

# Indian government cracks down on Islamic student organisation

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The Indian government's ban on the Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) in late September and subsequent police crackdown on its members is a further indication that the ruling Bharathya Janatha Party (BJP)-led coalition is intent on exploiting the war in Afghanistan to stir up communalism and restrict democratic rights.

In the wake of the government ban on September 27, police arrested several hundred SIMI members and supporters across 10 Indian states. Four people were killed in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh and SIMI's main stronghold, when police indiscriminately fired at a protest march opposing the ban. The Provincial Armed Constabulary, a notorious Hindu sectarian police force formed in the early years after the independence, was deployed to attack the protesters.

The government has made a series of sweeping accusations against SIMI—ranging from sympathy for Osama bin Laden and links to his Al Qaeda organisation through to charges of inciting communalism and of being anti-national. SIMI has also been accused of masterminding a series of bomb explosions in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, including two attacks on passenger trains.

So far, however, the government has provided no evidence for any of the accusations—other than that SIMI is a communalist organisation that promotes Islam. But if the promotion of religious communalism is to be illegal then the charge would also apply to the BJP itself, along with a number of other Hindu chauvinist organisations that are either in the ruling coalition or associated with it—from Shiv Sena and the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) to the World Hindu Council or Vishwa Hindu Parsishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal.

BJP general secretary Narendra Modi defended the

government's decision, saying the ban was “long overdue”. According to Modi, Indian law agencies have been closely monitoring SIMI's activities for two years. Far from justifying the decision, his comments simply underscore the fact that the government has seized on the political situation in the wake of September 11 to impose the ban and intimidate anyone—Muslim or non-Muslim—opposed to the US war against Afghanistan.

The anti-democratic character of the government's actions against SIMI has provoked some criticism in ruling circles. Former Supreme Court Judge V.R. Krishna Iyer has questioned the ban on constitutional grounds. He told the *Hindu* newspaper: “SIMI is a prima facie communalist organisation with a strong Islamic slant in its utterances. This vice by itself, cannot validate a total ban without being totalitarian and ultra vires [illegal]. Fundamental rights are fundamental and cannot be wished away by Government displeasure”.

The opposition Congress Party and Communist Party of India (Marxist) have opposed the ban, pointing to its communal bias and accusing the government of fanning Hindu chauvinism prior to state elections in Uttar Pradesh. Congress Party spokesman Jaipal Reddy told the Press Trust of India: “Apart from being lop-sided, the action on SIMI is ill timed... We are sure that this naked attempt to fan communal discord is not going to help the BJP in Uttar Pradesh.”

Congress, however, has a long record of fanning communal sentiment for political gain. In fact, Congress-led coalition governments in the states of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh have been demanding for some time that the national government outlaw SIMI.

SIMI's evolution is directly related to the growing

predominance of Hindu chauvinism in Indian politics during the 1990s. The organisation was formed in October 1977 following the arrests of the leaders of the moderate Jamat-e-Islami Hind under Congress (I) Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's emergency rule. It neither enjoyed mass support nor claimed to represent India's Muslim minority of 120 million people. Its first national conference attracted just 300 participants.

Exclusively based on students, SIMI declared itself to be an organisation dedicated to the "character building" of youth on Islamic principles. Students were recruited after they turned 15 and were obliged to resign at 30. In the late 1980s, the organisation began to recruit younger students.

But the key turning point came in December 1992, in response to the demolition of the Babri Mosque in the town of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh by a mob of Hindu fanatics drawn from various chauvinist organisations and led by the current Home Minister L.K. Advani, among others. The destruction of the mosque provoked the worst communal violence on the Indian subcontinent since its partition in 1947. SIMI reacted by advocating a more militant Islamic fundamentalism and gained considerable influence among the Muslim minority in Uttar Pradesh as well as in other states.

The VHP, RSS and other Hindu fundamentalist organisations have seized on the current political situation to press their provocative demand for the building of a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of the destroyed mosque. These organisations announced earlier in the month that they would proceed with the construction "on an auspicious date that could be earlier or later than March 2002". Previously the VHP had given the government until March 2002 to approve the new building.

The VHP also announced that it would organise nation-wide camps in two million villages to gather support for the temple's construction. As part of the campaign, the RSS indicated that it intended to organise a large congregation of Hindu fundamentalists and to march on Jaipur, the state capital of Rajasthan. Similarly, the Bajrang Dal started a state-wide Trishul program—Trishuls are sharp weapons measuring 10 to 16 cm. The Congress-led state government in Rajasthan called for the banning of Bajrang Dal but Home Minister Advani ruled out any such move.

Instead, the Indian government last week banned 23

mainly Muslim organisations under a new presidential decree on terrorism. Along with SIMI, six Kashmir separatist organisations were outlawed, as was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which has been fighting for a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka. The decree will allow police to detain suspects for up to 30 days. Any action defined as "terrorism" will be classified as a serious criminal act and anyone involved in financing, planning, carrying out or supporting "terrorist acts" will be liable for prosecution. The measure is due to be debated in parliament on November 19.



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