

# Indian business whets Hindu communalist's prime ministerial ambitions

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After receiving a ringing endorsement from India's business elite, Narendra Modi—the arch-communalist Chief Minister of Gujarat—is being touted by the corporate media and much of the cadre and leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the right-wing opposition's prime ministerial candidate for the next national election.

Modi is being promoted by significant sections of the business and political establishment under conditions where the nine-year-old Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance has been rocked by a series of corruption scandals and faces mounting popular opposition to its pro-market “reforms.” In February more than a hundred million workers participated in a two-day general strike protesting the government's economic policies.

Big business, for its part, is increasingly critical, if not exasperated, with the government. In its view, the UPA should move even more aggressively against the working class and rural poor, by imposing steeper social spending cuts, accelerating privatization, and making it easier to lay off workers and close down factories.

India's 80-year-old Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is increasingly being castigated by the media as a “ditherer,” while Modi is portrayed as a competent and dynamic administrator who has made Gujarat into a magnet for domestic and international investment.

Modi first came to political prominence in 2002, after he incited and abetted the worst anti-Muslim pogrom in India since the communal division of the subcontinent in 1947 into a “Hindu” India and “Muslim” Pakistan.

He has won three successive terms as Chief Minister of Gujarat, which with a population of 60 million is India's tenth largest state, while cultivating an image as a “strongman” who gets things done. He has routinely

denounced the Congress for “appeasing” Muslims and India's archrival Pakistan and publicly defended the summary execution of alleged criminals and terrorists.

Modi's political ascendancy in Gujarat has been facilitated by the Congress Party. Over the past decade it has joined in the promotion of Hindu communal politics, advocating what even the sections of the corporate media derided as “Hindutva lite” and welcoming into its ranks defecting senior BJP leaders, some of whom were directly implicated in the 2002 pogrom.

Modi has lavished land and tax concessions on big business and ruthlessly suppressed strikes. Powerful capitalists like Ratan Tata, the Ambani brothers and the Birlas have reciprocated by praising Modi and flocking to the biennial “Vibrant Gujarat” investment summit he has hosted since 2003.

The most recent summit, held in January, was far and away the biggest ever with 50,000 domestic and 1,800 foreign delegates in attendance.

It was no secret that Modi, who the previous month had led the BJP to victory in the December 2012 Gujarat state election, saw the event as a means of launching his bid to secure a major national role in the BJP.

While the titans of India Inc. did not explicitly endorse Modi's prime ministerial ambitions, they whetted them, lavishing the Gujarat Chief Minister with praise.

Mukesh Ambani, the billionaire head of the Reliance Group conglomerate, declared, “In Narendra *Bhai* (brother), we have a leader with a grand vision.” His younger brother, Anil Ambani, a fellow billionaire and business rival, called Modi “a king among kings.” Ratan Tata, the recently retired chairman of Tata Group, said Gujarat stood out among India's states for

its investment climate and that this was attributable to Modi's leadership.

Western governments, which previously spurned Modi because of his role in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, have taken note of his increasing prominence in Indian politics, and begun demonstrably courting him. In March a three-member U.S. Congressional delegation, authorized by the House of Representatives, met with Modi and said it would work with him to remove the ban that Washington imposed in 2005 on his traveling to the US.

The business support for Modi has rattled the Congress Party, whose own efforts to promote Rahul Gandhi—whose father, grandmother and great-grandfather were all Congress prime ministers—as the successor to Singh have fallen flat.

In the days immediately following the Vibrant Gujarat summit, the Congress Party, which has a decades-long history of collaborating with the BJP and adapting to Hindu communalism, suddenly began leveling explosive charges against India's Official Opposition. The Home Minister, Sushil Kumar Shinde, accused the BJP and the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the shadowy Hindu supremacist "volunteer" group with which it is aligned, of running "terrorist training camps." Information and Broadcasting Minister Manish Tewari, for his part, cautioned India's corporate leaders in Modi's thrall to take a lesson from the "similar fascination" German industrialists had for the Nazi dictator Adolph Hitler.

But even as Congress leaders were suggesting that Modi is a fascist and that the BJP gives succor to violent communal extremists, they were taking steps to appeal to the Hindu right and in the name "of the national interest" collaborating with the BJP.

In late January, Singh gave a special briefing to the BJP leadership on the government's steps to counter Pakistani "aggression" following a series of border clashes. And in early February, the Congress-led UPA government carried out a longstanding demand of the BJP and Modi, hanging Mohammad Afzal Guru, a Kahsmiri Muslim who had been framed for the December 2001 terrorist attack on Indian's parliament. So as to ensure Afzal Guru's execution went ahead, the government carried it out in secret, in flagrant violation of the law.

Modi has recently been promoted to the BJP's

Parliamentary Board and many within the party's rank and file are clamouring for him to be named the party's prime ministerial candidate.

But it is far from certain that he will secure the BJP leadership, let alone that India's corporate elite will press for the coming to power of a Modi-led BJP. The BJP's largest electoral ally, the Janata Dal (United) has said it will bolt from the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance if Modi is selected as its prime ministerial candidate. And there are widespread fears within the ruling class that Modi's rabid communalist politics would destabilize the country, harming foreign investment and inciting popular opposition to Indian capitalism as a whole.

By promoting Modi as a national figure, big business and the corporate media are, however, most definitely striving to push politics far to the right and, in pursuit of their profit interests, fanning communal reaction.



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