

Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi expelled from Indian parliament after trumped-up criminal conviction

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Rahul Gandhi, the most prominent leader of India's Congress Party and its prime ministerial candidate in the 2019 general election, was expelled from India's parliament last Friday, just one day after he was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison on a bogus defamation charge.

Gandhi's expulsion was the culmination of a weeks-long campaign by the governing Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to denigrate and silence him. From Monday, March 13, through Thursday, March 25, normal parliamentary business was paralyzed by BJP MPs' demands that Gandhi apologize for "defaming" India by telling audiences in Britain in February that democracy in India is "under attack."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, were no doubt piqued by Gandhi's denunciations of their increasingly autocratic methods of rule. They also likely took umbrage at his assertion that the RSS—the shadowy, Hindu communalist militia and organization for "national revival" which created the BJP and to which the BJP leadership, Modi and Shah included, continues to pay fealty—has infiltrated all organs of the state, including the judiciary.

But if the BJP has decided to mount a legal vendetta against Gandhi, whose big business Congress Party has long been on life support, it is above all because he has raised pointed questions about the government and especially Modi's close ties to the Indian oligarch Gautam Adani and his Adani Group.

In late January, the Adani Group and its associated companies saw their stock valuation cut in half after the Wall Street-based short-seller Hindenburg Research published a report accusing it of running the "greatest con game in corporate history."

While the government and Indian financial regulators appear to have contained the immediate economic fallout from the Adani Group crisis, it continues to threaten the Modi government politically. Modi has a decades-long close personal association with Gautam Adani, whose companies have benefited to the tune of tens of billions of dollars from the privatization of state assets, including airports, seaports and mines. Between the Modi government's coming to power in 2014 and last fall, Adani's personal fortune rose exponentially, from \$8 billion to \$140 billion, making him for a time Asia's biggest billionaire.

The BJP went into hysterics when Gandhi sought to make the Adani affair the Congress' principal line of attack in last month's budget session of parliament and demanded a probe into the Modi-Adani nexus. The Lok Sabha speaker, a BJP MP, repeatedly turned off

Gandhi's microphone and ordered questions he raised about Adani's relations with Modi be expunged from the parliamentary record.

In the midst of all this, on February 16, a BJP Gujarat state assemblyman, Purnesh Modi, revived a 2019 court case against Gandhi. It is this case that resulted in the Congress leader's conviction last week and his expulsion from parliament the following day under a law that allows MPs sentenced to two or more years' imprisonment to be "disqualified."

While Gandhi has the legal right to challenge his conviction, the government has already rushed to declare his parliamentary seat vacant.

The "defamation" case against Gandhi is transparently trumped up, relying as it does on a discredited British colonial law.

It arises from a speech he gave in April 13, 2019, to an election campaign rally in Kolar, Karnataka. Speaking in Hindi, and seeking to impugn the BJP government for corruption, Gandhi said, "I have a question. Why do all of them—all of these thieves—have Modi, Modi, Modi, in their names? Nirav Modi, Lalit Modi, Narendra Modi. And if we search a bit more, many more such Modis will come out."

Nirav Modi is a fugitive diamond trader and jewelry store-chain owner, who has been charged by Interpol and the Indian state with numerous crimes including fraud, embezzlement, money laundering and corruption.

Lalit Modi, the scion of a prominent business family and founder of the Indian Premier cricket league, has been living in London for years to escape having to answer money-laundering charges. He had such close relations with Vasundhara Raje during her first term as the BJP chief minister of Rajasthan, he was dubbed by the press and opposition as the state's "Super Chief Minister."

Three days after Rahul Gandhi's 2019 Kolar speech, Purnesh Modi filed a criminal complaint against him accusing the Congress leader of defaming the entire "Modi community."

This is absurd. As various commentators have pointed out, there is no such thing as a "Modi community," not even in the sense used by the Indian political establishment and media, who for decades have promoted caste-ism and communalism as a means of jockeying for pelf and power and dividing the working class. Modi is not a caste or jati group. People with that surname live across numerous north Indian states, and may be "low" or "high" caste and of various faiths.

That the case against Gandhi was filed in a Gujarat court—rather than one in Karnataka, where he made the supposedly defamatory remark, or New Delhi, where he lives—only serves to further underscore its trumped-up, politically-motivated character. The BJP has governed

Gujarat, the state from which Narendra Modi hails and presided over as state chief minister for over a decade, uninterrupted since 1996. It is well-known that the judiciary in the state, which played a major role in covering up Modi and the BJP's role in instigating and facilitating the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, is staunchly pro-BJP.

