

Indian government connives with BJP in Gujarat following anti-Muslim provocation

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At the request of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government dispatched army and armed police units to the state of Gujarat on May 3, with the aim of intimidating and if necessary violently suppressing protests by Muslims in and around the town of Vadadora.

Violent protests had arisen in response to the Vadadora municipal authorities' attempt to demolish an "illegal" 300-year-old Sufi Islamic shrine. Modi, a leader of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and notorious communalist, was forced to seek the aid of the Indian government because the protests were threatening to spread and overwhelm state authorities.

Despite vigorous Muslim protests, the BJP-dominated Vadadora Municipal Corporation (VMC) had the Sufi shrine demolished, then, to round out the humiliation, ordered the area flattened and asphalt poured on it, so a roadway could be constructed.

Vadadora is also the site of the family-owned Best Bakery, where on March 1, 2002, 14 innocent people were killed by a Hindu mob. Many of the victims—11 Muslims and three Hindu bakery workers, including women and children—were burnt alive or hacked to death. The Best Bakery incident has become an important symbol of the March 2002 Gujarat pogrom, in which activists and supporters of the BJP and its sister communal organizations, the paramilitary RSS (Rashtriya Swamyasevak Sangh) and the VHP (World Hindu Council)—aid and abetted by Modi and the BJP state government—orchestrated mob violence that resulted in the deaths of more than 2,000 Muslims and rendered another hundred thousand homeless.

When the municipal authorities arrived to demolish the Sufi shrine on May 1, they were met by a large group of Muslim residents from the area. The latter no doubt saw the demolition as a continuation of the BJP authorities' longstanding policy of victimizing Gujarat's predominantly poor Muslim minority. Despite the protests and earlier appeals from several Muslim organizations to call off the demolition, the authorities proceeded to destroy the shrine, justifying their actions with the claim that they had previously ordered several Hindu shrines dismantled.

According to press reports, the large contingent of police that accompanied the municipal authorities who enforced the demolition-order fired hundreds of tear gas shells to disperse the unarmed crowd and subsequently resorted to gunfire, killing five. Most of the 30 who were injured also had bullet wounds.

Protests soon spread to other areas of the town and BJP-allied Hindu supremacist groups began mobilizing in response. A Hindu mob surrounded Rafiq Vora, a 30-year-old Muslim oil worker and father, while he was returning home from work and burned him to death, bringing the fatalities among the Muslims to six.

In giving their order to destroy the roadside Islamic shrine, the Vadadora authorities claimed that they were simply following a *suo motu* ("on its own initiative") ruling by the Gujarat High Court to eliminate all "illegal" shrines in the state that encroach upon roads or create traffic jams.

The Gujarat High Court issued the order to demolish illegal shrines on the basis of nothing more than a *Times of India* newspaper report that documented shrines in several cities that it said were illegally encroaching upon roads.

Treating the newspaper report as a writ petition and without further investigation or evidence, the state High Court issued its ruling demanding hasty demolition of hundreds of shrines. The ruling directed local authorities to report back to it by May 5.

Roadside shrines are ubiquitous all over India and reflect centuries-old religious practices. Local shrines act as inexpensive folk-substitutes for temples and mosques that the poor can ill-afford to build or travel to. Another reason that the poor build such shrines is that "lower-caste" Hindus are often barred from entering temples patronized by the higher castes and rich.

Such social complexities were either ignored or dismissed as so much detail by both the courts and government authorities—thus resulting in the absurdity of a 300-year-old shrine suddenly being deemed illegal.

In a ruling indicative of the court's attitude toward the poor, the shrines were ordered demolished without any realistic provision for negotiating, let alone paying for, their relocation—and simply because they were impeding the speedy-flow of traffic.

Both the Gujarat court system and the police are completely intertwined with the state BJP administration. The State High Court upheld a Gujarat Trial Court's exoneration of all 21 accused in the Best Bakery case despite evidence that both the investigation and the trial were marred by incompetence, political intrigue and bribery.

So outrageous was this verdict, the Indian Supreme Court not only struck it down on appeal, but in what constituted an unprecedented vote of nonconfidence in a state judiciary it ordered the case be transferred to a special court in Mumbai, Maharashtra.

