

From NRIs to BJP, Akalis under 'pressure' ahead of trust vote

The ruling Akali Dal in Punjab is literally being pulled in all directions - by Non-resident Indians (NRIs) as well as by alliance partner Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - over the India-US nuclear deal, an issue on which the party has not been able to make its stand clear so far, and on supporting Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a Sikh and a Punjabi.

While the Akalis have decided to vote against the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, they have not voiced any serious objection to the nuclear deal.

The NRIs want the Akali Dal to support the deal and also Prime Minister Manmohan Singh - since he is the first Sikh and Punjabi prime minister of the country.

However, the BJP has forced the Akalis to issue a whip to its eight Lok Sabha members of parliament (MPs) to vote against the UPA government.

Though the Akali Dal had earlier this week made its position clear that Manmohan Singh being a 'Sikh' and a 'Punjabi' made no difference to its stand of voting against the UPA, alliance partner BJP did not want to take chances and on Friday evening forced the Akali Dal to issue a whip to its MPs.

The BJP was aware of the pressure on the Akali leaders from various quarters, especially the strong Punjabi and Sikh NRI community in the United States, Canada and Britain.

There are reports that at least 2-3 Akali Dal MPs are being offered bribes to vote against the party line.

The Akalis are running an alliance government with the BJP in Punjab since March 2007.

The NRI community, which has considerable influence on Punjab politics and the state's leadership, has been rooting for the nuclear deal and especially for the country's first Sikh prime minister, Manmohan Singh. They have been saying that the nuclear deal and Manmohan Singh have helped better the image of the country and the Sikh community.

Leading NRI and chairman of the Sikh council on religion and education, Rajwant Singh said Saturday that it was important for the nuclear deal and Manmohan Singh to be supported at this juncture.

'Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has demonstrated visionary leadership skills in creating immense admiration for India among the G8 countries and they have come around to support India's new status. Although the Akali Dal has decided to vote against the UPA government on this issue, but in the interest of the nation and Punjab, I request them to reconsider their decision,' Rajwant Singh said in an email statement.

'An issue like this is beneficial to all Indians, and voting should be considered based on the merits of an issue rather than past considerations or party line,' he added.

The opposition Congress in Punjab has also been reminding Akali Dal chief mentor and Punjab Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal that he has been using the Punjabi and Sikh card in getting

things for Punjab from the prime minister.

'It is time for you (Badal) to repay the favour to the prime minister,' former Congress minister Pratap Singh Bajwa said in a letter to the Akali leader

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