

# Hindu Hard-Liners Win Big in India's Gujarat

by Ramtanu Maitra

The lopsided victory of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Dec. 12 state assembly elections in Gujarat, has given mixed signals to the near-future political scene in India. The elections, held under the shadow of widespread anti-Muslim riots, which left at least 1,000 dead last spring, polarized the state population. What was considered as a seesaw battle between the ruling state party BJP and its main opposition, the Congress Party, turned out to be a virtual walkover for the ruling party. The BJP won 127 of the 182 seats. Congress, under the national leadership of Mrs. Sonia Gandhi and the state-level leadership of Shankarlal Vaghela, could manage to win only 50 seats—three less than it had won in 1998. Although the overall winner in the fray was the hard-liner Hindu chauvinist BJP leader Narendra Modi—who is now the state's Chief Minister—it is evident that the Hindus in Gujarat have voted with their feet in favor of BJP's communal electoral forum.

While the national BJP leaders, particularly Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, were less than enthusiastic for Modi's communal platform, it is likely that the BJP as a national party is now handcuffed, and has little choice but to use this victory as a morale booster for the upcoming elections in other states; and later, in 2004, the national elections. Already, the BJP leaders are falling over each other to congratulate Modi for helping to rejuvenate the party after it had suffered a series of state-level defeats during the past two years.

## What Caused the Surprise?

The results have shaken up India's non-communal politicians and analysts—all of whom like to be identified as promoters of secularism. Some analysts are shouting from the rooftops that the worst has happened and the Hindu fundamentalists will now steamroll to power in the coming elections. But the ground realities are by no means so well defined.

To begin with, the Hindu-Muslim tension in Gujarat is a historical fact. From the 12th Century onwards, Muslim raiders from Central Asia came and looted the rich Hindu temples of Gujarat. In addition, as a coastal state on the Arabian Sea, Gujarat has been deeply affected by Arab smugglers—all of whom were Muslims and deeply clannish. There are coastal towns which remain partially under control of this Arab Mafia who have enriched themselves by smuggling in gold, narcotics, and electronics from across the sea. In other words, a large number of Gujarati Hindus, often wrongly, associate the Muslims with pillaging and violence.

Moreover, the state borders Pakistan and had long been

an area of irregular warfare conducted by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) functioning within India. Dozens of riots have taken place since India achieved independence in 1947. All, barring the one in 2002, took place under Congress Party rule. And the Congress Party did not bring to the fore the real issues which might have drawn the attention of the people.

### The Untold Issues

The real issues were the economy and much-desired political stability. The Congress Party failed to convince the emotionally charged electorate on both counts. Modi spoke extensively against terrorism and the perfidious role of Pakistan, but never addressed the economic issues—which would have lost him the election. But Congress, also, did not tell the electorate that Gujarat's industrial growth has fallen since the 1990s, from 11% in 1996-97 and 8% in 1998-99, to 5% in 2000-01. In both cities and villages, unemployment has been rising. Four successive years of drought have made agricultural work hard to find. Ahmedabad's textile mills have collapsed more than the last decade, leaving over 100,000 workers in the city jobless. The number of educated unemployed registered with the government increased by 30% in three years, reaching 1.206 million in October. Capital-intensive investment in sectors such as chemicals, petrochemicals, and refining have not increased employment opportunities. Although the BJP government promised the High Court that it would fill 28,000 job vacancies for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, it has not yet done so.

In addition, water scarcity is ravaging Saurashtra and north Gujarat. All over Gujarat, per-capita availability of water has declined, from 1,391 cubic meters in 1991 to 1,137 cubic meters in 2000, according to economist Indira Hirway. Although four years of drought was most responsible for the water scarcity, the BJP government did precious little to alleviate the situation.

Nor did Congress remind voters that the BJP government had promised 14 continuous hours a day of power supply for agriculture, but most of rural Gujarat gets only four to six hours a day. Farmers need at least eight hours of uninterrupted supply, in order for their bore wells to function properly and to irrigate the fields sufficiently. Electricity supply is so erratic that many pump sets are destroyed by voltage fluctuations.

Moreover, the Gujarat government's debt has been increasing. In the last five years of BJP rule, the fiscal situation of the state government worsened, and it had to borrow on overdraft 21 times. It has no money to pay for development work carried out by the village councils. Bills worth almost 10 billions rupees (roughly \$250 millions) have not been paid to contractors. Government staff and workers have not been paid their salary for several months. Instead of addressing these issues, the Congress Party leaders chose to make routine visits to the temples to show that they were as good Hindus as the BJP leaders.

### What Now?

Unfortunately, as it happens often in India, the election was further distorted by the Muslims themselves. Just before the elections, the Imam of Ahmedabad, Jama Masjid, on the holy Muslim day of Eid-ul-Fitre which celebrates the end of Ramadan, issued an edict urging Muslims to vote for the Congress Party. Since the Hindu temples, nor institutions representing other faiths, do not tell their congregants whom to vote for, the edicts issued by the mullahs from the mosques sound like a *fatwa* to defeat a particular party. Since the Muslims are Indians, there is no reason why voters have to follow an edict and cannot vote according to their conscience.

In a recent article, a noted Muslim scholar, Rafiq Zakaria, pointed out that the Muslims of India should do some introspection and ask whether they have genuinely tried to contribute to the strengthening of Hindu-Muslim relations since Partition. "The answer will be: 'No,'" Zakaria said. "Indian Muslims must open their eyes to the ground reality that an increasing number of Hindus have begun to hate them. . . . They have to do their best to bring about a change in the hostile attitude of the communal Hindus towards them. This is as much in their interest as that of the nation. Muslim . . . leaders waste their energies in playing games, whipping up emotions, and bringing more trouble to the ordinary Muslims. . . . Their self-serving leaders, with utter disregard to the aftermath of Partition, remained oblivious to their miserable decline and continued to behave with incredible arrogance, exhibiting a sense of false bravado by their loud utterances; they take out protest marches at the slightest pretext, hold demonstrations, shout slogans, demand justice and fair play but all this never gives any relief to the community. . . . They quote the Constitution and demand the implementation of this provision or that, guaranteed to the minorities, but none of it gives Muslims the required protection; even democracy is ranged heavily against them because under it, numbers count," Zakaria pointed out.

If India's Muslim leadership were to follow Zakaria's advice, it would prevent the BJP from carrying out Narendra Modi's Gujarat-style campaign nationwide. India is a vast nation with states having different languages and varied concerns. In many ways, it resembles the European Union. Religion or caste can help win elections in a handful of states, but those issues could be a graveyard in most other states. If the political leaders can finally get this message, they would realize that by carrying out a fanatic religious campaign in favor of the Hindus, the BJP has become a one-dimensional, "Hindutva" party. Such a campaign can be defeated easily by projecting before the populace the right issues. In reality, BJP has lost a lot more than it gained by winning in Gujarat. But, it remains for political leaders of other parties, who oppose the religious politics and seek social harmony, to direct a campaign which has the economic substance of the common good for India.