

# India: Ayodhya campaign heightens the danger of communal conflict and war

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The World Hindu Council (VHP), a Hindu extremist group connected to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is pressing ahead with plans to construct a temple to the Hindu god Ram in the northern Indian city of Ayodhya. The VHP insists on building the temple on the site of the Babri Masjid (mosque), which was torn down by Hindu fanatics in 1992. The campaign threatens to fan religious communalism in the region right at the point when India and Pakistan are engaged in a tense military standoff.

The VHP has set a deadline of March 12 for the BJP-led government to hand over the land to allow the construction to begin. To press their demands, the organisation launched a march from Ayodhya to New Delhi late last month but was only able to attract several thousand supporters. In 1992, the VHP, along with sister groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), mobilised hundreds of thousands to break through a security cordon and physically destroy the mosque.

The land on which the mosque stood is subject to an ongoing legal battle, which the Supreme Court has placed in the government's hands. The VHP, RSS and other Hindu chauvinist organisations are demanding that they be permitted to begin building on the area surrounding the actual site of the mosque, pending the outcome of the legal case. Over the weekend VHP spokesmen announced that they would start moving carved stones and columns to the site on March 15, regardless of any decision by the government or courts.

The issue is a highly inflammatory one. The destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 triggered rioting throughout the region. In India, more than 3,000 people were killed and thousands were injured in the worst communal violence since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. In Bombay, Muslim shops and houses were ransacked and looting, burning and pogroms continued for nearly a month. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, Muslim extremists responded by attacking Hindus.

The Hindu fundamentalists claim that Mir Baqi, one of the Mogul Emperor Babur's generals, built the mosque in the

16th century after razing a Hindu temple. The destruction of the mosque some four centuries later is part of their broader, completely reactionary agenda of establishing the domination of Hinduism and Hindu culture in India and erasing the legacy of the "Muslim invaders". According to RSS leader S. Sudarshan, Muslims in India, who number in the tens of millions, "must accept the 'culture' of the majority community".

Key figures in the BJP-led government are long-standing RSS members, including Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani. All of them have taken the RSS pledge: "For the betterment of my sacred Hindu religion, Hindu culture, and Hindu community, I will devote myself to the prosperity of my Holy Motherland."

Advani and other BJP leaders faced charges for their direct involvement in the demolition of the Babri Masjid but none have ever been convicted. Last October members of the BJP's youth organisation went one step further and tried to deface the intricate inlaid marble that covers the Taj Mahal, built in the 17th century by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan.

The Vajpayee government is treading a fine line over the issue. None of the BJP leaders have backed away from their role in the Babri Masjid's destruction. As recently as last July, Advani described the point at which the mob of Hindu fanatics broke through the police cordon around the mosque complex as "the happiest moment" of his life. Conveniently the charges against him over the affair were dropped last year on a legal technicality.

Moreover, the BJP is facing a series of state elections over the next two weeks, including in its stronghold of Uttar Pradesh where Ayodhya is located. The party was routed in elections held in five states last year and cannot afford further losses. There is no doubt that BJP leaders in Uttar Pradesh are hoping to capitalise on the VHP's campaign to build the Ram temple to obscure the deepening social divide in one of India's largest and poorest states.

At the same time, however, Vajpayee has so far not agreed to the VHP's demands. He has denied that he promised VHP leaders that a "solution" would be found before their

March 12 deadline. He has called on them to respect the rule of law and warned that any attempt to flout the courts could create a law-and-order problem. He has been supported by the hardline Advani, who has called on the VHP to follow the prime minister's advice.

There are several reasons for the BJP's apparent reluctance to openly push the Ayodhya issue. The party does not hold a majority in parliament and only took office in 1998 with the support of a number of minor, regional based parties. To form the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the BJP had to shelve parts of its Hindu communalist agenda, including the building of the Ram temple, as its coalition parties were concerned about losing the Muslim vote.

More fundamentally, sections of the Indian ruling class supported the BJP and its Hindu fundamentalist agenda as a means of diverting attention from the growing social polarisation produced by the economic restructuring program implemented in the 1990s. Yet any widespread outbreak of communal violence could undermine the agenda of privatisation and cutbacks to social spending, and inhibit the flow of foreign investment.

As a result, editorials in the number of major Indian newspapers have urged Vajpayee to take a tough stand against the VHP. The *Hindustan Times*, for instance, commented: "It is a matter of deep regret that one organisation, with its dubious claim to speak for the entire Hindu community, is allowed to hold the country to ransom with its provocative postures. Some of the speeches made by their leaders should have landed them in jail straightaway for violating the simple norms of decency, not to mention abusing a particular religious group."

The *Indian Express* also had harsh words for the VHP: "Basically, the process of the resolution of the Ayodhya dispute, if it is already afoot, must proceed at its own pace. It cannot allow itself to be disturbed by the nuisance value, fast diminishing, of a bunch of hoodlums."

In the aftermath of September 11, another factor has entered Vajpayee's calculations. He has exploited the Bush administration's "war against terrorism" to order to aggressively push India's demands that Pakistan rein in armed Kashmiri separatist groups. Following the attack on the Indian parliament building on December 13, New Delhi issued a series of demands on Islamabad and threatened to take unspecified military action if they were not met.

Vajpayee's ability to denounce Pakistan for not taking action against Islamic fundamentalist groups would, however, be compromised if his government were seen to be too closely identified with the VHP and its provocative communal campaign. Moreover, if the BJP-led government were to openly champion the Hindu extremist cause, it might

disrupt India's developing ties with the US. The Bush administration might be forced to break its studied silence on the fundamentalist agenda of its Indian allies.

The major Indian opposition parties, including Congress and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), have made timid protests about the VHP campaign. Congress leader Mun Singh warned that "the VHP is playing with fire". The CPI-M Polit Bureau stated last month: "The speeches made in Ayodhya, Lucknow and Kanpur were full of inflammatory rhetoric against the minorities." Samajawade Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav demanded a ban on the VHP.

But for all their claims to defend secularism, these parties do not hesitate to flirt with, appeal to and at times whip up communal sentiment. Just over a year ago, the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, widow of assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and now Congress leader, sought to prove her Hindu credentials by bathing in the Ganges during the Kumbh Mela religious festival. Former CPI-M leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu has shared a political platform with Vajpayee as part of a joint anti-Congress campaign.

For its part, the VHP is well aware that its campaign has the potential to inflame communal tensions and heighten the dangers of war with Pakistan. Its leaders have been clamouring for Vajpayee to take an even more aggressive stance. They have indicated that the only circumstance in which they are prepared to call a halt to the construction of the Ram temple is if the Indian army attacks Pakistani-controlled Kashmir—an action that would almost certainly trigger war between the two nuclear-armed powers.



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