

# Gods of war are smiling

**W**hile all eyes are riveted on the Gulf drama, both India and Pakistan, who have been on the verge of a major war for months, are now besieged by dangerous and unpredictable internal political crises.

The trouble in India centres on Ayodhya, a small town southeast of New Delhi. Hindus, 80% of India's 800 million people, believe Ayodhya was the birthplace of the god Rama. They claim that in the 16th century Muslims tore down an ancient temple to Rama there and built a mosque over it.

Last year militant Hindus announced plans to raze the mosque, infuriating India's 100 million Muslims. Rioting ensued, in which hundreds died. In the past few weeks, 50 more people died in fighting between Hindus and Muslims over the holy site.

As if all this weren't bad enough, the leader of India's rapidly growing Hindu chauvinist party, the Bharatiya Janata, or BJP, announced plans for a massive march to Ayodhya. In an outrageous publicity stunt aimed at winning Hindu votes, BJP chief L.K. Advani led the march atop a huge float, promising to level the mosque on Oct. 30 and rebuild the temple to Rama.

On Tuesday Advani was arrested and his marchers stopped by security forces. Had they been allowed to proceed and raze the mosque, it's likely that bloody Hindu-Muslim rioting would have erupted across north India. In 1947-1948, such religious fighting left one million dead.

Unfortunately, Advani's BJP was also the major partner in the fragile coalition, led by prime minister V.P. Singh, that was running India. The BJP has now pulled out of the coalition and its supporters are staging strikes in many Indian cities. Some 22,000 BJP protesters were arrested in the state of Uttar Pradesh in the last two weeks.

Singh, who valiantly opposed destruction of the Ayodhya mosque, says he will stay on as prime minister even with a shrunken parliamentary

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minority. But it's questionable he can last long.

Rajiv Gandhi's opposition Congress Party, itself a backer of Hindu fundamentalism, is poised to form a new government.

This mess sadly mirrors recent events in Jerusalem. Attempts by Jewish zealots to tear down Islam's third holiest site, which sits atop the ruins of King Solomon's temple, Judaism's most sacred place, produced explosive rioting. Twenty-one Palestinians were gunned down by Israeli troops. This week Jews and Arabs have been killing each other in little, personalized battles of revenge.

Pakistan is also deep in political and ethnic crisis. Yesterday, Pakistanis went to the polls to decide whether to re-elect Benazir Bhutto — whose government was dismissed last August for egregious corruption — or the opposition alliance.

Bhutto, her husband and numerous senior political aides are now up on criminal charges before a variety of tribunals. They are accused of a dizzying collection of political offences: Embezzlement, blackmail, extortion and galloping corruption.

The U.S. Congress, angry at Bhutto's ouster, has just suspended military aid to Pakistan, under the pretext that Pakistan is working on nuclear weapons. Pakistan's generals, facing a possible war with India over Kashmir, want to be rid of Benazir, whose government proved inept, outrageously corrupt even by Pakistani standards and unable to deal with spreading ethnic violence and near civil war in the southern province of Sindh.

Even if Bhutto and her PPP are re-elected, chances are the tribunals will still disqualify her from office. Or the army will simply kick her out and tell the U.S. to go jump in the Arabian Sea. If this happens, look for Pakistan to veer away from its traditional alliance with the U.S. and go radical — just when George Bush is trying to face down Saddam Hussein.

Meanwhile, Kashmir continues to boil. Hundreds of rebelling Kashmiri Muslims have been gunned down by Indian troops in recent weeks. The armies of both nations are skirmishing daily on the Kashmir ceasefire line. War clouds are gathering in the overheated air as India and Pakistan reel and stumble into political confusion.

Both Islamabad and New Delhi will be sorely tempted to resort to war as a welcome diversion from political turmoil. The Americans, who could do much to prevent such a disaster, are too busy stuck in the shifting sands of Arabia to pay attention to West Asia.

Now that communism is no longer a threat, are we entering a new era of religious and ethnic wars? Judging from current events in the Mideast, India and Pakistan, it certainly seems so.

God save us from those Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Christians who believe they alone are His appointed agents on this troubled Earth.

