

Former Indian finance minister Mukherjee runs for presidency

Deepal Jayasekera
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The Indian presidential elections will be held on July 19. Former finance minister Pranab Mukherjee and Purno Agitok Sangma, a former speaker of the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Indian national parliament, are running for the ruling Congress and opposition Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), respectively.

Mukherjee resigned from his finance portfolio in the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government on June 26 to file his nominations for presidency. The fact that the Congress had to spare Mukherjee, known as number 2 man in its cabinet, to make him its presidential candidate, underscores the rising significance of the elections. This position—considered ceremonial in “normal” times—has become increasingly significant as the global economic crisis destabilizes Indian bourgeois rule.

As Indian national elections have increasingly produced hung parliaments without a clear winner, the president’s role in deciding which party should be invited to form a government has become crucial. No single party has had an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha since 1989. Particularly as the next elections in 2014 are widely expected to produce such an outcome, Congress wants to control the presidential palace to ensure that its interests are defended in the event of another hung parliament.

With Mukherjee, the Congress has selected a well-connected party veteran for the post. On one hand, the Congress-led government has been under fire from sections of big business for its failure to push ahead with neoliberal economic reforms. And on the other hand, the government faces the anger of workers and rural toilers amid deepening poverty and inequality and rising price inflation.

In a clear warning about explosive social conditions in India, last year Mukherjee compared contemporary

India with the period preceding the Emergency in the early 1970s. Mukherjee—who himself was a cabinet minister in the government of then-Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who suspended civil liberties under emergency laws from 1975 to 1977—denied he had any plans to suspend civil liberties. However, he accused the right-wing BJP and the Indian Stalinist parties of disloyally destabilizing the government.

Mukherjee, who has had a four-decade-long political career, is known as the Congress party’s key troubleshooter, involved in managing conflicts not only with Congress’s coalition partners but also with “outside” supporters like the Stalinist Left Front.

He played a key role in managing UPA’s alliance with the Left Front in 2004-08, when the latter was supporting the UPA government in parliament. Hailing from West Bengal, a Stalinist stronghold, Mukherjee has a long history of working with them. He has held top cabinet posts like finance, external affairs, defence and commerce. Congress considers Mukherjee’s experience of dealing across party lines an advantage in mobilising support from other parties for his candidacy.

After wrangling over a month, the Congress party finally declared Mukherjee its presidential nominee on June 15. The protracted character of the presidential nomination highlights the fragility of the ruling coalition.

India’s president is elected not by a popular vote but by an electoral college, which includes members of both houses of national parliament and legislative assemblies of India’s 28 states and 7 union territories. Hence, to ensure victory for its candidate, a party needs the support from other parties if it lacks a majority in the Electoral College. The Congress had to hold talks with its partners in the UPA and several regional parties, to seek support for its nominee, before

announcing his name. This underscores the growing weakness of the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional ruling party.

Mukherjee's nomination has been opposed by a key partner of the ruling UPA, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal. TMC chief Mamata Banerjee proposed former president Abdul Kalam as a candidate, claiming that the Samajwadi Party (SP), a regional and caste-based party in Uttar Pradesh, also supported her suggestion. However, the SP and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), led by Mayawati, former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, have said they will support Mukherjee's candidacy.

After indicating his readiness for filing his nominations only if his candidature has a consensus among various parties, Kalam finally confirmed that he would not run for the presidency. As a former president, Kalam was unwilling to risk being defeated by Mukherjee.

Banerjee's attempt to promote Kalam was based on Indian chauvinism, using his role as a nuclear scientist who pioneered the country's nuclear weapons program. Banerjee also sought cross-party support for his nomination as a man "above politics," as Kalam is not formally affiliated to any party.

She said: "He is a seeker of truth, a fount of knowledge and an impartial voice of reason and sanity, who is above narrow politics. He is the kind of man all our citizens aspire to make President." However, Kalam was also nominated to the presidency in 2002 by the right-wing BJP.

The presidential campaign has also exacerbated divisions inside the UPA coalition. Sangma, a leader of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP, a UPA member party), resigned unilaterally from his party and filed papers to run for the presidency after the NCP leadership declined to support him.

The presidential elections have also exposed the cracks in the BJP-led opposition, as well. While refusing to support Mukherjee's candidacy, the BJP failed to announce its own nomination and seized upon Sangma's declaration to support him as its candidate. Two leading partners of the BJP, the Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena and Janatha Dal (Union) have refused to follow BJP line and have announced their support for Mukherjee.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) and

the CPM-led Left Front have been divided in their stand on presidential elections. While the CPM and Forward Bloc (FB) have decided to support Mukherjee, the other two partners—the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP)—will abstain.

The CPM politburo issued a statement on June 21 that justified its support for Mukherjee by arguing that "[i]n the present situation, he is the candidate for the post of President who has the widest acceptance". That is, the CPM supports Mukherjee because he has the "widest acceptance" in the ruling class. Trying to cover up its support for a Congress candidate committed to free-market policies, the CPM statement also claims that the party "will continue to oppose the UPA government and resolutely fight neo-liberal economic policies being pursued which are against the interests of the people".

CPI parliamentary leader Gurudas Dasgupta declined to support the Congress candidate "simply because their economic policies have almost ruined the country. They are the architect of the neo-liberal policies."

This position is deeply dishonest. In addition to helping keep the UPA in power in 2004-2008, while complaining about its pro-investor policies, the Left Front was notorious for ruthlessly implementing the same policies while in power in West Bengal and Kerala.



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