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2017

Juhi Ahuja, & Pravin Prakash. (2017). Cow Vigilantism in India: Modi's Dilemma or Legacy? (RSIS Commentaries, No. 131). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/83742>

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Cow Vigilantism in India: Modi's Dilemma or Legacy?

By Juhi Ahuja & Pravin Prakash

Synopsis

The recent phenomenon of 'cow vigilantism' poses a serious threat to the political legitimacy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. His dilemma lies in balancing his image as a strong Hindu leader with his popularity as moderniser and reformer. The inability to find a balance that disavows violence threatens to leave behind a legacy of religious extremism.

Commentary

IN MANY parts of India, the majority Hindu population considers the cow sacred. However, violent acts against humans in the name of 'cow protection' are a worrying indication of the current administration's failure to reign in extremist Hindu groups. Narendra Modi's ascension to the premiership was propelled by the support of the Sangh Parivar – the family of Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) organisations, including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), where he earned his stripes as a grassroots organiser.

However, a large section of his support base also comprised the urbanised middle-class, who elected him for his commitment to economic development. This middle class largely disavows the use of violence and sees it as antithetical to economic development.

Modi's Conundrum

The Modi conundrum is thus as follows: If he allows for religious extremism and violence, he might lose the support of the growing middle-class. Yet if he is perceived to be too harsh on the Sangh groups -- some of which allegedly instigate

cow vigilantism -- then he risks losing his other major support base. Modi is thus forced to strike a balance between his two major support bases while taking serious action against violence in the name of religion.

Arguably, there has been a correlation between the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) national victory in 2014 and the emboldening of a number of radical Hindu and Hindu nationalist groups and sub-groups. While most of them have existed prior to Modi's electoral victory, they have gained great visibility and media prominence in the past three years. It comes as no surprise that membership numbers are on the rise and groups exercise significant public demonstrations of their ambitions – without fear of accountability or punishment.

For instance, on 13 June 2017, a mob of around 200 Hindu cow vigilantes attacked a government convoy carrying cattle from Rajasthan to Tamil Nadu for a government-sponsored breeding programme. Around 50 individuals have been charged with assault, while some members of the police have also been questioned for not acting promptly. This is the second violent incident related to cow vigilantism in Rajasthan in just two months. Other similar incidents have taken place in Gujarat, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.

Also, much of the violence has been directed at Muslims and Dalits who often form the most marginalised sections of Indian society. This has led to increased cynicism towards the Modi administration's commitment to the Indian ideal of secularism.

Religious Triumphalist?

While Modi is unabashed in portraying himself as a proud Hindu nationalist, he has actively called for people of all faiths to coexist peacefully. Yet, his critics have pointed out that he has been largely silent about increasing incidences of violence, aggression, and discrimination in the name of Hinduism by purportedly radical Hindu mobs, determined to assert their cultural and religious superiority.

Historian Richard Landes calls this phenomenon 'triumphalist religiosity', in which believers consider non-believers inferior, such that they attempt to justify their own religiosity publicly. In the case of cow vigilantism, the perpetrators are self-proclaimed *gaurakshaks* or "cow protectors" who believe that defending cows is their ordained religious duty. Thus, public mob lynching and targeting minorities become rational actions for them.

The context for the surge in violence by so-called *gaurakshaks* is mired in a deep political squabble between the BJP and opposition parties on the issue of cow slaughter. The RSS has called on a nationwide ban on the slaughter of cows, even though many poorer sections of society depend on beef for consumption and India is the biggest exporter of beef in the world.

Despite this, the central government has issued a nationwide ban announced on 26 May 2017 on purchasing and selling cattle for slaughter, citing illegal animal trade as a justification. This has resulted in outcry in states such as Kerala, Nagaland, and Meghalaya where beef consumption is high. However, the central government's

actions of restricting the sale of cows is seen to legitimise cow vigilantes who are perceived to be enforcing the government's mandate on the streets.

Modi's Political Legitimacy Under Threat

Modi the Hindu reformer and moderniser cannot be seen as the benefactor of cow vigilantes and the killers of Muslims and Dalits. The spectre of cow vigilantism thus threatens to fracture Modi's political legitimacy as well as stifle his attempts to expand the BJP's appeal on the back of his popular brand image. Understanding this requires comprehending that the rise of Modi is a largely middle class phenomenon. His popularity today is due to his image as a rational moderniser and developer – an image that can be delegitimised if excesses of Hindu extremism are permitted.

Christophe Jaffrelot, an expert on Indian politics, has argued that a young, aspirational burgeoning middle class – that which Modi has referred to as a “neo-middle class” – perceives Modi to be a “super-CEO” and less of a politician. Distrustful of traditional politicians and disdainful of the legacy of dynastic politics and corruption, this neo-middle class forms the core of Modi's new support base.

It constitutes a culturally Hindu imagined community made up of an increasingly young educated population, Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) living overseas and newly urbanised groups who share economic aspirations. With promises of strong economic growth rather than the maligned redistributive politics of old, Modi's image as an economic reformer and development maverick is very attractive to the neo-middle class. Modi promises to make India great again.

Staying True to *Moditva*

The argument here is not one that prioritises economic development over Hindutva, but rather that Modi's brand of politics, dubbed *Moditva* by political observers situates economic development and pragmatic, rational politics as the key driver of the rise of a powerful, prosperous Hindu India. Modi's political legitimacy then lies in his ability to abstain from the excesses of Hindu nationalism and pursue *Moditva* with the drive and vision of politicians like Lee Kuan Yew whom he is often compared to by followers. The beef ban would result in a devastating economic blow to the industry, a deep contradiction to Modi's development ambitions.

Serious questions must then be asked about whether the neo-middle class would remain supportive of a regime that overtly or tacitly supports mob justice which continually threatens to spill into communal violence. While there is discernible support for legislative action banning beef eating and instituting ‘cow protection’, cow-vigilantism is a different beast altogether. It will be seen as antithetical to Hindu values, inhumane, and counterproductive to the vision of economic growth and development. It will also question Modi's legitimacy as a harbinger of economic prosperity and a strong peaceful Hindu *rashtra* or nation.

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