

# With rising tensions, BJP faces a political dilemma

Over the past decade, the Hindu-Muslim axis has once again emerged as the central pole of Indian politics. But now, a period of churn has set in, following a raft of incidents, the latest being the brutal daylight murder of a Hindu tailor in Rajasthan's Udaipur by two Muslim men, because the former backed controversial comments on Prophet Mohammed by a former Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spokesperson. There is a view that the current state of sectarian tensions was inevitable in a way, because majoritarian rhetoric has been part of the ruling party's electoral agenda. But signals coming from the top leadership of the BJP and its ideological fount, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), indicate that the ruling party is increasingly finding itself in a tricky position due to the cascading effect of these events. The tipping point seems to have been breached. It has not only exposed the inner fault lines of hardliners versus moderates within the Hindutva ecosystem, but also exposed a fundamental contradiction between the party's ideological-political goals with its governance-related imperatives.

How will the BJP proceed from here on? There are two views on what the party must do. The first believes that the BJP must pivot before it's too late and course-correct before the 2024 Lok Sabha (LS) polls, because, though there is no nationally assertive Opposition, the party might find it difficult to counterbalance anti-incumbency sentiments emanating from continuously winning LS seats for several terms in many parts of northwest India. Furthermore, as a ruling party, it must focus on establishing order, and shift from agitational routes of politics to implementing its governance agenda, especially on employment. This necessitates that the party must rein in some supporters who are flirting with what amounts to hate politics, adopt a more restrained position on majoritarian nationalism, and reach out to Muslim communities.

The second believes that the uproar over the remarks on Prophet Mohammed was yet another organised attempt to undermine Hindus and the Modi government. According to this view, the riot-like situations in many parts of the country thereafter, the backlash from West Asia, and the selective response of the liberal-secular position on some of these incidents (including those who commented on symbols related to Hindu religious beliefs) have been hypocritical at best. A section of the Hindutva base – which has been unhappy with the BJP for not doing enough – has been further galvanised by the Prophet row and the gruesome murder in Udaipur. This group has likely imbibed the idea that having the BJP in

power is necessary to protect its religious interest and keep so-called anti-Hindu forces at bay.

The BJP confronts a clear dilemma and its strategies will depend on the party's calibration of the positive and negative fallouts on various fronts. The party realises that the impulse towards radicalism and polarisation has strained the rule of law and impacted governance. And, many of these controversies will hurt investment and hinder the government's efforts to rein in commodity prices and boost job growth. The current regime is already seen unfavourably by large sections of the global civil society, including many international media outlets, on questions of liberties, and it is now being forced to spend political capital in mending diplomatic strains.

The biggest challenges for the party are ideological and political. Since coming to power in 2014, the Modi regime has delivered on two longstanding ideological goals – construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and changing the status quo in Jammu and Kashmir. The current set of controversies – ranging from the Karnataka *hijab* row, the violent clashes on Hanuman Jayanti and Ram Navami and the revanchist campaign in Kashi and Mathura – has the ability to create new ideological planks. For this reason alone, the top leadership has struck largely conciliatory positions, and even occasionally admonished more extreme elements.

Politically, the BJP's challenges are not merely electoral but also organisational. All political parties have layered support bases, with a core forming the nucleus. In the BJP's case, while hardliners have clear anti-Muslim prejudices, the main concern of moderates is propagation of pro-Hindu politics. While these different support bases may share overlapping concerns, the BJP needs to figure out a way to engage with the hardliners, without alienating its more centrist base. The leadership understands that political power in India necessitates forging a broad-based social coalition. The current unhappiness of hardliners may not lead them to think of forming an extreme-Right wing alternative or vote for non-BJP parties, but they are indispensable for the party's mobilisational infrastructure. A dip in their enthusiasm level will diminish the BJP's mobilisational capacity to rally non-core voting blocs.

On the one hand, current communal conflagrations might bring clear electoral advantages for the BJP, and restraining hardliners could give them greater incentives to unite and emerge as a more powerful lobby within the party system. On the other, it won't be easy for the party leadership to reverse this rising tide after letting the hardliners set the terms of debate by raising the bogey of one controversy after another.

The die has been cast and the fallout of these events is unpredictable – both for the BJP's internal politics as well as its governance legacy. India is now in the midst of a cycle of incremental polarisation, with periods of highs and lows, which will keep shifting the ideological middle ground further to the Right. How the party treads this path will determine the future of not just the BJP, but also Indian democracy.



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How the BJP handles this cycle of increased polarisation will determine the future of the party and Indian democracy ANI VIA REUTERS

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The views expressed are personal