

Indian elections:

Congress Party drops two candidates implicated in 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom

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In the face of a public outcry, the Congress Party, the dominant partner in India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government, has dropped as candidates for the coming national election two veteran congressmen, both of them sitting MPs, implicated in a horrific 1984 communal pogrom against India's Sikh minority.

On Thursday evening, the Congress leadership announced that it had accepted Jagdish Tytler's and Sajjan Kumar's "offers" to abandon their candidacies. Tytler was the party's nominee for the North-East Delhi Lok Sabha seat; Sajjan Kumar was standing in South Delhi.

Earlier in the day, the two had met with senior party leaders and were evidently told that the party leadership was no longer prepared to support their candidacies.

The Congress Party bosses were clearly taken aback by the storm of protest that had erupted over Tytler's and Kumar's nominations. National attention came to be focused on the issue after a well-known Sikh journalist, Jarnail Singh, threw a shoe at Home Minister P. Chidambaram to demonstrate his anger at the Congress's readiness to embrace reputed leaders of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom.

According to Indian authorities, 2,733 Sikhs were killed in Delhi in the days following the October 31, 1984, assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, with more than half being murdered in an orgy of violence on November 1.

The Congress Party leadership has always sought to portray the 1984 pogrom as a spontaneous, popular reaction to Gandhi's assassination, which had been carried out by two of her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for Indian security forces' storming of Amritsar's Golden Temple, the most important Sikh shrine.

However, there is a mountain of evidence that conclusively demonstrates Congress Party leaders incited and organized the pogrom in collusion with the police. Only on November 2 did the government order troops deployed in the capital, and reportedly for the first 24 hours senior police officers systematically denied them permission to fire.

In 2004 the Nanavati Commission—an inquiry into the 1984 events that had been established by the Bharatiya Janata party-led National Democratic Alliance government in 2000—indicted Sajjan Kumar, Tytler, and long time Delhi Congress leader and former

Union cabinet minister H.K.L. Bhagat for their role in inciting and leading anti-Sikh mobs.

Sajjan Kumar, the commission reported, had been named as an instigator of anti-Sikh violence in many First Information Reports (FIRs) filed during and in the immediate aftermath of the pogrom. (FIRs are initial police reports of criminal activity that summarize evidence, including the accounts of victims and eye-witnesses.) Yet police initiated no legal proceedings against him.

The commission further concluded that there was "credible evidence" against Tytler, and that "very probably" he had instigated mob violence against Sikhs. Similarly, it found "credible evidence" that Bhagat "probably...had a hand in organizing attacks on Sikhs."

Following the release of the Nanavati report, Tytler stepped down from his UPA cabinet post as Minister of State for Overseas Indian Affairs, and Sajjan Kumar resigned as chairman of the Delhi Rural Development Board. But neither was compelled to resign his parliamentary seat by the Congress leadership. Subsequently, the Congress Party-led government claimed that there was insufficient evidence to bring Tytler and Sajjan Kumar to trial and that Bhagat, who would die in late 2005, was too ill for any action to be taken against him.

In December 2007, after fresh evidence was brought forward against Tytler, India's Criminal Bureau of Investigation or CBI was forced to reopen the case against him. Suddenly, in late March of this year, with elections pending, the CBI announced it was recommending that the case against Tytler again be abandoned.

Having sanctioned Tytler's and Sajjan Kumar's re-nomination to parliament, the Congress leadership initially stood behind them, emphasizing that the pair has never been found guilty by the courts of any crimes arising from the 1984 pogrom.

But their re-nominations served to galvanize anger amongst India's Sikhs over the manifest failure of India's political and legal authorities to hold the authors of the 1984 bloodbath to account.

"[A] perception that justice was not fully done after the '84 riots has prevailed in society," observed the *Times of India* in an April 11 editorial. "A quarter century after the massacres took place in the capital...only 13 people have been convicted in 6 cases. Masterminds, who organised the killings, have so far escaped conviction. The many commissions that investigated the

riots have not been conclusive or convincing in their findings and have only fuelled mistrust.”

