

ISAS Brief

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Clearly Troubled: The Indian Government and a Nuclear Deal

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The ruling Indian coalition is tottering on the brink of an implosion, following a fall out between two of its major constituents – the ruling Indian National Congress and the supporting communist parties. And the disharmony, amusingly described as marital discord by the parties concerned, though seeming like daggers drawn to everyone else, is the direct consequence of the recently concluded Indo-US civilian nuclear deal.

Very briefly, what is the importance of the deal? The deal brings India back into the nuclear mainstream after almost a decade of being a pariah following the nuclear tests of 1998. The United States, under the terms of deal, will provide India with civilian nuclear technology, including reactors, and supply India with nuclear fuel, presumably with the cooperation of the Nuclear Suppliers Group of countries.

In return, India is committed to put a majority of its reactors under international safeguards open to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, while keeping the few used for the weapons programme out of this purview. Sounds reasonable – India being given de-facto recognition as a legitimate nuclear weapons state by the country which matters, and acquiring the best technology and much needed fuel for a civilian programme, which could solve India's large energy requirements, without compromising the environment, in the long run.

However, the howl of protests from the Left parties and the leading opposition parties make the deal seem like a blatant sell out of India's interests. Sovereignty is a sensitive word in India, even sixty years after independence, and those opposed to the deal say India is compromising it at the doors of the White House.

To be fair to all, the deal replete with the best tools of international diplomacy – jargon and obfuscation – is difficult to interpret for even the best of minds. Amidst the confusion, I see two major reasons for concern.

First, can India conduct a nuclear test again without incurring sanctions, or worse, a costly rescinding of the whole deal? The Indian government's position is that we retain the

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autonomy to test. The United States government has said that India will face consequences if another test takes place. Perhaps nobody really knows what will happen. A lot depends on the interface between the fine print of this particular deal and other United States laws such as the Hyde Act which are more stringent on the freedoms India can enjoy. As such, this problem is postponed to a time in the future when India may test again. My question is why do we want to test again? As far as we, ordinary citizens, are given to believe, we already have sufficient workable and deliverable nuclear weapons to meet our security needs. I can see that the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has a problem with any restrictions on testing – after all, it brought them rich political dividends in 1998 and may do so again in the future. But I would have assumed the Left parties to have a more pacifist view of the matter.

The second matter of concern is whether this agreement binds India to follow American foreign policy diktats, especially on Iran and its nuclear weapons programme. It would seem that, at the least, the United States does expect India to vote against Iran's nuclear ambitions at international fora. And India has dutifully done so at the IAEA. Logically speaking, it would seem in India's interest to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Iran's theocratic regime, run by men in cloaks, but cloaked in a sham democracy, with a seemingly extremist and militant president, hardly seems like an ideal ally. Not to mention the dastardly way the regime treats opposition and dissidents. A democratic and secular India could do better than support Iran unconditionally, just to spite the United States. Of course, pressuring Iran not to acquire nuclear weapons is not the same as joining the United States in a war against Iran – an unlikely scenario anyway given the debacle in Iraq and the quickly fading Bush presidency. The Left parties should realise this. The Hindu nationalist BJP shouldn't have much love lost with Islamic Iran anyway.

Arguments and individual views aside, who really does have the authority to make the deal operational? This question raises some important issues about the nature of democratic decision making in an era of a fractured polity and coalition politics.

One would normally argue that the government with a parliamentary majority should have the authority. But in the case of India's multi-party ruling alliance the government achieves a majority only with the crucial 'outside' support of 60 members of parliament of the Left parties. Supporters of the deal say that 60 members of parliament, drawn largely from two states of Bengal and Kerala, and commanding around five percent of the nation wide popular vote, cannot hold foreign policy hostage. At the same time, the Indian National Congress, the main party of government with around 150 seats, has just 26 percent of the total seats in parliament with a similar number describing their share of the national vote. Does that fraction give them a mandate? What exactly are the views of the other smaller regional parties in the coalition? Does the Tamil chauvinist Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, or the Bihar based Rashtriya Janata Dal, or the *dalit* based Bahujan Samaj Party, all of who are chiefly concerned with a politics of redistribution towards their communities and regions, have a view on this matter of national importance? Whatever their view, it must be made public as they constitute a set of around 70 members of parliament, on who's support and participation this government depends.

In the final reckoning, if a majority in parliament opposes the deal, the deal should not go through. That would be the democratic will of the people. Should the deal be blocked, the Congress Party must have the courage of conviction to call an early election and ask the people of India for a fresh mandate. The opposition, and the Left parties, to retain their credibility, must insist that the deal not go through. And if necessary, they should bring down

a government which seeks to push through policies of national importance without a parliamentary majority.

It's a game of brinkmanship and much depends on who blinks first. A lot will depend on who has the most to lose from an early poll. Suffice to say that if an early election is held, it will be fought on issues far removed from the nuclear deal, which very few people really understand, or even care about, outside the living rooms of Delhi and the other metropolitan cities. Perhaps an indicator for politicians to squabble more over matters of greater importance to the people at large – schools, roads, hospitals, water and sanitation, anyone?

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