

Is India Going the Way of 1930s Germany?

By Arun R. Swamy

The recent rounds of violence between religious groups in India do more than reveal the fragility of India's secular state. They highlight the inability of Indian democracy to combat what is essentially a fascist onslaught.

At first glance what happened in India appears to be another—if extreme—case of religious passion gone awry. A train carrying Hindu activists to the disputed religious site of Ayodhya was firebombed by a mob, killing 58 of the activists. Several days of revenge attacks by Hindus against Muslims followed in the state of Gujarat, killing over 700.

However, India's Hindu Nationalists have always resembled 1930s European fascists more than they do contemporary "fundamentalists." Members of the core organization of Hindu nationalism, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in the 1920s, are given paramilitary instruction, not religious, and wear khaki uniforms reminiscent of Mussolini's brownshirts. While the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), founded in the 1960s, is mainly concerned with religion, it still does not prescribe how Hindus should worship or behave—an impossible task given the diversity of Hindu religious practice.

Instead, like all Hindu nationalists, it is bent on characterizing *Muslims* as alien and hostile while seeking to unify Hindus around a romantic nationalism, in which military prowess plays a central role. Hindu nationalists' emphasis on international prestige has won them the support of the westernized middle class, typically the target of Islamic fundamentalism. Their focus on demonizing Muslims rather than promoting Hinduism is illustrated even by the dispute over Ayodhya, where extremist Hindu groups destroyed a 16th century Muslim mosque in 1992, sparking nationwide sectarian riots in which more than 2,000 people died.

Hindu nationalists claim that a temple on the same site honoring the birthplace of the Hindu deity, Rama, was torn down to make way for the mosque. For Hindu extremist groups the claim that a temple was torn down to build a mosque—for which there is no concrete evidence—was at least as important as the claim that Rama was born at the site. The destruction of the mosque was commonly spoken of in terms of retaking territory that had been lost to invaders. Hindu nationalists have identified other mosques they wish to destroy, claiming that these too were built on temple sites. For none do they claim the sanctity associated with the birthplace of Rama. Indeed, the purpose of claiming a particular site as Rama's birthplace—for which there is no basis in theology or tradition—was to justify tearing down the existing mosque.

It is this fascist ideology, and the fact that a party espousing it is at the head of the national government, that makes the recent anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat so much more disturbing than earlier rounds of riots. As horrific as the recent violence was, more died in 1992. But the political establishment's response this time has been ambivalent and feeble. The paralysis in the political system is emboldening the Hindu extremist organizations responsible for the Gujarat "riots" to press their agenda more forcefully. There are times when India seems to resemble Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s.

The analogy to the rise of Hitler is not one that should be made lightly, but there are many parallels. The Gujarat attacks were not spontaneous expressions of mob rage but were highly organized and brutally efficient, probably identifying Muslim homes and businesses through the use of public records. The state government was almost certainly complicit in the wave of

violence that affected the entire state and saw no effort by the police to control it. The central government was slow to dispatch the army, and has attempted to put the focus on the train attack, for which they blame Pakistani intelligence.

The state government initially sought to limit judicial inquiry to investigating the train attack, to use its emergency powers only against those accused of the train attack, and to offer higher levels of compensation to the (Hindu) victims of the train attack on the grounds that they were victims of terrorism. Even many liberal intellectuals and politicians, whose protests forced the state government to retract some of these measures, have tacitly accepted the idea that several days of targeted anti-Muslim violence can be equated with the attack on the train, and even resulted from it.

Worse, there has been no effort by those in power to hold those responsible for the Gujarat attacks accountable. The national government, run by the same party as the state government, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has chosen not to use its constitutional authority to take over the state's administration despite having attempted last year to do so on law and order grounds in another, opposition-ruled state. Although the government has banned militant Islamic groups, it has ignored calls by parties both in the opposition and in its own coalition to do this to Hindu extremist organizations. The involvement of these organizations in the Gujarat violence is widely attested to, and they were banned after they tore down the Ayodhya mosque in 1992.

Worse still, even *after* the Gujarat riots the government negotiated with the VHP over its plans to begin construction of a temple on the disputed site.

The compromise involved an official in the Prime Minister's Office accepting possession of two pillars intended for inclusion in the temple structure. Even though this seriously compromised the Indian state's claims to religious neutrality, the government has congratulated itself for defusing a potentially explosive situation.

