

Despite Samajwadi support, it's still touch-and-go for government

It's still touch-and-go for the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, even as he prepares for his trip to Japan for the G8 summit, even though the ruling coalition has managed to rope in the Samajwadi Party's support in parliament in case of a showdown over the India-US civil nuclear deal.

Even with the Samajwadi Party's 39 MPs in the Lok Sabha, the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is expected to have 275 members - just three above the mandatory half-way mark to prove the majority - to back the government if there is a trust vote in parliament if the Left withdraws its support over the deal.

According to a senior minister in the Manmohan Singh's cabinet, the government will finalise its decision to go to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to finalise the India-specific safeguards agreement and to proceed with the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) only after ensuring a clear majority.

The Samajwadi Party (SP), once a bitter critic of the Congress, clarified that it would support the nuclear deal and the government as the '(Bharatiya Janata Party leader) L.K. Advani is more dangerous than (US President) George W. Bush. '

'The fight is between the secular and the non secular parties, not between the pro-deal and the anti-deal people,' SP general secretary Amar Singh said.

However, the ruling Congress member expressed apprehension that some of SP's Muslim MPs may revolt against the leadership's decision to support the government over the deal, fearing a backlash from the minority community.

A survey, carried out by SP Rajya Sabha MP Shahid Siddiqui's Urdu newspaper Nai Dunya says that at least 75 percent of the Muslims in the country feel that the deal was 'anti-Muslim'. The party MP from Muzzafarnagar, Munawar Hassan, has told reporters he would defy the party whip and vote against the Congress-led government.

The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)-led Left parties, which prop up the government, are expected to go to President Pratibha Patil to submit a letter of withdrawal of their support next Thursday after the prime minister returns from Japan.

A top minister in the UPA government said that it would not give a specific reply to the four Left parties, which has given the July 7 deadline for the government to clarify its position on approaching the IAEA for finalising the India-specific safeguards agreement.

'The government will reiterate its position that it would first finalise the findings of the 15-member UPA-Left nuclear committee and that we want the Left's permission to go ahead with the IAEA. We will also stand by our stand that the nuclear deal is in the interest of the nation,' the minister told IANS.

The government, according to the minister, will request the Communists to attend the last meeting of the nuclear committee.

The Left has said the government should not finalise the safeguards agreement as it is a crucial step to take forward the 123 agreement with Washington. The Communists oppose the nuclear deal vehemently.

However, Left leaders clarified that they would not attend any more meetings. 'We will wait for the prime minister to return from his Japan visit before going to the president,' a senior CPI-M leader said.

The ambiguity in the Lok Sabha arithmetic has even made some Congress leaders consider the possibilities of allowing the government to fall in a floor test - and then prepare for elections.

The Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs is expected to meet Tuesday, with External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee in the chair, to decide on the convening of parliament's monsoon session. Although the government is planning to commence it by Aug 11 or 13, the Left's withdrawal may force them to face the session immediately.

The main opposition BJP has already demanded that parliament be convened immediately and the UPA has to seek a trust vote.

'Though normally, the house is to meet some time in August, in view of the present situation, my party demands a session of parliament is immediately convened and Manmohan Singh seek the confidence of the house and move a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha,' demanded Advani, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA)'s prime ministerial candidate Saturday.

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