The 2024 Indian General Election IV: How polarizing is Hindu nationalism?

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Narendra Modi's controversial ideology of Hindu nationalism risks dividing India, argues László Csicsmann in the fourth part of our Indian election series.

Picture credit: Journal of Democracy

Introduction

Narendra Modi's election campaign featured numerous symbolic phrases that presented a unified vision of the Hindu nation. When India's Prime Minister, Modi, opened the country's new parliament building in May 2023, a mural dubbed "*Akhand Bharat*" sparked debate among people both inside and outside of India. Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Organization) frequently allude to a region of Greater India, Akhand Bharat, which stretches from Afghanistan to Myanmar and

from Sri Lanka to China. Critics claim that this is unmistakable proof of the expansionist nature of the Hindu nationalist philosophy. According to one [Indian explanation](#), the painting alludes to the former Mauryan Empire, a time when India not only unified but also experienced a successful "people-friendly" government. However, [neighboring countries](#), where anti-India protests were visible on the streets, do not find this argument persuasive.

[Secularism](#), enshrined in the 1950 Constitution as one of India's core democratic values, is called into doubt by Hindu nationalism. On the eve of independence, secularism in India implied accepting the equality of all Indian religions while rejecting the idea of a Hindu nation.

Hindu nationalism and the Muslim community

At 14.9 percent of the population, India's Muslim community is, after Indonesia and Pakistan's, the world third-largest. Muslims are frequently portrayed in Hindu nationalist discourse as alien invaders who came to the Indian subcontinent with swords. During his most recent campaign, [Modi called](#) Muslims "infiltrators" and people "who have more children." These slogans particularly hurt Muslims who fled to India from nearby nations, especially in light of the discriminatory new citizenship rule passed in 2019, which barred Muslims from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan from obtaining Indian citizenship.

Rebuilding the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, the birthplace of the God Vishnu's incarnation of Rama, served as a [symbol for Hindu nationalists](#). The mosque in Ayodhya called Babri Masjid, which was built in honor of Babur, the first Mughal Emperor, was destroyed by Hindu nationalists from the RSS and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Council for Hindus) in 1992. Hindu nationalists traveled to Ayodhya in 2002, the tenth anniversary of the demolition. However, as their train arrived at the Godhra station, it caught fire, killing 59 people on board. Next followed the Gujarat riots, a series of coordinated protests directed towards Muslims in the province, whose then-Chief Minister was none other than Narendra Modi, today's national prime minister. As a consequence of the pogroms against Muslims, Modi was refused entry into the US for humanitarian reasons. A 2019 [court ruling](#) held that Muslims were to be offered another piece of land on which to construct their house of worship, while Hindus were given the opportunity to rebuild the mandir where the mosque once stood.

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Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies
Corvinus Centre for Contemporary Asia Studies
CAS Commentary, no. 16, 10 June 2024

Ayodhya and the crisis of Indian secularism

After 11 days of fasting, [Modi consecrated the Ram Mandir](#) at Ayodhya a few weeks before the 2024 elections. He has not only established his own political cult of personality, but also gained some religious authority as the head of the Hindu nation. After Ayodhya, Modi [inaugurated a Hindu Shrine](#) in the United Arab Emirates, a conservative Muslim country, where around 4 million Indians reside. The Indian diaspora is an important asset for Hindu nationalist to promote its ideology beyond the country's borders. Hindu nationalists assert that the Taj Mahal – to most, a major national symbol on the UNESCO World Heritage List – was constructed on the site of a former Hindu temple. The ruling [BJP party demanded](#) the opening of Taj Mahal's sealed chambers in order to gather proof that Hindu idols do indeed reside within the monument built by the Mughals.

Hindu nationalists are [trying to outlaw the slaughter](#) of cows, their revered animal, by organizing a national campaign to safeguard cows. Some Hindus hope that after the elections the BJP will change the constitution to ban the killing of cows nationwide. The relatively close result, perhaps, makes that less likely.

The idea of Hindu nationalism is intrinsically anti-colonialist, advocating for emancipation from the enslavement of the colonizers. One symbol of foreign influence is the name of the streets, cities and the country itself. When the invitations to the G20 dinner in New Delhi were sent out a year ago, the name of the country included on the invitation was [Bharat](#), not India. It suggests that Hindu nationalists would drop the country name India, which in their minds reflects slavery.

Conclusion

The emergence of Hindu nationalism accompanies a period of glorification of India's ascent to prominence in the world economy, the triumph of its space program, and its growing influence in international affairs. The prevailing narrative, which stresses the presence of a heroic Hindu nation, caused division within the multicultural nation. This is probably why the BJP's national election results and those in certain Hindi-speaking states were not as remarkable as expected. In [Uttar Pradesh](#), the state with the largest population and home to Ayodhya, the BJP lost those votes even after the inauguration of the Ram Mandir. It remains

to be seen how the BJP's new coalition government will implement its ideology; we do not anticipate that the party will change its core doctrine.

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