

India: BJP makes indicted Hindu supremacist terrorist a “star” election candidate

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One of the chief accused in a Hindu supremacist terror network that killed scores of Muslims has been named by India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a “star” candidate in the country’s general elections, which are being held over seven phases this month and next.

Last Wednesday, the BJP leadership announced that Sadhvi Pragya Thakur Singh—who is under criminal indictment for her role in a 2008 bomb blast—will stand against Congress Party General Secretary and former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijaya Singh in Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh, India’s fifth most populous state. The national significance of her candidacy has since been highlighted by both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP President Amit Shah.

A self-styled Hindu priestess, Thakur is currently facing terrorism charges for her role in a September 29, 2008, bombing in Malegaon, Maharashtra, that killed six people. She is accused of finding the people to carry out the bombing, which was orchestrated by a Hindutva (Hindu supremacist) terror network with connections to the Indian military known as the Abhinav Bharat, and with supplying them with a motorcycle used in the attack. However, there is compelling evidence that Thakur was involved in other bombings and criminal acts perpetrated by the Abhinav Bharat.

Thakur’s candidacy is a vile and incendiary provocation. It is meant to electrify the BJP’s Hindu supremacist activist base, intimidate Muslims, and serve as a “wedge” to intensify the BJP’s communal attacks on its political opponents, especially the Congress Party.

Soon after Thakur was inducted into the BJP and appointed its candidate for Bhopal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi began invoking her name to accuse the Congress Party of vilifying Hindus and maligning “Hindu civilization.”

Amplifying the BJP’s attacks on the Congress Party for having dared to term the Abhinav Bharat a “Hindu terrorist” group when it was first exposed in 2008, Modi claimed, “Without any evidence, a rich civilization as old as 5000 years ... You called such a civilization terrorist? To give a reply to all such people, this [Thakur’s candidacy] is a symbol and this symbol will cost Congress dearly.”

Speaking at a press conference in Kolkata on Monday, BJP President Amit Shah defended Thakur’s candidacy. “It is absolutely a right decision. The allegations against her are baseless.” Earlier in an interview with the *Indian Express* he had championed Thakur’s candidacy, while accusing the Congress of “defam(ing) the entire country in the name of Hindu terror,” and “compromis(ing) national security for their vote bank politics,” or in BJP/RSS-speak “appeasing Muslims.”

Thakur, as would be expected, has been using her candidacy to espouse communal reaction. She has described her election bid as a “dharma yudh” (religious war) and touted her role, whilst an activist

in the RSS/BJP’s student wing (the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad), in the 1992 razing of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Carried out in defiance of express orders from Indian’s Supreme Court, the destruction of the nearly 500-year-old mosque precipitated the biggest communal bloodletting in India since the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent.

“Why would we regret the demolition of the Babri Masjid?” the BJP’s Bhopal candidate told *Aaj Tak*. “We are, in fact, proud of it.” Invoking Hindu fundamentalist ideology which venerates the site of the former Babri Masjid as the birthplace of the mythical god Ram, Thakur went on to describe the mosque’s destruction as the “removal” of some waste products of the Ram Temple (i.e., the Babri Masjid). She continued, “This has awakened the self-respect of our country and we will construct a grand Ram temple [in Ayodhya].”

Thakur, who was released from prison on bail in April 2017 for “health reasons,” has longstanding ties to RSS-BJP circles, including during the three-year period in which the Abhinav Bharat appears to have been active. This includes membership in the Durga Vahini, the women’s wing of the RSS-aligned Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council).

Impunity for communalist criminals

When the Abhinav Bharat was first exposed in 2008, the BJP anxiously sought to distance itself from the accused, while vociferously denouncing any suggestion that there was, or could be, Hindu supremacist terrorism.

But it has become emboldened by the unraveling, due to obstruction from within the state apparatus, of one case after another against those involved in the Hindu terror network. Modi and Shah publicly crowed last month when an Indian court declared the prosecution case against the four accused in the February 2007 bombing of the Samjhauta Express, in which 68 people died, unproven. In delivering his verdict, the judge admonished the National Investigation Agency (NIA) for failing to follow up on key leads in the case.

Home Minister and BJP leader Rajnath Singh responded to the verdict by categorically ruling out any appeal to a higher court. Flaunting his communalism, the minister ostensibly charged with upholding law and order, including protecting India’s Muslims and other minorities, declared that it is his “personal stand” that “Pakistan is always responsible for such terrorist attacks.”

