



HALL OF INFAMY

AMIT SHAH

JOB: Home Minister of India

REPUTATION: Spear-carrier of rightwing Hindu fundamentalism

The ambitious Amit Shah comes out of the Gujarati crucible – birthplace of the current wave of violent Hindu sectarianism that is gripping India. He is a long-time confidant and friend of prime minister Narendra Modi, who rules India at the head of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Together they are architects of an increasingly authoritarian blueprint designed to overturn the country's proud (if troubled) tradition of non-sectarian tolerance and developmental democracy. They seek to replace it with an autocratic religious nationalism that portrays all dissidents and minorities (particularly Muslims) as 'anti-national' outsiders – a fifth column against their chosen Hindutva vision of a religious state with a strong commitment to the market economy and captains of industry. To this end Shah, as Modi's

home minister, has crafted legislation to undermine the special status of the largely Muslim state of Kashmir and used a brutal regime of martial law to suppress dissent there. Recently he has been the moving force behind a citizenship registration scheme which has caused widespread alarm and protest as it is being seen as an instrument for disenfranchising Muslims and other disadvantaged groups. His party has been condemned for passing discriminatory legislation that would normalize only non-Muslim refugees from neighbouring countries.

Shah grew up in the ranks of the RSS – a paramilitary Hindu fundamentalist grouping with a long and spotty history of political violence against those who stood in its way. The RSS, which dates back to the 1920s, drew inspiration from the European Far Right and one of its members assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1946 because of his belief in nonviolence and a multicultural India. Despite being banned several times, the millions-strong RSS has gained new respectability under Modi and Shah and some of its members act as shock troops against anyone who opposes the BJP's agenda – whether journalists, activists, minorities or just ordinary folk horrified by its intolerant fundamentalism.

Shah managed to overcome a series of scandals in Gujarat where he was implicated in the murders of a couple

of troublesome characters (who were accused of being Muslim terrorists). As Gujarat's home minister in 2013 he was also implicated in illegal spying on his political opponents. Shah has always denied all accusations, pointing the finger at political meddling by his opponents. His national political career took off in earnest in 2014 when he attained the post of president of the BJP. Shah quickly gained a reputation as a master strategist, steering the party to electoral victory in state after state, peaking in the big BJP national victory in 2019. Shah's recipe for success is a combination of grassroots organizing that cultivates ambitious local activists and a highly vocal assault on all opposition, questioning its patriotic credentials. Many of his utterances can be interpreted by his followers as calls to violent action and he has ominously suggested that maybe multi-party democracy is not the best form of governance for India. With the recent economic downturn, speechifying about the BJP's growth model is wearing thin and being replaced by the widespread use of dog-whistle politics highlighting the nefarious doings of 'anti-national' opponents, painting them as 'interlopers', 'migrants' and 'terrorists'. But with a marked decline in the polls and losses in a number of states, the BJP's rise may be beginning to falter – and with it, Shah's star could be starting to dim. ●

LOW CUNNING: *Since Amit Shah became president of the BJP in 2014, he has actively encouraged its IT cell to create and spread fake news. The modus operandi is to amplify communal hatred and suspicion by routinely manufacturing anti-Muslim propaganda and spreading it through social-media channels.*

SENSE OF HUMOUR: *The usually dour Shah surprised observers by having a section of cartoons entitled The Lighter Side on his website. However, the jokes that circulated when he got caught between floors in an elevator while campaigning in Bihar state did not make it.*

Sources: *The Guardian; The Hindu; Common Dreams; BBC; India Today; The New Indian Express; Deccan Herald; Frontline; Economic and Political Weekly; ThePrint*

