

Indian ruling coalition in disarray over communal campaign

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The ongoing campaign by the communalist Vishva Hindu Parshad (VHP) to build a temple to the Hindu god Ram in Ayodhya has thrown India's ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) into disarray. While Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee secured a deal at a crisis meeting of coalition members on March 22, the future of his fragile government is by no means certain.

Vajpayee's own Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) is the major component of the alliance, but he depends on the support of 22 smaller parties—many of them regionally-based—for a majority in parliament. These parties only joined the NDA on the understanding that key aspects of the BJP's Hindu chauvinist program would be off the government's agenda—including the issue of Ayodhya where a mob of Hindu fanatics destroyed a Muslim mosque in 1992.

At last week's meeting several NDA parties, including the Janatha Dal-U (JD-U), Samata Party and Trinamool Congress, insisted that the BJP restrain the VHP and other Hindu extremist allies. The VHP had announced a provocative plan for a procession carrying the funeral urns of some of its supporters killed in early March when a mob, allegedly of Muslims, attacked and set fire to a train in Godhra in the state of Gujarat.

The incident set off a wave of communal violence in Gujarat in which hundreds of people, mainly Muslims, were killed. The BJP is directly implicated in the deaths. The BJP-controlled state government has been accused of failing to act to halt the pogrom while leading BJP members were reportedly actively involved in the killings.

The VHP's ongoing campaign threatened to tear the coalition apart. Several BJP parliamentarians have openly supported the planned procession. The BJP's partners, however, have expressed concern that the VHP's actions will provoke another round of violent clashes, heighten political instability and jeopardise the government's already shaky voter base.

Vajpayee is desperate to defuse the issue. He appealed to the VHP to put off plans to start building the Ram temple on March 15. In a last minute deal, the VHP and its sister organisation, the Ram Janmabhoomi Trust (RJN), were allowed to observe a symbolic puja or religious ceremony outside, but not on, the site of the destroyed mosque. But the arrangement provoked

criticism from several NDA allies—the National Conference of Jammu and Kashmir (NC), Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Trinamool Congress (TC)—who warned that they would reconsider their support for the coalition.

These disagreements surfaced again at last week's NDA meeting which was a crucial test for Vajpayee. A Samata Party leader, Raghunath Jha, warned his party would not hesitate to sever its ties with the government. Janatha Dal (JD-U) leader Devendra Prasad Yadav attacked the “saffron-robed people” (Hindu priests) for causing tension in the country.

The day before meeting, the National Conference of Jammu and Kashmir (NC) went a step further and voted against the government's new anti-terrorism legislation—the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO)—in the parliamentary upper house. The vote served two purposes: firstly, to distance the NC from legislation that is highly unpopular in Jammu and Kashmir, where it will be used against alleged supporters of Kashmiri separatism, and secondly, to warn the BJP that it may pull out of the NDA altogether.

At the NDA meeting, Vajpayee was forced to give “assurances” to his coalition partners that the government would stick to the NDA's “secular” agenda. He had managed to convince the VHP to call off its planned procession. The prime minister also directed the BJP-led government in Gujarat not to proceed with charges under the POTO law, which has been in force since December as a presidential ordinance. The state government had exploited the POTO provisions in a blatantly communal fashion—arresting Muslims involved in the initial attack on the train, but not the Hindu leaders who incited the subsequent anti-Muslim violence.

In return, the NDA partners promised to support POTO legislation when it was presented to a rare joint sitting of the upper and lower houses of the Indian parliament on Tuesday. Vajpayee called the joint session—only the third since independence in 1947—to circumvent the opposition of the upper house where the government does not have a majority. The draconian legislation, which provides for lengthy detention without trial, was passed by a substantial majority.

The BJP's allies also agreed to end the rancorous public criticism of each other and work together for the two years before the next national elections. None of the underlying

issues have been resolved, however, and the uneasy peace is unlikely to last for long.

The Indian press commented on the tenuous character of the compromise reached last week. An editorial in the *Hindu* on Monday described the BJP's assurances as no more than a "ritual, if not a farce, enacted every time the latent discord burst into open". The newspaper's political analyst, K.K. Katyal, noted that "the glue of power" had held the NDA together for the time being but predicted that the BJP's allies would be reconsidering their position in the future.

The BJP came to power in 1998 by appealing to widespread discontent with previous Congress governments on the basis of Hindu chauvinism. But having won office, Vajpayee has continued the program of economic restructuring begun under Congress, which has, in turn, led to deepening social polarisation and a growing sense of alienation among the BJP's base of support.

Behind the latest crisis in the NDA coalition is nervousness in all the parties about their electoral prospects. The BJP and its allies lost heavily in the latest round of state elections, including in Uttar Pradesh, previously regarded as a secure BJP base.

Congress, the main opposition party, has not pressed for national elections or tried to woo any of the NDA partners to its side—for obvious reasons. The electoral losses suffered by the BJP have not resulted in any substantial gain in support for Congress. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, Congress finished a distance fourth behind the BJP and two regional parties.

The international media has warned the BJP against trying to bolster its position by appealing to Hindu extremism. The *Economist* declared: "A combination of widening political cracks and increasing religious violence means India is entering another worrisome period." The *Far Eastern Economic Review* expressed its fears about the dangers of political instability and called on the government to "reject the demands of Hindu extremists".

These comments reflect fears in international ruling circles that any resort to communal politics will only heighten political instability on the Indian subcontinent. Another concern is the lack of any clear alternative if the BJP-led coalition should collapse. Congress, which is already widely distrusted, is unlikely to be in a position to rule in its own right. The result could well be a series of unstable coalition governments that would have difficulty implementing the market reforms demanded by foreign investors.

In the short-term, the BJP has already begun seeking out other alliances. It has been making advances to a regional party in Tamil Nadu, the AIDMK, which has more MPs in the national parliament than its current ally, the DMK. For its part, the DMK has announced that it will not work with the local BJP in Tamil Nadu because of these overtures.

But all of the BJP's alliances could easily be brought undone by the actions of Hindu extremists in its own ranks and

associated organisations such as the VHP. The VHP has already stated that it plans to mobilise support for the Ram Temple building project.

The Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), a fascistic organisation with close links to the BJP, passed a resolution at its conference a fortnight ago that will further inflame communal tensions. To be safe in India, it declared, Muslims must earn the goodwill of the country's Hindu majority. Vajpayee and other senior BJP leaders are longstanding RSS members.

The violence against Muslims is continuing. The president of the National Human Rights Commission, J.S. Varma, told a recent press conference that the "sense of insecurity" continues to prevail among Muslims in Gujarat even though the Chief Minister Narendra Modi has asserted that the situation in the state is under control. Modi is a member of the BJP and an RSS supporter.

A number of towns in Gujarat were still under indefinite curfew this week, including Baroda, Vadgam, Modasa, Kalpur, Dariapur, Shahpur, Himmatnagar, Godhra and several places in Panchmahal district. Last week two people were stabbed to death in the town Baroda and another six were killed in Ahmedabad.

The communal violence, previously confined to Gujarat, has also spread to other states. On March 16, several Hindu extremists chanting pro-Ram Temple slogans ransacked the state assembly building in Orissa. In Haryana state in northwestern India, Hindu chauvinist mobs set fire to Muslim homes and a mosque. On March 25, Hindu communalists blocked a procession of Muslims in Muharram in Rajasthan, 90 km from the state capital of Jaipur. One person died in the chaos—either trampled to death or as the result of a police shooting.



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