

In secular India, it's getting tougher to be Muslim

New Delhi, India (CNN) On the eve of India's independence, the man who would soon become the country's first Prime Minister outlined an aspirational vision.

India would be a nation where people of all religions had equal rights, privileges, and obligations, Jawaharlal Nehru said in his now-iconic speech to the country's parliament on August 14, 1947.

Now, over 70 years later, there are signs that Nehru's hopes for the nation face perhaps their greatest threat.

On November 9, India's top court gave Hindus permission to build a temple on a disputed centuries-old holy site in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, which holds significance for both Hindus and Muslims.



India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru outlined a vision for a secular India.

Hindus believe the site is the birthplace of Lord Ram, one of the most revered deities in Hinduism. However, Muslims have also prayed there for centuries.

The ruling on the Ayodhya site was seen as a blow to Muslims. It also came at a

time when Muslims increasingly see themselves as second-class citizens in the predominantly Hindu country.

India has a long history of sectarian violence, but over the past few years, there has been a rise in suspected hate crimes against Muslims, who make up roughly 200 million of the country's 1.3 billion population.

In August, the Indian government stripped the majority-Muslim state of Jammu and Kashmir of its autonomous status, essentially giving New Delhi more control over the region's affairs. That same month, nearly two million people in India's northeast Assam state were left off a controversial new National Register of Citizens, which critics feared could be used to justify religious discrimination against Muslims in the state.

All of this comes under the shadow of the country's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a self-proclaimed Hindu nationalist who has spoken out repeatedly against India's secularism.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has roots in Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing organization founded in 1925 that promotes the vision of a Hindu nation.

So when the BJP was reelected in May, Indian Muslims worried that the fabric of society could change. Modi dismissed their fears as "imaginary" — but less than six months into his second term, there are signs things could get worse for India's Muslims.



A Kashmiri Muslim woman raises her veil in the air to pray in Srinagar, India, on November 10, 2019.

A secular nation

Although Hindu nationalism has come to prominence under Modi, it has been brewing for decades.

When India gained independence from Britain in 1947, Nehru, the architect of modern India, helped construct a constitution that protected the “liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship” — and the “equality of status.”

“Nehru was very cognizant of the fact that India was a diverse society and the only thing that could work was secularism,” Sanjay Kapoor, a political commentator and editor of independent political magazine Hardnews, told CNN.

In the years that followed, the notion of secularism became more abstract. Political parties — including Nehru’s own Indian National Congress (INC) party — began to pander to voters along religious divides.

In the 1980s, Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi, and eldest grandson Rajiv Gandhi, both served as Prime Minister and continued to promote his vision of a secular India. However, Indira Gandhi also imposed authoritarian policies that prompted a backlash from voters and kindled growing support for the Hindu-nationalist BJP.

It was the issue of Ayodhya that first helped the BJP to gain significant electoral ground.

The disputed religious site was an old matter of contention that had only ever received local attention — but the BJP seized on it to help secure over half the seats in Uttar Pradesh’s 1991 state elections.



Men pay tribute to former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in Amritsar on October 30, 2019.

Rise of nationalism

At the time, political observers accused the BJP of fanning religious divisions and empowering Hindu nationalists. Those criticisms are still being leveled at Modi's party today.

In 1992, only a year after the BJP's election victory, right-wing Hindu mobs demolished the 16th-century Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, triggering nationwide riots that left more than 2,000 people dead. It was some of the worst communal violence since India's independence.

To some, this was a moment that changed Indian politics. Kapoor, the editor, recalls how some of his fellow journalists saw the destruction of the mosque — and the ensuing riots — as the end of secular India.

After a slew of corruption scandals in the 2000s, the INC lost support, opening the gates for the BJP to come to power.

In 2014, Modi and the BJP swept to victory in national polls, becoming the first

party to win a parliamentary majority in 30 years. It was a move toward nationalism, even before right-wing politics took hold in the United Kingdom with Brexit, and Donald Trump's "America's First" campaign in the United States.

To those tired of what they saw as cronyism and political dynasties, Modi's promise of economic reforms while restoring traditional Indian values appealed.

But India's new leader also promoted religious nationalism.

In Modi's first term, Hindu vigilante groups killed dozens of people — many of them Muslims — allegedly for slaughtering or transporting cows, which are considered sacred by many Hindus. Critics said the presence of a Hindu nationalist government in Delhi encouraged hardline supporters to commit violent acts against Muslims and other minority groups. A charge the BJP has vehemently denied.

A bleak future

When Modi came to power, he had three key election promises. He would overturn the autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir, build a temple to the Hindu god Ram at Ayodhya, and impose a uniform civil code that would create one law for all, regardless of their religion.

Six months after being reelected in his second term, Modi has already made headway in achieving two of his aims.

In August, he withdrew Article 370, a constitutional provision that granted Jammu and Kashmir relative autonomy and protected the rights to employment, property ownership and state aid for its permanent residents. The government also imposed a communications blackout in the area.

People in Jammu and Kashmir — which has been downgraded to a union territory — fear that Modi's move will encourage migration to the Muslim-dominated area, which could alter its demographics.

The Supreme Court's ruling that the Ram Temple can be built at Ayodhya has also prompted a backlash from Muslim communities.



Activists stage a candlelight vigil urging people belonging to all religious communities to maintain peace and harmony before the Supreme Court verdict on Ayodhya, in Bangalore on November 7, 2019.

Asaduddin Owaisi, the president of Muslim political party AIMIM, said the judgment was a “victory of faith over facts” which the BJP would use to achieve its “poisonous agenda.”

“A resounding message has been sent to more than 200 million Muslims in the country that they must bear every humiliation and injustice with the silence expected of an inferior citizenry,” he said in a tweet.

Now, some wonder how long it will be until a uniform civil code is imposed.

Currently, India has separate marriage, property and adoption rules for people from different religions — but a code would wipe those out. That particularly worries the Muslim community, as it could mean that Sharia law no longer governs their marriage, inheritance, and succession.

Analysts worry that India’s attempt at marrying a pluralist society with a secularist system of governance will continue to be chipped away at as the ideas proposed by Hindu nationalists gain mainstream credence and support from

citizens and public institutions.

“There is something deeper at play here that is not only the outcome of electoral strategy,” Gilles Verniers, assistant professor of political science at India’s Ashoka University, told CNN.

“There is a deeper, structural, societal transformation taking place.”

Verniers said Modi’s BJP was creating a nation where citizens of different religions were increasingly second-class citizens.

The editor Kapoor’s concerns are broader — he is worried about the health of the world’s biggest democracy.

“I think it’s bad for democracy. Especially the secular democracy we were brought up on, we were told it would be fair to minorities, fair to everybody,” he said. “(The government) has a clear idea about where they want to take India and it has nothing to do with secularism.”

Read more: CNN wants India to tolerate an Islamic state and Shariah law within its territory to uphold ‘Secularism’

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