Indian police and prosecutors did initially tried to pin many of the

bomb blasts orchestrated by the Abhinav Bharat on poor Muslims, in what one judge described as a calculated attempt to shield the real perpetrators.

Quizzed by the press why a party that professes to be the foremost advocate of “law and order” and an implacable foe of “terrorism” would stand a candidate under indictment on terror charges, Modi, as the BJP invariably does when accused of communalist outrages, pointed to the crimes of the Congress. He noted that the current Congress Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Kamal Nath, was long under indictment for having incited mobs to attacks Sikhs following the 1984 assassination of Indira Gandhi. And he recalled the infamous statement of Rajiv Gandhi, the father of current Congress head Rahul Gandhi, who upon inheriting the Congress leadership and Prime Ministership justified the anti-Sikh pogrom with the quip, “when a big tree falls, the earth shakes.”

The reality is the Indian state has systematically failed to prosecute and, in the rare instances they have been charged, convict the political leaders responsible for inciting and facilitating communal atrocities against Muslims and other minorities. This is true of Modi himself, who as Gujarat chief minister incited the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom, and effectively ordered security forces to stand down, so as to allow it to unfold over the course of three murderous days. It is also true of Modi’s predecessor as BJP leader, L.K. Advani. He was one of a number of front rank BJP leaders that led the mob that on Dec. 6, 1992, defied the Supreme Court by amassing at the Babri Masjid, then incited it to raze the mosque.

The BJP and the putrefaction of Indian politics

That said, Thakur’s candidacy is something new even for the cesspool that is Indian politics. Never before has an Indian political party fielded a candidate under indictment on terrorism charges for communalist atrocities.

And Thakur’s candidacy is only one particularly noxious and provocative element in a BJP campaign that revolves around militarist and communalist appeals. The BJP is celebrating the military attacks Modi ordered inside Pakistan, and which brought South Asia’s rival nuclear-armed powers to the brink of all-out war in the fall of 2016 and again this February; while denouncing the opposition for appeasing Pakistan and undermining the military. Amit Shah has denounced Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, which until Partition was an integral part of India, as “termites” and vowed to throw them into the Bay of Bengal. The BJP’s election manifesto is full of vile communalist pledges, from a vow to press forward with the speedy construction of a Ram Temple on the site of the razed Babri Masjid to the elimination of the special constitutional status accorded Jammu and Kashmir. India’s only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir has been under occupation by more than half a million security forces, under BJP and Congress-led governments alike, for the past three decades.

The BJP campaign speaks both to its apprehension and sense of impunity.

Modi and the rest of the BJP leadership are acutely aware that they face mounting opposition from the working class and rural poor. They are desperately beating the Hindu supremacist drum with the aim of dividing the working class and stoking reaction.

The Hindu supremacist right is emboldened in this course by the craven character of their establishment opponents. Not only are the Congress, the host of “anti-BJP” regional parties and the Stalinist CPM and CPI all widely discredited by their complicity in the pursuit of incendiary pro-investor reforms. They all support the great-power ambitions of the Indian bourgeoisie, and hence all joined Modi in celebrating the Indian military’s “surgical strikes” on Pakistan, and are themselves deeply immersed in caste-ist and communal politics. This is especially true of the Congress Party, which in the run up to the elections mounted what even sections of the media described as a Hindutva-lite campaign.

The press reaction to the BJP’s promotion of the indicted Hindutva terrorist Thakur is no less politically wretched and revealing. Leading dailies engaged in handwringing, arguing the BJP had taken a misstep; one that could be rectified by withdrawing Thakur’s nomination. Typical was the *Hindustan Times*, which under the headline, “Given the charges against her, Pragya Thakur’s choice was avoidable,” intoned, “The Bharatiya Janata Party has set an unhealthy precedent in inducting [Thakur] into the party and making her its candidate in Bhopal.”

In reality, the BJP is only giving expression to its far-right, fascistic character, and to the true state of ruling class politics in the “world’s largest democracy” under conditions of global capitalist breakdown, the relentless growth of social inequality, and the drive of capitalist elites the world over to sweat more profit from working people and prevail over their big business rivals through trade war, rearmament and military conflict.

The putrefaction of Indian establishment politics underscores that the struggle against communal reaction and the defence of democratic rights as a whole requires the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force in opposition to all factions of the ruling elite and the capitalist profit system.

The author also recommends:

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