

Hindu supremacists, media seize on Mumbai atrocity to push India's government further right

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Officials close to the investigation into Tuesday's terrorist atrocity in Mumbai claim that they soon should "have something substantial" to say about who perpetrated the coordinated bombings of seven commuter trains in India's most populous city and financial center.

The death toll in the bombings, which were planned to inflict the maximum loss of life, stands at 200 and will in all likelihood rise. More than 400 people, many with grave injuries, remain hospitalised.

Within hours of the attack, Indian authorities said that they strongly suspected it had been authored by Lashkar-e Toiba (LeT)—an Islamicist, terrorist organisation active in the anti-Indian insurgency in the disputed Muslim-majority region of Kashmir.

Indian police and intelligence sources now say their investigation continues to point to the LeT having played a pivotal role in the attack, but add that they believe LeT operatives were assisted by militants from the Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). An Indian-based Muslim communalist organisation, the SIMI came to prominence in the wave of communal violence that was triggered by the 1992 razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu supremacists.

Police report that since Tuesday they have detained more than 300 people in raids in Mumbai and elsewhere, most of them SIMI activists.

Representatives of both the LeT and SIMI have denied that their organisations had anything to do with Tuesday's bombings and have denounced them as an outrage. At a Delhi press conference Thursday, former SIMI President Shahid Badar Falahi accused the "government, media," and the Hindu-supremacist "RSS and Bajrang Dal" of seeking "to deliberately discredit the SIMI," by falsely blaming it for a "crime against humanity."

Government, police, and intelligence officials have said little about the attack, other than that the coordination and type of explosives used—most likely high-grade plastic explosives—indicate a high level of sophistication, significantly beyond that seen in any previous LeT attack.

Various officials have given wildly differing accounts as to whether the authorities had any intelligence suggesting such an attack was in preparation. R.R. Patil, the deputy chief minister of Maharashtra, the state of which Mumbai is the capital, told the *Times of India* there had been a massive intelligence failure: "It's not just the state intelligence department and the elite anti-terrorist squad that failed. Even the intelligence bureau at the Center (New Delhi) had no inkling of the blasts." Yet, the Maharashtra state police chief, P.S. Pasricha, has said the police had known for a "few months" that Mumbai was a target.

It cannot be excluded that Tuesday's atrocity was facilitated by agents provocateurs working for one of India's intelligence agencies or that elements within the security forces allowed the terrorist attack to take place, with the aim of panicking the public into accepting increased repressive powers for the state. It is also possible that the Mumbai

bombings were the work of Hindu-supremacist fanatics bent on stoking up anti-Muslim violence, undermining the Indo-Pakistani peace process, and destabilising the Congress Party-led state and Union governments.

In a televised address to the nation Wednesday evening, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh vowed that terrorism would be defeated, held up Mumbai as a symbol of an economically strong, "united" and "inclusive" India, and urged the public not to be "provoked by rumours"—an oblique reference to the attempts of India's official opposition, the Bharatiya Janata Party, and its Hindu-supremacist allies to use the Mumbai outrage to fan anti-Muslim chauvinism.

In his speech, Singh did not accuse any group of responsibility for Tuesday's atrocity, nor make any mention of Pakistan, which the Indian establishment holds largely if not wholly responsible for the insurgency in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

However, earlier in the day, an Indian government official had ratcheted up the anti-Pakistani rhetoric after the Pakistani Foreign Minister, Khurshid Kasuri, criticised the slow progress of the India-Pakistani peace dialogue, then affirmed that "the best way of tackling extremism in South Asia" would be to tackle the core issues, including the Kashmir dispute.

Although Kasuri had reiterated Pakistan's condemnation of the Mumbai attack, Indian External Affairs spokesman Navtej Sarna accused him of apologising for terrorism and using it as a bargaining chip. Sarna said Kasuri's remarks "appeared to suggest that Pakistan will cooperate with India against the scourge of cross border terrorism only if so called disputes are resolved." He then called on Pakistan to do more to "dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism on its territory."

The Hindu-supremacist right, which has been in disarray since the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition fell from power in the May 2004 general election, is seeking to exploit the Mumbai tragedy to promote its politically noxious agenda. The NDA government, it should be recalled, seized on the December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian parliament—an act also blamed on the LeT—to push through a draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and put the country's military on a war alert for nearly a year in an attempt to threaten and bully Pakistan.

On Wednesday, the BJP leadership passed a resolution that accused the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government of failing to tackle terrorism in pursuit of votes—i.e., of "appeasing" the Muslims, other minorities and the Naxhalites (Maoist insurgents). "The UPA," declared the BJP, "has created an environment wherein the infrastructure of terrorism can breed, promote itself and subsequently create havoc in the country.... The BJP demands that the UPA government choose between vote and India. It must either govern or get out."

The BJP is demanding that the UPA government restore the POTA, which the UPA repealed in September 2004 (although retaining some of its most severe provisions) in response to numerous complaints by human

rights organisations and even mainstream political parties that it was being used to terrorise the Muslim community, Dalits (ex-Untouchables), and peasants and tribals fighting for land.

The BJP has announced that it will mount a two-day “anti-terrorism” campaign this weekend and that as part of this campaign, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi will be touring Mumbai. The dispatching of Modi to Mumbai is a blatant and callous provocation. He is reviled as the instigator of an anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002 that killed upwards of 2,000 people and left tens of thousands homeless.

The Shiv Sena, the Maharashtra-based ally of the BJP, is seeking to mount a campaign to destabilise the Congress-led Democratic Front state government. “This government is not capable of protecting Maharashtra because those whose politics is based on appeasing minorities, cannot defeat terrorists,” declared Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray in the party’s newspaper Thursday.

