

Indian supreme court overrules BJP push for early election in Gujarat

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India's Supreme Court last week upheld the national Election Commission's decision to reject calls by the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) for early elections in the state of Gujarat. The BJP, which holds power in Gujarat and at the national level, has been pushing for an early poll in order to capitalise on the divisive communal atmosphere created by anti-Muslim riots earlier in the year.

The opposition of the Supreme Court and Election Commission, shared by sections of the media, reflects concerns in ruling circles over the consequences of the BJP and its Hindu extremist allies deliberately inflaming communal tensions. The Election Commission, which ruled unanimously against early elections in Gujarat, declared in its 40-page decision that "the communal divide following the riots has not yet healed". It stated that elections might be possible in November or December.

This ruling provoked an angry reaction from the BJP, which described it as a "constitutional anomaly". Party spokesman Mukhtar Naqvi insisted there was "no concrete reason to postpone elections in Gujarat". The BJP referred the decision to the Supreme Court through the Indian president.

The Supreme Court's verdict against an early election has left the BJP in a dilemma. The BJP leader in Gujarat, Narendra Modi, dissolved the state assembly on July 19, nearly 10 months before a poll was due, and planned for elections in October. Now the poll and the campaign will be delayed until at least November or December and Modi has been left in limbo as a caretaker chief minister.

Modi's plan for an early election followed a series of BJP election losses, including in India's largest state of Uttar Pradesh, previously regarded as a BJP stronghold. Modi had the backing of sections of the BJP leadership who are calling for a more strident advocacy of Hindutva, its Hindu chauvinist agenda, as a means of shoring up its base of support. Gujarat was to be the starting point.

Modi and the BJP state government have been widely criticised for their involvement in the anti-Muslim pogrom after an attack on a train carrying Hindu extremists at Godhra in February. The BJP and allied Hindu fundamentalist groups blamed Muslims for the death of 58 people on the train—a claim that is disputed—and unleashed gangs of Hindus against the

Muslim minority. About 2,500 people, including women and children, were killed in the violence and hundreds of women were raped. At least 150,000 people were left homeless as houses and businesses were ransacked and destroyed.

A number of human rights organisations accused Modi of failing to take action to halt the violence. Reports cited the presence of state ministers and officials in the midst of the riots. In a number of cases, the police stood by while gangs carried out their attacks. So blatant was the involvement of the Modi administration that the BJP-led government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in New Delhi faced a censure motion over its failure to intervene to halt the violence.

Since then, Modi's aim has been to exploit the communal divisions to gain support for his re-election. One of his cabinet ministers bluntly stated to the *Times of India* in July: "If we are unable to hold elections early, the whole purpose of dissolving the assembly early will be lost. We wish to cash in on the upsurge of Hindutva over the last several months."

By whipping up communalism, Modi calculates that he will be able to divert attention from his government's failure to alleviate the social crisis facing Hindus and Muslims alike. Gujarat is still recovering from the impact of the disastrous earthquake in January 2001. While the state government received \$US900 million in loans, little reconstruction has been carried out and there are accusations of official corruption. Contractors are owed around \$200 million in payments for various government projects.

An industrialist explained in the *Frontline* magazine last month: "Even before the economy was ruined by the communal violence, the state had slipped into a recession. While Modi keeps boasting about foreign direct investment and large companies like Reliance investing here, the state's own industrial base is a shambles. Small and medium industries, which laid the foundation for Gujarat's progress, are in trouble, with around 60 percent of them either sick or closed." Around half a million workers are estimated to have lost their jobs as a result of the closure of small businesses. Many state corporations are on the verge of closure.

As part of its bid to fan communal hostility, the state BJP is provocatively planning a Hindu religious procession or Gaurav Yatra throughout Gujarat to celebrate "the new mood of

assertiveness” among Hindus. Vajpayee intervened at the last minute to postpone an earlier proposal for the yatra to start on July 4.

Anti-Muslim violence is continuing. The Hindu fundamentalist World Hindu Council (VHP) and its youth organisation, Bajrang Dal, have carried out attacks on shops and houses belonging to Muslims in Gujarat. A number of camps where Muslims fled for refuge were forced to close after the Modi government cut the level of rations being supplied.

