

Mumbai massacre survivors join new Indian anti-corruption party

Ask Thomas Uledar how he plans to vote in next month's Indian elections, and his face falls with the memory of what should have been a happy trip to see his sister's new baby.



Thomas Uledar

By Amrit Dhillon in New Delhi

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Mr Uledar, an English teacher, was stood in the maternity ward at Mumbai's Cama Hospital last November when gunmen burst in, lined him and other visitors against a wall, and began shooting them at point blank range.

It was only because his would-be executioner's machine gun jammed that he avoided becoming one of the 188 people killed in that month's

terrorist atrocities.

"I knew I was going to die," said Mr Uledar, who came face to face with Ajmal Amir Kasab, the sole survivor of the ten-strong terrorist gang, who was charged with murder last week. "I was counting 'one, two, three' to my death. They tried to shoot us, but by the grace of God, their machine guns jammed and they went away."

Three months on, Mr Uledar still thanks God for saving his life – but he also blames India's government for allowing the rampage to cause such carnage in the first place.

The authorities' lack of preparedness – including badly-equipped police and botched rescue operations – provoked widespread public fury, and for Mr Uledar was the final straw that made him abandon his support for the country's political elite.

He will instead back the newly-created Professionals Party of India (PPI), a movement that aims to end the corruption and incompetence which have dogged the country's government for generations.

"Our leaders are filthy and immoral," said Mr Uledar, 29, a devout Christian. "Instead of running the country and giving us security, they are looting it, getting fat from corruption. I want honest people to come in to give us a new start."

Standing on a platform of professionalism and meritocracy, the new party is emblematic of a new mood of anger and frustration among India's rapidly growing middle class, for whom the new dynamism in the economy is lacking sorely in the political sphere.

Comprising doctors, executives, academics and other professionals from all religious backgrounds, it promises to cleanse what is frequently described as an Augean Stables of sleaze and graft within India's parliament. A quarter of its sitting members are either convicted of or facing criminal charges, including serious offences such as embezzlement, rape and murder.

This week a former cabinet minister, Sukh Ram, was jailed for three years in New Delhi for corruptly amassing a fortune of 40 million rupees (£500,000). But in general it is rare for such cases to end in punishment.

The PPI is determined to make Indians realise that it is corruption and inefficiency that allows terrorist attacks and the poverty portrayed in *Slumdog Millionaire*, even after 60 years of independence.

"Mumbai policemen had no guns to fight the terrorists, only sticks," said Shefali Sagar, Mumbai coordinator for the PPI. "The fire engines were ancient. Commandos had to use a bus to get to the site. India has no antiterrorist squad. Politics is just a means for politicians to make money."

The party's founder, R V Krishnan, wants to put up honest, efficient, educated professionals who can run India the way successful Indian businessmen run their companies.

He argues that if Indians can head multinational companies like Citibank and PepsiCo, there is no reason why talented professionals with the necessary expertise cannot govern India in the same way.

New parties can struggle at first to develop a following in India, but the middle class are growing tired of the existing duopoly on national power enjoyed by the Congress Party and its rival, the Bharatiya Janata (Hindu Nationalist) Party.

"It's a very interesting experiment because it shows the middle class re-engaging with politics after having left it to the politicians for decades," said Pratap Bhanu Mehta, president of the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi. "I also think it will appeal to the younger generation over a 5-10 year horizon."

Although the PPI is only fielding 12-15 candidates for the 540-seat parliament, it aims to run more than 100 candidates in the election following that. Mr Krishnan's objective this time is merely to make voters notice the difference.

"I want everyone to know that solutions to our problems are available," he said. "If India can have just one parliament of honest, clean, qualified professionals, we can be a developed nation in five years."

The party even has the blessing of its more established rivals, who sometimes accuse India's professional classes of being aloof from politics.

Ravi Shankar Prasad, spokesman, BJP: "I welcome the party," said Ravi Shankar Prasad, spokesman for the Bharatiya Janata Party.

"Instead of criticising from the sidelines, it's good that activists, intellectuals and professionals want to enter politics. What the party's impact will be, how knows?"

The PPI is just one of the many new social movements to emerge to protest at the government ineptitude exposed by the Mumbai attacks. Ashamed that it took the full might of the Indian state three whole days to end the mayhem, middle class Indians – through text messages, emails, and networking sites – have been coming together in a "people's movement" to put politicians on notice.

In Mumbai, 35 new social networking sites have joined hands to support the PPI's attempt to make a fresh start. The PPI's aim is to help canvass support for its agenda to improve the life of every Indian to effect change from the top. Corruption, though, has seeped down to almost every level, something the teacher, Mr Uledar, experienced when he tried to reclaim from the police his mobile telephone, which had been seized by the terrorists in the hospital.

"I had to bribe a policeman," he said. "You have to bribe to get your own things back in this country."

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