

India: Gujarat Congress party lines up with BJP's campaign against actor Aamir Khan

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The Congress Party in Gujarat has lined up with the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the ruling party in the west Indian state, in its campaign against the world famous Bollywood actor Aamir Khan. A Muslim, Khan is probably best known to Western film audiences as producer and lead actor in the 2002 Oscar-nominated film *Lagaan*.

Gujarat's cinema-owners have refused to show Khan's latest film, the record box-office hit *Fanaa*, saying that they fear violent anti-Khan protests. Khan's previous film, *Rang De Basanti*, was withdrawn from Gujarat's screens in April after the BJP and other Hindu-supremacist organisations fomented riots. "Last month, mobs attacked theatres screening *Rang De Basanti*," said the president of the Gujarat Multiplex Owners Association, Maubhai Patel. "There was a lot of damage to property. They broke glasses and seats. To prevent it from happening again, we decided not to screen" *Fanna*.

But Patel made clear that he supported the anti-Khan protests. He demanded the actor "apologise" for criticising the Gujarat government's decision to raise the height of the controversial Narmada Dam in defiance of a Supreme Court order and for its failure to properly compensate those displaced by the dam: "Aamir Khan has hurt the pride of the Gujarati public. We have to support them."

The BJP's youth wing has staged violent protests in support of its demand that the state government ban *Fanaa* outright, blockading shops that are selling DVDs, CDs and cassettes of the film and burning effigies of the actor. One protester who is said to have no political affiliations set fire to himself in the Amber cinema hall in Jamnagar and has since died.

The agitation against Khan was launched after he angered Gujarat's BJP government by paying a visit in mid-April to Medha Patkar, the leader of the Save Narmada Movement (*Narmada Bachao Andolan*, NBA), who was staging a hunger strike against enlargement of the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada River. The enlargement could result in a further 35,000 people being displaced.

The Gujarat state unit of the Congress, the party that

dominates India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government, has officially opposed the call for a government ban on *Fanaa*, but it has connived with the BJP in its agitation against Khan—an agitation that has an obvious Hindu-supremacist subtext.

The Gujarat Congress's youth wing and the Congress student movement, the National Students Union of India, participated in the protests against *Fanaa* and *Rang De Basanti*.

Jagat Shukla, the general secretary of the Gujarat Congress's youth wing, called on the Gujarat government to ban *Fanaa* and subsequently lauded the cinema owners' decision to not screen the film.

The Gujarat Pradesh [state] Congress Committee has dismissed Shukla's support for the ban on *Fanna* as a "sudden emotional outburst by a youth leader of our party," while echoing the BJP's calls for Khan to "apologise" for his purported anti-Gujarat remarks..

Union Textiles Minister and senior Gujarat Congress leader Shankersinh Vaghela told the *Times of India* on May 31, "I find fault with Aamir Khan not because of what he said but the platform he chose to speak from."

"It is in his own interest that he should distance himself from NBA. After all, Medha Patkar and Co. are anti-Gujarat. They are against water from the dam going to Gujarat. Aamir Khan must clarify that he is not identified with this organisation."

Ahmed Patel, the political secretary to Congress president Sonia Gandhi, gave encouragement to the anti-Khan protests, telling Gujarat leaders that they were "at liberty to go ahead with their agitation against Medha Patkar." He added that the Congress slogan is "*Narmadey Sarvadey*" (Narmada is supreme).

It was only after *Fanaa* proved to be a gigantic box-office success and the Indian film industry and much of the media had rallied to Khan's defence that the Congress at the all-India level felt it necessary to distance itself somewhat from the BJP-led campaign against Khan. In respect to the actor, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared, "Every citizen

has the freedom of expression as long as he does not indulge in unconstitutional activities”.

Activist-director Mahesh Bhatt and a Gujarat-based NGO filed a petition at the Supreme Court arguing that the Gujarat cinema owners’ refusal to show *Fanaa* violated the right to freedom of speech. However, the Court dismissed the application, saying that cinema owners could always seek police protection—ignoring the fact that Gujarat’s government and police have repeatedly failed to stop, when not fomenting, Hindu-supremacist violence.

Khan, meanwhile, has refused to retract his criticisms of Gujarat’s BJP government and Chief Minister Narendra Modi for failing to provide proper compensation to the tens of thousands displaced by the construction of the Narmada dam. At the same time, he has made clear that he does not oppose building the dam. “All I want,” said Khan, “is that the people, who have been ousted by the construction of dam, should get alternative accommodation.... I want the people of Gujarat to get water. I love the people of Gujarat. I want them to have a good quantity of water but there should be justice for the displaced people too.”

“I will not apologise. Why should I apologise? I am not saying anything wrong.... The BJP is a strong and big party and I am a very small man compared to them. If I am speaking for the poor, why should I apologise?”

Khan added, “I want the people of India to see that here is a political party that does not believe in democracy. Here is a party that does not believe in the rights of poor people. I believe in democracy and if I believe in a cause, I will support it.”

Khan is well known for his support of social causes, including the victims of the 1984 gas explosion at a Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal. He has also criticised the Gujarat BJP government for its failure to control violent communalist riots in March 2002 and, more recently, in May of this year in the city of Vadadora, saying, “I feel it is sad that innocent people are getting killed in riots. I strongly feel no innocent Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christians should get killed in riots. I am also against [US President] George Bush who is killing innocent people in Iraq. I feel all human beings should oppose such people. Those who instigate others in the name of religion are wrong.”

Since 1995, the BJP has been the ruling party in the state of Gujarat. In late February 2002, at the same time as the BJP-led Union government was threatening Pakistan with war, Chief Minister Modi seized on a train fire that killed some 60 Hindu-supremacist activists to mount an anti-Muslim campaign that quickly turned into a pogrom that left more than 2,000 dead and 100,000 homeless.

The Congress in Gujarat has openly adapted to Modi’s communalist politics. In December 2002, it ran an election

campaign, which many in the media described as “Hindutva or Hindu chauvinism lite,” including the use of posters in rural areas that portrayed Hindus as the victims of the previous winter’s riots.

Since coming to power nationally two years ago, the UPA government has refused numerous calls to use its constitutional powers to dismiss the BJP regime in Gujarat for its role in the 2002 pogrom and its continuing refusal to prosecute the perpetrators.

But it did answer a call from Modi this May to send in the army and police to counter protests by Muslims after the municipal authorities in Vadadora demolished an “illegal” 300-year-old Sufi Islamic shrine, claiming it impeded road construction. The UPA backed Modi’s claim that the protests were a law-and-order problem and ignored the views of protesters who saw the demolition as a continuation of the BJP’s ongoing persecution of Gujarat’s predominantly poor Muslim minority.

One major reason the UPA is so willing to collaborate with Modi is that the Gujarat government enjoys strong backing from big business for the sort of neo-liberal policies the UPA is implementing at the national level. In May 2005, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, which is headed by Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi, issued a report hailing Gujarat as the “best governed” and most business-friendly state in India whilst avoiding any mention of the 2002 pogrom.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) has denounced the de facto ban on *Fanaa* as “an indication of the extreme intolerance displayed by the ruling party and its organisations in Gujarat to any dissenting opinion.” It, however, has made no mention of the Congress’s complicity in the BJP anti-Khan agitation.

The CPI-M and its Left Front allies, which are supporting the UPA government “from the outside,” 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 role in the anti-Khan agitation attests, the Congress is quite willing to collaborate with communalist forces when political expediency demands it or when the interests of capital against the working class and oppressed are involved.



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