

Coalition Governments in India (Government and Left Front Policy Contradictions)

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Introduction:

The Left Front had extended its support to the Congress led UPA-I government with a view to keep the communal BJP out of the power. However, the Congress and the Left Front had the contradictory economic policy stances, though they had tried to reconcile and reduce these policy differences through NCMP but the differences continued to persist. After releasing the text of the NCMP the Left Front endorsed it but, simultaneously indicated its reservation on some economic policies. The Left Front's dual approach of support to secularism and its opposition to the economic policies of the government was bound to come under strain sooner or later¹. The first contradiction between the UPA-I government and the Left Front got surfaced during the first budget of the new government, when Finance Minister P. Chidambaram proposed some economic policies that were considered more market oriented and deviant from the NCMP by the Left Front. The Finance Minister P. Chidambaram proposed the increasing sectoral caps on FDI in insurance, civil aviation and telecommunication. The Left Front argued that such a move will be against the national interest as the foreign investments in these sectors could drive out the domestic players and hence affect the economy as a whole². The Left Front vehemently criticized this government proposal on the ground that these proposals did not form part of the NCMP and reiterated that their support to the government is based on the NCMP. Finally, the consensus was built and the proposal to increase the ceiling on telecom was accepted and the proposal for increasing FDI in insurance and civil the UPA-I government would depend upon how the UPA-I constituents will adhere to the NCMP. On another occasion, the Left Front and UPA-I government

locked horns when the Deputy Chairman of Planning Commission Montek Singh Ahluwalia decided to include the representatives of World Bank, Asian Development Bank and McKinsey, a private consultative firm, in the consultative panel of the Planning Commission for the midterm appraisal of the Tenth Five Year plan³. While defending his decision Montek Singh Ahluwalia gave the rationale that, there is a whole range of expertise available outside the government which should be utilized in order to benefit the country. But this argument failed to satisfy the Left Front and the Left economists heavily criticized it. In this context, CPI leader Atul Anjan remarks:

...these institutions have always been opposed to the concept of the planned development, would their recommendations strengthen the Planning Commission or weaken it? We all have⁴ seen that what they did to ruin the Latin American and South East economies.

Therefore, this decision was revoked and matter was buried. The disinvestment in Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) created friction again between the UPA-I government and the Left Front. The government's decision of disinvesting 10 percent of BHEL's share was vehemently criticized by the Left Front. The UPA-I government argued that the decisions proposed were consistent with the NCMP and there is no issue of diverting from the NCMP and the decision is taken to accelerate the competition and consumer welfare. Chidambaram argued that proposed policy of disinvestment does not violate the coalition dharma, as enshrined in the NCMP, and NCMP had provided for the sale of share to retail investors. Furthermore, he added that NCMP provided that government should find the ways to revive the ailing PSUs and that money raised from the disinvestment will be utilized for the same purpose⁵. However, what gave impetus to the Left Front's demand to revoke the decision was that when

it got support from a section of Congress Party particularly from Mani Shankar Aiyar, who argued that BHELs equity is being sought to be disinvested not to enhance competition or for the welfare of the workers but just to raise revenue⁶. The Left Front refitted this decision and described this move as a first step, towards privatization and first serious violation of NCMP. This led the Left Front to boycott the further meetings of the Coordination Committee. Disinvestment policy was jeopardized when other allies particularly DMK threatened the UPA-I government that it will withdraw its support if the government did not stop the proposed disinvestment in the Neyveli Lignite Corporation. The DMK opposed this decision because its opponent AIADMK was taking advantage of this situation and making inroads into the hitherto DMK-led workers⁷. The government finally decided to postpone all the decisions and proposals on disinvestment till further consultation and review because the withdrawal of DMK support could have brought more dependence of the government on the Left Front. Despite the pressure from the DMK to halt the disinvestment process the Left Front's decision to boycott further meetings of the coordination committee also alarmed the government about the stability of the coalition government. However, it was due to the intervention of the Sonia Gandhi that Left Front was brought back into the coordination committee.

