Former Gujarat minister convicted for her role in 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom

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Mayaben Kodnani, a sitting state legislator and former minister in Gujarat's BJP government, and thirty others have been convicted by a so-called "fast track" court for the brutal massacre of 97 Muslims more than ten years ago in the Naroda-Patiya locality of Gujarat's capital, Amhedabad.

The Naroda-Patiya massacre was part of an anti-Muslim pogrom conducted by Hindu communalists at the instigation of the BJP and its *Sangh Parivar* allies after 59 people, most of them Hindu communal activists, died in a Feb. 27, 2002 train fire in Godhra. The Feb-March 2002 Gujarat pogrom left well over 1,200 people dead and destroyed the homes and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands more.

Narendra Modi, then as now Gujarat's Chief Minister, played a particularly vile role in inciting the anti-Muslim violence. Without a shred of evidence that the Godhra fire was deliberately set, Modi blamed it on "Muslims." He ordered the corpses of the Godhra fire victims to be paraded in the capital Ahmadabad to whip up communal sentiments and declared his government's support for a "bandh" (total shutdown) call issued by the BJP's communal partner, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, the World Hindu Council), to "protest" the Godhra killings.

Although subsequent investigation by the Indian Railway Ministry concluded that the Godhra train fire had not been deliberately set and perhaps was caused by persons on the train cooking with kerosene stoves, a special court formed by the Gujarat judiciary framed-up 31 Muslims for having been part of a "pre-planned" conspiracy to set the train alight. (See: "Gujarat court frames Muslims for train fire used to incite 2002 Gujarat pogrom")

Kodnani is the first prominent politician, police or government official, or Hindu communalist leader to be convicted for having played a role in the anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in 2002.

The court, which sentenced her to a total of 28 years in prison, described her as "[the] kingpin of entire riots in the Naroda-Patiya area." "She led the mob and incited them to violence." This included pointing out targets for attack—Muslim religious places and *chawls* (tenements) where Muslims resided

According to press reports, there is evidence that the Modi government sought to shield Kodnani from prosecution. So confident was Modi that she would be able to escape any accounting for her role in 2002, he named her the state's Minister for Women and Child Welfare in 2008.

Convicted along with Kodanani was one other high-profile person—Babu Bajrangi, the former state president of the Bajrang Dal (BD), the VHP's youth-wing. Bajrangi, as he admitted on tape in a sting operation conducted by *Tehelka* magazine in 2007, collected bombs and guns for attacking Muslims and was himself an eager participant in the violence, including in one case slaying a pregnant women with a sword. The court sentenced Bajrangi to spend the rest of his life in prison.

Seven other participants in the Naroda-Patiya were sentenced to 34 years in prison and the remaining 22 were ordered to serve jail terms of 24 years.

While the *World Socialist Web Site* is in principle opposed to the death penalty, there is clearly a marked contrast between the sentences meted out to those found guilty in the Godhra fire and the Naroda-Patiya massacre. Eleven of the Muslims framed up for the Godhra train fire were given the death sentence, while none of those found guilty of the wanton slaughter of Muslims in Naroda-Patiya was condemned to death.

It has taken India's criminal justice system ten years, several judicial inquiries, and countless investigations to convict even one prominent government representative for having played a role in the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom. This despite the existence of incontrovertible evidence that the whole state apparatus in Gujarat including ministers and the police were mobilized in the days following the Godhra train tragedy against the state's Muslim minority.

Modi himself continues to enjoy impunity. Recently, a Supreme Court-appointed Special Investigations Team (SIT) submitted a report to India's highest court absolving him of any criminal wrongdoing. In doing so, it ignored not only his inflammatory public actions, but eyewitness testimony that he told government officials that Muslims needed to be taught a lesson and, at another meeting, effectively ordered police to stand down so as to allow Hindus to vent their "understandable" anger.

