

Parliament Says Stop Nuclear Deal

Prakash Karat

The 123 agreement for civilian nuclear cooperation with the United States has finally been discussed in both houses of parliament. As expected, a majority of the members in both houses have opposed the nuclear deal on various grounds. This debate should have taken place in the monsoon session itself and could have been a timely warning to the government not to proceed with the deal.

The opposition to the deal was expressed mainly in three forms. Firstly, the demand that the nuclear deal be not proceeded with to the next stages for operationalisation, given the provenance of the Hyde Act and the failure to get the assurances made by the Prime Minister in August 2006 incorporated in the 123 agreement. Secondly, there was the demand for renegotiation of the deal. Thirdly, some of the parties took the stand that only by clearing all doubts and achieving a consensus should the deal go forward. In this connection some demanded a Joint Parliamentary Committee.

Curiously, the debate in the Lok Sabha was sought to be portrayed as a “victory” for the government, or, a dilution of the opposition by some parties. Leading the pack in purveying such a false picture were newspapers like The Times of India and The Indian Express. The spurious conclusion was based on the so-called dilution of the stand of the Samajwadi Party and the alleged failure of the Telugu Desam to participate in the debate. The Samajwadi Party leader Shri Ram Gopal Yadav made a comprehensive speech questioning the deal on all grounds – the Hyde Act, the cost of nuclear energy, the adverse impact on foreign policy and the damage it would do to our independent nuclear programme. The questions he posed and the clarifications and assurances he sought were mischievously interpreted. In the case of the Telugu Desam, its speaker Shri Audikesavulu did not speak protesting the lack of time allotted to him. He requested that his speech be laid on the table and be part of the record. The speech as it appears in the proceedings is a categorical rejection of the 123 agreement as “the single most dangerous issue as it impinges on national sovereignty. The UNPA popularly known as the Third Front has made its opposition to the Indo-US nuclear deal known” Yet, the most fervent mouthpiece for US interests in India, The Indian Express claimed editorially on November 30 that “The biggest outcome from the

nuclear debate this week is the falsification of the Karat-Advani thesis that the majority opinion in the parliament is against the nuclear deal". Perhaps the editorial writer needs to be taught the basics of arithmetic. The Lok Sabha debate established that a big majority of the house is against the deal. The parties which represent around sixty per cent of the total membership spoke out against the nuclear deal. They included the Left parties, the NDA, the UNPA and parties like the BSP.

If the Lok Sabha debate gave a negative verdict on the nuclear deal, the discussion in the Rajya Sabha which followed made the isolation of the UPA government all the more evident. The Rajya Sabha debate comprehensively demolished all the arguments put up by the government with regard to the non-applicability of the Hyde Act, the "non-binding" provisions of this Act; the role of nuclear energy in our energy security; the costs of nuclear power; and the effects on our indigenous three-state nuclear programme. Many speakers spoke about the subversion of an independent foreign policy and the American design to convert India into a subordinate ally.

At the end of the debate in both houses, after Shri Pranab Mukherjee replied to the discussion, the leaders of the CPI(M) group in the two houses, Basudev Acharia and Sitaram Yechury respectively, asked for a categorical assurance from the government that taking into account the views expressed by a majority of the house, the government will not proceed further with the nuclear deal. This is the sense of the House. Shri Pranab Mukherjee replied that where is the question of taking the sense of the House until the process is completed. He answered that at the end of every stage, the government will come to parliament and discuss.

This is not good enough. Parliament has repeatedly discussed the deal at different stages beginning from Joint Statement of July 2005 which announced the nuclear cooperation agreement. At every stage despite the majority view against the deal, the government has proceeded ahead. The 123 agreement was negotiated and the agreement initialled and the text frozen. Then the Union Cabinet approved it. After this fait accompli, in the current parliament session discussion has taken place. The argument that the sense of the House can be taken only after the process is completed would mean that parliament has no say whatsoever except to have an academic debate on the issue. Therefore, it is imperative that the government take into account the clear verdict of the parliament against the 123 agreement. Any move to take the next steps to operationalise the agreement would be showing disrespect for parliament and the essential tenets of parliamentary democracy