

Mumbai atrocity: the dead end of communal politics

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The toll of the terrorist atrocity in Mumbai—over 170 innocent dead and 300 wounded among the city’s tourists, shopkeepers, workers and pedestrians—elicits a genuine sense of horror in masses of people worldwide.

Such tragedies do not simply happen: they are prepared over decades. The Mumbai tragedy both stems from and will exacerbate the national and communal tensions that have plagued the Indian subcontinent since its partition in 1947, at the end of British colonial rule.

The response of India’s Congress Party-led coalition government has been as reckless as it was predictable: Indian authorities have rushed to blame the attack on India’s historic arch-rival Pakistan, issuing increasingly ominous threats of reprisals.

No serious investigation has been carried out as to how and why ten gunmen turned India’s largest city into a war zone for three days. The Hindu wrote that in recent weeks “India’s intelligence services” had made “at least three precise warnings” of an imminent attack, suggesting at the very least a massive failure on the part of Indian security forces.

India’s minister of state for home affairs Sriprakash Jaiswal said Indian intelligence “will be increased to a war level.” An Indian army spokesman had to issue denials Sunday that India is mobilizing troops against Pakistan.

After Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari pledged Saturday that he would move against any individuals or groups in Pakistan found to have a role in the attacks, it appears Zardari himself is none too sure what role Pakistani intelligence and related forces played in the atrocity.

Zardari also reportedly met with his prime minister and armed services chief late Saturday night to discuss the preparedness of Pakistan’s armed forces to repel an Indian attack.

Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has rushed to make common cause with the official opposition Bharatiya Janata Party—which has long accused the government of being “soft” on terrorism—and demanded that India’s security forces be given sweeping new powers. On Sunday Singh announced he had initiated cross-party talks to create a new federal anti-terrorism agency and “a new legal framework” to fight terrorism.

The BJP, a Hindu supremacist party, has a long record of inciting violence and outright pogroms against India’s Muslims and other religious minorities. In the weeks prior to last week’s commando-strike on Mumbai, the BJP and its allies were mounting a shrill campaign in defense of Hindu extremists who carried out a campaign of terrorist bombings that caused widespread fatalities.

Washington, meanwhile, is exploiting the popular revulsion over the Mumbai atrocity to lend legitimacy to the “war on terror,” the catchphrase used to justify both its predatory wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and its massive assault on democratic rights at home. No doubt behind the scenes it is using the fresh eruption of tensions between India and Pakistan to press Islamabad to do more to suppress the armed opposition to the US occupation of Afghanistan in Pakistan’s border regions and to aggressively assert the US’s “right” to carry out military action inside Pakistan.

These events again underline the inflammable character of world politics. An unexpected event produces a political crisis that threatens potentially incalculable consequences for the globe. The capitalist press, with its sensationalist and class-driven reporting, will attempt no serious explanation for such a sudden, and seemingly accidental, turn of events.

The western media has celebrated India in recent years as the “world’s most populous democracy,” home to a vibrant entrepreneurial elite—in short, a capitalist success story.

The reality is that South Asia is wracked by massive social antagonisms. These antagonisms are rooted in the colonial subjugation of the Indian subcontinent and the betrayal and suppression by the nascent Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisies of the mass anti-imperialist and socially emancipatory movement that convulsed the subcontinent in the first half of the 20th century.

The partition of British India into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India resulted in communal violence in which up to two million people perished, with the migration of 14 million people from Pakistan to India and vice versa. It gave rise to a bitter Indo-Pakistani geo-political rivalry that has thrice exploded into all-out war.

Partition was itself only the most bloody and tragic expression of the emerging South Asian bourgeoisie’s organic incapacity to complete the tasks of the democratic revolution—to unite the myriad peoples of the subcontinent, eradicate landlordism, and abolish caste oppression—because of its dependence on imperialism and fear of the young, but increasingly combative working class.

Now, 61 years after independence, South Asia is home to the world’s largest concentration of poor people. Under orders from the IMF, Pakistan is currently imposing a brutal economic restructuring program, cutting social spending, eliminating energy price subsidies, and raising interest rates. In India, the bourgeoisie has starved the agricultural sector—upon which the majority of the population depends for their livelihood—of state support in order to pursue a “development strategy” under which it will enrich itself by providing cheap labor production for world capitalism.

Geo-politically rivalry, manipulated by imperialism, has resulted in tens of billions being squandered on wars and weapons and frustrated economic development. Today South Asia is the world’s least economically integrated region.

Unable to provide any progressive solution to the problems of the masses, the respective camps of the Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisie have sought to deflect social tensions by inciting popular hostility against the “external enemy” and by promoting the politics of caste, ethnicity and religious sectarianism.

In Pakistan, US imperialism played a direct role in this process, arming Pakistan and

encouraging successive military dictatorships, particularly after it incited the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in which it intervened with Pakistan as a regional proxy.

A marginal force during the first three decades of independent India, the Hindu right, in the form of the BJP, is now the Indian bourgeoisie's alternate party of government. The Congress Party, as the events in Mumbai have again so graphically demonstrated, adapts to, and connives with, this reactionary layer.

The Mumbai tragedy ultimately constitutes a devastating indictment of bourgeois nationalism, whose opposition to class appeals leaves it unable to overcome South Asia's ethnic, communal, and caste antagonisms. Instead, South Asia's reactionary state system divides and incites the workers of the Indian subcontinent against each other, threatening to provoke further wars in a region now armed with nuclear weapons. This dead end will admit no lasting resolution apart from a socialist revolution to unify the masses of South Asia.

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