Despite these contradictions on economic policies another irritant between the UPA-I government and the Left Front was the Indo-US relationship. The Left Front had criticised the NDA government constantly on the ground that it had made the country (India) a junior partner of USA in her imperialist design, and it (NDA) had sacrificed the India's commitment to Non-Alignment and multilateralism. Before finalizing the NCMP of UPA-I government the Left Front draw the attention of government on this issue and it (government) declared that it will pursue an independent foreign policy keeping in mind its past traditions and it will promote multi-polarity in world relations and oppose all attempts of unilateralism. Moreover, it declared that it will pursue closer relation and engagement with the USA. The Left Front had aroused their concern on different issues and even criticized the UPA-I government on signing the agreement of New

Framework for US-India Defence Relationship which enlarged the scope of the Next Step in Strategic Partnership, and also India's vote against Iran in IAEA. But it never turned to be dangerous for the stability of the government until the government concluded the 122 Agreement. The Indo-US nuclear deal all started when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited the US on July, 2005 and it was on July 18th, 2005 that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George W. Bush, in a joint statement, agreed in principle to have a civil nuclear cooperation. As per the joint statement the Indian government agreed to separate its civil and nuclear establishment and to put the civil nuclear facilities under the IAEA safeguards and in exchange, USA agreed to give India access to nuclear technology and fuel. However, prior to this Joint statements India concluded a ten years defence frame work agreement with the United States, which established close defence relation between the two nations in terms of defence strategy dialogue, strengthening military capabilities to promote security, intelligence exchanges and more importantly allowing India to have access to US military hardware⁸. The Left Front did not press too much on the defence deal and India's vote in IAEA against Iran although; it registered its protest without too much pressure on the government. Zoya Hassan said:

... if there was one issue of principle on which Left Front could have withdrawn support, it was the defence deal agreement. After not withdrawing support the Left Fronts position was considerably weakened when it eventually decided to cut ties with the UPA⁹.

The success of Left Front in vetoing the disinvestment proposal would have encouraged the Left Front to pressure the government through coordination committee, short of withdrawing support. The Left Front did not press this issue too much because it did not want to withdraw its support to the government which was on its initial stage and it could have affected the party in the assembly elections of West Bengal and Kerala. Despite this, the Left Front raised the issue of Congress pro-US approach during the assembly elections in Kerala and West Bengal, just to attract the Muslim voters. The Left Front's criticism and opposition to the nuclear deal became more lethal when the US Congress

passed the Henry J. Hyde Act in December 2006 till then the progress on the nuclear deal was slow. The Henry J. Hyde US-India peaceful Atomic Energy Act was the enabling act which permits nuclear cooperation with India. The UPA-I government from the very beginning argued that the Hyde Act was a domestic US law and was binding on US only and the domestic law cannot apply to India and India would be only bound by the 123 Agreement. The interpretation of the Act became the major issue in the whole process of Indo-US nuclear deal. The Left Front strongly criticized this agreement on the ground that it was a one sided agreement and would turn India into a subordinate ally to the imperial ambition of the US. This will have adverse impact on independent Indian foreign policy and will halt the nuclear programme and particularly its nuclear weapon programme. The Left Front's landslide victory in Kerala and West Bengal assembly elections further strengthened their commitment to halt the nuclear deal. Moreover, the Congress Party was initially pessimistic about the nuclear deal and the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had to face scathing criticism from Congress Working Committee on July 2005 on the nuclear deal¹⁰. The Congress concern was that the deal would alienate the Party's Muslim vote base and will encourage the Left Front to withdraw support to the minority government. The Congress Party could not evolve consensus within on the nuclear deal. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh after returning from the USA tried to remove the apprehension of the opposition and Left Front on the nuclear deal and made a statement in the Parliament in this context, making it clear that there was no secret deal behind the public one and denied that India entered into a military alliance with the US to counter China. The Left Front did not press the issue too much but once the Hyde Act was passed it mounted pressure on the government to stop the proceedings of the deal. Their major contention was that many provisions of the Hyde Act were not consistent with the joint statement of July 18th, 2005. The Left Front put press on the government to renegotiate the deal. The Prime Minister Manmohan Singh didn't succumb to the pressure exerted by the Left Front and made his stand clear when he said:

...I have told them (Left Front) that it is not possible to renegotiate the deal. It is an honourable

deal, the cabinet has approved it, and we cannot go back on it. I told them to do whatever they want to do, if they want to withdraw support so be it¹¹.

