

India: Modi tries to distance himself from incendiary communalist remarks

By Deepal Jayasekera
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Narendra Modi, the prime ministerial candidate of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has thought it politic to somewhat distance himself from recent highly inflammatory, communalist remarks made by several prominent leaders of the BJP and allied Hindu nationalist organizations.

The Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi is himself a notorious Hindu communalist. He helped instigate the 2002 Gujarat pogrom in which well-over a thousand Muslims were killed and tens of thousands more rendered homeless.

In India's current parliamentary election campaign Modi has pitched himself as the candidate of "development" and "good governance." By so doing he is trying to appeal to mass popular anger over soaring food prices, mass unemployment and under-employment, and rampant corruption. Even more importantly, he is seeking to reassure big business—much of which is now openly plumping for the BJP—that a Modi-led government will focus on implementing its neo-liberal "reform" agenda, not the building of a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of the razed Babri Masjid (mosque) or ratcheting up tensions with Pakistan.

Giriraj Singh, a BJP candidate and former Bihar cabinet minister, told an April 18 election meeting in Jharkhand that Modi's opponents are "pro-Pakistani" and that their rightful "place" is in Pakistan. "Those," he continued, "who have united in Bihar and the country to stop Narendra Modi from becoming Prime Minister are pro-Pakistan. They have no right to live in India."

The next day, Pravin Togadia, the head of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP – World Hindu Council), a Hindu fundamentalist organization allied with the BJP, exhorted Hindus to expel a Muslim who had recently moved into a predominantly Hindu neighbourhood in Bhavanagar, Gujarat's fifth largest city. Addressing a mob outside the Muslim businessman's house, Togadia said they should

give him 48 hours to vacate the property, after which they should forcibly seize it. "If he does not relent," said the VHP leader, "go with stones, tires and tomatoes to his office." "We should have it in us," continued Togadia, "to take the law in our own hands in an area where we are a majority."

Earlier this month, BJP General Secretary Amit Shah urged a rally of Jats (a Hindu-Sikh caste group) in Muzaffarnagar, a district in western Uttar Pradesh, to seek "revenge." Said Shah, "The elections in Uttar Pradesh, especially in western Uttar Pradesh, [are] an election for honor, for seeking revenge for the insult, and for teaching a lesson for those who committed injustice." Shah's remarks were a crass appeal to anger over the communal strife that convulsed Muzaffarnagar last September and which resulted in the deaths of sixty people and the displacement of nearly 40,000, most of them Muslims. Flanking Shah during his address was a BJP state legislator, Suresh Rana, who currently faces criminal charges for inciting anti-Muslim violence during last September's riots.

Amit Shah, it need be noted, is Modi's right-hand man. A former Home Minister in Modi's Gujarat state government, Shah was dispatched to Uttar Pradesh to lead the BJP campaign in what is far and away India's most populous state.

With sections of the corporate media raising concern over the BJP's rank communal appeals, Modi on Tuesday tweeted "Petty statements by those claiming to be BJP's well-wishers are deviating the campaign from the issues of development and good governance."

While not referring to any specific statement, let alone publicly condemning Giriraj Singh, Togadia or Amit Shah, Modi said, "I disapprove of any such irresponsible statement and appeal to those making them to kindly refrain from doing so."

When directly asked in a television interview what he

thought about Giriraj Singh's statement that those who oppose him should be made to go to Pakistan, Modi simply said, "Nobody can agree with that."

Also this week, Modi sought to soften his anti-Pakistan rhetoric. In response to a question about his view of Indo-Pakistani relations, the BJP leader said, "I believe mutual respect for one another and cooperation should be the basis for relationships with foreign nations." In his remarks Modi lavished praise on Atal Vajpayee, who headed a BJP-led government from 1998 to 2004, saying he would pursue a like foreign policy.

Vajpayee's government formally declared India a nuclear-weapons state within weeks of taking office and for eight months in 2001-2 mobilized almost a million troops on the border of Pakistan in war-formation. Nevertheless, so far has Indian bourgeois politics swung to the right, Vajpayee—who under US prodding did enter in 2003 into a "comprehensive peace process" with Pakistan—is now generally hailed as a "moderate."

Pakistan's High Commissioner to India, Abdul Basit, was quick to put a favourable interpretation on Modi's remarks, saying he "was very much encouraged. They were very positive."

Also this week, Modi declared that the BJP remains committed to India's pledge not to use nuclear weapons unless it has been subject to a nuclear attack. A BJP election manifesto commitment to review India's nuclear strategy and comments by the BJP leaders involved in drafting that section of the manifesto had provoked much concern in the press that the BJP was intending to abandon India's no-first strike pledge. Such a step would have immediate ominous strategic implications for Pakistan, since it depends on its nuclear arsenal to offset India's massive conventional military superiority.

Modi's renewed emphasis on his "development" agenda and invocations of Vajpayee are clearly aimed at solidifying his support in India's corporate elite. They are also tailored to appeal to international capital.

Large sections of India's corporate elite have rallied round Modi, looking to the self-styled "strongman" to ram through socially incendiary measures over mass opposition. International capital or at least many of its more astute representatives, on the other hand, remain wary of Modi. They fear his communal politics will become a flashpoint for opposition within India and recklessly imperil relations with Pakistan. The London-based *Financial Times* recently described Modi as the personification of "desperation" in the face of "desperate times." The *Economist* magazine, which

recently titled an editorial on the coming Indian election "Would Modi save India or wreck it?," announced in its April 5th edition, "this newspaper cannot bring itself to back Mr. Modi for India's highest office." While critical of the current Congress Party-led government, the *Economist* called its return to office the "less disturbing option."

Even as Modi seeks to placate elite concerns over his aggressive communalism, he and the BJP continue to send mixed signals so as to mobilize the party's cadre—which is largely comprised of members of the Hindu supremacist RSS and its offshoots such as the VHP.

Although he hails from Gujarat, Modi, with the transparent aim of projecting himself as a "Hindu leader," has chosen to stand for election from Varanasi (Benares), India's holiest city. The BJP election manifesto reiterates longstanding demands of the Hindu right such as the building of a Ram temple in Ayodhya and elimination of Jammu and Kashmir's special status under India's constitution.

The day after Modi urged his followers to refrain from inflammatory remarks, Amit Shah gave a speech in which he claimed that once Modi becomes prime minister any infiltration of India's borders from Pakistan and China will cease. They "will not even dare to enter into the Indian side," declared Shah.

India's corporate media is forever claiming that there are "two Modis"—Modi the "able administrator" who has presided over Gujarat's rapid capitalist growth and Modi the communalist. In reality, there exists only one Modi who has been using Hindu communalism to provide a popular base for the pursuit of a big business agenda that benefits only a tiny capitalist elite and their hangers-on in the upper middle class. By scapegoating Muslims and other minorities, Modi and the BJP channel in a reactionary direction the social frustrations and anxieties caused by increasing social inequality and economic insecurity and seek to split the working class.

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