

The BJP at the Halfway Mark: Political Challenges

The last issue of South Asia Monitor addressed the economic challenges facing Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee as his government reaches the halfway mark in the maximum term available to the parliament under Indian law. This issue analyzes the political dimension of the recent troubles of India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

Devastating communal riots, election reversals in several states, and a continuing challenge to both India's secular political culture and the authority of its courts from some of the ruling party's hard-line core supporters have put on display an ineffective government that has difficulty holding together a political coalition. The resulting volatile tensions have raised fundamental questions about the ability of the current leadership to offer the country the safety and stability it needs.

BJP Suffers at the Polls. In the second half of February, a number of Indian states held elections, and the BJP did badly throughout. Its most costly reversal came in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP lost its status as the single largest party and seems likely to lose its position in the state government. The BJP's loss in Delhi, traditionally a party stronghold, was also striking. The Congress, the principal opposition party at the national level, now controls 14 out of 28 state governments, while the BJP controls 3.

The outcome of these elections does not directly affect Vajpayee's government at the national level, and the Congress Party's dominance at the state level is a mixed blessing in a national election. The Congress, with a base in most of India's states, is in direct local competition with the state-based parties that polled nearly half the total votes cast in the last election. This gives the BJP a continuing structural advantage in forming a coalition that relies on state-based parties. The recent state election results add to the sense that the BJP is losing its appeal in many parts of the country, however, which other developments of the last month enormously complicated.

Ayodhya Once Again Sparks Violence in Gujarat. The violence in Gujarat in February and March stems from the troubled history of the Ayodhya dispute. In 1992, a crowd of activists, under the leadership of current home minister and long-time Hindu nationalist L.K. Advani, tore down the 400-year-old Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. The structure was famous among Muslims because the emperor Babar was supposed to have worshiped there; it was also built on the site of what Hindus believe is the birthplace of the god-king Ram. The

communal riots that followed, the worst since partition in 1947, left over 3,000 Indians dead.

In order to restore peace, the government of India froze the status of the land. In the subsequent national elections, the BJP campaigned to rebuild a temple on the sacred site. However, the Indian courts have forbidden construction for the past decade, and the current BJP government chose not to pursue the temple in deference to its more moderate alliance partners. The government left it to the Supreme Court to ultimately decide whether the proposed temple can be built.

A number of organizations loosely affiliated with the BJP, known as the "Sangh Parivar" family and led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the World Hindu Council, have continued to press for construction of a temple. Violence flared after they demonstrated in Ayodhya in late February. Returning by train from their protest, approximately 58 Hindu activists were killed and 20 injured on February 27 when a group of nearly 2,000 Muslims attacked their train and torched four of its cars in Godhra, Gujarat. The background of this attack remains murky, but its effect was explosive. Retaliatory riots left more than 800 people dead across the state of Gujarat, where a curfew was imposed on the tensest cities of Ahmedabad, Godhra, and Baroda, among others. In order to curb any new clashes, more than 40,000 policemen were deployed across Gujarat and the town of Ayodhya. Despite these measures, flashes of violence have continued to contribute to the riot death toll in India.

The Temple and the Courts. Adding to the passions unleashed by these events is the VHP's challenge to the authority of the Indian courts. Despite the orders of the government forbidding religious events at the proposed temple in Ayodhya, the VHP nevertheless planned a puja, or Hindu religious ceremony, at the site. The attack on the train strengthened the VHP's resolve to hold a ceremony to place the first brick for the foundation of the proposed temple.

The government's response was equivocal. It decided that the Supreme Court would make the final decision, but when the case was presented, Solicitor General Soli Sorabjee argued that a modified puja should be allowed. The Supreme Court eventually did deny the request. By then, the VHP has assembled thousands in Ayodhya to take part in a mass exercise. In the end, the day passed peacefully and without a violation of the court order. However, the VHP's repeated statements questioning the court's authority and promising to continue their struggle make it clear that the issue is not yet resolved. Meanwhile, the government has the worst of both worlds: it has

angered its right-wing base by not allowing a prayer service, and infuriated its coalition partners by arguing in court for a solution offensive to secular politicians.

Shock and Shame at the Local Level. The riots provoked widespread shock at the realization that communal passions simmer so close to the surface. Although Indians are proud of their secular democracy and religious harmony, riot-torn Gujarat speaks otherwise. That the violence is not an isolated incident, but rather still continues to rage across Gujarat, is also testament to the failure of the numerous civic organizations that can supposedly quell religious rifts. During the past week, small flare-ups have left an average of four Indians dead each night.

