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WORLD

Riots turn deadly in India as Patel clan demands inclusion in government quotas

By Annie Gowen

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Ahmedabad: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has appealed for calm after a rally that drew half a million members of a powerful clan resulted in a night of rioting that left six dead and dozens of buses and police stations torched.

Protesters from the influential Patel, or Patidar, community gathered on Tuesday to demand inclusion in government programs for the disadvantaged, but the demonstration erupted into mob violence, as agitators threw stones, battled police and set a state minister's home ablaze.



An estimated half a million protesters participated in a rally in Ahmedabad, India. AP

On Wednesday, the skirmishes continued and curfews remained in effect in various trouble spots throughout Gujarat, the home state of the prime minister.

Among those killed were a father and son caught in a protesting crowd on their way home from work and then killed when police fired on a crowd in Ahmedabad. AFP reported a third person was killed in Ahmedabad, where an estimated half a million people had gathered.



Police strike a protester in Ahmedabad. REUTERS

Two people died from police gunfire in Palanpur, and a third was killed by paramilitary fire in Mehsana, according to police officials.

TV stations reported that police fired tear gas to disperse the crowds in some parts of the state, where Mr Modi was chief minister for 12 years.

"Violence will not benefit anyone," Mr Modi said in a video message. "The only way forward is to have a peaceful dialogue."

The violence was sparked on Tuesday when police briefly detained the movement's charismatic young leader, 22-year-old Hardik Patel. Disruptions ensued around the state.



Members of the Patel community wear masks of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. AP

"Our movement is nonviolent," Mr Patel told the television channel NDTV on Wednesday. "We have not triggered any violence." He promised that his campaign would "intensify" in the coming days.

Members of his clan historically have been politically powerful landowners, businessmen and diamond polishers in India, and they been a driving force in the country's diaspora. More than 40 per cent of motels in the United States are owned by Indians, for example, many with the last name Patel.



Indian policemen on patrol. AP

But long-held resentment of what the Patels see as the government's preferential treatment of the underprivileged, twinned with economic woes, came to a boil this summer in a series of rallies and protests.

"We are angry. We are frustrated. We want the system changed," said Ankit Patel, 25, who said he was passed over for admission to a master's program at a state university in favour of three classmates from tribal communities who had lower marks.





Policemen walk past vehicles damaged during the clashes. AP

Hardik Patel rocketed to prominence in recent weeks when he appeared at dozens of rallies throughout the state, asking that Patels be included in a system - known as reservation - that provides quotas for seats in state universities and for government jobs. The baby-faced activist has been hailed as a hero by his followers, who have spread photos of him posing with guns on social media.

"He has shaken Gujarat in the last 50 days," said Manoj Patel, 29, the owner of a textile-export firm who attended Tuesday's rally.



An Indian policeman chases protesters. AP

At the rally, hundreds of thousands gathered in an exhibition ground at a university in the state's commercial capital to cheer as Hardik Patel stood in the heat and spoke before long rows of mostly young men in white Gandhi caps. Mr Patel vowed that they would "snatch" their protections from the government if they had to, called for a general strike and said he would stay at the venue on a hunger strike until his concerns were heard.

Since its independence from Britain in 1947, India has sought to protect its Dalit and tribal communities by reserving special seats in universities as well as some government jobs.

Those set-asides were later expanded to include some socially disadvantaged castes, a designation called "Other Backward Classes", according to Sonalde Desai, an expert on caste and a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland. Mr Modi, who rose from humble origins as the son of a tea seller to become prime minister, is from a caste that falls into this category.

In contrast, the Patel clan counts among its ranks numerous politicians, including Vallabhbhai Patel, one of the revered founders of the country. On Tuesday, his image was everywhere - on masks, on T-shirts - in Gujarat.

Such a background will make the Patel demand for inclusion into the OBC category a difficult sell, analysts say, although some Patels argue that the caste-based system should be scrapped

altogether in favour of distribution of government assistance by economic need. Gujarat's chief minister, Anandiben Patel, has said that expanding the state's existing quota system would violate a Supreme Court ruling on the matter.

"These are very, very politically powerful, extremely well-off people," said newspaper columnist Aakar Patel, whose family lives in the Gujarati city of Surat, India's diamond-polishing centre. "It is incredible to me that they should even be making this demand."

Some analysts wonder how Hardik Patel's Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti movement coalesced so rapidly this summer. Social scientist and author Achyut Yagnik suggested that many of the state's youths have a "sense of deprivation" and feel left out of progress in Gujarat, the home state of Mr Modi, who rode to national victory last year showcasing his state's economic success.

"He hasn't done anything for us. We start sweating at the mention of his name," said one protester, Keyur Patel, 25. In the past, the Patels have been strong supporters of Mr Modi and his political party.

Gujarat, like the rest of India, has high numbers of unemployed young workers. The state government said in November that 900,000 "educated but unemployed youths," including 30,000 with postgraduate degrees, had registered with various state employment exchanges between 2011 and 2014.

Yet many at the rally on Tuesday voiced typical middle-class concerns over salaries, the cost of student tuition and the desire for better, more stable jobs.

"We need a reservation for university admissions," said Kalavatiben Patel, 43, a homemaker in Ahmedabad. "Our children get good marks, good percentages, and they don't get admissions. It would be a level playing field."

She said her daughter, Shraddha, 25, was not accepted into a government college, so the family paid for her to go to a private university. She's now attending Northeastern University in Boston on a scholarship.

But Pradeep Patel, 56, a farmer, social worker and organiser, said it was a mistake to think of all Patels as affluent and not in need of government help.

"Many of us have had to sell land in distress and open grocery stores and paan [betel leaf and tobacco] shops," he said. "Not everyone is a businessman. That is just a myth. There is a Gujarati saying, 'All Patels are happy'. That's just a saying. It's not the truth."

Washington Post, AP
