

Gujarat elections: BJP chief minister reverts to Muslim-baiting

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The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, has reverted to stoking up anti-Muslim sentiment in a transparent attempt to polarize the west Indian state on communal lines and thereby cling to power in the state assembly elections that are being held in two phases this week.

Modi—an aspiring national leader of the Hindu-supremacist BJP, India’s official opposition—and his government fomented and abetted the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat that resulted in the deaths of some 2,000 Muslims and rendered another hundred thousand homeless.

Prior to last week, Modi made economic “development” the focus of the BJP’s election campaign, unintentionally mimicking the BJP’s disastrous 2004 “India Shining” national election campaign. But in response to a series of developments that suggested the BJP was facing a formidable challenge from the Congress Party, including large crowds at rallies addressed by Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi and the defection of a cabal of BJP legislators to the Congress, Modi switched gears.

In a speech Dec. 4, he expressed his approval for the police murder of Sohrabuddin Sheik, in a fake terrorist encounter. A Muslim, Sheik and his wife, Kauserbi, were apprehended, then summarily executed by police in November 2005. (See “India: Gujarat police murders covered up as terrorist ‘encounters’”)

The Gujarat government has itself filed an affidavit in the Indian Supreme Court admitting that the two were murdered without justification, yet Modi said Sohrabuddin “got what he deserved.”

In response to Modi’s speech, the Gujarat government’s special counsel to the Indian Supreme Court said he would resign unless Modi apologized for his remarks. Indian big business has long had a close relationship with Modi because of his ruthless promotion of neo-liberal “reform,” but much of the corporate media felt compelled to chastise Modi, who portrays himself as a strong advocate of law and order, for so brazenly supporting illegal executions.

The next day, Modi accused the Congress of “encouraging terrorists by its actions” and bayed for the blood of Mohammed Afzal—a Kashmiri Muslim who has been given a death sentence for the role he supposedly played in organizing the December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian parliament. Modi

demagogically demanded that if India’s Congress-led coalition government “cannot execute the Supreme Court’s order to hang him [Afzal],” its should bypass the constitution and “send him to Gujarat.” While Modi didn’t spell it out, the implication was that he would organize Afzal’s execution.

Afzal’s death sentence was handed down in a trial that spurned the most elementary judicial and democratic principles. (See “India: Stop the state murder of Mohammed Afzal”)

Modi has claimed that he was prompted to make his remarks in reply to a speech given by Congress President Sonia Gandhi December 2, in which she said the Gujarat government was a “merchant of death.”

The Congress Party in Gujarat and India’s Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government have a long record of complicity with Modi’s regime. Sections of the Congress Party in Gujarat participated in the 2002 pogrom and the party mounted a campaign for the December 2002 Gujarat state elections that even that corporate media mocked as “Hinduvta [Hindu nationalism] lite.”

Although there is incontrovertible evidence that the BJP government incited and helped organize the 2002 pogrom, then shielded the goons who carried it out, the UPA government has refused to use its special constitutional powers, in the case of a breakdown of law and order, to unseat the Modi government; yet it has imposed “presidential rule” on other states.

Earlier this fall, when *Tahelka* magazine published an exposé of the role that leaders of the BJP and associated Hindu-supremacist organizations played in organizing the 2002 pogrom, the Congress joined with the Modi regime in suppressing it. (See “Magazine exposé shows BJP state government organized 2002 pogrom”)

Yet in recent weeks, the Congress Party has changed tack, with Sonia Gandhi in particular making repeated references to the Modi regime’s criminal conduct. For example, on December 8, she described Gujarat as a place where “the stomach of a pregnant woman is split open”—an obvious allusion to the well-publicized killing of a young pregnant woman, Kausar Banuduring, during the 2002 anti-Muslim massacre

The Congress leadership’s sudden discovery that the Modi government is a criminal regime that is victimizing the state’s

Muslim minority is not just a case of electoral opportunism. It is very much meant to serve as political cover for the Congress's courting of BJP dissidents who, no less than Modi, share responsibility for the 2002 pogrom.