The BJP and its Sikh communal ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal or SAD, were quick to seize on the issue and began to organise protests to force the Congress to withdraw Tytler’s and Sajjan Kumar’s candidacies. They have charged that the government pressured the CBI into giving Tytler a “clean-chit,” so as to ease the way for his re-nomination.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, himself a Sikh, has denied interfering in any way with the CBI’s investigation of Tytler. But he would hardly have been the one to do so. A technocrat, Singh serves as prime minister at the pleasure of Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi and leaves many decisions relating to political and party affairs, especially the dispersal of patronage and selection of candidates, to others in the government and party leadership.

As if to underline that the CBI is in fact susceptible to political pressure, it changed its attitude toward Tytler at the same time as the Congress leadership was deciding to drop him as a candidate.

According to the announcement made in late March, the case against Tytler was to be officially closed by a court decision this Thursday. But the court proceedings were postponed when the CBI reversed course and announced that, given the severity of the crimes for which it had been investigating Tytler, rightfully a more senior court should sanction its decision to abandon the case against him

The BJP’s “outrage” over the Congress’s readiness to consort with pogromists is patently hypocritical given its long association with noxious communal violence. Its current prime ministerial candidate, L.K. Advani, was the principal leader of the 1991-92 agitation to build a temple to the mythical Hindu god Ram on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya—an agitation which culminated in the razing of the temple, in defiance of a Supreme Court order, and India’s bloodiest wave of communal violence since the 1947 partition. Another leading BJP campaigner is Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. In 2002 he helped foment an anti-Muslim pogrom in which more than 2,000 perished and 100,000 were rendered homeless. As in the case of the 1984 Delhi pogrom, there is irrefutable evidence of BJP leaders leading communal mobs and of the collusion of the police.

In recent weeks, the BJP has been trying to make a political martyr of Varun Gandhi after he was caught on a video inciting hatred against Muslims. An estranged member of the Gandhi-Nehru family dynasty and the BJP’s candidate in the Uttar Pradesh constituency of Pilbhit, Gandhi made a series of rank communal appeals. He told one rally, for example, “This is the hand of the ‘lotus.’ It will cut the throat of the (derogatory reference to a Muslim) after the elections.... Varun Gandhi will cut.... Cut that hand, cut it, cut it.”

The BJP leadership has refused opposition demands and an Indian Election Commission request that it withdraw Varun Gandhi’s nomination.

The BJP’s and SAD’s machinations notwithstanding, the popular Sikh outrage over the Congress’s continued embrace of instigators of the 1984 pogrom was genuine, palpable, and entirely warranted.

Whilst the Congress and BJP may find it useful from time to time to point to each other’s implication in communal crimes, the Indian political elite, police and judiciary have failed to apprehend and successfully prosecute those responsible for a succession of communal riots and atrocities, the most important of these being the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, the wave of violence unleashed by the December 1992 razing of the Babri Masjid, and the 2002 Gujarat pogrom.

According to press reports, Congress party leaders began to fear that the controversy over the 1984 communal bloodletting would damage the party’s election prospects in parts of Delhi and in the Punjab, which has a majority Sikh population.

No less significantly, Tytler’s and Sajjan Kumar’s candidacies were serving to undermine the Congress’ efforts to portray itself as India’s only national party and this in a triple sense, as a party present in all regions of the country, open to Indians of all faiths and ethnicities, and a party of all classes.

In reality, the Congress is the traditional party of India’s capitalist elite: a party that has presided over a grossly unequal social order that condemns 800 million people to surviving on less than 50 cents (20 rupees) a day, a party that is a cesspool of corruption and criminality, and that revolves around a family dynasty.

Under conditions where the Congress-led UPA has pursued policies little different from those of the BJP—a rightwing socio-economic agenda aimed at attracting foreign investment and making India a cheap-labour producer for world capitalism and a “global, strategic” partner with US imperialism—the Congress finds it all the more important to declaim itself an inclusive party and the champion of secularism. But these claims, as exemplified by the case of Tytler and Sajjan Kumar, are not supposed to, and generally do not, get in the way of the Congress utilizing various caste and communally-laced appeals, competing with the BJP in making bellicose attacks on Pakistan, and colluding with outright communalists.



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