

Bush's party woos Modi with US invite

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(From left) Narendra Modi with representatives of the US Congress Aaron Schock, Cynthia Lummis and Cathy Rodgers in Gandhinagar on Thursday. (AFP)

March 28: A US business delegation led by three Republican lawmakers today met Narendra Modi and invited him to America, a significant development given that Washington had denied him a visa citing the 2002 pogrom and recently asserted that it hadn't changed its stand.

The 24-member delegation was impressed with Modi's statement of "minimum government, maximum governance", Rep. Aaron Schock told reporters in Ahmedabad.

"Minimum government" happens to be a slogan for the Republicans whose government, headed by George W. Bush, had denied the Gujarat chief minister a visa in 2005.

"We have invited him to come over to the US and share with us the work he has done," said Schock, who was accompanied by fellow US Congress members Rep. Cynthia Lummis and Rep. Cathy Rodgers, Chair of the House Republican Conference.

Last month, US assistant secretary of state Robert Blake had told a TV interviewer that Washington had not changed its policy on a visa for Modi.

Sources said the three visiting Republican lawmakers had informally assured Indian officials, though not Modi personally, that they would try their best to prevail on the US state department to end its embargo on Modi.

Schock is considered a friend of Gujarat and had made a statement in the US House of Representatives congratulating Modi after his victory in last year's Assembly polls.

The Americans, visiting India to "promote people-to-people contact and diplomacy", arrived in Ahmedabad directly from the US last night. They met Modi at his residence for about an hour around noon and said they had found his vision of development "inspirational".

Rogers felt "safer here than anywhere else" but did not explain which other places she was referring to. "We don't feel any threat here in Gujarat. We were like ordinary commuters. We feel confident doing business here. Modi has brought a change to people's lives," she added.

Lummis said Gujarat "is a desirable place to live in because of Modi's leadership qualities".

An elated Modi later tweeted: "Am thankful to the member of USA Congress and business persons for their kind words on Gujarat's development."

Modi had become a pariah to the West after the 2002 pogrom, with the European Union declaring him persona non grata and Britain imposing a diplomatic freeze. But with Modi emerging as a serious national player and with China and Japan wooing trade with Gujarat, the recession-hit EU and the UK too have followed suit.

But the US has so far proved tougher to crack. The Wharton India Economic Forum, which had invited Modi to deliver a lecture by video-link this month, scrapped the invite following protests by academics and students who cited Modi's riot record.

Jolly worked in tandem with the National India America Public Policy Institute in Chicago, headed by entrepreneur Shalabh "Shalli" Kumar. The institute declares as its mission the formulation and promotion of public policies based on the principles of "free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom and resolute national defence" — which tie up nicely with the views of Modi and the Republicans.

In a talk-up on its website, the institute has said it would "articulate a short-term and a long-term vision for all

Americans and in particular Indian Americans” who, it said, now equal half the Jewish American population and are the “least dependent” on the government.

Modi pulled out the stops to indulge his guests from Washington. His office had initially arranged a dinner for them at a five-star hotel but the chief minister shot the idea down, saying that since the Americans were used to upscale hotels, they should be treated to something “rustic and down to earth”.

Modi himself chose an ethnic resort called Vishalla for his guests’ dinner last night though they have been put up at the Taj in Ahmedabad. Vishalla has no tables or chairs and serves Kathiawadi fare on silver *thalis* placed on low seats while the diners sit on mats spread on the ground in a sprawling, open space.

There was no indication of the Americans having raised the topic of the 2002 pogrom with Modi, unlike some British politicians who take care to mention how they brought it up whenever they interacted with the chief minister.