Therefore, the Left Front decided to mount more pressure on the UPA-I government by threatening it of withdraw support. The other allies of UPA-I government particularly, RJD, and DMK were not in favour of the deal and they were more concerned about the survival of the government because the early elections could have proved costly for the allies. More importantly, realizing the conflict within the Congress Party on the issue and being the chairperson of UPA-Left Coordination Committee, Sonia Gandhi did not support the deal at the beginning because she was more concerned about the survival of the UPA-I government. Sonia Gandhi made her stand clear on the nuclear deal when she eloquently spoke in October 12, 2007 at Hindustan Times Summit and argued that that survival of the government was more important than the nuclear deal and the Congress would carry on its dialogue with the Left Front so as to seek their consent and would do nothing to force the issue and risk the break with the Left Front. Sonia Gandhi's stand on the deal softened Manmohan Singh who in his address at the Hindustan Times Summit said, "...the failure of deal would not mean end of life nor was the UPA a one issue government"¹². It was in this context that UPA-I government, in order to diffuse the tension set up a committee in September 2007, to examine the implication of the Hyde Act on 123 Agreement, and self reliance in the nuclear sector, and above all the ramification of the nuclear deal on the foreign policy and security cooperation. The Left Front allowed the UPA-I government to go ahead in their talk with the IAEA on Safeguard's Agreement but putting condition that such agreement could be accepted only after UPA-Left panel clears it for the final agreement. Zoya Hasan remarks:

... the Congress got the green signal about the end of Left's resistance to the deal. The Left Parties offered a window of opportunity which the government quickly grasped. This weakened the Left Front's hand in the face off as it lost its triumph card to delay the clearance of Indian specific safeguards with the IAEA, which could have scuttled the deal.

What led the government to fasten its process of operationalisation of deal were the concerns that

the change in the USA political executive may imperil the deal. It was on 20th February 2008 that a delegation from US including John Kerry, Joseph Biden and Chuck Hagel visited India. They stressed on the government to conclude the deal by the end of July 2008 so that US Congress will approve the deal before the US Presidential elections¹³. On the other hand the Congress Party became successful in taking Mulayam Singh Yadav into confidence who had earlier withdrawn his support to the government on the same issue. The UPA-I government went ahead with the deal once the Congress top leadership was convinced that the government would not fall. Mulayam Singh was aided in switching his support to UPA-I government on nuclear deal by the statement issued by the former President A.P.J Abdul Kalam in support of the nuclear deal. Kalam being the Muslims and his support for the nuclear deal with US was exactly the kind of political backing Mulayam Singh needed to turn away from the United National Progressive Alliance (UNPA)¹⁴. Furthermore, the Prime Minister and his close aides played a significant role in bringing the Samajwadi party on board¹⁵. Thus the UPA-I government concluded the agreement with the IAEA and backtracked from its commitment that the results of the talks with the IAEA would be deliberated in the coordination committee. The result was that Left Front withdrew its support from the government. The Left Front tried until the last moment to convince Sonia Gandhi to save the government by dumping Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and replacing him with pro-Left Prime Minister but they failed. This was because of the fact that Manmohan Singh's credibility as a Prime Minister had risen immensely at that time and any antagonistic action against him could have proved disastrous for the Congress Party¹⁶. The Left Front in order to halt the progress of the deal tried to communalize the deal and echoed that the deal is anti- Muslim so as to get the support of the secular political parties having substantial Muslim support. Moreover, it was held that Left Front's stand against the nuclear deal was also a move to woo back its Muslim support in West Bengal which had moved away from it following the Nandigram Episode. But this plan of the Left Front did not bear fruit and it had to face the wrath of the electorate in the subsequent elections.

