

# Deep cracks in India's ruling coalition revealed in debate over Gujarat violence

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The Indian government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee last week defeated an opposition censure motion in the Lok Sabha (lower house) over its handling of continuing anti-Muslim violence in the state of Gujarat. But the vote revealed widening cracks within the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and put a large question mark over its future.

Vajpayee's own Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) is deeply implicated in the communalist violence, which has resulted in more than 900 deaths since a train carrying Hindu fanatics was attacked and burned at Godhra on February 27. Gujarat is the only state in which the BJP rules in its own right and Chief Minister Narendra Modi has been widely accused of giving Hindu extremist mobs a free hand in attacking Muslim communities. The US-based Human Rights Watch issued a report last week alleged that state officials "were directly involved in the killings of hundreds of Muslims... and are now engineering a massive cover-up of the state's role in the violence."

Among the Hindu extremists in the BJP and associated organisations such the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Siva Sena, Modi is regarded as a hero for supporting the anti-Muslim mobs. But the BJP's allies, who joined the ruling NDA coalition on the basis that the BJP would shelve its communal agenda, have been forced to distance themselves. A number of NDA partners are heavily dependent on Muslim voters and fear the electoral consequences.

Congress and other opposition parties sought to exploit the divisions in the NDA's ranks by moving a censure motion over "the government's failure of administration in ensuring security of the minority community in various parts of the country, especially in Gujarat" and urging "effective steps to restore confidence of the minority communities." After a protracted 16-hour debate, which lasted into the early hours of May 1, the government defeated the motion 276 to 182 but not before taking a political bruising.

On April 29, Coal and Mines Minister Ram Vilas Paswan resigned, taking his Lok Jan Shakti party and three fellow MPs out of the ruling coalition. The following day, the State Minister for External Affairs, Omar Abdullah, tendered his resignation after his Kashmiri-based National Conference decided to abstain on the parliamentary vote. The Trinamool Congress based in West Bengal did the same.

The Telugu Desam Party (TDP)—the BJP's largest ally with 28 MPs—has been criticising the government's handling of the Gujarat violence for weeks. It has made a number of demands,

including a call for the removal of Modi as Gujarat chief minister. Just prior to the vote on the censure motion, the TDP stalked out of parliament, protesting that its demands had not been met.

TDP member C. Ramachandriah told the *Washington Post*: "This is the final warning to the BJP from the allies. The cracks will widen further if they continue to threaten the secular fabric of the nation." His protestations should, of course, be taken with a grain of salt—all but one of "the allies" remain in the NDA. But Ramachandriah's remarks do indicate that relations in the ruling coalition are stretched to breaking point as the TDP and other NDA parties find it increasingly difficult to pretend that they are a moderating influence on the BJP's communalism.

For his part, Vajpayee is finding his balancing act between the Hindu extremists of his own party and the demands of the NDA partners for a more moderate approach increasingly difficult to maintain. In the course of the parliamentary debate, he defensively confessed: "I admit my failure [over the Gujarat violence]. I should have made more efforts in this regard." In a bid to appease his allies, he appointed retired police commissioner K.P.S. Gill as a security adviser to the Modi administration and announced a rehabilitation package of 1.5 billion rupees (\$31 million). The sum is a tiny fraction of the damage to businesses and homes in Gujarat, estimated to be at least 20 billion rupees.

At the same time, Vajpayee has been compelled to keep Hindu extremists on side. He has refused to use the constitution to intervene in Gujarat to sack Modi. At the BJP National Executive Committee held in Goa in mid-April, the prime minister openly blamed the violence in Gujarat on Muslims, thereby justifying the actions of Hindu mobs. "Where there are Muslims, they do not want to live with others. Instead of living peacefully they want to preach and propagate their religion by creating fear and terror in the minds of others," he said.

After his remarks set off protests, Vajpayee claimed that his words had been misinterpreted in the press. It was no mistake, however. Like every bourgeois politician, he tailors his comments to his audience—one thing for the BJP national executive, another for his NDA partners. The problem for Vajpayee is that the political gulf between the two has become increasingly difficult to bridge.

