

India used bribes to win vote on US nuclear accord, WikiLeaks cables show

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19 March 2011

India's Congress Party-led coalition government has been rocked by the publication of a WikiLeaks-derived US diplomatic cable that substantiates longstanding claims that it used bribery to win a pivotal July 2008 "trust" or non-confidence vote arising from its push to cement a global strategic partnership with the US.

Had the government lost the vote, it would have been legally obligated to resign and the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord would, in all likelihood, have died with it.

The accord, which opened the door to the lifting of a decades-long international embargo on civilian nuclear trade with India, was spearheaded by the administration of George W. Bush with the publicly stated aim of demonstrating the US's readiness to "help India become a world power." Washington's real goal is to entice India into an alliance aimed at containing, and if necessary confronting, a rising China.

On Tuesday, the Chennai-based English language daily the *Hindu* began to publish reports based on a cache of 5,100 India-related US diplomatic cables it has obtained from WikiLeaks. In its edition dated Thursday, March 17, the *Hindu* reported on a cable drafted on July 17, 2008, in which the US's Indian embassy informed Washington that Congress Party officials had boasted to it about their efforts to win the impending trust vote by bribing opposition MPs.

Written by the US embassy's then chargé d'affaires, Steven White, the cable says a top aide to Satish Sharma, a Congress MP and confidante of Congress Party boss Sonia Gandhi, "mentioned to an Embassy staff member in an aside on July 16 that Ajit Singh's RLD had been paid Rupees 10 crore (about \$2.5 million) for each of their four MPs to support the government."

The aide, Nachiketa Kapur, "mentioned that money was not an issue at all, but the crucial thing was to ensure that those who took the money would vote for the government. Kapur showed the Embassy employee two

chests containing cash and said that around Rupees 50-60 crore (about \$25 million) was lying around the house for use as pay-offs."

The cable further reports that the embassy's PolCouns was told by "another Congress Party insider" that Minister of Commerce and Industry Kamal Nath "is also helping to spread largesse." The cable cites the "insider" as saying that formerly Kamal Nath "could only offer small planes as bribes, now he can pay for votes with jets."

As for Satish Sharma, the cable says that at a July 16, 2008 meeting with the PolCouns he assured him that the Congress Party was doing all it could to win the trust vote: "Sharma mentioned that he ... [and] others in the party [were] working hard to ensure that the UPA government wins the confidence vote on July 22.... Sharma said that [Prime Minister Mahmoan] Singh and others were trying to work on the Akali Dal (8 votes) through financier Sant Chatwal and others, but unfortunately it did not work out. He mentioned that efforts to encourage Shiv Sena (12 votes) to abstain were on-going."

In the immediate aftermath of the trust vote—which the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government won by a margin of 275-256, with 10 MPs either abstaining or not participating—the principal opposition parties, the official opposition Hindu Supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Stalinist-led Left Front, accused the Congress of vote-buying. The Stalinists, it must be remembered, had for four years been in a governmental alliance, although not a formal coalition, with the UPA, providing it with the parliamentary votes needed to sustain the government in office. But in June 2008, the Congress broke the alliance forcing the Left Front into opposition, so it could proceed with finalizing the nuclear accord with Washington.

Revelation of the diplomatic cable substantiating the allegations of vote-buying comes at a time when the UPA government is already mired in a series of corruption scandals, including over the sale of wireless telecom spectrum licenses to corporate India at fire-sale prices. These scandals have shed light on the extent to which India's corporate houses are not only benefiting from the sell-off of state assets, but dictating government policy and even the selection of cabinet ministers.

The government has stonewalled in the face of the corruption scandals, denying despite overwhelming evidence that the spectrum sale was a gigantic scam that cost the Indian treasury tens of billions of dollars.

In the face of the WikiLeaks cable showing the government subverting the will of parliament, its response has been even more brazen.

Pranab Mukherjee, the current finance minister and the foreign minister in 2008, claimed what happened in the 2008 trust vote was now irrelevant since there had been an election, "I cannot either confirm or deny the WikiLeaks revelation," said Mukherjee. "The Government elected is accountable to the 15th Lok Sabha (the lower and more powerful house of India's bicameral legislature) and not to the 14th Lok Sabha."

Congress MP Rajiv Shukla drew on the worldwide campaign governments and the corporate media have mounted against WikiLeaks for daring to expose the hypocrisy and banditry of imperialist diplomacy to dismiss the evidence of vote-buying. "Quoting WikiLeaks in the Indian parliament is ridiculous, frivolous and trivial," declared Shukla. "No government in the world recognizes WikiLeaks. The allegations have got no basis."

In refutation of the vote-buying charge, Shukla noted that the RJD MPs mentioned in the cable as bribe recipients had voted against the government in the confidence vote. RJD leader Arjun Singh made the same point in insisting he was above reproach.

But the cable itself cited the US's Congress Party informant expressing doubts that the RJD MPs would "honor" their bribe. The cable reports him saying that "the crucial thing was to ensure that those who took the money would vote for the government."

In a rare statement to both houses of parliament on Friday, Manmohan Singh insisted that no one in his government or the Congress Party had tried to illegally influence the trust vote and chastised the opposition for reviving "old charges." "It is most surprising," said Singh, "that speculative, unverified and unverifiable

communication should be given dignity and seized upon by the Opposition parties to revive old charges that have been soundly rejected."

The Indian press has responded matter-of-factly to the revelation that the 2008 trust vote was rigged. There is strong support within India's ruling elite for the pro-US tilt of India's foreign policy and geopolitical strategy over the past decade and, consequently, no support for calling into question the legitimacy of the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord.

Typical was the comment of political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan: "WikiLeaks confirms what everyone expected.... There is nothing earth-shattering in the revelation. But, of course, it is damaging to the Congress. This season of scams seems to continue. Every week, every month, something new happens."

The WikiLeaks cable concerning the July 2008 trust vote speaks volumes about not only the lengths that the Congress Party was prepared to go to secure a closer partnership with US imperialism, but also about the commitment to democracy of the governments which the Indian and US corporate media incessantly promote as the world's two most populous democracies.

The Congress leadership was shameless in using bribery to win the trust vote and was eager to make Washington aware that it was pulling out all stops—legal and illegal—to press forward with the Indo-US civilian accord.

They calculated, correctly, that Washington would not only remain silent, it would take the government's readiness to subvert parliament's will as proof of their and the Indian elite's commitment to a strategic partnership with the US.

Hours before the July 22, 2008 trust vote, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino 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."

No sooner had the UPA government prevailed in the vote than the then-US Ambassador David Mulford declared, "The US welcomes the support in Indian Parliament for the US-India civil nuclear cooperation initiative."



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