

India: Parliamentary “trust vote” to determine fate of UPA government and Indo-US nuclear treaty

By Keith Jones
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The Lok Sabha—the lower, directly-elected house of India’s parliament—began debate Monday on a one-sentence motion affirming confidence in the country’s Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. The debate will end today with a vote that will decide the fate of the four-year-old UPA government.

The government’s defeat would in all likelihood trigger early national elections and deal a crushing, potentially fatal, blow to the Indo-US civilian nuclear cooperation treaty.

However, the Bush administration served notice yesterday that it will urge New Delhi to continue with the complex process of securing international sanction for the nuclear treaty even if the government loses the confidence vote and is reduced to caretaker status pending fresh elections. Richard Boucher, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, told reporters that minority governments are common: “You can’t say, ‘Oh, well, we are going to stop dealing with you till the next election or until some new coalition or something’.”

Joe Biden, the Democrat who heads the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has, for his part, gone on record as saying he will fight “like the devil” to see the Indo-US nuclear treaty is ratified by the current US Congress if New Delhi proceeds with implementing it.

Today’s “trust” or confidence vote has been precipitated by the Left Front’s withdrawal of support for the minority UPA government.

Led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the Left Front with its sixty odd MPs, has been the Congress’s most important parliamentary ally since the 2004 general elections. But earlier this month the Left Front withdrew support for the minority UPA government after it succumbed to pressure from the Bush administration to move forward with the implementation of the nuclear treaty and formally asked the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to bless the Indo-US nuclear deal.

The Left Front charges that the nuclear deal marks a fundamental shift in India’s foreign policy, from “non-alignment” to a strategic partnership with the US, and that Washington intends to use nuclear-cooperation and burgeoning Indo-US military ties to bind India to its predatory ambitions in Asia and the Middle East. The Left Front points to the fact that the Bush administration and US legislators have repeatedly used the civilian nuclear cooperation deal to bully India into toeing the US-line in the IAEA’s deliberations over Iran’s nuclear program. Moreover, under the Henry Hyde Act, the US Congress has made Indo-US nuclear cooperation contingent on the US president making an annual finding that India is cooperating with US nuclear non-proliferation efforts—thereby giving Washington a permanent mechanism to pressure India to do its bidding.

India’s geo-strategic, military, and nuclear establishments have hotly debated the merits of the Indo-US nuclear deal, although the preponderance of opinion has come down in favor of the treaty. By

contrast, the most powerful sections of Indian big business have been all but unanimous in endorsing the nuclear deal, which would give India unique status within the world nuclear regulatory regime as a state that acquired nuclear weapons in defiance of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty but is nonetheless legally allowed to trade for nuclear fuel and advanced civilian nuclear technology.

Big business calculates that the treaty goes a long way to realizing their longstanding ambition to win India “world-power status,” that it will enable India to lessen its dependence on imported oil and natural gas, and that it will allow India to concentrate the resources of its indigenous nuclear program on the development of its nuclear weapons arsenal. A further factor in corporate India’s strong support for the deal is that it calculates that a closer partnership between New Delhi and Washington will further tilt India’s internal politics to the right.

Corporate India’s championing of the nuclear deal notwithstanding, it is impossible, less than 24 hours before the trust vote, to say with any assurance that the UPA government will prevail. According to the most recent media reports, the UPA is counting on eleventh-hour defections and abstentions from the camp of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to win the vote.

There are currently four major parliamentary groupings—the Congress-led UPA, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, the CPM-led Left Front, and a loose alliance of ostensibly “secular” and/or lower-caste parties led by the Telugu Desam Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the governing party in India’s largest state (Uttar Pradesh). The last three groupings have all pledged to vote to bring down the government.

