5 July 2005

Sudheendra Kulkarni resigned Sunday from all three leadership posts he held in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP): party national secretary; secretary to BJP president L.K. Advani; and member of the national executive.

According to press reports, Advani, who doubles as the leader of the official opposition in India's parliament, pressed for Kulkarni's resignation in an attempt to shore up his own embattled leadership.

Advani, who himself quit as party president June 7, only to withdraw his resignation three days later, apparently chose to "sacrifice" Kulkarni, in the hopes that his purging from the party leadership will appease elements in and around the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—the shadowy, Hindu supremacist organization that helped found the BJP and provides many of its cadres.

The hard-line Hindu supremacists, particularly the RSS-affiliated Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council), have accused Advani of betraying the "Hindu nation" for remarks he made while on an official visit to Pakistan May 31 to June 5. A member of the RSS since his adolescence, the 77-year-old Advani is notorious for his baiting of India's Muslim minority and saber-rattling against Pakistan. Yet the VHP is demanding he retire from politics and has vowed to launch an agitation in his home parliamentary constituency, located in the state capital of Gujarat, to force his resignation.

The top brass of the RSS, for its part, has failed to give Advani's leadership unqualified support. RSS leaders have indicated that Advani should soon relinquish one of his two top leadership posts and earlier this year RSS supremo K.S. Sudarshan suggested that the time was rapidly approaching when the BJP should make a generational change in its leadership. (Apart from Advani, the other top BJP spokesperson is the octogenarian former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.)

The RSS's relations with, and aspirations for, the BJP reportedly top the agenda of an RSS conclave being held in Surat this week.

A key consideration for both RSS and BJP leaders is the impact that a flagrant assertion of RSS power against Advani and his close ally Vajpayee (the latter was among the few first rank BJP leaders to unequivocally endorse Advani's leadership after his Pakistan remarks) will have on the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the multi-party coalition that the BJP heads and without which it would have no real chance of returning to power at the next election. Several top leaders of the Janata Dal (United), the second most important NDA constituent, have said their party will be compelled to quit the NDA if the RSS and its allies force Advani out on the grounds that he is insufficiently committed to *Hindutva*, the Hindu supremacist ideology championed by the RSS-BJP.

George Fernandes—the senior-most Janata Dal (United) leader and "convener" of the NDA—met with the RSS chief at its Nagpur headquarters for two-and-a-half-hours June 29 to plead for and end to "the tension" between the RSS and BJP. Fernandes refused to publicly divulge anything more about the talks, but the following day he briefed both Advani and Vajpayee about his discussions with Sudarshan.

The BJP has been buffeted by crisis since it and the NDA were driven from power in the May 2004 general election. Having secured the backing of big business by pressing forward with its neo-liberal, export-led growth agenda and bested the opposition Congress in a number of state-elections, the BJP and, indeed the entire political establishment, were confident the NDA would win re-election with an increased majority. Instead the elections became a means for India's masses to vent their anger over mounting economic insecurity and social inequality and their disdain for the BJP's Hindu chauvinism.

No less great was the BJP leaders' shock when the most powerful sections of Indian big business embraced the coalition government put together by the Congress with the help of the Left Front, a multi-party bloc led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist).

Having seen the poll results and reassured by the Congress' decision to name as the new prime minister the finance minister who in 1991 launched the drive to dismantle India's nationally-regulated economy, India's business elite quickly concluded that a government led by the Congress, its traditional ruling party, and enjoying the support of the official left would be the best means of deflecting and dissipating social discontent, while pressing forward with the drive to transform India into a cheap labor haven for world capital.

Embittered and disoriented by its sudden fall from power, the BJP has for all intents and purposes refused to accept the results of the elections. Its spokesman have repeatedly predicted the imminent collapse of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance coalition and sought to hasten it by paralyzing parliament with walkouts and boycotts and by trying to blindside the government with various smears and phoney issues.

But its rank chauvinist and anti-communist appeals have had no traction. Not with the public. Not with big business. Rather the corporate-controlled media has become increasingly critical of BJP "obstructionism," accusing the party of failing to fulfill the role of a "loyal opposition," and, with the notable exception of the state elections in Bihar and Jharkand, the BJP has suffered a non-stop series of electoral reversals since the ouster of the NDA government.

The Bush administration, which the BJP assiduously courted when in power, has also, to the BJP leadership's chagrin, embraced the Congress-led government. In fact, Washington, which had no difficulty working with the Hindu supremacists when they held power in New Delhi, recently denied the BJP Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi—notorious for his role in inciting a pogrom against Muslims in 2002—a visa to visit the US.

All of this has only deepened the crisis within the BJP, ultimately prompting Advani to conclude that the BJP needs to reposition itself if it is to recapture the support of India's economic elite.

This shift was first signalled by a speech Advani gave to the

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Confederation of Indian Industry (CIU) and then much more boldly in the carefully scripted departures he made from traditional BJP-RSS ideology during his tour of Pakistan.