Realizing the Muslim backlash to the crude political provocation

carried out by his minions in Vadadora was threatening to spin out of control, Chief Minister Narendra Modi rushed off to New Delhi to seek the assistance of the Congress-led UPA government. He did not have to exert much effort, however, as the UPA was already geared up to dispatch a company of Indian army troops and other paramilitary forces.

UPA Home Minister Shivraj Patil was quoted by the *Hindu* as saying, “This kind of situation cannot be allowed to remain beyond the control of the authorities.”

If the imposition of a curfew and the presence of troops failed to bring a quick end to the unrest in Vadadora, the government authorized the military to use live ammunition.

In a bid to defuse the crisis, the UPA government also successfully appealed to the Indian Supreme Court to order a halt to further demolitions.

Arguing the government’s case, the additional solicitor general of India noted that the Gujarat High Court’s ruling was issued “without even conducting a prima facie examination into the veracity of the contents of the newspaper report and without any pleadings on record. There was no petition, no affidavits or counter- affidavits or any official documents about the total number of temples or Islamic shrines on public space or whether they are protected monuments.”

He went on to argue: “If the demolition drive is continued, the situation in Vadodara may become uncontrollable and may result in repercussions in other states as well. Union of India is only interested in ensuring that the law-and-order situation in the state of Gujarat does not go out of hand.”

Given the sordid record of Narendra Modi—his role in instigating the 2002 pogrom and his continuing protection of those responsible—one might have expected the UPA to have treated him as a political pariah upon his arrival in New Delhi.

Modi was in no such danger, however. The Congress-led UPA embraced Modi’s claim that the situation in Vadodara was a law-and-order problem, not the outcome of the ongoing persecution of the state’s Muslims, and proceeded to treat Gujarat’s chief minister as a political partner who had to be rescued.

Since coming to office two years ago, the UPA government has rebuffed numerous calls for it to use its constitutional powers to dismiss the BJP regime in Gujarat for its role in the 2002 pogrom and its continuing cover-up.

This refusal is certainly not due to any reluctance to make use of the central government’s prerogatives to take over the administration of states. The political kid-glove treatment accorded to Modi needs to be contrasted with the haste with which the UPA moved to impose President’s Rule in Bihar after assembly elections in the spring of 2005 resulted in no party or pre-poll alliance winning a majority.

One reason the UPA is so willing to connive with Modi’s BJP regime in Gujarat is that it enjoys strong backing from big business for pursuing investor-friendly “reform” policies like those being implemented by the UPA at the all-India level—tax cuts, the diversion of public funds from social support to profit-generating infrastructure projects, privatization and deregulation. Indeed, the Modi government has been dubbed the most-business friendly in India.

In May 2005 the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, which is headed by none other the Congress Party president, Sonia Gandhi, issued a report that hailed Gujarat as the “best governed state” in India and gave it top billing in what it termed as an “economic freedom index,” i.e., a ranking of states according to how business-friendly they are.

Among other things, the report praised Gujarat for having low business-licensing fees, and few man-days lost to strikes, and the smallest government in relation to state GDP. The report declared “safety of life ... an essential component (of economic freedom),” then, blithely ignoring the 2002 pogrom and the ongoing persecution of the state’s Muslims, praised the Gujarat authorities for presiding over a state with relatively low violent crime rates and an efficient police force.

So overjoyed was Modi at this praise for his government he publicly thanked the foundation’s chairperson—Sonia Gandhi.

The Congress in Gujarat has also openly adapted to Modi’s communalist politics. In the December 2002 Gujarat election it ran on a program that even sections of the media described as Hindutva—or Hindu nationalist-lite.

The assertion by the Congress party that it is a champion of secularism and a bulwark against the forces of communal reaction represented by the BJP is hardly matched by its record, including its role in the 1947 partition of South Asia. Leading Congressmen have been implicated by a government inquiry commission as the organizers of the anti-Sikh pogrom that convulsed northwest India in 1984 following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Yet not a single organizer or perpetrator of this crime has been brought to justice and punished.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front allies have played a major role in propagating the myth that this party of the Indian bourgeoisie represents a secular and progressive alternative to the communal BJP. Yet, as its support for the criminally culpable Modi government amply demonstrates, the Congress will not shy away from adapting to and conniving with communalist forces, whether it be for reasons of political expedience or to uphold the interests of capital against the working class and oppressed.



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