The other prime Shiv Sena target at this point is impoverished workers from Bangladesh who have flocked to Mumbai in search of employment. A demonstration of several hundred Shiv Sena members and supporters Wednesday demanded the state mount a campaign to expel the millions of Bangladeshis who in the past three decades have taken up residence in India.

Important sections of the corporate media, while not employing the inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Hindu supremacists, have echoed their calls for the government to increase the repressive powers of the state to combat terrorism and to place renewed demands on Pakistan to cut off its logistical and even political support for the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir.

In an editorial titled “What is this government doing about terror?,” the *New Indian Express* complained that “a complicated set of political factors...has made the UPA government seem like it doesn’t quite know how hard it should be on terror. We have seen this, in a variety of ways, after the Delhi Diwali blasts last year, after the Bangalore attack, after the Varanasi bombs, after many Kashmir killings...”

The *Hindustan Times* demanded both greater powers for security forces and a hardening of attitudes toward Pakistan: “There is need to tell our friends in the war against terror that enough is enough, and that something needs to be done urgently about the jihad factory next door [Pakistan]. To tell them much more needs to be done to ensure that wanted terrorists sheltering there are rendered up to India.”

The *Hindu*, arguably India’s most prominent liberal newspaper and hitherto a keen proponent of India’s rapprochement with Pakistan, urged the UPA government to demand Islamabad cease all support for the Kashmir insurgency, warning that otherwise the peace process may collapse. “This is the moment,” declared the *Hindu*, “for the Prime Minister to leverage growing international outrage to compel Pakistan to deliver on its repeated promises to end terrorism directed at India. Indeed it can be argued that the future of India-Pakistan détente will depend on his ability to do this, for each terrorist strike diminishes the reservoir of public goodwill underpinning the détente process...”

“Pro-jihadist elements in Pakistan’s military establishment might believe that the defiance of United States edicts by Iran and North Korea demonstrates that there are limits to the West’s coercive powers—and that in any case the jihad against India can be pursued at no great strategic cost. Dealing with the Lashkar’s maximum terror poses tough challenges, but hard decisions based on a rigorous analysis of India’s options in the face of recurrent acts of terror can no longer be deferred.”

Needless to say, the *Hindu*’s claims that Lashkar was responsible for the Mumbai bombing and that it acts at the behest, or under the protection, of the Pakistani government or sections of its military-intelligence apparatus are supported by nothing other than the assertions of India’s security establishment.

But even if true, the claim that India’s terrorism problem is “made in

Pakistan” conveniently ignores the Indian ruling class’s patronage of Hindu supremacism, the subterfuges it used to gain control of Kashmir during the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, the ruthlessness with which it has suppressed the Kashmiri and other separatist insurgencies, the deprivations it has imposed on the Dalits and tribals, and the predatory character of its decades-long geo-political rivalry with Pakistan.

In the light of the BJP-led government’s bellicose reaction to the attack on the Indian parliament in 2001, the UPA government’s response to the Mumbai bombing seems muted and measured.

But it is far too soon to conclude that the UPA government will not use the bombings to try to effect significant shifts in India’s domestic politics and foreign policy. Certainly—as evidenced by the editorials cited above—Indian big business is using the bombings to pressure the government sharply right.

Home Minister Shivraj Patil has promised that “very soon” the government will be “taking some steps to strengthen the existing [security] systems,” suggesting the government will give police and intelligence agencies new powers.

The Congress-led UPA has rejected calls for the rapprochement with Pakistan to be reviewed or slowed, arguing that disrupting the peace process was one of the objectives of the Mumbai bombers. “The confidence-building measures [with Pakistan] will continue,” declared Home Secretary V.K. Duggal. “The peace process will not be slowed down.”

But these statements do not preclude New Delhi placing new demands on Islamabad, especially if the Bush administration deems such action to be useful to achieving its own objectives.

Given the current, delicate state of the negotiations to forge a “global” strategic Indo-US partnership—the US Congress is currently deliberating on legislation aimed at giving India a unique status within the world nuclear regime—New Delhi would undoubtedly closely coordinate any change in its posture toward Pakistan with Washington.

Significantly, relations between Washington and the Pakistani regime of General Pervez Musharraf have become increasingly strained, notwithstanding the general’s status as a key ally in the Bush administration’s war on terrorism. Islamabad is miffed with Washington for entering into an ever-tighter partnership with India, even as New Delhi refuses to make any substantive concessions to Pakistan on Kashmir. Washington, for its part, has echoed complaints from its Afghan puppet Hamid Karzai that Pakistan is not doing enough to capture Taliban fighters who have found refuge in Pakistan.

For unexplained reasons, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice refused Wednesday to hold a joint press conference with the Pakistani foreign minister at the conclusion of bilateral meetings in Washington.

On Thursday, US President George Bush telephoned Manmohan Singh and they reportedly decided that they will hold a discussion focusing on combating terrorism when they meet on the sidelines of the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg.

The *Washington Post*, which has long been critical of the Bush administration for not forcing Musharraf to even more tailor his domestic and international policies to US interests, ran an op-ed piece in the wake of the Mumbai bombing highly critical of Pakistan. Its author, Xenia Dormandy, was until last August the director for South Asia on the Bush administration’s National Security Council. “How long,” asked Dormandy, “can India, Indians and the Singh government withstand the constant pressure from militant groups before they have to react [against Pakistan]? By any measure of international diplomacy, they’ve already been extraordinarily patient; compare their restraint with Israel’s response to the kidnapping of its soldier or to the U.S. and Japanese responses to North Korea’s missile tests.

“Now is a moment when Pakistan really needs to respond,” if it expects

“to be treated as a responsible player in the region.”



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