

India's V.P. Singh government about to collapse over religious warfare

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The minority Janata Dal government of Prime Minister V.P. Singh, drawing support from the communists and Hindu chauvinists, is about to fall. President R. Venkataraman has advised the prime minister to prove his government's majority in the Lok Sabha—India's upper house of Parliament—Nov. 7. By the time this article appears in print, the 11-month old rule of the Janata Dal, wrought with civil dissension, caste and communal hostilities, and intra-party quibblings, will have come to a deserving end.

The end, however, is coming with a bang. Those who were doubtful about the outcome of the test of strength at the Lok Sabha are convinced that the breakout of widespread riots throughout north India following the government's British-style approach toward the temple-building volunteers at Ayodhya will finish off any chances Singh had. On Oct. 30, at least 40,000 Hindu chauvinist volunteers, who had come to inaugurate the building of Sri Ram's temple at Ayodhya, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, faced a sea of security forces with guns. The Hindu fanatics claim that the Ayodhya site, where a mosque already exists, is the birthplace of their god Ram, and hence claim their right to build a temple there in his name. The entire town of Ayodhya was cordoned off and curfew was imposed. The disputed mosque and the entire complex were surrounded with steel barricades topped off with barbed wire.

Bereft of leaders who, alongside at least 100,000 volunteers were arrested earlier, the surging mass swarmed around the town trying to break through the security cordon. When paramilitary forces opened fire and police made baton-charge, 11 were killed and scores injured. But thousands of men and women suddenly appeared from the side-streets of Ayodhya carrying the saffron flags and a spirit of defiance. This was a surprise, since the government has repeatedly said that the local people were against the building of the temple. One analyst pointed out that the Uttar Pradesh government's provocative steps had infuriated the local people.

Despite the resistance offered by the security people, some stick-wielding youths managed to break through the cordon—according to some reports, the paramilitary forces,

in fact, helped the youths—and climbed to the top of the disputed mosque with the obvious intent of damaging it. While the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and all local newspapers gave detailed accounts of the takeover of the shrine, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mulayan Singh Yadav has claimed that the attempt to start building the temple has been thwarted.

After manipulating both the Hindu chauvinist BJP and the Indian variety of communists throughout this period, Prime Minister Singh finally met his Waterloo on Oct. 23 when the Bharatiya Janata and its 86-member legislative party withdrew its support from the government. The crisis, building up for months, burst into the open when BJP President L.K. Advani was arrested by the Bihar state government, which is also under Janata Dal leadership. Advani was leading a "Rath Yatra," a chariot procession with thousands of Hindu chauvinists following a route over 10,000 kilometers long to Ayodhya, where the BJP had been planning to inaugurate the building of a temple to honor the birthplace of Sri Ram, the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu.

It is an old but volatile dispute. According to many, and based on Hindu belief rather than on historical documents, Sri Ram was born at Ayodhya more than 2,000 years ago, at the site where, in the 16th century, the Moghul rulers erected a mosque. The dispute arose during the British colonial era, when the British rulers put the issue under the jurisdiction of the Allahabad High Court and locked up the whole issue. The mosque, which was allegedly built after demolishing a Hindu temple—an incident not uncommon during the Moghul rule of India—and was last used for saying prayers in 1939. The issue was reopened once in 1949, following independence, but the court put the entire complex under locks. That same year, some Hindus placed Sri Ram's idols inside the mosque.

The issue was reopened again in 1986 during the Congress party rule of Rajiv Gandhi, and the Hindu chauvinists surged ahead to reestablish their demands, the most disturbing one being to destroy the mosque and build Sri Ram's temple at the same location. The Congress Party government

allowed the BJP to lay the foundation for the temple in an adjacent area, and declared that the dispute about the mosque will remain with the Allahabad High Court. The BJP considered the laying of cornerstone a great victory, to the extreme consternation of the Muslim communal leaders. According to poll analysts, the issue aggravated the Muslims so much that the Congress party, which usually benefits from Muslim votes, came out poorly in the 1989 elections.

