

Instigator of 2002 Gujarat pogrom seeks new term as chief minister

By Kranti Kumara
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Voters in Gujarat, a state in western India with a population of more than 60 million, go to the polls today in the second and final phase of state assembly elections. The first phase was held Dec. 13. Results will be announced this Thursday, Dec. 20.

Chief Minister Narendra Modi, a senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and unabashed Hindu supremacist, is not only trying to win his third elected term (fourth term in total) as head of the government of India's tenth largest state. He is hoping he can use victory in the Gujarat state polls to catapult himself onto the national stage and become the BJP's prime-ministerial candidate at the next general election, which is slated for 2014.

Modi became Chief Minister in October 2001, after his predecessor and bitter rival, Keshubhai Patel, was forced to resign after the BJP suffered a series of by-election defeats. Hitherto considered little more than a party apparatchik, Modi gained political notoriety in late February 2002 when he seized upon a train fire in the town of Godhra in which 59 persons, most of them Hindu communal activists, died to incite mass communal attacks against Muslims through vile hate speeches. According to eyewitnesses, Modi instructed the state police and the bureaucracy to stand down so that Hindu mobs could "vent anger" on Muslims.

In the ensuing bloodbath, anywhere from 1,400 to over 2,000 innocent Muslims were brutally killed, some being burnt alive. Hundreds of thousands of others, mostly Muslims, were driven from their homes to languish for years in squalid refugee camps without running water or electricity. (See "India's ruling party abetted communal carnage in Gujarat" and "India: Five years after 2002 Gujarat pogrom").

Modi's criminal actions have been covered up and excused by India's corporate elite and media. The liberal *Times of India* ran an editorial earlier this year in which

they suggested Modi could indeed play a major national role if he would only apologize for the events of February-March 2002.

India Inc. has warmly embraced Modi as an administrator who cuts through red tape and "makes the trains run on time". What this really means is that Modi is a determined facilitator and promoter of their interests, who has lavished tax concessions and cheap land on domestic and foreign big business, while repressing strikes and other popular protests.

Among the six political parties standing in the election only the BJP has fielded candidates in all 182 constituencies. The Congress Party is contesting 181 seats. All of the other parties are Gujarat-based or, like the Janata Dal (United), largely confined to a single state. The Gujarat Parivartan Party, which was recently founded by the ex-BJP Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel, is fielding 174 candidates, while the Janata Dal (United)—a major constituent of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition headed by the BJP, and led by Modi's arch-rival Nitish Kumar—is standing 105 candidates. The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or, CPM, which partnered with the Congress Party in the 2007 elections promoting it as a "secular alternative," is fielding no candidates this time.

So deep is Modi's antagonism towards Muslims that when some members of his BJP campaign committee advocated allotting a few electoral slots to Muslim candidates so as to soften his anti-Muslim image, Modi rejected this emphatically, stating that the time for "appeasement" of Muslims has not yet arrived.

The electoral campaigning has been carried out within the narrowest possible framework, focusing almost exclusively upon whether Modi's autocratic rule deserves the accolades it has received from big business.

Although the Congress Party proclaims itself the foremost defender of secularism, it has adapted to and

connived in Modi's promotion of communalism. In the December 2002 Gujarat elections, it ran a campaign that even sections of the corporate media described as "Hindutva lite." (Hindutva is the official name of the noxious "Hindu nationalist" ideology promoted by the BJP and its parent organization the "non-political" RSS.) For the last (2007) state election, the Congress recruited a number of BJP dissidents, including several who had been cabinet ministers in 2002 and were themselves implicated in the anti-Muslim pogrom, and sent party president Sonia Gandhi to seek the support of various Hindu *sadhus* (holy men).

In the current campaign, the Congress has remained largely silent about the plight of the state's 5.5 million Muslims, who make up the single most poverty-stricken group in the state and continue to live in fear. Similarly they have remained silent on the exposure of a police practice of summary executions of Muslims in fake encounters—a practice Modi's government has both covered up and sought to defend in the name of fighting terrorism.

During the current campaign, Modi has surrounded himself with *sadhus* and made a number of rank communalist and bellicose statements, as when he accused the Congress-led central government of "surrendering" to Pakistan in the Sir Creek border dispute. But he has centered his campaign on his "development record."

With ample support and publicity from top Indian industrialists such as Ratan Tata of the giant Tata Group, Modi has propagated the myth of a "vibrant Gujarat" on the basis of the state's growth rate having exceeded the national average over the past 11 years.

Critics of Modi, however, have observed that even in terms of this hackneyed measure, Gujarat's growth under his regime has been far from exceptional, with the average annual growth rising from about 8 percent in the decade prior to 2001 to 8.7 percent in the following decade. The latter period saw India's overall growth rate rise as large amounts of foreign direct investment flowed into the country, following the implementation of far-reaching pro-market "economic reforms," so as to take advantage of India's vast pool of cheap labour.

By other measures, including job growth, literacy, and infant mortality, Gujarat under Modi has stagnated if not regressed. According to official figures, 23 percent of the state's population lives in poverty—and this under conditions where the poverty line is preposterously and callously low. Only those whose per capita expenditure is

less than Rupees 725.90 (US \$13) per month in rural areas and Rupees 951.40 (\$17) in urban areas are considered poor.

A recent book on Gujarat by ten academics and researchers and based upon official statistics that are themselves often unreliable or at best optimistic found that "goals like social equality, sustainable livelihoods, access to education and health, justice and peace have been abandoned in the race for growth in the high-speed lane."

Modi's Labour department is notoriously anti-worker and wastes no time in victimizing workers when they go on strike. For example, soon after Apollo Tire workers went on strike in October to demand recognition of their newly formed union and reinstatement of two of their colleagues, the Gujarat government intervened to declare the strike illegal, thus giving the green light to the management to fire the striking workers at will and hire replacements.

A myth propagated by the media and a section of the Indian ruling elite is that there is Modi the rabid communalist and then there is Modi the able administrator. In fact his *Hindutva* politics are aimed at providing a popular base, through the mobilization of backward and economically frustrated sections of the petty bourgeoisie, for the ruthless defence of the profit interests of big business and the suppression of the working class.

Modi has been able to get away with his brazen criminality because the Indian ruling class, beginning with India Inc. and the Congress Party, and its courts have turned the other way and done so even when presented with incontrovertible evidence, such as that from the high-ranking police officials who have sworn that Modi told them not to intercede to prevent the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom.

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