Speaking in mid-May before the annual meeting of the CII, one of India's most powerful business lobbies, Advani backed away from the near-total obstructionism the BJP has pursued since the last general election, saying his party would support "any reform that is vital for India's economic progress." While touting the BJP's record in promoting the agenda of big business, including its pre-1991 opposition to Congress "socialism," Advani pledged to work hand-in-glove with the Congress if it ditched its left allies so as to more aggressively pursue neo-liberal reforms. Assuming the pose of an elder statesman, Advani declared, "A nation can achieve great goals and ambitious targets only through broad national consensus."

Less then two weeks later, Advani chose his visit to Pakistan to make a series of remarks that clearly were calculated at provoking a crisis in the BJP and distancing it from the most rabid Hindu supremacists. Advani lavished praise on Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who is officially revered in Pakistan as the founder of the Muslim state and reviled by Hindu nationalists as the architect of the 1947 partition. First he called Jinnah a "great man." Then in a subsequent speech, he declared him "a secularist." As proof he cited a speech Jinnah gave after his Muslim League, the Indian National Congress, and the British had agreed to partition India on communal lines in which Jinnah called for equal citizenship rights for persons of all faiths in Pakistan.

Further challenging traditional RSS-BJP ideology, Advani told the Pakistani press the question of "Akhand Bharat"—an India embracing the entire subcontinent—had long ago been settled. Even more provocatively, he called the day in 1992 when Hindu chauvinist militants, who had been whipped into a frenzy by a campaign led by none other than himself, razed the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya "the saddest day of my life." To underline the point Advani went onto describe his Pakistan trip, which included a visit to his native Karachi, "The best week of my whole life."

Advani's remarks were tied to reminders that it was the BJP leadership that, at least from the Indian side, initiated the current rapprochement with Pakistan. Advani is well aware India's corporate elite is solidly behind the Indo-Pakistan peace process, for it believes war crises, like that provoked by the BJP in 2001-02, are a barrier to foreign investment and that India's larger and more technologically advanced companies are well-positioned to dominate a future South Asian economic bloc incorporating Pakistan.

But if Advani was willing to endure some dissidence within the BJP and complaints from the RSS and VHP so as to renew the BJP's bond with big business, he was in for a surprise. Apart from Vajpayee, virtually no one in the BJP leadership rallied to this defence when his remarks elicited the expected outcry from Hindu chauvinist hardliners. On arriving back in India, Advani found himself forced to tender his resignation, so as to pressure those whom he had counted on to rally behind him in his efforts to refashion the BJP's image to issue declarations of support for his leadership.

As a condition for the withdrawing his resignation, Advani forced the BJP to issue a resolution praising his Pakistan trip as "path-breaking." But he had to make a major concession to his critics. The resolution effectively repudiated Advani's statements about Jinnah. It proclaimed the state Jinnah founded "theocratic and non-secular" and reiterated the Hindu chauvinist/Indian nationalist contention that Muslim communalists like Jinnah and British imperialism alone bear responsibility for the 1947 partition.

How the crisis in the BJP will unfold in the coming weeks and months is impossible to predict. The petty bourgeois elements around the VHP and RSS are highly volatile. Moreover, they are incensed at their marginalization with the BJP's fall from power and now the efforts of Advani, whom until recently they considered one of their own, to put them on a tighter leash. It is certainly possible that sections of the Hindu supremacist right may take steps that cut across the attempts of the RSS top brass to pressure the BJP leadership to remain true to the party's Hindutva roots.

While support for Advani within the BJP has been tepid, the press is all but unanimous in supporting him in trying to distance the BJP from the divisive and destabilizing politics of the most extreme Hindu chauvinists. Declared the *Indian Express* in a June 8 editorial: "What is at stake in this contest is the very soul of the BJP. Will it be a party that is dominated by rabble rousers, fanatics and pinched-up ideologues of the sort the VHP and RSS support? Or will it become a genuine right of center party that is capable of governing India in the twenty first century?"

Two things, however, can be said with certainty.

The 1998-2004 BJP-led NDA government, in which Advani served as the home minister, was far and away the most right-wing government in the history of modern India. It pursued a neo-liberal socio-economic agenda, nuclearization and a massive military build-up, authored a draconian anti-terrorism law, sought a strategic alliance with US imperialism, presided over the 2002 communal pogrom in Gujarat, and engaged in nuclear brinkmanship with Pakistan.

The makeover of the BJP that Advani is attempting is aimed at making it a more pliable instrument of Indian big business' socially incendiary agenda: the dismantling of whatever remains of the nationally-regulated economic and associated social-welfare programs and the pursuit of the Indian elite's ambitions to make India a major military power and player in world geo-politics.

The BJP, like its predecessor the Jana Sangh, is a party imbued in Hindu chauvinism. While it may find it convenient to temper its chauvinist appeals it cannot dispense with the Hindu nationalist ideology that animates its cadres and through which it seeks to blur class and caste distinctions, the better to deflect social antagonisms against India's minorities and rival states—not least because the agenda of Indian big business so manifestly conforms with the interests of only a tiny, privileged layer.

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