

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	544
Land:	Indien
Kilde:	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)
Titel:	India Votes 2024: A resurgent Hindu nationalism sets the stage for the upcoming elections, driving communal violence
Udgivet:	28. april 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	24. maj 2024

Election Watch

India Votes 2024: A resurgent Hindu nationalism stage for the upcoming elections, driving communal violence

28 April 2024

*The second report in ACLED's **India Special Election Series** covering the parliamentary elections held from 19 April to 1 June focuses on the increased religious polarization — particularly between the majority Hindu population and large Muslim community, among others — as a driver for political violence across India.*

On 22 January 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Ram temple in Ayodhya at the site where the Babri mosque once stood, marking the unofficial start of the general elections campaign by his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).¹ The construction of the temple, which had served as a rallying cry for Hindu nationalists since the mosque's demolition by a Hindu mob, stirred up sentiments of Hindu pride across the country, with the BJP leading the celebrations.² On the other hand, the principal opposition party, the Indian National Congress (INC), boycotted the ceremony, accusing the BJP of politicizing religion.³ The fanfare surrounding the inauguration also overlooked the temple's deadly origins, prompting concern over the turn toward majoritarianism in Indian society.⁴

The Babri mosque, constructed under the reign of the Mughal emperor Babar, was believed to have stood upon the birthplace of the Hindu Lord Ram, making it a point of contention between India's Hindu and Muslim communities for nearly two centuries.⁵ Following nationwide mobilization by senior BJP leaders to reclaim the Ram Janmabhoomi (birthplace), a Hindu mob demolished the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992.⁶ In the years since, the Ram Mandir (temple) remained a focal point of the Hindu nationalist movement, with the BJP at its forefront. A 2019 Supreme Court judgment awarding the disputed land to the Hindu applicants, finding they possessed a better title, ultimately paved the way for the temple's construction, even as the court condemned the mosque's demolition by the mob as an illegal act.⁷

The values of secularism and religious tolerance enshrined in India's Constitution have long struggled against the realities of its demographics, where Hindus, comprising around 80% of the population, form the overwhelming majority.⁸ The gradual rise of the BJP, which views India foremost as a Hindu *rashtra* (nation), further increased the strain on these principles while also emboldening more radical Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) groups within the country.⁹ Among these is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing Hindu paramilitary group that organized the Babri Masjid's demolition.¹⁰ The BJP has strong ideological and organizational ties with the RSS; Modi himself began his political career as a religious volunteer with the group.¹¹ The mainstreaming of Hindutva politics under the BJP has increased tensions between Hindus and religious minorities, sparking a resurgence in communal violence. India's Muslim community, which is among the world's largest Muslim populations, has borne the brunt of this violence. With the BJP galvanizing its supporters around the cause of Hindu nationalism ahead of the

2024 elections, the second part of ACLED's India Elections Special Issue focuses on increased religious polarization as a driver for political violence across India.

Religious polarization drives communal violence

The BJP's decisive victory in 2019 marked a turning point for Hindu-Muslim relations in India, as the party followed through on some of the long-standing demands of Hindu nationalists. In August 2019, just weeks after the elections, the BJP government abrogated Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state.¹² The greater autonomy guaranteed by Article 370 was a consequence of Jammu and Kashmir's contested accession to India, as opposed to the Muslim-majority Pakistan, at the time of their independence from British rule. The decision to end the special status was perceived as the first step toward changing the demographic character of the state by allowing non-Kashmiris, likely Hindus, to buy land and settle there.

