

Pope's visit to India exacerbates tensions in BJP-led government

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The Pope's four-day visit to India in early November quickly revealed the tensions within the newly elected government led by the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who is keen to present a more moderate face both to preserve the ruling coalition and to consolidate international ties and investment.

As the *Indian Express* explained, the government was concerned that the Pope would make "embarrassing statements" about the position of Christians in India under the BJP at "a critical juncture when Western countries were inching closer to India". Put in plainer language, Vajpayee was worried that adverse comments by the Pope, who is pursuing his own agenda, would inflame the BJP's own supporters, create a major public controversy, and damage the tentative relations the government is developing with the US in particular.

Vajpayee could not very well cancel the visit as the invitation to the Pope had been issued some time ago—in 1995 by former prime minister I. K. Gujral. A huge police presence was mobilised in the Indian capital of New Delhi to ensure tight security. "All the avenues of the Papal visit stand converted into virtual fortifications with police cordoning off the area and keeping vigil all day," one report noted. In addition, the government initiated a widespread police crackdown against some of the Hindu chauvinist organisations planning protests against the pontiff's visit.

At the same time, however, Vajpayee and the BJP have the closest links with these same organisations and are imbued with the same communalist politics. So in order to prevent a backlash within the party itself and the opening up of internal divisions, the government's reception for the Pope was decidedly muted—almost a snub. The Pope told a meeting of Catholic Bishops from Asia on November 6 that "the church will reap a harvest of faith in the Asian Continent in the new millennium"—hardly a perspective welcomed by the Hindu extremists of the BJP. It was like the chiefs of two mafia gangs eyeing each other off before the beginning of a turf war.

On the eve of the visit, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and its front organisation, the Sanskriti Rakshana Manch (SRM) or the Protection of Culture Forum, called for protests against the Pope. VHP National Secretary Dharmanarayan Sharma warned of a mass campaign in December against religious conversion if the Vajpayee government failed to act. Another leader of the VHP, Ashok Singhal, demanded an apology from the Pope for the persecution of Hindus three centuries ago by Christian colonisers

and warned that the Catholic Church was about to launch a massive campaign for conversion in the year 2000. His brother B. P. Singhal, who leads the SRM, is a prominent BJP leader and a BJP member of the Rajya Sabha (upper house of the parliament).

At the government's urging, the VHP shifted its protest meeting scheduled for the day of the Pope's arrival to the day before. Its activists traveled over 1,500 kilometres from Goa, on the west coast, flaunting anti-Christian banners. In the evening, more than a thousand demonstrated in New Delhi shouting: "Ram but not Rome!" Ram is the mythical Hindu hero in whose name Hindu extremists destroyed the ancient Babri Masjid mosque in December 1992, claiming that it stood on the site of an even older Hindu temple.

On the first day of the Pope's visit, the VHP and the SRM took out an advertisement on the front pages of the leading newspapers, questioning the Pope's motives. The VHP demanded that all foreign missionaries be expelled from India. "Foreign missionaries funded by internationally financed church groups were backing terrorist activities in the North East [of India] where the native population is predominantly Christian," Singhal claimed. In the light of the murder of Australian missionary Graham Steines and his sons earlier in the year by Hindu extremists, the statement can only encourage further violent communalist attacks on missionaries and Christian communities.

In the case of Shiva Sena (SS), which is a member of the ruling coalition, Vajpayee initiated the police detention of its leading members. Three days before the Pope arrived, the Chief of Shiva Sena's Northern Indian Chapter Jai Bhagwan Goyal, and its New Delhi unit leaders, including V. P. Om Datt Sharma, Propaganda Secretary Rajendra Singh and executive member Ramkant Sharma, were arrested under sections 151 and 150 of the Code of Criminal procedure. This law, passed during the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975, gives police sweeping powers to arrest anyone they believe may cause a breach of peace.

Newspapers reported that the SS planned to stage a series of black flag demonstrations if the Pope did not apologise for ancient wrongs by Christians against Hindus. It had already held a protest on November 1 in the Jantar Mantar area of New Delhi during which an effigy of the Pope was burnt. Despite police warnings, the SS staged a further demonstration when the Pope visited the Mahatma Gandhi tomb in Rajghat. Three protestors were arrested.

