

India's ruling party abetted communal carnage in Gujarat

Keith Jones
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There is compelling evidence that leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the dominant force in India's coalition government, abetted the anti-Muslim riots that convulsed the western state of Gujarat last week.

Not only do local activists from the BJP and the BJP-allied Vishwa Hindu Parishad (or World Hindu Council) figure prominently among those named by police as orchestrators of the communal violence, there have been numerous reports from journalists and Muslim victims that police stood by and watched as mobs mobilized by BJP and VHP activists attacked Muslim neighborhoods and villages. Ostensibly many of these mobs had formed to voice their support for a *bandh* or general strike called by the VHP and backed by the state BJP to protest an earlier atrocity in the Gujarat district town of Godhra allegedly perpetrated by Muslims.

India's National Human Rights Commission has demanded that the BJP-controlled Gujarat government explain what it has done to suppress communal violence in the state, adding that reports "suggest inaction by the police force and the highest authorities in the State to deal with this situation."

The major opposition parties, including the Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), have issued a statement condemning the Gujarat government for its "abject" failure to protect human life and property. "We are of the view that without the criminal negligence, if not connivance of the State Government, such dastardly events could not have happened."

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi has all but publicly defended the anti-Muslim violence. First he noted that "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction." Then, in a second reference to the Godhra attack, Modi commended the state's population for

their "remarkable restraint under grave provocation." Needless to say, Modi is rejecting all calls for an inquiry into the police and state government's handling of the crisis.

A report in the London *Daily Telegraph* suggests that India's central government, which is controlled by the BJP-dominated National Democratic Alliance, also played an important role in allowing the anti-Muslim violence to continue.

The *Telegraph* cited an unnamed senior military officer as saying that early last Thursday evening the military had 13 transport aircraft fuelled and ready to fly troops to Ahmedabad from Jodhpur in neighboring Rajasthan, "But for an inexplicable reason, even though it was apparent the state police were proving incapable, 1,000 troops were flown out only the next morning."

Furthermore, when the troops did arrive, they were not provided with proper transport or intelligence. "When the army was eventually deployed on Friday evening, it was not taken to the trouble spots," says a second officer, described by the *Telegraph* as an intelligence official. The army was "merely asked to display itself in areas from which the Muslims had already fled. It was a calculated decision by the state's Hindu nationalist government."

The violence in Gujarat is India's worst communal bloodletting since the wave of rioting set off by the December 1992 razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya. Although the BJP leadership, in deference to its coalition partners, has backed off from its previous commitment to build a Hindu temple on the Ayodhya site, the party is inextricably connected to the Ayodhya issue, since it was the BJP's main rallying cry in the early 1990s.

On Monday, the Gujarat police reported that the death toll in six days of gruesome violence had reached 572.

The communal carnage was precipitated by the February 27 attack at Godhra on several railway cars carrying Hindu fundamentalist activists back to Gujarat from Ayodhya, where they had gone to support the scheme to erect a Hindu temple on the site of the razed mosque. Allegedly carried out by a mob of Muslims, the Godhra attack left 58 dead.

In the ensuing 48 hours, communal violence erupted in Ahmedabad, Rajkot, Surat, Baroda and Gujarat's other major urban centers and in many Gujarat villages. In harrowing scenes, Muslim men, women and children were bludgeoned to death, set ablaze after being doused with gasoline or burned alive in their homes. Muslim-owned tea-stalls, shops and businesses were systematically looted and torched. Only after the mobilization of army personnel and repeated firings on riotous crowds—the police report 97 deaths due to police firing—did the violence abate.

Significantly, outside of Gujarat, India's only major state still governed by the BJP, there were only isolated instances of violence. And the VHP's call for a nationwide general strike Friday, March 1 was completely ignored.

In a nationally-televised address Saturday, India's Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee called the communal violence in Gujarat a "black mark on the nation's forehead," adding that it had "lowered India's prestige in the world."

However, the leader of the BJP said nothing about the actions of the Gujarat state government, nor the hostility against Muslims which has been whipped up over the Ayodhya issue by Hindu activists aligned with his own party and echoed in his own anti-Pakistan war-mongering.

Vajpayee's immediate fear is that the events in Gujarat could cause the NDA coalition to collapse. Several coalition partners, including the National Conference of Jammu and Kashmir and the Telugu Desam Party, draw considerable Muslim support. They have justified their alliance with the Hindu chauvinist BJP on the grounds that they can keep its communalism in check. The Gujarat events come in the aftermath of the BJP's rout in last month's state elections, a rout that has changed the national political equation and caused all of India's political players to reassess their position.

While trying to keep the NDA coalition in tact,

Vajpayee also faces the problem of conciliating his party's increasingly restless Hindu nationalist base. Vajpayee cancelled his trip to last weekend's Commonwealth heads of government meeting in Australia to deal with the crisis in Gujarat. But he has spent much, if not most, of his time, consulting with BJP officials, Hindu religious leaders and leaders of the Hindu supremacist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) on how to persuade the VHP not to proceed with its plan to defy India's Supreme Court and begin constructing a temple on the Ayodhya site on March 15.

A third concern for the BJP leadership is that the communal violence has shattered the government's attempts to gain international backing in its conflict with Pakistan by contrasting a purportedly democratic and tolerant India with a military-ruled Pakistan that is allied with Islamic terrorism. The truth is both the Indian and Pakistani elites have tried to deflect social discontent by fanning communalism and religious fundamentalism.

In a strong indication that the BJP intends to try to weather the current crisis by continuing, if not intensifying, its belligerence against Pakistan, senior BJP officials have claimed that the attack on the Hindu activists at Godhra was organized by Pakistani intelligence with the aim of provoking anti-Muslim riots and sully India's reputation. This claim has a double-purpose: to fan hostility to Pakistan and cover up the BJP's responsibility for the communal carnage in Gujarat.



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