

December 16, 2002

Hindu Nationalists Win Landslide Vote in Indian State

By AMY WALDMAN

NEW DELHI, Dec. 15 — In an election that was widely viewed as a referendum on India's secular character, Hindu nationalists won a landslide re-election victory today in the western state of Gujarat, which was convulsed by Hindu-Muslim riots early this year.

The vote seemed to affirm the success of the campaign strategy of the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party, which had focused on uniting Hindus against a threat of Islamic terrorism and implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, against the state's Muslims.

The Bharatiya Janata Party, which also leads the national coalition government, won 126 seats in the 182-seat state assembly. The Congress Party, the main opposition, won 51 seats.

The party's greatest gains came in areas where rioting took place last spring, and where tensions were high. The riots — prompted by 59 Hindu pilgrims' being burned to death in February in a train compartment that had been surrounded by a Muslim mob — left 1,000 people dead, most of them Muslim.

The Bharatiya Janata Party won 52 of 65 seats in riot-affected areas. In central Gujarat, where the rioting was concentrated, it won 45 seats, 30 more than it had in 1998. Even candidates whom witnesses had described as leading or inciting rioting mobs won handily.

The polarization was so severe that in some localities, Muslims, who make up only 9 percent of the state population, and Hindus stood in separate lines on election day last Thursday.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's victory defied the anti-incumbency that has defined almost every recent state election in India, as well as the caste-based political equations that had worked in favor of the Congress party in the past.

The results represent a major comeback of sorts for the Bharatiya Janata Party, which has lost every major state election, including four in February, in the last two years. A loss in Gujarat could have severely weakened its national coalition.

Before the riots, the party had seemed vulnerable even in Gujarat. In 2000, it lost 25 out of 26 district elections in the state, and earlier this year, it lost two of three assembly by-elections.

But the decision to install Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist preacher turned political organizer, as the state's chief minister last year, and the riots that came under his watch five months later, seemed to have raised the party's fortunes.

Mr. Modi, who was accused of allowing the rioting to unfold unchecked, led a campaign that focused relentlessly on the immolation of the Hindu pilgrims. He and others used it to create a fear of terrorism in Gujarat, and to present the Bharatiya Janata Party as Hindus' protectors.

Today, Mr. Modi said in Ahmedabad that the results represented the defeat of the "pseudo-secularists." Those who were defeated, he said, "should not attempt to divide Gujarat, in whichever field they are, for the sake of God, for the sake of Allah."

But for some, the election results showed that the division of Gujarat had already occurred.

"The political marginalization of the five million Muslims of Gujarat is complete," said J. S. Bandukwala, a professor of physics at the University of Baroda and a Muslim who narrowly escaped with his life during the riots last spring.

"Most Hindus of Gujarat have given electoral approval of state-sponsored dehumanization of Muslims," he said, adding that Muslims were now the "new untouchables."

Despite fears that victory celebrations might spiral out of control, there were only sporadic incidents of violence today. A victory parade passing through a Muslim area in the city of Vadodara prompted an exchange of stone-throwing that the police dispersed with tear gas and gunfire. Six people were injured, and a curfew imposed.

The party's national leadership credited the victory in Gujarat to local voters' anger at the criticism of the state after the riots.

Deputy Prime Minister L. K. Advani said at a news conference in New Delhi: "Ordinarily also we would have gotten a renewed mandate. But the renewed mandate coming in this manner has a lesson for the whole country."

Jaipal Reddy, a spokesman for the Congress Party, said its poor showing was a result of "a purely negative sectarian campaign led by the B.J.P. and its affiliates for the last eight months."

But the Congress Party, which historically has had a strong secular identity, had run what analysts called a "soft" Hindutva, or Hindu-ness, campaign of its own. Its state party president was a former legislator for the Bharatiya Janata Party, and it avoided campaigning among Muslims.

Mr. Reddy defended the Congress campaign, saying, "Secularism is not the same as negation of religion."

But he added, "The communalization of the campaign was so complete, nothing worked."

The victors have their own challenges ahead as well. The election campaign laid bare the divisions in the Hindu nationalist family of organizations, of which the party is merely one element.

It pitted moderates, like Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, against hard-liners like Mr. Modi, who has been strongly backed by the World Hindu Council, a fundamentalist sociocultural group that has become increasingly active politically.

Moderates in the party say privately that extremists, and the World Hindu Council in particular, were given a long leash during the campaign because they have a mass base in Gujarat that is unmatched in other states. After the election, an aide to the prime minister said, they would be reined in.

But that may not prove so easy. The council's militantly nationalistic members campaigned hard for the party and will certainly take much of the credit for its victory.

"Gujarat is the graveyard of secular politics," Pravin Togadia, the firebrand international general secretary of the World Hindu Council, declared today. "The graveyard will extend to Delhi."