

India: Advani resigns as BJP president amid party crisis

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28 October 2005

Amid intense inner party turmoil, Lal Krishna Advani announced late last month that he would resign his post as president of India's Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in December. Advani will remain the BJP's parliamentary leader, but media speculation is rife that he will be compelled to exit "gracefully" from this position sometime in 2006.

Advani was forced into the announcement after a campaign against his leadership within the BJP, backed by the Rashtiya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS is an extreme right-wing, militia-style organisation based on Hindu supremacism that was instrumental in the BJP's formation in 1980 and has a long history of fomenting communal violence.

The widespread condemnation and undermining of Advani inside the BJP began in June after he made conciliatory remarks about Pakistan during a trip to that country. His comments, which dovetailed with demands by global and Indian companies for a more stable relationship between Pakistan and India, were part of an attempt by Advani to demonstrate to the ruling class that the BJP could act as viable opposition party.

Advani's remarks came after 12 months of crisis in the BJP following its surprise loss in the May 2004 election. Resorting to continued boycotts and walkouts of parliament, the BJP, including Advani, refused to accept the Congress Party's victory, unlike the corporate elite who wished to see their economic and political agenda proceed under the new Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

Advani first attempted to heed the media criticism about the BJP's "obstructionism" at a meeting of business leaders in May. In a speech at the annual meeting of the Confederation of Indian Industry, a powerful business lobby, Advani downplayed the 12 months of trouble-making by the BJP, saying the party would support "any reform that is vital for India's economic progress".

One of the Advani's messages was that BJP would be willing to pass Congress legislation that benefited business if any elements of the UPA government or the Left Front, which is supporting the UPA "from the outside", threatened to block it.

Advani visited Pakistan in late May where he described Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who is officially revered in Pakistan as

the founder of the Muslim state, as "secular" and "a great man". Such comments are anathema to Hindu chauvinists who blame Jinnah and the Muslim League for the 1947 communal partition of British India that blocked Hindu domination of the entire subcontinent.

Advani also distanced himself from the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 by Hindu fanatics, even though at the time he was in the forefront of urging on the mob. The demolition of the mosque, which provoked communal bloodletting in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, helped to propel the BJP to political prominence. The demand to build a temple to the Hindu god Ram remains a key element of the BJP's Hindutva agenda.

Advani's comments in no sense amounted to a renunciation of the rightwing communal agenda on which his entire political career has been based. Advani is a long-time RSS cadre whose name is synonymous with anti-Muslim communalism. Even as he attempted to soften the party's attitude to Pakistan and pacify business circles, Advani has staunchly stood by Narendra Modi, the chief instigator of the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat that claimed hundreds of lives.

Advani's remarks provoked sharp criticism inside the BJP, as well as from the RSS and World Hindu Council (VHP), leaving him isolated. Other than former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, no one in the BJP leadership openly backed Advani. He even resigned in June for three days before withdrawing that resignation in a desperate attempt to draw support.

In mid-July, Madan Lal Khurana, former Delhi chief minister, began a destabilising campaign against Advani after receiving clearance from the RSS leadership. He wrote letters to Advani demanding his resignation over the comments about Jinnah and stating he could not work under Advani. Khurana also called for the resignation of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who is in the midst of a power struggle over his position.

On 7 September, the BJP suspended Khurana for "gross indiscipline and criticising the party leadership openly". But this move sparked a further crisis for Advani, particularly when Vajpayee stated that Khurana "should have been given one more opportunity to explain his point of view". Advani had been relying on Vajpayee to shore up his position inside the

party.

Just a fortnight later, Advani, at the end of the BJP's national executive meeting on 18 September, announced that he would retire in December after the BJP's silver jubilee political session in Mumbai. In his speech, after first praising the history of the RSS, Advani made clear that he would maintain a degree of independence as BJP parliamentary leader. "[L]ately an impression has gained ground that no political or organisational decision can be taken without the consent of the RSS functionaries," he said.

Since Advani's resignation announcement, the haggling and speculation over the leadership position has dominated the BJP, including discussion that the RSS would take more direct control over appointing positions in the BJP. No clear choice of a new president has emerged.

The BJP's turmoil goes deeper than the immediate leadership problems or even the fallout from the 2004 election defeat. Like other parties around the world, its crisis stems from its inability to establish a popular base of support to carry through the free market policies required by the ruling elite.

The BJP has never had widespread national support. Even when it came to power in 1998 on the back of its best-ever result, the BJP received less than 26 percent of the vote. Its main support was in the Hindi-speaking north, northwest and central parts of the country. To form government, it had to rely on a coalition of over 13 parties in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Even the 26 percent vote in 1998 was more the result of popular hostility to Congress, than positive support for the BJP. Congress had implemented a program of privatisation, slashing public sector jobs and cutting food and fuel subsidies from 1991 under the so-called New Economic Policy.

In power from 1998 to 2004, the NDA government continued the previous policy of opening up the Indian economy as a cheap labour destination for foreign investors. At the same time, the BJP attempted to divert attention from the devastating social impact of this policy by stirring up nationalist and communal sentiment. One of the first actions of the NDA government was to heighten tensions with Pakistan by conducting a series of nuclear tests.

However, the implementation of pro-market policies provoked sharp opposition, raising concerns within the BJP leadership as the party lost one election after another at the state level. The 2002 riots in Gujarat were a deliberate strategy by Modi to inflame communal sentiment, divide working people and bolster the party to prevent yet another state election loss later that year.

The NDA was widely predicted to win the May 2004 national elections under conditions of high economic growth and foreign investment. Its \$US20 million advertising campaign under the slogan of "India Shining" hailed the successes of the Indian economy and featured the smiling faces of contented middle class Indians.

The BJP, along with much of the Indian ruling elite, was shocked when the electorate rejected the BJP's policies and its claim that India was prospering. The opening up of the Indian economy had benefited certain privileged strata but had hurt those, particularly the poorest, affected by cuts to public services, the loss of public sector jobs, the undercutting of the viability of whole industries and the removal of subsidies to small farmers.

The BJP was also shocked that the ruling elite quickly concluded that a Congress-led government, supported by the Left Front, would be the best means to press forward with its economic policies in the face of widespread popular opposition.

Advani and the BJP refused to accept the election outcome. Firstly it railed against the "foreign born" Sonia Gandhi who was expected to become Prime Minister. After Congress installed Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister, the BJP attempted to make government impossible by disrupting parliament with various walkouts and "scandals".

Recently, the BJP attacked the government over allegations that KGB documents showed that various Congress members received money from the former Soviet Union. These actions, however, have gained little traction in the Indian ruling elite, or improved the party's standing in opinion polls.

Advani's resignation as party president highlights the dilemma confronting the BJP. The BJP's Hindu supremacist agenda was central to its formation and its political advances. In power, however, the BJP was compelled to shelve these policies to form an alliance with other parties and to gain the support of key sections of the ruling class. At the same time, the government's economic measures impacted on layers of the BJP's own supporters.

Having lost office, the BJP is floundering around looking for a strategy to rebuild its base of support. Advani's attempt to respond to the requirements of big business has only angered those who demand that the party return to its roots—that is, the stirring up of communal hatred and violence. Advani's resignation as party president, far from solving this crisis, will only exacerbate it.



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