

India: Official Opposition names arch-communalist as its prime ministerial candidate

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India's Official Opposition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has named Narendra Modi—the Chief Minister of the western state of Gujarat and a notorious communalist—as its candidate for prime minister in the general election to be held in the spring of 2014.

Modi came to national prominence as a result of his role in instigating Gujarat's 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom. He has since fashioned an image as a nationalist-communalist "strongman" who can deliver "economic development."

Modi's nomination was announced last Friday after receiving formal blessing from the BJP's Parliamentary Board, its highest decision-making body.

In early June, in what was widely seen as a prelude to his being chosen as the party's prime ministerial candidate, Modi was named the BJP's campaign chief for the 2014 national elections. Subsequently, however, Modi's ascendancy encountered considerable opposition from within the BJP, as well as from the other parties in the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance.

While much of this opposition was due to factional and personal rivalries, it also was rooted in fears that Modi will prove anathema to large sections of the electorate and, in the likely event no party wins a parliamentary majority, it will prove an obstacle to stitching together a BJP-led governing coalition.

Shortly after Modi was named BJP campaign chief, the Janata Dal-United, the ruling party in Bihar and the second largest party within the NDA, walked out of the Alliance, ending a 17-year partnership.

Within the BJP, the opposition to Modi has been led by L. K. Advani, the Deputy Prime Minister for four of the six years that the BJP-led NDA ruled India. A fellow Gujarati, Advani was at one point Modi's mentor. But at 83 years of age he continues to have his own prime ministerial ambitions. Advani rose to political prominence by spearheading the campaign to build a temple to the Hindu God Ram on the site of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in

Ayodhya—a campaign that culminated in the razing of the mosque and the bloodiest Hindu-Muslim communal clashes since Partition.

If Modi was able to overcome the opposition to his candidacy within the BJP and what remains of the NDA, it was because he received strong support from two decisive quarters. One is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS or National Volunteers Association), the Hindu supremacist paramilitary organization that provides much of the BJP's cadre and leadership and exercises a decisive sway over its appointments. At the beginning of last week, the RSS held a two day meeting with the leadership of the BJP and the VHP (Hindu World Council) at which it reportedly pressed for Modi's early endorsement as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate.

Perhaps even more important has been the ringing endorsements Modi has received from a who's who of prominent Indian business leaders. Under conditions where India's economy is unraveling and big business has soured on the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance because of its reputed failure to push through pro-investor reforms in the face of mass popular opposition, much of Indian big business is embracing Modi as the strong leader "who can make the trains run on time."

The billionaire Ambani brothers and Ratan Tata, scion of the Tata industrial empire, are among the many CEOs who have lavished praise on the "good governance" Modi has provided Gujarat, feted him at the biannual "Vibrant Gujarat" investors' summit that he hosts, and whetted his prime ministerial ambitions.

In truth Modi's "development model" has consisted of lavishing tax breaks and cheap land on domestic and foreign investors, pushing big business projects forward over popular opposition, and effectively outlawing strikes.

While the corporate media lauds Gujarat's high growth rate, critics have noted that it is based on the savage exploitation of cheap labor. Key social indicators, including

poverty and literacy rates, trail many poorer states. According to official figures in 2011, the average daily wage of a worker in the “informal” sector—which employs well over 90 percent of the workforce—was 106 Rupees (about US \$2) in urban areas and 83 Rupees (\$1.60) in rural areas.

Big business is not troubled that Modi has blood on his hands. Without a shred of evidence, he blamed “Muslims” for setting a train on fire in February 2002 in which some 58 people perished, then called for a day of protest, which, with the connivance of the police and government officials, quickly became an anti-Muslim pogrom. Well over a thousand Muslims were killed and hundreds of thousands of others were driven from their homes and forced into squalid refugee camps.

Subsequently, Modi worked to shield those responsible for carrying out the pogrom. One of his ministers and closest allies was, nonetheless, ultimately found guilty of directing mobs in killing Muslims.

Modi’s promotion as India’s next prime minister is a high-risk gamble for the BJP, which since falling from national office in 2004 has been buffeted by crisis. That significant sections of corporate India are now looking to this communalist thug as a potential savior is a measure of the desperate straits in which they find themselves.

Not only is Modi a highly-polarizing figure within India. His political rise has the potential to dangerously heighten tensions with India’s neighbors, particularly Pakistan and China.

Modi chose a rally of ex-military personnel last Sunday for his first public campaign address since being named the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate. In that address he denounced the Congress-led government for a series of recent border clashes with Pakistan and China, saying the government’s “soft” policies were encouraging Islamabad and Beijing. He heaped praise on former BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who in 1998 staged nuclear tests so as to formally transform India into a nuclear-weapons state and in 2001-2002 threatened Pakistan with war, including mobilizing almost a million troops on India’s western border.

Thanks to the complicity of India’s police and judiciary Modi has thus far escaped indictment for his role in the 2002 pogrom. But this is not the only crime in which he is implicated.

In the years following, the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, the state police carried out a policy of systematically and summarily executing “Muslim terrorist” suspects, most of whom had nothing to do with anti-Indian Islamicist groups. Modi publicly defended the “summary executions,” but since the criminal indictment of several top police officials for staging encounter killings has tried to deny any responsibility.

Recently, a high-ranking police officer facing criminal charges for his role in organizing the killings issued an open letter in which he charged that Modi had instituted and overseen the assassination policy.

Modi’s nomination has generally been welcomed by India’s corporate press. Typical was a *Times of India* piece titled “Modi campaign should be premised on growth, so every tea vendor can be upwardly mobile.” The media have cautioned Modi against stoking Hindu communalism too vehemently. They instead are urging him to focus upon his supposed positive “economic record” in Gujarat, while they attack the current Congress-led government for corruption and “governance” problems i.e. for not slashing social expenditure with sufficient vigor.

Generally there is a great deal of longing in the corporate media and among India’s big businesses for a “center-right” alternative to Congress that will brutally offload the economic crisis upon the backs of the impoverished Indian masses. This is a pipe dream because such a “center-right” alternative would have no popular traction and because the BJP is steeped in violent communal politics. As an editorial in *The Economic Times* observed: “Narendra Modi’s early choice as the BJP’s candidate for prime minister [demonstrates that] the BJP is incontrovertibly under the control of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. ... The RSS not just appoints the BJP’s president but also controls the organisation.”

Modi’s candidacy, whatever its ultimate fate, demonstrates that under the impact of the economic crisis Indian big businesses is breaking with any pretense of democratic forms of rule and embracing authoritarianism and reaction. A recent opinion poll by *The Economic Times* of the 100 top CEOs in the country revealed that fully three-quarters of them support Modi to head the Indian government while only 7 percent of them support Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the Nehru family and the Congress Party’s presumptive prime ministerial candidate in the 2014 April-May general elections.



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