

## From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

### India's opposition is in trouble

*The Hindu opposition's vaunted "show of strength" on Feb. 25 fizzled, and now the BJP party is faltering.*

An unprecedented show of strength by India's Congress Party-controlled government to enforce its ban on all rallies in the capital, and some serious miscalculations by the leadership of the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), joined up with several days of cold and drizzly weather to turn the rising opposition party's Feb. 25 demonstration into a thoroughgoing flop.

The government's preventive measures virtually shut down the city for two days: Schools were closed, and there was some 60% absenteeism from work, as roads and transport routes were blocked and free movement was prohibited through a series of concentric circles around the capital. Steps were taken across the country to prevent activists from even getting to Delhi. In the event, some 1,000 BJP workers were arrested in the city, including all the top leaders, and not a single soul gained access to the rally site. The hundreds of local rallies anticipated in general, also did not materialize.

This was in sharp contrast to BJP chief Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi's strident claims that 1.5 million people would attend the rally despite the government ban. Though the BJP has since blamed the "brutal use of state power" for the fiasco, it is apparent that its own miscalculations were at fault.

The Feb. 25 rally was called as a show of strength, and to demand government action on the party's demands for a repeal of the ban on the Hindu religious group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS), which

has been in force since the Dec. 6 destruction of the Muslim mosque in the town of Ayodhya. The BJP has demanded prompt reconstruction of a Hindu temple on the ruins, and prompt elections in the four previously BJP-ruled states taken over by the national government after Dec. 6.

But despite the BJP's organizational skills, plentiful resources, and elaborate planning, the rally did not inspire public participation beyond the already committed activist cadres. The assumption that the typical BJP sympathizer would jump to join a confrontation with the government, was a serious miscalculation. The call subsequently for observance of "Anti-Repression Day" on Feb. 26, likewise drew scant response, despite the absence of any government or police restriction of movement on that day.

This reality has exacerbated tensions within the BJP leadership between so-called hardliners, represented by Dr. M.M. Joshi, and more moderate voices such as that of Atal Behari Vajpayee and others, who had argued for a change of venue for the rally pending satisfactory negotiations with the government. These leaders seem more concerned with reestablishing the party's credibility as a responsible, future ruling party, and not the zealous demolition unit reflected in the Dec. 6 events in Ayodhya.

Along these lines, in early February a party leader's call for forcible eviction of Bangladeshi immigrants in Delhi was immediately pounced on as an attempt to start riots in the city, and

had to be officially retracted.

The dilemma is that the BJP's momentum as an up-and-coming force has been fueled almost exclusively by the type of communal passions which characterized Ayodhya. On the day-to-day issues of economy and governance, the BJP does not distinguish itself, much less arouse the public's imagination or passion.

The depth of the crisis in the BJP leadership can be gauged by the fact that the "direct action" program promised loudly by Dr. Joshi did not materialize on Feb. 25, and was not heard of following the party's national executive meeting Feb. 27, either.

Accordingly, the party's angry vow not to allow the parliament to function until its demands were met, has now been revised, despite government intransigence. The BJP had demanded an unconditional apology from the government, a parliamentary inquiry into alleged excesses against members of parliament, and removal of the Delhi police commissioner. The reversal is tied to the realization that such disruption tactics are becoming counterproductive. Meanwhile, a BJP filibuster has been the party's mealy-mouthed response to the government's 1993-94 budget. But the budget, presented by Finance Minister Manmohan Singh on Feb. 27, appears to have effectively buried the BJP drama for the duration.

The BJP's stance on the budget shows, however, that it offers no real alternative. The critique consists of complaints that the finance minister is overestimating India's growth rate, and therefore government revenues. One unnamed senior leader is putting forward the tortured argument that the budget is "an election year budget" designed, since the Congress Party knows it cannot win, to be an albatross around the neck of the next party in power.