

Death of militant may help Gandhi experts say

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By Elaine Carey

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India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi "created a monster she couldn't control" in radical Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a local academic observer says.

Bhindranwale's body was discovered in Amritsar's Golden Temple after a two-day siege by government troops.

Gandhi actively promoted Bhindranwale's rise as head of a radical wing of the Sikh nationalist Akali party two years ago in an effort "to fracture the movement", said Arthur Rubinoff, a political science professor at the University of Toronto.

But the move backfired. Bhindranwale became a messiah and Punjab state's most powerful religious leader. He eventually forced Gandhi to order the army to storm his headquarters in the Golden Temple, the Sikh's most sacred shrine.

Enhanced chances

"What he did was a very symbolic act," said Rubinoff. "The government of India has put down political uprisings before but when you do this to religious institutions, there are memories that will last."

But Rubinoff and other academics interviewed by The Star believe that by quelling the extremist movement, Gandhi has enhanced her chances of re-election in a national vote that must be held within the next year.

The 13 million Sikhs in India are a majority in Punjab state, but make up only 2 per cent of the country's 700 million people.

"Any quelling of extremist minorities only enhances the majority position," said Rubinoff.

Jayant Lele, a professor of Indian politics at Queen's University in Kingston, said sympathy with Bhindranwale and his extremists has declined rapidly among the general Sikh population in recent months as the level of violence increased.

A martyr is born

David Taylor, a professor of South Asian studies at Britain's London University, said Gandhi held off to avoid converting the large body of moderate Sikhs into backers of the extremists.

But he predicts that Bhindranwale will now become a martyr to his people.

"Sikhs put great emphasis on martyrs and unless Mrs. Gandhi is able to find a political settlement fairly quickly, some new leader or group will emerge for whom Bhindranwale will be a hero."

"She was forced to deal with the extent of the violence," he said. "Although this will put an end to plots to kill senior politicians, it won't necessarily cope with sporadic violence."



Out of control: India's Gandhi helped Bhindranwale become radical leader.