To be sure, the government is in a tight spot. BJP members of parliament have expressed outrage at the government's refusal to let temple construction proceed until the Supreme Court rules on the subject. However, statements and actions by Hindu extremist organizations since suggest that they have been emboldened by the concessions the government has made. Over the weekend of March 15 members of several right-wing Hindu organizations stormed and sacked the legislative assembly of the state of Orissa for unknown reasons, while the RSS warned Indian Muslims that their safety depended on the goodwill of the Hindu majority. The next week the VHP indicated that it had plans to carry the ashes of the train attack victims in processions throughout the country—an act calculated to incite mob fury. It later disavowed its plans when many of the BJP's coalition allies threatened to pull out of the coalition if the plans were carried through.

The opposition parties and some of the BJP's coalition allies have succeeded in checking the VHP to some degree. They have called for Hindu extremist organizations to be banned, and condemned the compromise with the VHP over the performance of the temple ceremony, as well as the attack on the Orissa assembly and the RSS' statement on Muslims. In addition to blocking the alleged plans to carry the ashes of Hindus killed in the train attack in a procession many

have threatened to withdraw their support if the Ayodhya temple is built. The BJP leadership has promised to abide by the Supreme Court's ruling on the temple site. However, the VHP can undertake many provocative acts short of actually constructing the temple and has announced plans for more religious ceremonies centering on the temple issue around the country. There is a limit to how many battles the allies can fight and win from within the government.

The BJP's allies have been reluctant to withdraw from the government and indeed, voted with the government in passing a Prevention of Terrorism Bill that will significantly weaken protections for civil liberties including allowing confessions extorted from prisoners by police to be admitted as evidence. The Act, the provisions of which are currently in operation as an executive order, was defeated in the upper house of parliament where the opposition parties are in a majority, but it then passed in an unusual joint session of parliament. During the acrimonious debate two former prime ministers charged that the existing ordinance was used selectively against Muslims in Gujarat, while the current Leader of the Opposition, Sonia Gandhi, argued that the law would be used by the national government to intimidate its opponents and divide the country.

Short-term political calculations keep the government in power. Most of the BJP's allies are regional parties. The opposition Congress Party, which has won a string of recent elections is their local rival. Similar divisions between the Congress and other opposition parties have also hindered efforts to form an alternate coalition. Indeed, some opposition parties are gravitating toward the government

out of tactical considerations even as some of its allies pull away from it. Meanwhile the two communist parties, outwardly the most opposed to the BJP, have announced that they would refuse to support a Congress government because of differences with that party's economic policy.

This combination of organized thugs affiliated with the ruling party who terrorize a minority community and intimidate a silent majority, with a divided opposition in which the center is getting squeezed from both sides, is only the most obvious parallel to Germany in the early 1930s. Over the past few years, the BJP has tried to reshape the secondary school curriculum by stealth in ways that fit with Hindu nationalist ideology and has presided over the slow militarization of the polity. By casting the Pakistan-supported insurgency in Kashmir as a crisis of national security, military expenditures have been increased while social welfare expenses have been cut. The command structure of the armed forces, which were kept divided for decades to ensure civilian control, has been unified in recent years. With the passage of the Prevention of Terrorism Bill,

the government will have most of the tools it requires to gradually reduce the space for dissent.

There are many factors that could prevent this from happening. The Supreme Court has blocked both the VHP's plans for Ayodhya and the release of new textbooks following the social studies curricula. The National Human Rights Commission, which in India has some judicial powers, has rejected the Gujarat government's initial report on the riots as "perfunctory" and demanded a more thorough accounting. With the opposition parties controlling the presidency, upper house of parliament, most state governments, and therefore the electoral college for electing the next president this summer, it would be difficult for the BJP to significantly alter the constitutional balance or to declare a state of national emergency. Moreover, the government has a stake in preserving India's credentials as a secular state, in order to maintain U.S. pressure on neighboring Pakistan to crack down on militant Islamic groups and in order to develop economic ties with Islamic countries like Iran. Continued provocations by Hindu extremist organizations could yet force a rift between

the BJP and its allies or even within the BJP, which is divided over the temple issue.

However, the difficulty India's mainstream parties have had in maintaining a united opposition to the BJP's agenda, and the change in the international attitude toward civil liberties following September 11, make it difficult to feel confident that Hindu fascism will be defeated. For this to happen, both centrist parties in the ruling coalition, and India's friends abroad will need to recognize that what happened in Gujarat was not just another instance of religious communities in conflict. Rather, as Indian opposition leaders have charged, it was part of a broader tendency toward eliminating civil liberties and scapegoating cultural minorities in an aggressive effort to impose a unified sense of nationhood on one of the world's most culturally diverse societies.

(Arun R. Swamy
<swamy@EastWestCenter.org> is
a fellow at the East-West Center in
Honolulu, Hawaii.)

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<http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>

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