Professor Ashutosh Varshney of the University of Michigan illustrated the dimensions of communal violence in his recent book *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Yale University Press, 2001) and a talk at CSIS. His research revealed that an overwhelming preponderance of death from ethnic violence occurred in cities rather than rural areas. Ahmedabad, Godhra, and Baroda—where the rioting continues—are three of the six most riot-prone cities in India. He found that among similarly situated cities, the factor that seemed to contribute most to preventing riots was the presence of substantial intercommunal civic engagement, especially engagement involving regular professional activities rather than simple social interaction. Without these crucial Hindu-Muslim civic networks, any spark like the train attack can incite further violence.

Failure of the State Government. The breakdown of civic organizations in preventing violence across the state of Gujarat was amplified by the failure of the state government to control the crisis. Although the Gujarat state government publicly condemned the rioting, critics have been quick to point out that state leadership was slow and ineffective in responding to the spreading violence. During the riots, the police were reportedly unable to reach the areas of violence because of burning barricades. Yet in a state where the government itself said, “Even a kite-flying incident can lead to a flare-up,” combating riot violence should be nothing new. These events have led to a national outcry for the removal of Gujarat’s chief minister, Narendra Modi, a BJP leader, who is seen as having in effect abetted the rioters.

A change of state officials, however, will not be enough to battle communal problems that have roots far deeper than the recent attack on the train in Godhra. Although the BJP and VHP just broke through to the national scene at the end of the 1990s, the Hindu right wing had an ideological and financial grip on Gujarat long before the Ayodhya conflict. A systematic “saffronization” of Gujarati politics has been taking place for years in which the Sangh Parivar has been campaigning against Muslims in an attempt to consolidate and win the Hindu vote. And the views of the Parivar have been institutionalized in Gujarat far longer than in other parts of India. For example, an effort to rewrite textbooks on Indian history from a Hindu nationalist perspective has roiled national politics the past two years. However, textbooks of this sort have been mandatory in Gujarat for years. As the public has become increasingly

polarized, Gujarati politicians have made less of an effort to form a secular challenge to the Parivar’s parties.

Doubts about Vajpayee’s Leadership. Vajpayee’s inability to control the actions of radical Hindu groups and the outbreaks of violence has raised serious questions about his leadership of the central government. Vajpayee’s appeals for peace and his April 8th visit to Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat, did little to cool communal tensions as violence in Gujarat continued to spiral out of his control.

Meanwhile, for several weeks in February and March, the riots in Gujarat monopolized the government’s attention, leaving other issues at the wayside. Although a million troops are still gathered at the border with India and Pakistan and tensions remain high, scant attention has been paid to that situation as it gets pushed into the background. The prime minister’s budget, released before the riots in February, is also of the utmost importance to the health of India’s economy. Ironically, while the sagging economy has been cited as one impetus for the communal riots, India’s budget and economic health have drifted out of the national spotlight.

A Stand-Off in Parliament. The national executive meeting of the BJP would normally have blended light politics with a vacation in the beach paradise of Goa. At this crisis meeting, however, the fate of Gujarat’s leader Narendra Modi dominated the session. Despite cries from around the country for his removal, the BJP took a tough line, rallying around their beleaguered colleague. The BJP Parliamentary Party, moved to oppose any parliamentary discussion on the issue, infuriating the government’s non-BJP allies. The Modi issue has kept Parliament at a standstill, as both houses adjourned after agitated members disrupted proceedings.

Looking Ahead. The BJP is scrambling to keep the government intact in the face of ultimatums from increasingly skeptical supporters. Opposition Congress leader Sonia Gandhi, eager to capitalize on the government’s disarray, has bitterly criticized the Prime Minister’s leadership and is reaching out to old rivals like Uttar Pradesh leader Mulayam Singh Yadav and Maharashtra boss Sharad Pawar.

The weeks ahead will test the political leadership of both government and opposition. The government is now focusing on keeping its traditional Hindu nationalist base happy. To succeed in governing through a coalition, though, its leaders also need to keep together a fractious coalition and restore momentum to a national policy agenda. The government must also restore its unequivocal support for the judiciary. If the Congress came to power, it would face these same challenges that are inherent to leading a coalition government. Not only the government’s stability, but also its ability to manage India’s social and economic transformation is at stake.

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