The Congress led UPA-I government in order to win the vote of confidence approached different political parties in order to ensure their support in to it (UPA). The Congress bargained with the leader of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Shibu Soren, who demanded to be made as the Chief Minister of the Jharkhand and his son to be made as the Deputy Chief Minister but he could not get what he desired and the Congress offered him to be inducted in the cabinet¹⁷. The Congress Party also tried to woo Ajit Singh and renamed the Lucknow airport after his father, a former Prime Minister, Charan Singh, but failed to satisfy him. The Congress also tried to bargain with JD (S) which demanded central ministerial berth and support of the Congress to topple the incumbent BJP government in Kamataka, but this also failed in this bargain¹⁸. The Congress led UPA-I government also tried to woo TRS which bargained for the separate Telengana state, but the government did not accept this demand¹⁹. Although, UPA-I government didn't become successful in wooing JD (S), RLD, TRS which the Congress considered as its natural allies. It became successful in wooing SP of Mulayam Singh Yadav, who had withdrawn its support from the government earlier. The new love of SP for Congress was interpreted in different way. The Left Front believed that in return of support to the UPA-I government, the government would shield its (SP) leaders against pending corruption cases. But this was not only the reason, the political rivalry between SP and BSP was also another factor that led the SP to support the Congress led UPA-I government²⁰. On the other hand Mayawati, along with Left Front, TDP, and JVM formed the Third Front to bring down the government. Mayawati played a master stroke by offering political alignment with JD (S), RLD, TRS parties with aim of fighting the next election together and these political parties could not deny their support as she had a significant support across Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan²¹. On the day, set for the vote of confidence i.e. July 22, 2008 the Congress led UPA-I government secured the majority with 275 votes in its favour and 256 went against it, in the house of 542, with 10 abstentions. The opposition political parties heavily criticized the government for horse trading which had become the prominent

feature of Indian coalition. The Congress leader Digvijay Singh said, "... what opposition calls horse trading is lobbying in political parlance²². However, the victory of the UPA-I government was stained by the allegations of bribery and manipulated absentees of the MPs. This really was the dark movement for Indian parliamentary democracy as the political parties violated all the norms of the parliamentary democracy for the electoral gains.

The Congress led UPA-I government after winning the vote of confidence interpreted it as a vote in favour of nuclear deal. Pranab Mukerjee said:

...It is a legal, constitutional and political victory for the government, the vote of confidence has not only cleared the way for the government to go forward with the India-U.S. nuclear deal in a rightful manner but has also accorded political sanction to the agreement since a majority of legislators of the Indian Parliament have put their stamp of approval on it.²³

Different interpretations came forward on the question, why the Congress led UPA-I didn't drop the nuclear deal and why it opt to seek vote of confidence? One such view suggests that the Congress led UPA government wanted to separate its way from the Left Front which had vetoed its most of the policies. The nuclear deal became the excuse for the government. The Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, after the vote of confidence eloquently said, "The Left Front vetoed in its every step on nuclear deal which is unacceptable, they wanted me to behave as their bonded slave²⁴. Therefore, the statement from the Prime Minister was a clear indication of government's intention.

The Left Front also used the nuclear deal to mobilize its electoral base which had started to move away from it due its pro-liberal policies in states like West Bengal. The nuclear deal gave them the opportunity to separate themselves from the UPA-I government and depict to its electorate its distinct ideological stance from other political parties. After the state assembly election in the West Bengal in 2006 the Left Front's support base started to erode. The social coalition of the middle class, several groups of civil society, Muslims, SCs and STs turned their back against the Left Front due to its contradictory positions — a pragmatic support for the Congress at the centre and at the same time giving

the electoral challenge to the party in the West Bengal²⁵. This dual approach proved very costly for the Left Front in the subsequent Panchayat election (2008) and the Parliamentary election (2009). Moreover, Sanjay Barn's revelations have given another dimension to the UPA-I government and Left Front contradiction on Indo-US nuclear deal. He remarks:

The Left's opposition evolved from being purely ideological into becoming a political ploy by which Prakash Karat aimed at marginalizing all the pro-PM elements within his own party. Surjeet Singh, Jyoti Basu, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, and Sitaram Yechury were the moderates. Having up staged Surjeet Singh, Prakash Karat used the issue of opposition to 80 nuclear deal as a way of consolidating his own position within the CPI (M). Therefore, for both the Left Front and the Congress it was an electoral strategy. The Congress Party wanted to contain both sections of the electorate, i.e. middle class by nuclear deal and closer engagement in terms of trade with US, and poor by implementing the flagship programmes. The Left Front on the other hand wanted to resurrect its support base in the West Bengal and Kerala where TMC of Mamta Banarjees and the Congress Party was making inroads to the traditional support base of the Left Front. Therefore it will be wrong to conclude that it was a one sided strategy.

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