

Gujarat election opens door for more communal violence in India

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In a sharp electoral turnaround, the Hindu chauvinist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) won the December 12 election in the western Indian state of Gujarat, setting the stage for further communal violence throughout the country. BJP state leader Narendra Modi pushed for an early poll following anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat earlier in the year and deliberately inflamed communal tensions in the course of the campaign to divert attention from the failure of his administration's social and economic policies.

After a string of defeats in other state elections over the last two years, the BJP not only retained, but increased its vote in Gujarat. The party won 126 of the 182 seats in the state assembly, nine more than in the 1998 elections. The opposition Congress Party won only 51 seats, two less than in 1998 and 12 less than its numbers prior to the assembly's dissolution in July. The number of seats held by regional parties and independents also fell—from 12 in 1998 to just four.

The result was not the “landslide victory” claimed by sections of the media—in 66 constituencies the BJP's winning margin was less than 3 percent. Nevertheless, Modi's appeal to Hindu chauvinism had an impact. The BJP made its biggest gains in the areas most affected by communal violence—winning 58 out of the 66 seats in central Gujarat and 16 of the 29 seats in north Gujarat. In other areas, such as Kutch, which was hit by a devastating earthquake in 2001, and Saurashtra, which is suffering from a drought, the party's vote dropped—a reflection of the anger felt over official corruption and the lack of relief provided by the state administration.

The central issue dominating the election campaign was the communal violence that erupted after a train carrying Hindu extremist activists was attacked in the town of Godhra on February 27. Some 58 people died after the carriages were set alight. The BJP and associated Hindu chauvinist groups immediately blamed Muslim vendors

and unleashed a wave of violence in which more than 2,000 Muslims were killed and tens of thousands left homeless.

A number of independent commissions have found that the BJP and its allies were directly involved in organising the gangs of thugs who carried out the violence. In many cases, the police stood by and took no action. Scientists from the Indian Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) have categorically rejected the BJP's version of events, saying that the train could not have been set alight from outside. They told an inquiry “it was not possible to pour the liquid from outside as the compartment was seven feet above the ground level.”

The Godhra incident took place shortly after the BJP lost badly in state elections, including in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, previously regarded as a BJP stronghold. In the wake of the defeat, Modi became the champion of the BJP hardliners who insisted that the only way of reversing the party's fortunes was to aggressively revive its Hindu chauvinist, or Hindutva, agenda. He dissolved the state assembly in July, 10 months before the end of its term and, despite the objections of the Election Commission, pressed for an early election to exploit communal tensions.

The BJP's election manifesto accused Pakistan of being responsible for “cross-border terrorism” that threatened the “safety and security” of Gujarat. Campaign posters and literature portrayed Modi as leading the fight against Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee actively supported Modi in the Gujarat campaign, speaking at four rallies. Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani told a rally that Pakistan risked a fourth war unless it stopped its “cross-border terrorism”.

The BJP campaign directly targetted Muslims by claiming that Islamic religious schools or madrassas were a “utility” for terrorism and promised to investigate their

activities. In a flagrant attack on religious freedom, the party promised to enact a law banning religious conversions. It also called for the establishment of a compulsory National Cadet Corps (NCC) for college students as well as various armed self-defence groups—in the name of fighting terrorism.

Modi made a direct appeal to layers of the middle class who have benefitted from a decade of free market restructuring at the expense of the working class. He rhetorically declared at his election rallies: “You may have a wife, a car and your own land, but what if your son doesn’t return home safe?” The BJP made no attempt to address the state’s underlying economic crisis that has led to rising unemployment. Economic growth for 2000-2001 was just 1.1 percent as compared to 20 percent in 1994-95.

One factor in the BJP’s win was the intimidation of Muslim voters, many of whom had to return to villages and towns they had fled in order to vote. The Election Commission reported that more than 170,000 displaced Muslim voters were living at new addresses and the whereabouts of another 224,000 were unknown. On election day, many people were not able to cast their votes as their names were missing from the electoral roll.

However, the main reason for the result was the complete capitulation of Congress and other opposition parties to the BJP’s communal campaign. Incapable of addressing any of the underlying social and economic issues, Congress appealed to what the Indian media described as “the second line of the BJP” or “soft Hindu chauvinism”. The party chose a former BJP leader Shankersinh Vaghela to head its campaign, which began with a rally addressed by Congress leader Sonia Gandhi at a Hindu temple.

Congress sought to cover up its appeal to communal sentiment by modifying the Gujarati language version of its election manifesto. It left out references contained in the English language version to the party’s support for the rights of minorities. It also left out a passage characterising the election as “a battle for the soul of India,” in which the “forces of secularism” were ranged against “the forces of narrow-minded communalism.”

In rural areas, Congress used posters portraying Hindus as the victims of the riots to directly compete with the BJP’s communal campaign. One poster proclaimed: “Hindus suffered economically the most. Those who lost their lives in Akshardham [a temple attacked by armed Islamic separatists in Jammu & Kashmir] were all Hindus. Why are Hindu traders committing suicide with their

families?”

The Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) offered no alternative. The CPI-M leadership ignored the communal orientation of the Congress campaign and called for an electoral alliance against the BJP. When that was spurned, the Stalinists continued to act as political apologists for Congress. CPI-M secretary Harkishan Surjeet Singh wrote: “It is true that Congress on occasions compromised with or capitulated before the communal forces, but it also had to pay the price for that. All said and done, Congress per se is a secular party...”

With a national election due to be held before late 2004, the BJP and its extremist allies are already concluding that the “Gujarat formula” is its best option for retaining office in New Delhi. World Hindu Council (VHP) Secretary Praveen Togadia declared that, “the Gujarat election has shown the right direction to the BJP” and stressed that “the storm ahead was not going to be limited to Gujarat.”

Prime Minister Vajpayee, who is portrayed by the media as a “moderate”, indicated a similar direction. Reacting to media comments on the “Gujarat formula,” he commented: “Will Godhra be repeated elsewhere? That is what I will say to those who ask the question on the Gujarat formula.” His remarks leave the door wide open for the BJP, the VHP and other groups to use any pretext to ratchet up communal tensions throughout India.

Shortly after the Gujarat result was declared, communal violence erupted in the eastern Gujarati city of Vadodara. Police imposed an indefinite curfew and fired on a crowd, killing one person and injuring 17 others.



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