The political difficulties confronting Vajpayee are symptomatic of a more fundamental crisis. The BJP came to prominence on the basis of its communalist agenda, particularly after leading Hindu mobs to destroy a historic mosque in Ayodhya in 1992. The party

appealed to layers of small businessmen, farmers and workers, disenchanted with Congress, on the basis of defending Indian business and jobs. But on coming to power in 1998, Vajpayee pledged not only to moderate the BJP's communal program but also to implement the demands of big business for further restructuring to open up the Indian economy to foreign capital.

Over the last three years, the BJP-led government has presided over far reaching market reforms that have hit sections of the middle class and led to rising unemployment and a widening gulf between rich and poor. The result has been growing disaffection with the BJP which has suffered a string of electoral defeats in state elections over the last two years. The government also confronts sharp opposition from workers as shown by the April 16 general strike, in which 10 million participated, against privatisation and proposed changes to labour laws.

A debate has opened up within the BJP leadership over the means for halting its decline. Hard-line elements are demanding that the BJP return to its Hindu extremist roots even if that means the loss of its NDA allies and government control at the national level. Prior to the latest round of state elections in February, the Vajpayee government seized on an attack by Kashmiri separatists on the parliament building on December 13 to ratchet up tensions with Pakistan and engage in the largest-ever military build-up along the border.

Despite the sabre-rattling, the BJP received a drubbing in the state elections. The loss of Uttar Pradesh, in particular—India's largest state and previously regarded as one of the BJP's secure bases—heightened the desperation in the party leadership. Modi, among others, figures that he has nothing to lose by openly appealing to Hindu chauvinism and stirring up communal violence. He has mooted the possibility of calling early state elections to exploit the communal polarisation in Gujarat.

Sections of big business, however, which previously supported Vajpayee as a means of pushing through market reform, have become increasingly concerned about the stability of the government. The April issue of the Indian journal, *Business Week*, published an article entitled "Deep cracks in India's ruling coalition" which warned that "riots and election upheavals in India make the region more unstable". Associated Chamber of Commerce and Industry official Ravi Wig complained that "government fragility had shackled its hands on the reform front."

In a bid to woo back sections of the middle class, the NDA government has been forced to backtrack on some of its budget proposals. During the budget debate in parliament on April 24, Vajpayee called on Finance Minister Yaswant Sinha to set aside "harsh and anti-middle class measures," including the removal of a 20 percent tax rebate on small savings and protection for small-scale industry.

None of the opposition parties—Congress, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), the Samajwadi Party or the Communist Party of India (CPI)—have any fundamental differences with the Vajpayee government either over its pro-market policies or its handling of the anti-Muslim violence. All of them are based on Indian nationalism and have appealed to communal sentiment in the past to bolster their position. For all their talk of "defending secularism," their criticisms have been constrained to appeals to

the Hindu chauvinist BJP to take "effective steps to protect minorities."

From the outset, Congress indicated it was not on a collision course with the government. Spokesman Jaipal Reddy urged the BJP's partners to vote for the opposition resolution because "there is no constitutional implication even if the motion against the government got voted in." In other words, the party had deliberately moved a censure motion rather than a formal no-confidence motion that would have toppled the Vajpayee government. Congress praised the appointment of retired police commissioner, K.P.S. Gill, a largely cosmetic measure, as a move to "clip the wings of Modi".

Far from criticising Congress, the Stalinist leaderships of the CPI-M and CPI have taken the opportunity to try to further ingratiate themselves in ruling circles. Like Congress, the two parties promote the illusion that intervention by the Vajpayee government can halt the communal violence in Gujarat. At the same time, CPI-M leader Somnath Chatterjee has indicated that his party would support from outside a Congress-led Government to replace the BJP.

A further debate is now underway in the parliamentary upper house, the Rajya Sabha, over the Gujarat violence. Despite holding a majority in the upper house, the opposition has carefully tailored its motion to be acceptable to Vajpayee—calling for intervention by the national government in Gujarat but not the removal of Modi. In the course of the debate, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh pointedly referred to the opposition's past record of stirring up communal tensions, saying: "We are all naked in the bathroom... [there is] no point in slinging charges [at each other]."

While a vote is due today, the government has taken the sting out of the debate by accepting the opposition's motion.



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