

India's ruling party continues to fan communal tensions in Gujarat

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Almost four months after extensive violence broke out against Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat, the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led state government continues to stoke communal tensions in a bid to shore up its flagging support.

Chief Minister Narendra Modi provocatively allowed a traditional Hindu procession to take place last Friday through the streets of the state's commercial capital of Ahmedabad, including some of the city's Muslim neighbourhoods. In the past the *rathyathra* procession has been exploited to incite anti-Muslim pogroms. In the current situation, there were widespread fears that violence would erupt, provoked by the BJP and its allied Hindu extremist organisations.

Modi used the occasion as the pretext for a massive police operation involving 30,000 police officers and other security personnel, including members of the Rapid Action Force, the Border Security Force and the Central Reserve Police Force. Police lined the streets along the 14km route, while marksmen were placed on neighbouring rooftops and hundreds of plainclothes police mingled with onlookers.

The heavy police presence did not reassure the local Muslim population, many of whom fled into relief camps in Ahmedabad. State police, government officials and BJP members were widely accused of either turning a blind eye or actively participating in the anti-Muslim pogrom that erupted in February after a train carrying members of the extremist World Hindu Congress was attacked. At least 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in the ensuing rampage and more than 150,000 left homeless.

Modi brushed aside criticisms of his government's failure to stem the violence and has continued to play the communal card. The BJP was planning to launch a campaign of *gaurav rathyatras* or "sense of honour" processions throughout the state, starting on July 4, to celebrate the "new mood of assertiveness" among Hindus

in Gujarat. Modi had intended to lead one of these processions in a specially built, high-tech chariot through 125 of the state's 182 assembly constituencies.

The National Human Rights Organisation appealed to the Gujarat government to cancel the plan, warning it represented "a distinct potential for disturbing communal peace". Opposition leader Sonia Gandhi wrote to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee calling on him to prevent the campaign. At the last minute, Vajpayee intervened and the processions were postponed.

Modi's immediate aim in fomenting communal hatred is to ensure that the BJP wins the next state election. The poll is due next February but the BJP is debating the possibility of holding the election early. An opinion poll in May indicated an unprecedented communal polarisation of the urban and rural areas of Gujarat. If elections had been held then, the BJP would have won 152 out of the 182 assembly seats, resulting in an absolute majority in the state legislature.

Four days before the outbreak of riots in February, the BJP lost two of the three seats contested in assembly by-elections. The losses in Gujarat were just part of a series of sharp electoral reversals in state elections over the past two years, including states such as Uttar Pradesh that have been regarded as BJP strongholds. Staring defeat in the face, Modi has latched onto communalism to divert attention from his government's failure to alleviate in any way the deepening poverty facing masses of ordinary people—Hindu and Muslim alike.

Thousands of Muslims driven from their homes by Hindu mobs are still living in primitive conditions in makeshift camps in schools and other public buildings. The state government has provided little assistance to the refugees. Most of the camps have been organised by non-government organisations. Many have inadequate facilities, with few toilets and little drinking water.

Many people have been pressured to return to their

damaged and plundered houses with promises that they will receive compensation. But to be eligible, refugees had to agree to withdraw any allegations of murder, assault, theft and destruction of property against their Hindu attackers and to lead a more “conformist” way of life. The closure of the camps is part of Modi’s political agenda. As long as the camps remain open, the election commissioner has indicated he will not allow early elections in Gujarat.

The decision to postpone the *gaurav rathyatras* was bound up with sharp infighting in the BJP over the party’s response to the violence in Gujarat. Sections of the leadership in New Delhi have backed Modi’s fostering of anti-Muslim communalism and proposal for early state elections as a means of arresting the party’s fortunes on the national level.

Vajpayee, however, has struck a moderate stance, declaring: “If we have to win the election after shedding so much blood, I would rather not.” His posturing has nothing to do with any opposition to communalist politics. Like other senior BJP figures, Vajpayee is a longstanding member of the Hindu extremist organisation, the Rastriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS).

What concerns the prime minister is that his ruling coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which includes nearly 20 regional parties, may disintegrate if the BJP resorts to Hindu communalism too openly. The national government narrowly defeated a parliamentary censure motion in the lower house of parliament in May over its handling of the Gujarat violence. Several large coalition members, including the Telugu Desam Party based in Karnataka, threatened to withdraw from the NDA unless Vajpayee reined in Modi.

Sections of big business are concerned about the BJP’s encouragement of communal violence. One indication is a recent comment by Tavleen Singh, a leading columnist, who confessed in the *Indian Express* that she had been wrong in believing that India needed a rightwing party like the BJP “with a commitment to prosperity and economic growth”. She declared that “in a country with the second largest Muslim population in the world, Hindutva [Hindu nationalism] was quite simply unworkable”. She condemned the proposed *gaurav rathyathra* campaign, saying it “seeks support for violence rather than a political idea. It is an open attempt to urge Hindus to vote for murder, rape and barbarism”.

The debate in the BJP leadership, however, may be going against Vajpayee, as was indicated by the elevation of Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani to the post of

deputy prime minister in a recent cabinet reshuffle. Advani represents the more extreme faction within the party. He is considered to be the mastermind behind the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodya in 1992 by mobs of Hindu fanatics. His nationwide campaign in the 1990s atop a motorised chariot set the pattern for the proposed *gaurav rathyatras* in Gujarat.

Unlike Vajpayee, Advani openly defends Modi’s handling of the communal violence in Gujarat and has hailed him as the “hero” of Hindus. During his visit to the state on July 7, Advani blamed undisclosed “vested interests” for the failure to stop the violence. He ruled out any change to the BJP leadership in Gujarat and advised Modi to “concentrate on governance” with a view to early elections.

The BJP has attempted to create the impression that Gujarat has returned to normal so an early poll can be called. But anti-Muslim violence has not ended. Sporadic attacks by Hindu mobs are regularly reported in the state. On July 7, a 70-year-old man, who returned home after three months in a refuge, was killed along with his 25-year-old son. A day earlier, in the first trial involving rioters, the nine accused were acquitted due to the “lack of evidence”.

Three years of economic restructuring by the Vajpayee government has not brought any prosperity to the majority of the Indian masses. Millions have been driven to poverty by the opening of the domestic market to the international capital, the elimination of agricultural subsidies, the privatisation of state enterprises and similar measures. As the ongoing violence in Gujarat demonstrates, the BJP has only one answer to its slump in popularity—to fan the fires of communalism, with all its disastrous consequences.



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