The SS has 15 seats in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) and 16 percent of the votes in the west coast state of

Maharashtra. It is a quasi-fascist outfit based on Marathi (the main language of Maharashtra) chauvinism, which often seeks to outdo the Hindu extremist groups directly affiliated with the BJP, including the RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh), VHP and Bajrang Dal. Shiva Sena leader, Bal Thackeray, is an open admirer of Hitler.

Although not wanting a major public row during the Pope's visit, the BJP leaders are clearly playing to the same audience. It scaled down the reception for the Pope, abandoning earlier plans that the Prime Minister would be part of the welcoming party at the airport. The government had earlier prevented the Vice President from attending an inter-religious dialogue organised by the Catholic Church and to be addressed by the Pope.

Home Minister Lal Krishan Advani who initially tried to distance himself from the VHP-SRM campaign, called for a secret report on the visit immediately after the Pope's departure. In what was a calculated insult, the New Delhi police demanded the Catholic Church pay a sum of 75,000 rupees (about \$US2,000) for "damage" to the grounds where the Pope had held his open mass. The demand was only withdrawn after protests from church bodies in India.

The BJP is based on Hindutva, the Hindu fundamentalist platform and its origins go back to the Hindu Maha Sabha (Great Hindu Association) whose members accused Mahatma Gandhi of being too conciliatory to Muslims and were responsible for his murder. The Hindu extremist organisations, collectively known as the Sangh Parivar, played the leading role in the BJP's fundamentalist campaigns in the 1990s. The present BJP cabinet ministers, Advani and Murali Manohar Joshi, led the Ratha Yatra (Chariot Tour) campaign that resulted in the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the ensuing communal riots.

Concerns have already been raised that Human Resources Development Minister, Murali Manohar Joshi, has appointed a number of Hindu extremists to head key research bodies including the Indian Council of Social Science Research and the Indian Council of Historical Research, both of which are involved in dispensing research grants. Professor B. R. Grover is an open defender of the destruction of the Babri Masjid and advocates the building of a Ram temple on the site. Professor Sondhi was elected in 1976 as one of the first parliamentary representatives of the Jan Sangh, BJP's predecessor party.

Since the BJP first formed a government in 1996, the incidence of communal violence against Christians has skyrocketed. During the 32 years from 1964 to 1996, the number of violent acts recorded was 38, compared to 150 for the two years between 1996 and 1998. A report by the Washington-based Human Rights Watch blamed the government for failing to curb violence against Christians, including attacks on priests, the rape and murder of nuns, and the burning of prayer homes.

According to the 1991 census, there were almost 20 million Christians in India out of a total population of 950 million. The Catholic Church has been able to exploit the suffering of some of the most impoverished Indians, who are on the lowest rungs of the Hindu caste system, to extend its influence. This irks the ruling elites, who in turn whip up Hindu extremism to divide the masses and divert their attention from the huge social problems they face.

The BJP-led government was no doubt relieved when the Pope came and went without major incident. The pro-government *Indian Express* exulted: "The Vajpayee Government's first foreign affairs exercise did go much better than expected, and officials in New Delhi are upbeat over a trouble-free visit of the Pope John Paul II". But the activities of the Hindu extremists both inside and outside the BJP continue unabated.

On November 13, the *Hindustan Times* reported that in Kesavapuram near New Delhi a Christian prayer meeting was attacked and broken up. Four of the attackers were arrested. But as a subsequent investigation by the civil rights group Jan Hastakshep concluded: "The violence was planned and orchestrated by the Sangh Parivar which wanted to test the waters for bigger actions against the minorities in the future." It also pointed out that the police had tried to "hush up the case, distort facts and avoid arresting the culprits".

At the end of November, Kalyan Singh, the former BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, attempted to further inflame the Babri Masjid issue by threatening to revive the campaign for the erection of a Hindu shrine at the site of the demolished mosque. The state's present Chief Minister Ram Prakash Gupta, also from the BJP, gave credence to the call, saying: "The Ram Mandir (the proposed temple) has been the BJP's issue... and party workers are bound to raise it from time to time."

Such activities will undoubtedly lead to further tensions in the governing coalition. However, the reaction of the BJP-led government to the Pope's visit also highlights the dangers facing the working class. If it is prepared to use the police to detain the leaders of some of its Hindu chauvinist allies then it will employ far more repressive measures against the opposition of workers and others to its communalist politics and the social impact of its economic policies.



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