The Congress Party leadership forced today’s parliamentary showdown by choosing to go forward with the nuclear treaty despite repeated warnings from the Left Front that such action would compel it to withdraw support and despite grave concerns among the Congress’s UPA allies over the electoral impact of spiraling food and energy prices.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi gambled that a deal with the Uttar-Pradesh based Samajwadi Party (SP), which has 39 MPs, would enable the government to survive without the Left Front’s support. But the SP’s sudden volte-face—it has had an oft-times bitter rivalry with the Congress and made common cause with the Left Front in aggressively opposing the Indo-US nuclear deal—has led to a split in its ranks. The SP has long postured as a defender of the Muslim community against the Hindu chauvinist BJP, but its endorsement of the Bush administration-spearheaded nuclear deal has caused a section of the party to rebel, at least in part from fears that Muslims will desert the party at the next election.

As a result of the divisions within the SP, the Congress and its UPA partners have been compelled to mount an increasingly desperate and

sordid search for further votes.

The last quarter-century has seen the emergence of a myriad of regional, communal and caste-based parties. While these parties are subservient to the Indian bourgeoisie—as manifestly demonstrated by their unanimous participation in the implementation of the bourgeoisie’s neo-liberal, economic reform program—they add a volatile dimension to Indian politics, since their standpoint on any given issue is bound up with the interests of the narrow fractions of India’s political and economic elite for whom they speak and immediate calculations of electoral/political advantage.

In the current context, many of these parties are hard-pressed to see how it is in their interests to support the government under conditions where the UPA’s five-year term is rapidly approaching its finish, the Congress has suffered a series of major electoral setbacks, and the public has been hard-hit by a surge in energy and food prices.

The Indian elite routinely trumpets India as the world’s largest democracy. Indeed one of the arguments routinely made in both Washington and New Delhi in favor of a global partnership between India and the US is that they have like interests being, respectively, the world’s most populous and world’s most powerful “democracy.”

With the Congress-led UPA fighting for its life, Indian democracy has come into full-bloom this past week. In the hopes of cobbling together a parliamentary majority, the Congress leadership has made all manner of backroom deals and arranged for the support of several MPs who are in jail as convicted criminals.

Among the Congress’s coups has been to secure the support of the tribal-based Jharkhand Mukti Morcha Party (JMM). In 1993 the JMM’s leader, then as now Shibu Soran, and three other MPs took a massive bribe to help prop up Narasimha Rao’s Congress Party minority government. Soren claims that this time he has been promised the Coal Ministry—Jharkhand has massive coal reserves—and other concessions to secure his party’s support.

The Congress, which claims to be a bulwark of secularism despite a decades-long history of pandering to, and conniving, with the Hindu right, has also been wooing, albeit apparently with little success, MPs from the BJP, the fascistic Shiv Sena and the Sikh communalist Akali Dal.

One indication of how close today’s vote is likely to be and how the issue of the Indo-US nuclear treaty has thrown the entire Indian establishment, across the political spectrum, into crisis, is the attention that has been focused on the Lok Sabha Speaker—CPM MP Somnath Chatterjee. Normally, the speaker does not cast a vote on Lok Sabha motions, but in the event of a tie he is empowered to cast the deciding vote.

In June 2004, the Congress secured Chatterjee’s election as Speaker as a means of further cementing its alliance with the Left Front after the latter, for tactical reasons and not without internal divisions, had declined the offer of seats in the UPA cabinet.

Earlier this month, the media cheered Chatterjee, when he rebuffed a CPM order that, since the Left Front had severed its alliance with the UPA government, he resigns as Lok Sabha Speaker. Chatterjee, who hails from West Bengal, had support from sections of the party leadership in that state, the CPM’s principal bastion. The CPA leadership, however, have been far from enthusiastic about the drive to bring down the UPA because they fear an electoral backlash against their West Bengal Left Front government’s pro-investor policies.

Now that Chatterjee, under strong pressure from the CPM leadership, has announced that in the event of a tie in today’s vote he will ensure the government’s defeat, there has been a spate of press commentary arguing that it would not be in keeping with India’s parliamentary tradition for Chatterjee to use his tie-breaker vote to defeat the government.