One Muslim told the Indian magazine *Frontline* last month: “Anyone who dares to speak to us is terrorised and threatened with a fine of Rs.500 (\$US10.29). We have to travel 14 kilometres to buy our food and provisions. I can’t even reopen my shop elsewhere. No one is willing to rent a shop to me.”

The BJP came to power in New Delhi in 1998 as the major party in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government by exploiting the growing hostility to the economic restructuring policies being pursued by Congress. But having assumed office, Vajpayee rapidly fell into line with the demands of big business for the further opening of the Indian economy to international investors.

The BJP had promised good governance, an end to corruption and improved living conditions, but its policies only heightened social polarisation and created a backlash among layers of small businessmen, farmers and workers who previously supported it. Incapable of addressing the mounting social crisis, the BJP has resorted to nationalism and Hindu chauvinism to try to bolster its political fortunes.

A major reason for India’s aggressive stance against Pakistan is to divert attention from the consequences of its policies at home. Since last December’s attack by armed Kashmiri separatists on the Indian parliament building in New Delhi, Vajpayee and his ministers have repeatedly accused Pakistan of organising attacks inside India by Islamic extremist groups. The Indian military has kept around 750,000 troops in a high state of alert along the border with Pakistan.

Vajpayee has, however, been wary about backing Modi and other sections of the BJP leadership, including Vajpayee’s own deputy L.K. Advani, who have been insisting on a return to the party’s Hindutva agenda. At a book launch in late July, Vajpayee declared that the world and India need “togetherness” and “tolerance” more than ever before. Referring indirectly to the Gujarat violence, he exclaimed: “Why does barbarism perform its dance of death every once in a while?”

Modi reacted to last month’s Election Commission decision to delay the Gujarat election by insinuating that the Election Commissioner, a Christian, was biased. Vajpayee immediately called for calm. “One may have differences over the decision or the attendant observations of the Election Commission with regard to the Assembly polls in Gujarat,” he said, “But no one should use improper language or make indecorous insinuations in expressing their views... I appeal to all for an immediate end to this unseemly controversy.”

Vajpayee, who is a lifelong member of the Hindu chauvinist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has no fundamental disagreement with Modi and Advani. His immediate concern is the survival of the ruling NDA coalition, which involves more than 20 regional parties. His allies, who only joined the NDA after the BJP agreed to modify its Hindutva agenda, fear that any resort to communalism will cost them Muslim votes.

Vajpayee is also sensitive to the opposition in ruling circles, as reflected in the media’s backing for the decisions of the Election Commission and Supreme Court. Sections of big business turned to the BJP in the 1990s, in conditions where support for Congress was collapsing and a plethora of regional and caste-based parties was emerging. The BJP was viewed as the means of the pressing ahead with privatisation, deregulation and cutbacks to social spending, price controls and subsidies. There is a distinct nervousness, however, that the promotion of the Hindutva agenda will create political and social instability and adversely affect profits.

The opposition Congress Party has verbally opposed Modi’s agenda in Gujarat. In the debate over the dissolution of the Gujarat state assembly, Congress MP Manmohan Singh accused the government of “seeking to manage the country’s politics by unleashing terror.” However, for all its claims to be “secular,” Congress is mired in Hindu chauvinism. The party’s campaign in Gujarat is being led by S. Vaghela, who is a former president of the BJP’s state branch and a member of the RSS. Vaghela only left the BJP in 1995, after his main rival Keshubhai Patel was appointed as chief minister.

One commentator observed that the Congress motto for its party meetings in Gujarat seems to be, “don’t talk about the riots”. While Congress spokesmen have attacked the Modi administration over corruption and the collapse of the state’s economy, they have refrained from criticising its Hindutva agenda. In fact, in a bid to woo the Hindu vote, the party has announced that its leaders will be making visits to Hindu temples.

Far from criticising Congress, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) has indicated its willingness to do a deal with opposition parties in Gujarat and elsewhere—all in the name of fighting Hindu extremism. CPI-M general secretary Harkishen Surjeet declared: “We will support the Congress or any other party to ensure a one-to-one fight against Hindutva forces.”

The embrace of Hindu chauvinism by all these parties is the sharpest indication that none of them have any solution to the deepening social crisis confronting masses of ordinary working people in India.



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