The interim game

Having assumed power with the help of the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose 86 parliamentary seats provide the government the necessary majority, and being aware of the BJP's single-mindedness on the temple issue, Prime Minister V.P. Singh, a master tactician, began to manipulate both warring factions with the ostensible purpose of coming to a peaceful solution. However, the BJP continued to demand that either the mosque be demolished or that it be relocated brick by brick. The Muslim community, represented by hardline communal elements, saw an opportunity to play the role of a power broker. In other words, practically nothing was done, while the embers began to give off smoke and even spit fire occasionally.

Prime Minister Singh asked for six months' time to work out an amicable solution, but the issue was suppressed, until it blew up full force into the nation's face. The BJP, while agreeing to Singh's request, made it plain that the inauguration of the temple construction would begin on Oct. 30, an auspicious day according to the Hindu religious calendar. Prime Minister Singh, meanwhile, discussed matters with the hardline fundamentalists from both sides. Reports have recently surfaced of highly conciliatory conversations between Singh and the fundamentalist Hindu groups. According to the editor of the *Indian Express*, at one such meeting Singh he privately connived on means to remove the mosque, while at the same time he was making strident commitments in public to protect the mosque. The contents of the article, which was suppressed by the daily's owner before it came out, became available after the editor was fired.

Whatever happened, the fact remains that V.P. Singh has failed miserably in utilizing the time he requested to find any solution to the vexing issue. He paid lip-service to the minority Muslims on one hand, while he manipulated the BJP on the other. He did nothing to stop the "Rath Yatra" procession, which began in Gujarat at the Somnath temple, another temple which had been looted and destroyed on Sept. 25 by invaders from Afghanistan. The procession was heading toward Ayodhya and gathered large crowds along the way. Meanwhile, communal tensions were created all over India.

At the same time, Prime Minister Singh's man in Uttar Pradesh, where Ayodhya is located, Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav, began his statewide condemnation of the Hindu fanatics and threatened to arrest anyone who dared to

come to Ayodhya on Oct. 30 for the foundation laying. As the die was cast, Prime Minister V.P. Singh wavered, a characteristic which inspired his former Deputy Prime Minister to call him "spineless." On Oct. 25, the prime minister, after much deliberation, issued an ordinance announcing that the government will acquire the land where the mosque is situated and also the adjacent land where the temple's foundations have already been laid. The ordinance promised that the dispute over the mosque will now be referred to the Supreme Court, the highest court. Within 48 hours, the ordinance was lifted, following objections from the Muslim hardliners, who pointed out that the government cannot acquire the land on which the Mosque is located because it belongs to the Muslim community property, or *wakf*.

The cool calculator

Already more than 100 have died in the riots around the issue. In the coming days, it is expected to get gorier. Since neither side is willing to give an inch on its respective demands, the hardline communal elements belonging to both faiths will exploit the situation to the full. A nonexistent government will only help the situation to deteriorate further.

But, behind this religious façade, a dirty political game is in progress. For the BJP, the support to the Janata Dal government was based upon twisting the government's arms to get what it wants and enhance its popular base. In its scheme of things, the building of the Sri Ram temple is a crucial one.

On the other side, Prime Minister V.P. Singh is intent on "using" the BJP support to stay in power and build his political base. His target is to erode the Congress voter base, which comprises the backward caste members, the poor, and the Muslims, through polarization and division within the society and between religions. In order to win over the backward castes, he has partly implemented the reservation policy as recommended by a 1979 report (See *EIR*, No. 39, page 49). With the hope that the Hindu society will be divided, and the large majority of backward caste members will line up behind him, Prime Minister V.P. Singh, then, went casting for the Muslim votes while playing the role of a self-proclaimed social reformer.

With the downfall of the V.P. Singh government on or before Nov. 7, the country will face a mid-term election and large-scale violence. V.P. Singh is counting his chickens already, with the hope that his game of political polarization will ride him back to power with the helping hands of the communists, without the BJP. Singh knows the political calculations, and so he cannot be written off. But it is certain that he would not worry much about the caste and communal riots that have been unleashed and are expected to get uglier during the coming election time. There is no telling how far a politician can go for votes, but V.P. Singh could be a good yardstick.