Like many legal cases in India, that against Rahul Gandhi moved forward at a snail's pace, but in this case the plaintiff, the BJP legislator Purnesh Modi, himself sought a delay of up to one year. Then suddenly in February, as the BJP was fuming over Rahul Gandhi's accusations about Narendra Modi's corrupt dealings with Adani, it was revived at the plaintiff's request and, in striking contrast with most Indian legal actions, thereafter shot forward to a rapid verdict.

On March 16 the judge found the Congress leader guilty of defamation and immediately imposed on him the maximum sentence of two years imprisonment—not coincidentally the minimum threshold for disqualification from the Indian parliament under the Section 8(3) of the Representation of People Act, 1951.

And on cue, the BJP majority in the Lok Sabha voted the very next day to expel Gandhi, strip him of his seat and end all his parliamentary privileges. Only if his conviction is overturned on appeal will Gandhi have the right to stand in the next election, slated for April–May 2024.

Those who have expelled Gandhi for supposedly defaming the non-existent Modi community are themselves rank communalists. Many of them, beginning with Modi and Shah, have made the most odious and inflammatory remarks. During the same 2019 election campaign, Shah likened Bangladeshi migrants to “termites” and vowed a BJP government “will pick up the infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal.”

The opposition parties have denounced Gandhi's expulsion and warned that the government is using the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the Indian equivalent of the FBI, the tax department, other government agencies and the courts to attack its political opponents. Last month, the BJP government ordered tax officials to carry out a days-long raid on BBC offices in New Delhi and Mumbai in retaliation for the British-based broadcaster airing a documentary that highlighted Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom.

The Congress and the other opposition parties have no fundamental differences with the BJP government's foreign and socioeconomic policies: integrating India ever more completely into the US military-strategic offensive against China; massively expanding Indian's nuclear-armed military; fostering a “pro-investor” climate through privatization, massive tax concessions to big business and the rich, and by further expanding contract labour; and pursuing a profit-before-lives policy in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the Hindu supremacist BJP is relentlessly amassing political power in its own hands at their expense, flouting basic parliamentary norms, encouraging the central government-appointed governors to obtrusively interfere in state government affairs, and painting their limited criticisms as semi-treasonous.

Responding to Gandhi's expulsion from parliament, senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor tweeted: “I'm stunned by this action and by its rapidity, within 24 hours of the court verdict and while an appeal was known to be in process. This is politics with the gloves off and it bodes ill for our democracy.”

The reaction from the bourgeois press has been muted. Some sections of the liberal media, like the Chennai-based *Hindu*, have wrung their hands—just as they have in the face of a long litany of

previous authoritarian BJP actions and communalist outrages, from the targeting of government opponents as “urban Naxhalites,” the 2019 constitutional coup against Kashmir and the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act, to the violent suppression of anti-government protests and the bulldozing of the homes of people involved in them.

The dominant sections of the ruling class continue to see Modi and the BJP, with its cadre of far-right Hindu supremacist activists, as their best bet under conditions of cascading global crises to ruthlessly intensify the exploitation of the working class at home and pursue their predatory great-power ambitions on the global stage.

As for the BJP, for all its chest-thumping about India's world-beating growth and the supposed mass support for Modi, it knows that it is sitting atop a social powder-keg. Poverty wages, precarious employment, the government's privatization drive and austerity measures, mass joblessness and agrarian distress have fueled a wave of mass strikes and protests.

Rahul Gandhi, during his recent 10-day visit to the UK, said Indian democracy was under threat from the BJP and RSS, while passing over the Congress Party's own decades-long record of conniving with the Hindu right and its role in spearheading for most of the past 30 years Indian big business' socially incendiary pro-market/pro-investor “reform” program.

Noting that the western “democracies”—i.e., the imperialist powers—have been silent on the Modi government's authoritarian actions and communalist agenda, Gandhi appealed for their support by suggesting that a Congress-led government would be even more supportive of their war preparations against China. Indeed, Gandhi and the Congress party have consistently attacked the Modi government for being “soft” on China.

Yet it is to the Congress party and other right-wing caste-ist and ethnic chauvinist parties that the Stalinist CPM and CPI and the trade unions have for decades politically subordinated the working class in the name of fighting the “fascist BJP.” They have done so while systematically isolating the struggles of the working class and confining them to contract struggles and futile protests to Congress and BJP-led Union governments to adopt “pro-people policies.”

In India as around the world, the defence of democratic rights requires the independent political mobilization of the working class, uniting the struggle against communal reaction and authoritarianism with opposition to imperialist war and the fight for social equality.



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