

In the name of America's "war on terrorism"

Hindu regime in India fans anti-Muslim sentiment

Keith Jones
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India's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government rushed to declare its readiness to join a US-led coalition against global terrorism. Much of India's political elite was positively euphoric, for it saw the crisis triggered by last week's terrorist attacks as providing India a double opportunity. By rallying in support of the US and encouraging a backlash against Islamic fundamentalism, India could cement a new Indo-American "strategic partnership" while stigmatizing its historic rival Pakistan as a "terrorist state." Some officials of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the right-wing Hindu nationalist party that leads the NDA—spoke privately of an emerging US-Indian-Israeli axis against "Islamic terrorism."

The mood has since shifted dramatically. With the US signalling its intention to work with the Pakistani government in mounting military action against Afghanistan, anxiety and consternation have come to reign in New Delhi. Says independent MP and foreign policy specialist Kuldip Nayar: "India suspects that there is something going on behind the scenes between Pakistan and the US, with Islamabad extracting a price that will be unfavorable to India's interests."

According to press reports, Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee, External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, and Home Minister L.K. Advani spent much of Tuesday's cabinet meeting relaying US assurances that Washington had not struck a deal with Pakistan's military rulers. They reported to their agitated cabinet colleagues that top US officials had categorically rejected a CNN claim that Pakistan had won US acceptance of three conditions: US mediation of the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir, the exclusion of India and Israel from the US-led coalition, and a financial aid package.

Yet, reports the *Hindu*, when the meeting broke up

"many Cabinet ministers remained uncomfortable with the alleged American winking at Pakistan's past record in aiding and abetting terrorism"—a reference to Pakistan's close relations to the Taliban and support for anti-Indian guerrillas in Kashmir.

In the run-up to the meeting, a senior leader of one of the smaller components of the NDA, the Samata Party, harshly criticized the government for not telling the US "that it should tackle Islamabad." The party spokesman continued: "Pakistan and Afghanistan are twin brothers as far as fomenting terrorism is concerned."

What makes the situation especially difficult for the government is that much of the sudden disaffection with the US is coming from the ranks of the BJP, which commands about two-thirds of the NDA's parliamentary seats. Historically, the pro-business and virulently anticommunist BJP has been India's most fervently pro-US party. Under the BJP's influence, India recently came out in support of the US missile shield initiative.

But the BJP is also bred on anti-Pakistani and anti-Muslim chauvinism. The vast majority of its leaders, including Prime Minister Vajpayee and Home Minister Advani, are lifelong members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, a fascistic militia movement that holds India to be a Hindu nation and demands that Indians of other faiths accept Hindu dominance.

"Unfortunately, the statements issued by the US show its attitude has narrowed down to just getting Osama bin Laden," complained BJP General Secretary Narendra Modi. "If this happens", he continued, "the international community will conclude that the US does not understand the full import of terrorism."

The sharp shift in mood in New Delhi is testimony to the resentment in Indian ruling circles over Washington's

Cold War financial and military support of Pakistan, and its continuing refusal to acknowledge India as a geopolitical equal of China, despite India's nuclear capability and nearly equivalent population size. Even more fundamentally, it is testimony to the anxiety unleashed by Washington's declaration of a prolonged war against unknown enemies, located in, apart from Afghanistan, as yet unnamed countries. There is a feeling that the US has thrown the geopolitical cards of Asia and the Middle East in the air and no one, including Washington, knows where they will land.

The Indian government's eagerness to ally itself with the US is underscored by the fact that within 72 hours of the terror attacks on New York and Washington, New Delhi had broken with decades-old Indian policy and signalled its willingness to have American forces deployed at Indian military facilities. But Indian officials are now saying the US has not requested use of Indian air or naval bases. And following urgings by the opposition parties and Russia's foreign minister not to give the US a blank cheque, the NDA government has publicly counselled Washington against taking precipitate action.

Home Minister Advani, the leading Hindu chauvinist hardliner, is showing no such restraint in his anti-Pakistani statements. Last Saturday he told the annual training conference of the Border Security Force, "The world cannot disregard the fact that for over a decade Pakistan and now Taliban have been promoting terrorism. They have been giving refuge and asylum to all those indulging in terrorist violence."

The BJP's ultra-chauvinist supporters and allies have taken courage from the government's latest round of Pakistan-bashing. The Karnatakan city of Hubli has been convulsed by communal violence since supporters of the RSS-affiliated Vishwa Hindu Parishad took to the streets to demand that India's 130 million-strong Muslim community "choose" between Osama bin Laden and "peace."



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