Far from Modi being a political outcast for having presided over one of the deadliest communal bloodlettings since the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, he is being

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promoted by a section of the BJP, the corporate media, and many prominent industrialists as the Official Opposition's prime ministerial candidate in the next national election. Modi is a darling of big business because he has transformed Gujarat into an investor-friendly haven, with massive tax and land concessions for big business and lax enforcement of already inadequate labor, health and safety and environmental regulations.

Modi himself remains utterly shameless, cultivating an image of a strongman. In a recent interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, he bluntly declared that he had nothing to apologize for in regards to the events of Feb.-March 2002.

Following Kodnani's conviction, the Congress Party, the dominant force in India's national coalition government, wasted no time in attacking the BJP. Digvijay Singh the party General Secretary and frequent Congress political attack dog, said, "No minister would have been involved in such a crime unless they had the consent of the chief minister [Narendra Modi]."

But when asked to comment on Modi's role, Law Minister Salman Khurshid said, "I don't want to mix politics with issues around the case. It is not a political battle, but a legal and moral one."

Such cynical, double-faced posturing comes naturally to a Congress Party that routinely breathes hot and cold on the question of communalism, denouncing the BJP one-day and adapting to and conniving with the Hindu supremacists the next.

Although the Congress has led India's government for the past eight years, it has refused to take any political or judicial initiative to bring Modi to book for his central role in the 2002 Muslim massacre.

The Congress is itself no stranger to communal politics. In 1984 Congress Party cadres incited and played the leading role in organizing the massacre of thousands of Sikhs by Hindu communal mobs, after a Sikh bodyguard assassinated Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. To date not a single prominent organizer of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence has been successfully prosecuted and jailed.

In Gujarat, the Congress Party has adapted to Modi and Hindu chauvinism. Even the corporate media disparaged its campaign for the December 2002 Gujarat state election as "Hindutva lite." (Hindutva is the noxious Hindu supremacist ideology espoused by the Hindu right.) In the 2007 state election, the Congress stood as candidates several BJP dissidents, who had been in Modi's cabinet in 2002 and were themselves implicated in the pogrom; recruited a former leader of the RSS, the Hindu communal organization that gave birth to the BJP, to lead its campaign; and even fielded its own army of "sadhus" (holy men) to display a false image of Hindu-piety and attract their followers.

For the upcoming 2012 Gujarat Assembly election, the Congress has already given notice that it will not make the 2002 pogrom a major campaign issue. A spokesperson for the party told the *Indian Express* last April: "Actually, we do not want to make it an issue. What happened in 2002 is a serious, shameful and unfortunate episode and we do not want to politicize it."

Muslim groups have also made serious allegations, based on eye-witness reports, of several Gujarat Congress Party leaders themselves participating in the 2002 violence. Despite having received the names of the alleged participants, the party leadership has refused to undertake any serious investigation.

The BJP rose to national prominence in the 1980s only after the Congress Party started pandering to the Hindu-right, as it abandoned pseudo-socialist phrase-mongering and began to tout "market reform." Both Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the next Congress Party Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, were openly sympathetic to the Hindu communalists claim that the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya was the birth place of Hindu god Rama. In December 1992 Rao stood by as Hindu communalists—bringing to fruition a campaign spearheaded by BJP leader L.K. Advani to "restore" Indian pride—razed the Babri Masjid in defiance of a Supreme Court order. The razing of the Babri Masjid triggered violence across much of north and western India in which more than 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, died. Yet Advani , who was an eye-witness "observer" to the razing of the Babri Masjid has never been convicted of any crime. Indeed he rose to become India's deputy prime minister and remains a major figure in the BJP.

Far from being an affirmation of the "strength" of Indian democracy as the corporate media is claiming, the belated conviction of Kodnani is the exception that proves the rule. India's political elite and the police and judiciary of the Indian bourgeois state have manifestly failed to call to account those responsible for the politically-motivated mass killings carried out in 1984, 1992-93, and 2002, let alone the authors of numerous smaller instances of communal violence. Many of the main perpetrators of these crimes are not only strutting around scot-free, but like Modi have become or remain prominent political figures and the BJP is ensconced as the Indian elite's alternate party of government.

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