

ISAS Brief

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Cold Feet in Autumn – Climb Down from Elections in India

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The chill of autumn seems to be contagious, at least in the political class. First, in England, Gordon Brown got cold feet over calling an early election. Soon after, in India, Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi got afflicted with an almost identical ‘cold foot disease’ and climbed down from the brink of calling an early election.

Gordon Brown’s decision was entirely his own. However, the choice before the ruling Congress-led coalition in India wasn’t that easy or single handed. The government had been tottering for a while following a fall-out between the Congress Party and the Communist Parties, on whose crucial support the government depends for its survival. The Communist Parties were unhappy over the recently concluded Indo-US civilian nuclear deal – the Left Parties in India view the deal as the ultimate sell-out of India’s national and foreign policy interests to the United States of America. The Congress Party, led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, saw the deal as an honourable way back into the international nuclear mainstream after the pariah status conferred on India post the 1998 nuclear tests. The President of the Congress Party, and Chairperson of the ruling coalition, Mrs Sonia Gandhi, backed Singh to the hilt. Both Singh and Gandhi, at different times, challenged the Left Parties to bring the government down. The Left Parties held their ground and the Congress Party finally blinked. Prime Minister Singh has now gone as far as informing President Bush that the deal has encountered much turbulence. India’s international credibility has suffered much damage, without doubt.

Under the circumstances, the Congress Party, given its conviction on the merit of the deal, should have turned to the people of India for their verdict. Many argued that the time was ripe for a Congress Party victory in a general election. The reasons given are manifold. The economy has been growing steadily at about nine percent per annum. The opposition, particularly the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is in disarray, largely because of its own internal squabbling and jostling for power. The government has enacted two important legislations – the Employment Guarantee Programme Legislation and the Right to Information legislation – perhaps the two legislations which have done more to bridge the ever widening gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ than any legislations or programmes in recent times. The government has been free of any major scandal, a rarity in

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Indian politics. It has been secular and is widely viewed as more compassionate than its predecessor government. Even the opinion polls favoured a victory for the ruling alliance. Why, then, the hesitation?

For a start, opinion polls are notoriously unreliable in India, something the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance realised in the aftermath of their unexpected, and unpredicted, general election defeat in 2004. Second, high growth rates and urban prosperity often mask the deprivation and hardship faced by the majority, the same majority which turns out to vote in the largest numbers. Farmer suicides continue unabated all over India. Sharp rises in the prices of essential commodities like pulses and vegetables, in the recent past, have also hit the poor majority worse than the affluent middle class. The flagship anti-poverty Employment Guarantee Programme targeted at the poorest hasn't yet had enough time to change conditions on the ground. It was only extended to the entire country last month.

In addition to the precarious economic conditions of the majority, another matter of concern to the government would have been the public relations fiasco over the 'Ram Sethu' controversy, when the government denied the existence of the revered Lord Rama in the Supreme Court. The government's, thus, contentious, original stand, never mind the subsequent U-turn, in a case relating to the dredging of a certain Adam's Bridge (Ram Sethu), has given the battered Hindu-nationalist BJP a cane to beat the government with. An affront to religious sentiments is not good politics in India, even today.

And let us not forget that the issue of the nuclear deal which may have precipitated an early election is not an issue with much resonance amongst India's voting masses. The issue is too complicated, opaque and detached from reality to be of interest to the average Indian.

Many inside the Congress Party also realised that in any event the Congress Party wasn't likely to get near securing an absolute majority in a general election. It would thus still need the support of the Left parties, or the enigmatic *dalit* leader, Mayawati, to form a new government. Both come with strings attached and, often, with the power of puppeteers. The other allies, like the Bihar based Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Maharashtra-based Nationalist Congress Party and the Tamilnadu-based Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam were not keen on early elections. Again, the Congress Party is desperately dependent on alliances with these parties in crucial electoral battleground states.

In the end, the writing was on the wall. It isn't worth sacrificing 18 more guaranteed months in power for an uncertain election over an issue (the nuclear deal) which isn't going to interest the electorate. The other uncertainties just made the final climb down more certain.

The Congress Party may have even escaped unscathed. However, the Prime Minister and Mrs Gandhi committed a grave error by raising the stakes, and throwing the gauntlet to the Left Parties. Any exit strategy short of a call for elections was bound to dent the credibility of the ruling party. And it has – like Gordon Brown's recently and almost fatally dented credibility after he chickened out of to an early election, just weeks after raising the pitch for an early election. Nothing hurts more in politics than a loss of credibility – ask the ousted Tony Blair or the beleaguered George W. Bush. Eighteen months in power may prove too short to cure the ill-effects of the chill of autumn 2007.

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