

India under the BJP's rule: The long fight against Modi's Hindu nationalist agenda

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India under the BJP's rule has seen a sharp turn to the right, with Muslims and other minorities being subjected to violence and oppression on a daily basis.

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The EU resolution condemning the Modi government's Citizens Amendment Act (CAA) is welcome news [[1](#)]; less so the fact that voting on it in the EU Parliament has been postponed to the end of March so as not to embarrass the Indian prime minister on his forthcoming trip to Brussels on March 13. In any case, it is unlikely that the resolution will get a majority because Western governments tend to value economic benefits over democratic rule when it comes to dealing with authoritarian leaders.

It would be a shame if the EU lived up to these expectations and fails to act, because the current popular upheaval in India — the biggest since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government came to power in 2014 — against the CAA and all that is coming with it, marks the first major popular resistance to the decades-old project of institutionalizing a Hindu nationalist state.

This struggle needs the kind of international solidarity that will push foreign governments who claim a commitment to democracy to censure the Modi regime.

LYNCHINGS, BEATINGS AND KILLINGS

The CAA is the first law that links citizenship rights to religion and actively discriminates against Muslims by allowing only non-Muslims from three neighboring Muslim majority countries — Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh — to achieve fast-track naturalization as Indian citizens. It will be followed by a National Population Register or NPR, scheduled to take place from April to September, whereby a house-to-house enumeration will collect vital personal information that will then be used for two different purposes.

First, it is part of the process of establishing a stronger surveillance state. The BJP aims to pass the Personal Data Collection Bill through parliament which will give various government agencies in pursuit of their "duties" the freedom to selectively spy on targeted individuals and groups.

It is the second aim, however, that has been the real cause of the recent public uproar: the NPR will be followed by a National Register of Citizens (NRC) in which those who do not have all the required documentation — a common problem in India, where many do not even have a birth certificate —

will be deemed “doubtful” or non-citizens, who can then be put in detention centers, expelled as illegal migrants, deprived of basic citizenship rights, like the right to vote, own property and the right to a livelihood, or being denied personal freedoms regarding life and work.

The CAA, however, provides an escape clause for non-Muslims caught in this web; they can secure fast track naturalization by claiming they were migrants from one of the three above mentioned countries and lost their required documentation.

In short, this whole process is basically part of the larger project of terrorizing, inferiorizing as second class citizens, and ghettoizing Muslims in the country. Historically, large-scale anti-Muslim riots, for which the forces of Hindu Nationalism have been the main, but far from only, culprits were episodic in character and served specific political purposes. Since the Modi regime came to power in 2014, mob lynchings, beatings, killings and willful attacks on property and businesses — often facing no obstruction from the police whatsoever — against not only Muslims but also against Dalits, human rights activists, leftists, students and some progressive journalists have become routine affairs.

All this has been met with judicial inaction in bringing the culprits and the police to book, even when there is hard evidence of their crimes. This everyday “banalization” of violence — especially in BJP-controlled states — has caused an unprecedented and widespread fear among Muslims.

At the same time, we have witnessed a dramatic change in the terms of public political discourse. On the one hand, government officials, from the prime minister to MPs, are verbally attacking Muslims, leftists, liberals and many opposition figures with impunity. While on the other hand, sedition and other heavy charges are filed on the flimsiest of pretexts against those who criticize the government, its personnel and policies and whose criticisms are deemed “anti-national.”

From 2014 onwards, the Modi government has sought to ideologically transform major universities in the country in accordance with its Hindu nationalist state building project, fomenting a hatred for the religious Other, above all Muslims. This is being done through selective appointments of teachers and top-level administrative staff, flouting existing rules guiding such matters. The freedoms of speech, assembly and political activity of students has been met with unjustified curbs, legal harassment, even beatings by members of the BJP’s own student wing and their accomplices on and off campus. Because they acted at the behest of the BJP, the police’s brutality on campus [\[2\]](#) has gone, and will remain, unpunished.

The current popular upsurge is not led by political parties, but by ordinary Muslims — who have taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers — and youth and students across religious faiths, who have come out and joined forces with Muslim groups out of solidarity and because of the prolonged ill treatment of so many of their peers across the country. For both of these forces, lack of economic opportunity and secular democratic rule has added to their frustration and anger.

This is going to be a long fight. In the face of this upheaval, the BJP and Sangh Parivar are determined not to make any concessions but to deepen their efforts at political and religious polarization. The verbal attacks on CAA protesters that they are pro-Pakistani “fifth columnists” have intensified, and Muslims are being accused of protesting “in the name of Islam” rather than demanding equal citizenship.

LOCAL LOSSES, NATIONAL GAINS

In the run up to the February 8 local elections to the Delhi Assembly, the ruling Aam Aadmi Party or

AAP (Party of the Common Man) campaigned on its performance of improving public health facilities and schools and providing cheaper rates and better electricity generation, water provision and public transport services. In contrast, the BJP played its communal “nationalist” card of being the best protector of the Hindu majority citing its annulment of Article 370 which ended the autonomy of the country’s only Muslim majority state of Jammu and Kashmir and its success in the famous Ayodhya case for building a Hindu temple on the site of a mosque back in 1992.

