

India's Kristallnacht

by GWYNNE DYER

The anti-Muslim pogrom in northeastern Delhi last week only killed 43 people, and a few of them weren't even Muslims. But then on Kristallnacht ('The Night of Broken Glass') in Germany in 1938, only 91 Jews were killed. It was still a Nazi declaration of war on the Jews, and a forewarning of the 6 million Jewish deaths to come.

Is this India's Kristallnacht? History does not repeat, but it does have patterns, and there are disturbing similarities.

First, a disclaimer. Many senior officials in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling BJP (Indian People's Party) indulge in blood-curdling anti-Muslim rhetoric, and more than a few have urged violence against Muslims, but there is no plan to exterminate them in death camps. It can't be done.

Only one in a hundred Germans was Jewish in 1933, when Hitler came to power. One-seventh of India's population - two hundred million people - are Muslims. A Nazi-style 'Final Solution', or even the expulsion of the entire Muslim population (like the Nazis' early fantasies about moving all of Europe's Jews to Madagascar) is just not practical in India.

Modi is a realist, and his project is not genocide. It is the re-definition of Hindus as the only 'real' Indians, and the demotion of Indian Muslims to second-class citizenship at best. But it will still take a lot of violence to cow Muslims into accepting their new lower status, and that is what we were seeing in Delhi last week.

Modi's project went into high gear soon after he was re-elected with a landslide majority last May. In August he stripped Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, of the special status it had enjoyed since it joined India in 1947. The state has been locked down under military occupation ever since, and most senior Kashmiri politicians are still in detention.

Then in December he brought in two new laws that will, if they stand, make 'second-class citizenship' for Muslims a reality. One is the Citizenship Amendment Act, which makes it easy for immigrants of every religion except Muslims to become Indian citizens.

The other is the National Register of Citizens, which will force the hundreds of millions of Indians who have no documents proving their nationality to apply for citizenship, just as if they were migrants from somewhere else. Getting Indian citizenship will be easy if they are Hindu (or Sikh, or Christian, or Buddhist), but almost impossible in practice if they are Muslim.

The huge non-stop protests since December show that many Indians, including many Hindus, are appalled by these discriminatory laws, and by Modi's frontal assault on the principle of a secular Indian state whose citizens are all equal before the law. But most Hindus seem to approve, and Hindus are 80% of the population.

Modi hasn't won yet. The protesters have not given up, the courts are not completely subjugated by the ruling party, and the BJP actually lost the election for the Delhi state assembly last month. But it was a BJP leader who lost his seat in that election, Kapil Mishra, who then incited Hindu mobs to attack Muslims in Delhi.

It wasn't just neighbour turning on neighbour in some spontaneous outburst of hatred. There was a good deal of that after three days, but it was started by young Hindu thugs armed with iron bars, sticks and machetes, trucked in from nearby rural parts of Uttar Pradesh state to attack Muslims and get the violence going.

Similar but smaller events like that are occurring all over India, and in almost every case the police stand by or actually join in the anti-Muslim attacks. (The police are controlled by the national government, which is BJP, not by the states.) There are also stories of Hindus protecting their Muslim neighbours, as you would expect - there are good people everywhere - but it doesn't look promising.

The protests may go on for another month, or another six months, but Modi has four more years to play with before he faces another election. By then India may be an unrecognisable place: a 'soft' fascist state achieved more or less by democratic means.