
A tarnished triumph

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AFTER a rancorous, sometimes riotous, two-day debate on its most contentious policy, a nuclear co-operation agreement with America, India's government on July 22nd won a parliamentary vote of confidence. This did not ensure the survival of the vexed agreement, on which George Bush and India's prime minister, Manmohan Singh, shook hands in July 2005. It still needs the approval of several bodies, including the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). But the government's victory, by 275 votes to 256, with ten abstentions, has probably saved it from strangulation by its Indian opponents.

It has also prolonged the government, at least for a bit. A governing coalition led by Mr Singh's Congress party was on July 9th deserted by its Communist allies, in response to its long-delayed decision to submit the nuclear deal to the IAEA. A tribute to nuclear-armed India's rising stature, the agreement in effect grants an amnesty on its refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), by allowing it to purchase nuclear fuel and technology regardless. But the Communists oppose the deal's subtext, closer ties with America, and therefore vowed to bring the government down. So the government called the confidence vote to thwart them.

The victory was especially glorious for Mr Singh, who has waged a quiet and lonely campaign for the nuclear agreement, in the teeth of the Communists' opposition and Congress's indifference. But the deal—or, more precisely, a safeguards agreement attached to it—is now to go before the IAEA's board of directors on August 1st. If it approves it, the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group will be asked to waive its rules on nuclear trading for India. America's Congress would then be asked to give a final blessing—though this may not be possible before Mr Bush's administration ends in January.

It is also uncertain how long Mr Singh's government will enjoy its reprieve. With inflation at a 13-year high, it is not inclined to face India's voters before its term ends in May 2009. It must therefore hope that its new-look parliamentary majority, which it won by recruiting a fresh ally, the Samajwadi Party (SP), will hold firm. In India's fractured polity, that is an ambitious hope.

The wild scenes in Parliament were an image of this. India's legislators have a habit of unruliness: unsurprisingly, perhaps, when many—including over 100 currently—face criminal charges. But a special chaos prevailed during this debate. There was almost constant barracking and chanting; stray backbenchers raged inaudibly amid the din, for the television cameras and unknown reasons. Partly they were playing to the media gallery: some consider their constituents to be more impressed by strong words than sense. But it also reflected an ill-tempered display of horse-trading, floor-crossing and, the opposition alleged, vote-buying by the government.

Prison cells were opened, to allow five pro-government parliamentarians out to vote. The government also renamed the main airport in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) after the father of an important fence-sitter: the leader of a small party, Ajit Singh (who, in the event, voted against the government). But ten opposition members, including four from the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), voted with it. Perhaps anticipating this, three BJP members staged an unprecedented protest in Parliament. Shortly before the vote, they interrupted an angry Communist in mid-flow, by displaying wads of rupees to the packed chamber. They said this was the first instalment of a 90m-rupee (\$2.1m) bribe, given to them by the government's camp; and that they could prove it.

These scenes may be damaging for the government. The BJP has been reluctant to attack the prime minister personally, because of his unusual reputation for honesty in office; that may now change. And the government can expect no offsetting electoral joy from the nuclear deal. Indian voters, mostly poor and rural, are not fussed about foreign policy. Nor are many impressed by economic reforms, needed though they are. Mr Singh is a respected former finance minister. His government was expected to be much more reformist than its Communist comrades have in fact allowed it to be. Allied to the more flexible SP, it may now attempt a few modest measures: to allow more foreign direct investment in insurance, for example, and to try privatising a public company or two.

But as the election looms, the Congress party and its allies are likely to devote more thought to winning it. In fact, that partly explains the government's tie-up with the SP. Based in UP, and notorious for the corrupt governments it has led there, the SP is alleged to have demanded that the government pursue corruption allegations against its main rival, Mayawati, the state's chief minister. A champion of low-caste Hindus, her Bahujan Samaj Party trounced the SP in last year's state election in UP, and threatens to do so in the general election. The SP is also seeking a favourable electoral alliance with Congress in UP. Congress can probably live with both demands. Indeed, a lacklustre police investigation into the source of Mayawati's impressive wealth has already been revived. And an alliance with the SP in India's most populous state, UP, could improve Congress's own fortunes there.

Through such ad hoc alliances, in all 29 states of India, the BJP and Congress will build their campaigns. Indeed, their choice of allies, from among a growing multitude of regional and caste-based parties, is likely to have a bigger impact on their chances than any national issue. On recent form, both the main parties may emerge weaker from the election, and their allies stronger. Without surer leadership than either Congress or the BJP has recently displayed, their governments will become even weaker. This is a serious concern. But it is hardly surprising. All politics is local; and India has an awful

lot of localities.

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