When the results were declared on February 11, AAP secured 62 seats with a vote share of around 53 percent while the BJP upped its tally from three to eight seats by securing 38 percent of the vote.

This result followed a recent trend in which the BJP is losing at the local level while remaining at the top of the national polls. Since December 2017 the number of states under BJP control has dropped from 19 to 15 out of 29. Over the past months, the BJP was unseated in the states of Jharkhand and Maharashtra — India’s most industrialized state — and failed in prestigious Delhi despite — or because of? — its highly polarizing and hate-filled campaign.

Clearly, at the provincial level, local concerns regarding welfare, administration and the economy count more heavily, and inadequacies of performance by incumbent parties are punished. This is where AAP, which was re-elected, did better and its victory has afforded a degree of relief to many of those opposed to the BJP. Many Muslims shifted their support from the National Congress Party to AAP while all the twelve constituencies which are reserved for Dalit candidates were won by AAP as well. Similarly, poorer districts in Delhi supported the AAP while the BJP got a greater share of its votes from areas where the better-off reside.

But even while this victory comes after the defeat of the BJP in Jharkhand and Maharashtra, it is far from representative of any long-term political change. In each of these elections, the BJP increased its vote share and in Jharkhand and Maharashtra it lost out because of alliances between opposition parties. In the latter, the BJP went to the polls in a winning alliance with the regional Shiv Sena party, which shares its Hindutva ideology, but the latter jumped ship immediately after the poll results to lead a coalition government together with the Indian National Congress party.

What is most disturbing is that all the other bourgeois opposition parties — including AAP — refuse to challenge the Hindutva ideology and its vicious exclusivist and belligerent nationalism. The leader of AAP, Arvind Kejriwal, paraded his personal “Hinduness,” while his party carefully avoided extending active support to the current anti-CAA protests, nor has it taken a strong stance against the assault on universities or shown any solidarity with students against the police and the central government. It has endorsed the annulment of Article 370 and been silent on the shameful lockdown of Kashmir. AAP also welcomed the Supreme Court’s Ayodhya judgement.

The AAP grew out of the 2011-12 nationwide anti-corruption campaign and has enjoyed support from various social movements. While at first it presented itself as a new type of party with close links to social movements, it has since become a more mainstream party, willing to make ugly compromises in order to stay in power. It has rid the more liberal voices from its ranks and grown more independent from the various progressive social movements, instead implementing an authoritarian internal decision-making structure while fostering a deliberate personality cult around Kejriwal.

The end result is that, in varying degrees, all the opposition parties — including AAP — are to some degree playing to the tune of BJP’s Hindu nationalism, refusing to directly confront the ruling party’s blatant anti-Muslimness for fear of losing votes. By most accounts Modi remains by far the most popular leader and the Hindutva ideology has secured wider and deeper legitimacy.

A CALL FOR INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

The relief that the BJP has not expanded its hold at the provincial level must thus be tempered by the recognition that it continues to set the basic terms of public political discourse at the more important national level. This latest electoral setback will amount to little in the longer run if it does not feed into strengthening and expanding the current upsurge.

This is the real challenge. Yes, the current protests have been remarkable for their depth, spread and continuity, but it is quite possible that the central government will resort to even harsher methods to quash this resistance. Which is why, domestically, there is a responsibility thrust upon all those who oppose the BJP government to try to diversify our demands, especially concerning the economy and other aspects of the sharply accelerating democratic deficit, so that the struggle becomes even wider, stronger and carries a broader focus.

Given that the Modi government is concerned about his own and his government's international image, it is all the more necessary for progressives abroad to understand what is happening here and to make their outrage and opposition publicly known. Far-right populism is on the rise everywhere and its leaders are seeking to link up with each other. It is no coincidence that Modi's top international guest at India's Republic Day celebrations on January 26, 2020 was Jair Bolsonaro. Also, US president Donald Trump is scheduled to arrive in India for a state visit on February 24.

The rise of right-wing nationalism in India and the ruling party's adherence to the racist and fascistic Hindutva ideology is not an isolated affair, nor is the resistance leveled against it by the alliance of ordinary Muslims, an important section of Dalits and much of the country's youth.

Their struggle belongs to all of us, and it is the duty of leftists and progressives everywhere to stand in unequivocal solidarity with those resisting the forces of fascism, authoritarianism and oppression wherever it rears its ugly head.

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P.S.

- Roar Magazine. February 21, 2020:
<https://roarmag.org/essays/the-long-fight-against-modis-hindu-nationalist-agenda/>
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://countercurrents.org/2020/01/154-european-union-lawmakers-draft-stunning-anti-caa-resolution>

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tq-HQ7boPvE&bpctr=1582110105>