

Indian Stalinist leader defends alliances with Congress and rightwing regional parties

Deepal Jayasekera, Arun Kumar
20 May 2009

World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) journalists Deepal Jayasekera and Arun Kumar interviewed A.K. Padmanabhan, a Central Committee member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, at the party's Tamil Nadu State Committee office in Chennai on May 11.

The CPM is the dominant partner in the Left Front, which from May 2004 through June 2008 provided the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government with its parliamentary majority. For India's just completed national election, the Left Front helped organize a Third Front, comprised of regional- and caste-based parties, all of them former allies of the Congress or the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), claiming that it would constitute the basis for a "non-BJP, non-Congress," "secular," and "pro-people" government.

The following is an edited transcript of the interview with Padmanabhan. (Jayasekera's and Kumar's reply can be found at "Communist Party of India (Marxist): a key prop of Indian bourgeois rule". For an analysis of the outcome of the Indian elections, including the debacle suffered by the Left Front, see *India: Re-elected Congress-led government to accelerate pace of pro-investor "reforms"*.)

WSWS: As far as the CPM and Left Front are concerned what are the key issues in this election?

Padmanabhan: The present election is an important phase in Indian politics. As far as the CPM is concerned, we have raised three important issues. One major problem that we Indians face is the communal divide. There are right wing and fundamentalist forces working in various parts of the country. There are Hindu fundamentalists and Islamic fundamentalists. They are a major threat to our Indian secular fabric. These threats are not confined to within our borders; they come from outside the borders also. ... We are telling people that communalism is a major threat that should be defeated.

The next issue of importance is economic policy. As far as economic policy is concerned, for 20 years we have been fighting liberalization policies, so-called globalization policies. From 1991 onwards any government that has ruled India, whether that was a Congress-led government or a BJP-led government, has been following economic policies of the same type, with at most small differences. These anti-people economic policies have created havoc for all sections of working people, whether they are peasants, whether they are workers, small traders, small industrialists, youth or students. These policies have created havoc in many industrial sectors, in the health and environment sectors, in the energy sector. ...

We have been fighting against these policies, not only at election time but continuously for the past 20 years. We are raising all these issues. We are telling the people the communal forces have to be defeated. Government policies have to be changed. To change these policies—communalism and anti-people economic policies—both fronts,

one led by the Congress and the other led by the BJP, should be defeated.

The third issue is the need for an independent foreign policy. We consider it as an important issue, though unfortunately many other parties in the country are not raising this issue. India had a reputation of being part of the Non-Aligned Movement and a supporter of various freedom struggles—a country that has been against imperialist maneuvers. But unfortunately over the past few years, India has moved to the right and declared itself an ally of US imperialism. We want to reverse this.

In addition to these, there are other issues like social justice and center-state relations. ... There may be some differences with other parties on these issues but in general the Left and its allies in the Third Front stand for a non-Congress and non-BJP government, for an alternative secular government with a new set of policies. We don't say it should be a Left-led government. We are working towards developing a set of alternative policies that will form the basis of a secular government.

WSWS: The CPM supported the Congress-led government for four years. It withdrew support last year over the Indo-US nuclear deal. Now the CPM denounces Congress. You have accused Congress of betraying its agreement with the Left. Do you still consider the Left Front's policy of supporting Congress successful?

Padmanabhan: That was a tactical decision. We didn't call for a Congress government or for a Congress-led government in the 2004 elections. We called for the defeat of the BJP, because they were in power, and for the formation of a secular government. The major question was how to get rid of the BJP government. Along these lines we conducted our campaigns during the 14th [2004] Lok Sabha elections.

Nevertheless, not without knowing what the Congress will do, when it comes to whether there should be a BJP-led government or a Congress-led government, any secular person in India will choose a Congress government.

In 2004 the Left won 61 seats. Out of that 54 MPs were elected to parliament defeating candidates of the Congress. We then decided to support a Congress-led government. We didn't ask the government to implement our policy; we told the government to implement its Common Minimum Programme.

In the following four years, the CPM and the Left Front were in the forefront of struggles on policy issues. We took the lead, whether inside parliament or outside. The BJP was the official opposition ... But they never took up the key policy issues. Those were raised by the Left even though we were supporting the government.

Simultaneously we pressured the government to implement some of the assurances given to the people. We were successful in having certain policies implemented and also stopping certain policies.

We made it very clear that the government had been pulled into or sucked into becoming an ally of US imperialism through signing the civil nuclear deal. We didn't want the government to sign a deal like the civil nuclear deal with the support of the Left. That was the last straw.

Whatever we have done, we have done at an appropriate time. We broke

with the Congress and UPA at the correct time. People understand. We told the people that we were opposed to the civilian nuclear deal and conducted many national campaigns against it and against joint Indo-US military exercises. From Chennai to Visakapatnam we organized protest marches. In West Bengal at Kalagunda we mobilized *lakhs* [hundreds of thousands] of people.

