

In Indian Election, Hate Is Part of Platform

Hindu Nationalist Candidate in Divided Gujarat Is Also Accused of Murder, Rioting

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AHMEDABAD, India -- The candidate marched down the slum's narrow lanes, followed by men dancing to the sound of loud drums and spraying the streets with marigold petals. Hindu women paused from their chores of peeling garlic and doing laundry to offer garlands and blessings.

The cheerful scene, part of Jeetubhai Waghela's campaign for a seat in the state legislature, played out beneath a cloth banner that revealed a more ominous aspect of the coming election here in India's western state of Gujarat. The banner vows to avenge the killing of 58 Hindus during an attack on a train by Muslims last February, and as the supporters of Waghela, a member of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), pressed forward and choked the alleys, Muslim residents quickly hurried indoors.

"Here comes the lion," roared Waghela's men.

Nine months ago, as Gujarat was being riven by religious violence that followed the killing of the Hindus, Waghela stormed the same streets with a mob of Hindu men wearing orange bandanas and armed with swords, sticks and gasoline, according to witnesses and police records. Shouting angry slogans at Muslim residents, Waghela allegedly ordered the mob to loot and destroy their homes, leaving them homeless for months.

"For three days, Waghela and his men looted and burnt our homes. For eight months, we lived in relief camps because of him," said Nasir Khan, a complainant. "Now he tells Hindus he is their protector against us. Where do we run for cover if he gets elected?"

After a Muslim mob in the town of Godhra killed 58 Hindu train passengers in February, more than 1,000 people died, most of them Muslim, in weeks of arson and killing throughout Gujarat. Human rights groups have accused the BJP -- the ruling party in Gujarat as well as in India's national government -- of essentially ignoring the killings by its Hindu extremist allies.

As Gujarat prepares to elect a new state legislature on Thursday, many analysts are describing the vote as an important test of the secular foundations of India's religiously and ethnically diverse democracy.

In a state where only 9 percent of the population of 50 million is Muslim, the BJP is counting on sectarian passions to consolidate the Hindu vote. Throughout the state, BJP leaders have delivered fiery speeches against Muslims involved in the Feb. 27 attack and

against Pakistan-aided Islamic militants killing Hindus in the revolt-wracked province of Jammu and Kashmir.

One such party stalwart is Waghela, who was arrested in connection with this year's riots on four charges, including murder and rioting. Jailed for 108 days and now free on bail, Waghela, 31, is back here in Gomtipur, a mixed working-class neighborhood in Ahmedabad, with folded hands, asking for votes for the BJP. He denies playing a role in the riots and insists he was framed.

Campaigning on a recent morning, Waghela identified a new target of hate for his Hindu voters. Climbing on a platform, he told them that a fancy new high-rise for Muslims is being planned adjacent to their homes, on the site of a closed textile mill. He warned them that they would not be safe any longer.

"You will be surrounded from all sides by Muslims," said Waghela, breathlessly flicking back his hair from his forehead. "Don't let them gain power over you. Vote for me and I will stop that building plan."

"Do you want the building here?" he asked.

"No!" the crowd shouted back.

This election is critical to the political destiny of the BJP, which has suffered defeats in several state elections in the past two years. Gujarat is the last major state in which the party holds power, and critics fear that it could use a victory here as an endorsement of strident Hindu politics. The national coalition that the BJP leads in New Delhi under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee will face the polls in 2004.

"In this election, the BJP is seeking a legitimization of violence that its members indulged in against the Muslims," said Achyut Yagnik, a political analyst and social worker in Gujarat. "The results in Gujarat will determine whether they take this appeal of *Hindutva* [Hindu chauvinism] beyond Gujarat."

The BJP's main challenger in Gujarat -- and at the national level -- is the Congress party, which attacks the BJP's Hindu fundamentalism for endangering the lives and rights of India's religious minorities. As a result, Gujarat's Muslims and Christians have rallied behind Congress, while many Hindu voters in Gujarat feel that Congress, headed at the national level by the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, has an anti-Hindu slant and defends only the religious minorities.

Opinion polls show that it is likely to be a close contest between the BJP and Congress. Some secular analysts said that although Hindu voters may find the demagoguery of the BJP attractive, the social divisions inherent in the caste system may prevent Hindus from voting as a bloc.

The Muslims of Gujarat, on the other hand, appear to have decided to vote en masse for Congress. Yet many complained that Congress took their support for granted and often forgot them when attaining power. They will vote for Congress, they say, simply because they have no other choice.

Nowhere is this frustration felt more sharply than in Godhra, the epicenter of Gujarat's religious strife.

The BJP's candidate in Godhra, Hareesh Bhatt, campaigns under banners of the burning train, distributes pictures of the dead Hindu passengers and describes the election as a "religious war." But the Congress candidate there, Rajendra Singh Patel, many Muslims said, was involved in burning the shops and homes of Muslims in March.

"We made two appeals to the Congress last month not to field Patel in the elections, but they still made him the candidate," said Mohammad Yusuf, 56, a clerk in the city government. "But we are caught between a ditch and a well. To defeat the BJP, we will have to vote for Patel. But our heart is not in it."

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