In kicking off the trust vote debate Monday, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh argued that his government should be judged on its entire record

and asserted that “every single decision” taken by the UPA over the past four years has been in “the best interests of our people and our country.”

In fact, the UPA government has pressed forward with right-wing policies aimed at making India a cheap-labor haven for the world capital. Moreover, Congress Party bosses have signaled that should the government survive the confidence vote, the UPA stands ready to introduce “an ambitious” package of pro-big business insurance, banking and pension reforms.

In his speech, the prime minister went out of his way to praise veteran CPM leaders Jyoti Basu and Harkishan Singh Surjeet for their “wide and visionary leadership,” terming them “architects of our coalition government.”

Indeed the Stalinists played a pivotal role in forging the UPA coalition after the Congress’s unexpected emergence as the largest party in the 2004 Lok Sabha election. Just as importantly—and this is well recognized by the most perceptive sections of the Indian ruling class—they have played a key role in smothering the mass popular opposition to mounting economic insecurity and social inequality.

The government left the defence of the nuclear treaty to External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee. He said certain parts of the Hyde Act are unacceptable to India, while affirming that the government “can never compromise our independent foreign policy.”

Mukherjee made much of the fact that without the Indo-US nuclear deal India will not be able to pursue nuclear commerce with France and Russia. Hoping to benefit from the sale of nuclear reactors to India, Paris and Moscow have both come out strongly in support of ending the nuclear trade embargo against India and have thrown their support behind US efforts to secure India special status from the IAEA and the Nuclear Suppliers’ Group,

But none of this negates the fact that the US is intent on forging a close partnership with India as a means of countering China, that Washington has already shown how it intends to use cooperation with New Delhi in the nuclear, military and other fields to harness India to its imperialist agenda, or that the Indo-US nuclear accord, by providing India a major strategic advantage, will add a new explosive dimension to India’s decades-long rivalry with Pakistan.

BJP leader and prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani was at pains to distinguish the BJP’s opposition to the Indo-US nuclear treaty from that of the Left Front. The BJP, said Advani, is in no way opposed to a strategic partnership with the US, nor does it want the civilian nuclear treaty scrapped. Its objection is to the Henry Hyde Act, which threatens India with harsh penalties should it carry out further nuclear weapons tests. Said Advani, “If people vote the NDA back to power, we will renegotiate the nuclear deal to make it equal and ensure that there are no constraints on our strategic autonomy.”

In replying to Advani, Manmohan Singh took great exception to the BJP leader’s claim that he had opposed the BJP’s testing of nuclear weapons in 1998. Mukherjee, for his part, noted the BJP had opposed a previous Congress government’s decision to seek admission into the WTO, but ultimately the BJP-led NDA had approved India’s joining the WTO and on terms much like those favored by the Congress.

The leaders of the Left Front, in their contributions to the trust vote debate, chastised the Congress and government for “betraying” the alliance it had forged with them—as if the Congress, the traditional governing party of the Indian bourgeoisie, could be expected to do anything other than ruthlessly pursue the interests of Indian capital at the expense of India’s toiling masses.

Brinda Karat, the wife of the CPM general-secretary and herself a member of the top party leadership, thanked the prime minister for recognizing the Left Front’s role in forming the UPA government. Although the Left Front is now pursuing a possible electoral bloc with the BSP and TDP—parties which in the past have allied with the ultra-right

wing BJP—it is far from excluded that the Stalinists will reconcile with the Congress after, or even before, the next general election.

Meanwhile, CPI (M) Politburo member Sitaram Yechury made a speech Monday warning that the government's pursuit of a strategic partnership with the US could result in India being forced to provide US planes and warships with support facilities in the event of a war against Iran. "The country's security is under threat," said Yechury, "as the US is planning to launch an attack on Iran, and India will be forced to join ranks with the US as a strategic ally."

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