Prominent among these dissidents is Gordhan Zadaphia, who in 2002 was the state Home Minister—that is, the minister responsible for the police. (Numerous studies have shown that the police were instrumental in the pogrom, refusing to protect Muslims from attack and in some cases egging on the Hindu communalist mobs.) Zadaphia still has several court cases arising out of the 2002 events pending against him.

At least a half dozen of the BJP dissidents have been accepted as Congress Party candidates in the Gujarat assembly elections. The Congress has also welcomed into its ranks Nilesh Luhar, a leader of the Hindu-supremacist youth organization, the Bajrang Dal, and Vithalbhai Togadia, the younger brother of Pravin Togadia, the international general secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council), whose cadres played a prominent role in both the 2002 Gujarat pogrom and the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in 1992. Luhar came to prominence by mounting a communal campaign against Christian missionaries.

Several outgoing BJP legislators, who are founding members of a new political outfit headed by Zadaphia—the Sardar Patel Utkarsh Samiti—are being supported in their bid to win election by the Congress Party. In an interview with the *Deccan Chronicle*, published December 8, Zadaphia boasted about his alliance with the Congress and the role he had played in helping draft its election program, while proclaiming himself an RSS leader and lifelong adherent of its Hindu-supremacist ideology. (The RSS is the senior and, outside the BJP itself, the most important of the Hindutva-ite organizations.)

When asked by the *Chronicle* if the Congress was working with the Sardar Patel Utkarsh Samiti, Congress Party leader Shankersinh Vaghela exclaimed, “Of course we are together, they are doing our work for us.”

At the same time, four Congress Party legislators in the state have switched their allegiance to the BJP. Such opportunistic maneuvers are common practice in India, especially at election times.

According to press reports, the RSS and the VHP have failed to mobilize their supporters behind the BJP re-election effort and are, at least to some extent, helping the Congress-allied BJP dissidents.

The Congress Party in Gujarat has been assiduously courting Modi's BJP opponents for several years—no matter that the BJP is an extreme right-wing and militarist party that propagates an openly anti-Muslim, anti-minority ideology.

The dissidents have denounced Modi over his reputed dictatorial leadership style and his failure to divvy up patronage in the “right” caste proportions. Some have even criticized the instigator of the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom for not being sufficiently true to the BJP's Hindutva ideology.

Narendra Modi has, no doubt, become a polarizing figure within the BJP. His national leadership ambitions and crude identification of Hindutva with his personal political fortunes have alienated other sections of the RSS-led Sangh Parivar (a coterie of right-wing Hindu-communal organizations). To the dismay of the VHP, Modi outlawed some of its provocative activities in a transparent attempt to try to cover up his government's role in the 2002 pogrom and the continuing oppression of Gujarat's Muslims.

Modi is closely identified with big domestic and international capital—whom he has favored over other bourgeois elements more dependent on the old framework of national economic regulation. Gujarat has become the top destination for investment among India's states, dethroning Maharashtra from first place.

Modi's pro-big business policies have earned him the enmity of sections of the state BJP more identified with the petty bourgeoisie. They accuse him of implementing policies that have benefited big businesses at the expense of the state's farmers and rural Gujarat in general.

While Modi's policies have immensely benefited the rich and a section the urban middle class, they have left large sections of the working population mired in abject poverty. The state's Muslim population especially suffers from widespread poverty and neglect. Tens of thousands of Muslims who were driven from their homes during the 2002 pogrom still live in refugee camps in the midst of refuse and filth. They not only lack proper shelter, but access to proper water and sewage facilities.

The Congress Party election campaign in Gujarat is being supported by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), the dominant partner in the Left Front, a multi-party alliance that is helping sustain the minority UPA government in office. The CPM leadership has sought to justify its recent decision to allow the UPA government to open negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency on the Indo-US nuclear accord on the grounds that it was necessary to maintain the unity of “secular forces” against the BJP in the run-up to this week's voting in Gujarat.

But the Gujarat elections—which have seen the Congress party block with, and give refuge to, hardened Hindu supremacists, including persons directly implicated in the 2002 pogrom—have once again put the lie to the Stalinists' claim that the Congress Party constitutes any type of a bulwark against communalism and the Hindu right.



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