We knew what the Congress would do. But in the last elections it was not possible to do otherwise. Now in the present elections there is a chance to bring together parties that are opposing both the BJP and the Congress. With that in mind we see the 15th Lok Sabha election as an opportunity to mobilize certain political parties that are opposed to both the Congress and the BJP to form an alternative government. There are a good number of States where there are now powerful political parties that are prepared to fight both the Congress and the BJP.

The CPM's concept of an alternative government is something different. But in the present circumstances we see what is possible and will help us in moving towards our goal.

WSWS: In relation to supporting a Congress-led government after the polls, CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat and senior party leader Sitaram Yechury have not ruled it out completely. They have said: "We will decide after May 16" i.e. after the results are out. Then what is the official party position?

Padmanabhan: Karat and Yechury ruled it out. But the media persisted. So, Karat said let us wait till May 16. Everything will depend on the results. We are very clear that we are fighting to form a new government. We still feel there will be an alternative government. If the people decide something else that is their wish. ...

WSWS: The CPM says the Third Front will provide a secular pro-people government. But look at its constituents. The TDP, AIADMK, BJD—all have joined BJP-led governments.

Padmanabhan: All regional political parties in India, except the Left, have on various occasions and at different times joined with the BJP or Congress-led alliances. Both the major Tamil Nadu-based parties, the DMK and the AIADMK, have joined with BJP-led governments at different times. The DMK was in the BJP-led government four years. If [AIADMK leader] Jayalalitha says she is prepared to fight both the Congress and BJP we accept it. They have their own experiences.

TDP leader [Chandrababu Naidu] was an open advocate of World Bank policies but now he openly says that he was wrong. Previously he joined the BJP alliance, but now he is fighting the BJP. We accept that. People learn out of experience. Sometimes they change, sometimes they don't. We are for change. We want to be the catalyst of change.

If the Left says that all the other parties are wrong and have to be rejected will it help? The Left will stand alone. It will only help the communal forces. It will only help the adoption of anti-people policies.

If these parties are prepared to fight the Congress and the BJP, we accept it. We don't consider the DMK or AIADMK to be communal parties. The Indian situation is such that even a party with one MP could have its say in the central government. There is no use in saying "No, we won't have anything to do with you, because you were doing this last year."

We know our limitations. We are in power in three states. Objective conditions have to be addressed properly. We made it very clear that those democratic forces now with the [BJP-led] NDA and [Congress-led] UPA could be mobilized.

WSWS: Senior CPM leaders like former chief minister of West Bengal Joyti Basu and current chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee have said that socialism is not on the agenda now. Basu has said: "socialism is a far off cry". How do you see the struggle for socialism today?

Padmanabhan: Struggle for socialism and socialism on the agenda are different things. In our party program we said it is our strategic goal. We are working for a Peoples Democratic Revolution, which will lead us

towards that goal. Even the Peoples Democratic Revolution is not on the agenda as of now. There is no confusion on that. We have not even reached such a situation.

Who can say socialism is on the agenda? Where are we now? Only a small section of the working class has been organized. You can't jump over stages. People thought overnight people will change. Such imaginary things have done enough damage to the Indian Left movement. They took up arms. The given situation has to be understood properly. You have to work towards your goal. Meanwhile, whatever help you can get from democratic forces you take. There is no other option. We have said this clearly in our party program, the democratic forces that are with the NDA or UPA should be mobilized.

How many workers have been organized in the unions? What is the present situation in India? There are certain areas that are still in the pre-capitalist stage.

Even in 1957, CPI leader [and later CPM founder] E.M.S. Namboodiribad told the press the day after he took the oath of office in Kerala, "We intend to form a government where socialism is not on the agenda." That statement is still valid, not only in India but everywhere. In Bolivia and other countries too.

Socialism is your strategic goal. It will take lot of time. People will have to struggle for that. What we have got in West Bengal and in Kerala is administrative power, not political power. Political power is still in the hands of the ruling class. In the federal set up, State governments don't have the necessary funds. The impact of globalization has created more problems. Funds are lost. There are financial limitations on State governments and there are Indian constitutional limitations.

WSWS: Recently the CPM and Left Front have suffered electoral reversals in West Bengal, in a state assembly by-election, panchayat (local) elections and elections for Congress of Indian Trade Unions branches in Exide, Mitsubishi and Kolkata Port Trust. Is this not a popular reaction against the pro-investor policies of the West Bengal Left Front, especially the use of the police and goons to press to suppress the 2007 peasant protests against land expropriations for Special Economic Zones in Nandigram?

Padmanabhan: There is a rainbow coalition, running from Naxalites [Maoist insurgents] and so-called left, to the right and communal forces. They are all together against the Left Front. Even the Maoists who are calling for boycotting the elections in Jharkhand are calling on people in West Bengal to go and vote to defeat the Left Front. We are fighting them politically. ...

Even US Consulate in West Bengal is campaigning against the Left. They've got there a Bengali speaking consular.

WSWS: One of your allies in the Third Front, Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), participated in a BJP/NDA rally in Ludhiana yesterday.

Padmanabhan: The TRS leader is angling for a bargain with whoever comes to power. I have to go. I have spoken for more than an hour.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact