

ISAS Brief

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The Walkout in India: No Longer 'Left' in the Lurch

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With the Left [the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), the Communist Party of India, the Forward Bloc and Revolutionary Socialist Party] planning to meet President Pratibha Devisingh Patil on 9 July 2008 and submit a letter withdrawing support from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, the overall numbers game seems simple. There are two vacancies and the Lok Sabha now has 543 members. A simple majority requires 272 members. The UPA (the Congress Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the Nationalist Congress Party, Pattali Makkal Katchi, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Lok Janshakti Party, Kerala Congress, the Muslim League, Republican Party of India, All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, Peoples Democratic Party, Sikkim Democratic Front and three Independents) has 231 seats (the Congress Party has 153 seats). With the Left's 59 Members of Parliament having quit, the UPA has lost its majority. However, to all intents and purposes, the Samajwadi Party (SP) has provided support to the UPA through its 39 members, leaving UPA with only two members short of a majority. But it isn't that simple. There is dissidence within the SP too, and at least seven (if not 10) of its Members of Parliament may not end up supporting the government. Indeed, there are question marks about support from some of the UPA constituents too. Though these are political parties with single-digit Members of Parliament (one or two), even one Member of Parliament matters. Therefore, the Congress Party cannot be sure about the numbers yet and will try to get support from other political parties like Rashtriya Lok Dal (Ajit Singh), Janata Dal Secular (Deve Gowda), Telangana Rashtra Samithi, Trinamool Congress, National Conference, Shiromani Akali Dal and Independents.

Horse-trading is best conducted in private, not in public. The first question, therefore, is, will the President ask the government to face a trust vote in Parliament? A petulant Left has asked for this. However, it is unlikely to relish the prospect of being seen voting with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Nor would the SP like to see some of its Members of Parliament defy a whip. The President, who is understandably kindly disposed towards the Congress Party and would hate to confront a hard decision, has a soft option. The Constitution does not clearly require a test on the floor of the House, particularly for a functioning government, and a precedence of going by letters of support was set by the then President in 1998. In all probability, nothing is going to happen within the Parliament. Outside the Parliament, the SP's turnaround almost certainly ends the Third Front or the United National Progressive

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Alliance as a pre-poll alliance and perhaps increases the probability of a pre-poll alliance between the BJP and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Telugu Desam Party, Jharkhand Vikas Morcha, Indian National Lok Dal, Asom Gana Parishad and even Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhaga. The Bahujan Samaj Party should also feel threatened because the Congress Party-SP tie-up is not only for Delhi, but also for states like Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. However, all such alliances are likely to be post-poll.

It is certain that the general elections will be postponed. In any event, early elections had been ruled out after inflation increased, and the Karnataka elections did not go the way the Congress Party had expected them to. An earlier argument doing the rounds that anti-incumbency against the BJP in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan would work in favour of the Congress Party if the general elections coincided with state-level elections, no longer seems to be doing the rounds. While one can quibble about the indicator used to measure inflation, it is reasonably certain that inflation should ease off after December 2008. Hence, the government is likely to last its full term, with a vote on account (rather than a full-fledged budget) in February 2009. Other than the inflation issue, there is not much support within the UPA, and even within the Congress Party, for triggering a general election on the nuclear deal, which not too many people understand. In any event, something that is seen to side with the Americans does not normally win votes in India. The impasse over the nuclear deal fundamentally boiled down to a clash of egos between two individuals – Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and the leader of the Left, Mr Prakash Karat. One of the perennial mysteries is the Prime Minister's decision to grant an interview to "The Telegraph" newspaper in August 2007, read primarily in the East, calling the Left's bluff and triggering the crisis.

Having failed to achieve much on economic reforms (the Right to Information Act has been diluted, the step towards value-added tax is a legacy of the National Democratic Alliance, as is the road construction programme), Prime Minister Singh seems to be driven by the motive that his legacy for posterity will be what he leaves in the area of external relations, including the nuclear deal. There is an interesting tit-bit of information resulting from an application under the Right to Information Act, filed in Mumbai. In the last 10 years, Rs3.71 billion has been spent by Indian prime ministers on travelling abroad. Of this, almost one-third (Rs1.2 billion) was spent by the present prime minister in 2005 and 2006. The simple point is that there is not much empathy within the Congress Party (this includes Mrs Sonia Gandhi) for Dr Singh's obsession with the nuclear deal and within the CPI (M) for Mr Karat's rigidity. In the latter case, to take one example, the West Bengal government is concerned that several projects [airport modernisation, East-West metro in Kolkata, the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Nayachar in Haldia] might get held up because a friendly government no longer exists in Delhi.

Not all existing Members of Parliament get nominations for re-election. For those who get such nominations, the success rate is around 50 percent. Why would one, therefore, want to lose the privileges for anything up to 10 months? The argument is much stronger if one is a minister. Logically, Mr Somnath Chatterjee can no longer continue as a Speaker. However, less clear is the fallout for Mr Karat and Dr Singh within their respective political parties. Nonetheless, the latter has Mrs Gandhi's trust, a position that not many within the Congress Party enjoy. Under the assumption that the Congress Party heads a government that comes back to power in 2009, since it would be too early for Mr Rahul Gandhi to become prime minister, Dr Singh's return as prime minister is quite possible. By present calculations, the outcome of the 2009 elections is anyone's guess, barring the demise of the Third Front. The

BJP faces a leadership and infighting crisis, but has been rejuvenated by the state election results. The Congress Party will suffer from anti-incumbency (inflation is only one part of this) and the delimitation exercise, which has made many more constituencies urban, perceived to be a gain for the BJP and a relative loss for the Congress Party.

The nuclear deal is still uncertain. India has to first get nuclear proliferation safeguards approved by the International Atomic Energy Agency and then obtain a waiver from the Nuclear Suppliers Group. It is only after this that it can be presented to the United States Congress, which already has a packed legislative agenda for 2008. And in the likely event of a Democrat presidency, the United States' support may also be lacking. The Left has been perceived as an element that blocked economic reforms – telecommunications; insurance; civil aviation; agriculture; foreign direct investments in retail; pensions; intellectual property rights; privatisation; and SEZs. One might tend to think that, with the Left out of the way, reforms will now proceed. The hypothesis about the Left alone being responsible for blocking reforms is incorrect. There is not much support for reforms even within the Congress Party, not to speak of its new-found allies, who could have easily become allies in 2004, avoiding the present mess. Certainly, in the run-up to general elections, one should not expect reforms. The pound of flesh that these allies want is not clear yet. The Reserve Bank of India governorship and lucrative ministerial berths like finance, defence and petroleum have been mentioned as a possible price, but there could be more. Nothing comes free.

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