabha was thrown into chaos Tuesday afternoon when one BJP MP produced a bag full of cash and several others held up wads of currency—money they claimed had been given them by a leader of the Samajwadi Party or SP to get them to vote in favour of the government. The Samajwadi Party was a long-time ally of the Stalinist Left Front and a vocal opponent of the nuclear treaty until earlier this month when it struck a backroom deal with the Congress Party leadership to back the UPA in the "trust vote."

India's parliament is notorious as a cesspool of corruption. The Congress leadership has used outright bribes in the past to win parliamentary votes. Undoubtedly it stooped to all manner of backroom deals and made numerous promises of favours and considerations to rally

various small parties and even individual MPs to its side in yesterday's vote. As for the Hindu supremacist BJP, it too has rained down money and favours to win parliamentary votes. It also has a long history of staging reactionary provocations. Indeed, it has never reconciled itself to its fall from office at the last Lok Sabha elections in 2004.

At this point it is impossible to say whether either side will be able to provide any credible evidence supporting their allegations of corrupt practices or whether the allegations of vote-buying will prove to be a one-day wonder. What can be said with great assurance is that, given corporate India's strong support for the Indo-US nuclear treaty, it is highly unlikely that the media will pursue the vote-buying charges with any vigour.

In kicking off the "trust vote" debate Monday, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh thanked veteran CPM leaders Jyoti Basu and Harkishan Singh Surjeet for their "wide and visionary leadership," terming them "architects of our coalition government." This was not mere flattery. In the weeks immediately following the 2004 elections, the Left Front and especially the CPM played a pivotal role in assisting the Congress Party in cobbling together the UPA coalition. This included taking a leading role in writing the UPA government's ostensible program, the "National Common Minimum Program." The latter document is based on the lie that it is possible to reconcile the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to make India a cheap-labour producer for world capitalism with the needs of India's toilers.

On Tuesday, the Congress took a more aggressive stance against their erstwhile Left Front allies. Finance Minister Chidambaram all but openly accused the Left of being unpatriotic and serving as proxies for China. "There are some people in the country," Chidambaram told the Lok Sabha, "who do not want India to catch up with China ... They do not want India to be ahead of China."

Meanwhile, Rahul Gandhi, the son of Congress President Sonia Gandhi and assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the heir apparent to the Congress Party leadership, praised former BJP Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. In 2002 Vajpayee facilitated the horrific anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat and almost led India into all-out war with Pakistan. Making reference to the attempt of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government to negotiate a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement with the US, Gandhi said that Vajpayee "also saw the problem (of energy deficiency) and worked for its solution."

Tuesday's vote is a major blow to the Stalinist-led Left Front. For four years it faithfully propped up the Congress-led UPA, even while criticizing it for carrying out social incendiary economic policies little different from those of the previous BJP-led NDA government. Then the Congress leadership unceremoniously dumped its Left Front allies so that it could press forward with a strategic partnership with the Bush administration and US imperialism.

Even had the UPA government lost the "trust vote", it would not have thwarted the Indo-US nuclear deal and the burgeoning ties between New Delhi and Washington. As BJP leader and prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani was at pains to make clear during the "trust vote" debate, the BJP strongly favours a strategic partnership with the US. (BJP leaders have frequently spoken of an Indo-US-Israeli axis.) In so far as the BJP's opposition to the deal was not mere factional obstructionism against its Congress rivals, it was motivated by militarism. The BJP objects to the Henry Hyde Act, the US legislation that sanctions the Indo-US nuclear treaty, because it provides for harsh penalties in the event India stages a further nuclear weapons test. Advani pledged to the Lok Sabha that if the NDA returns to power, "we will renegotiate the nuclear deal to make it equal and ensure that there are no constraints on our strategic autonomy."

The Indian bourgeoisie's drive to the right—its neo-liberal socio-economic agenda, military build-up, and reactionary manoeuvres on the world stage—will not be halted through the Stalinists' parliamentary manoeuvres and opportunist alliances with a changing parade of capitalist

parties. That will require the independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of an internationalist-socialist program.



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