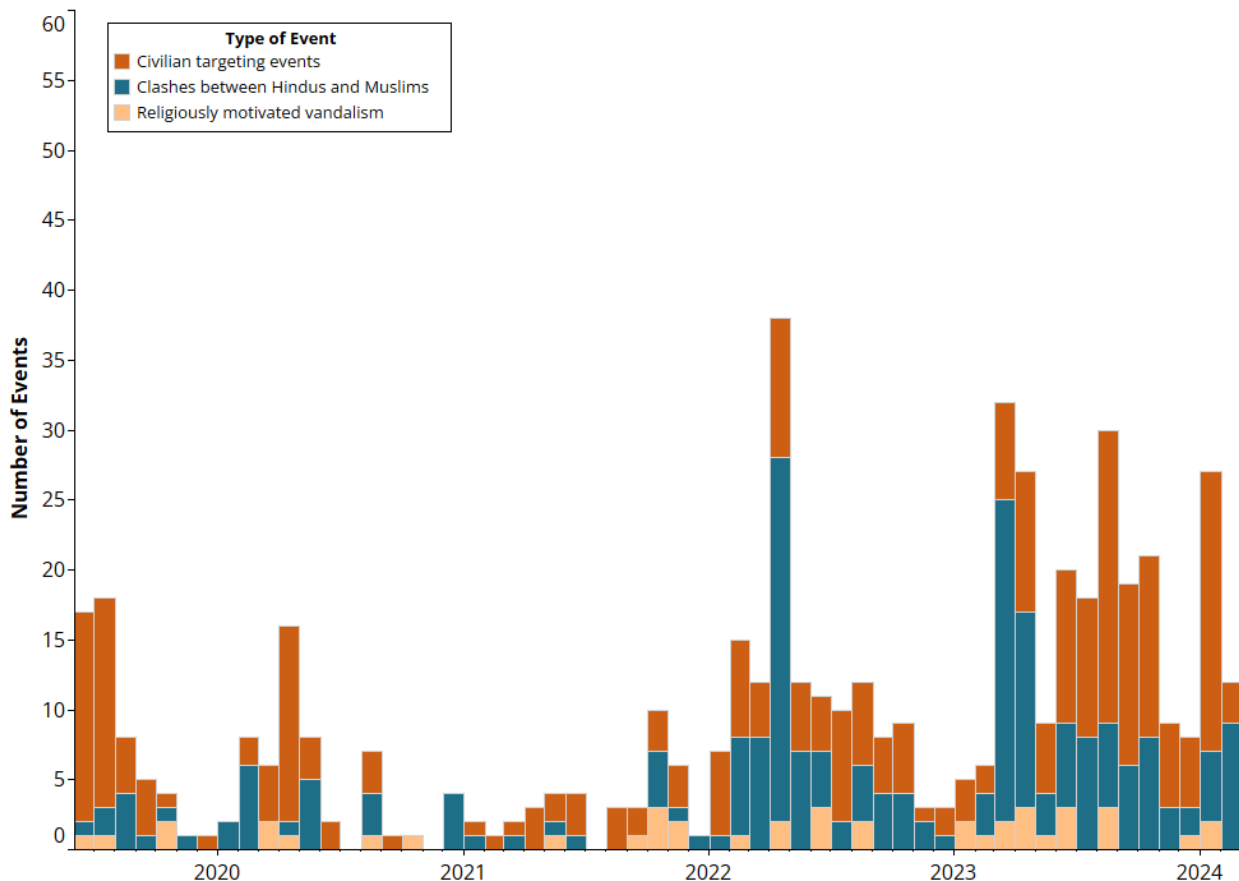
A few months later, the government proposed an amendment to the citizenship laws, making it easier for Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian religious minorities from the neighboring Muslim-majority nations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to gain Indian citizenship.¹³ By specifically excluding persecuted Muslim minorities, such as the Hazaras and Ahmadis, from these countries and all religious minorities from neighboring non-Muslim majority countries, such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the policy introduced religion as a basis of citizenship for the first time. Given that secularism was one of the founding ideals that differentiated India from Pakistan, which had been conceived as a homeland for Muslims, at the time of Partition, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) received backlash for violating the constitution's provisions on equality and nondiscrimination.¹⁴ Though passed in December 2019, the CAA's implementation was put on hold amid widespread protests that reportedly left scores dead. On 11 March 2024, just over a month before the elections, the BJP government announced rules implementing the CAA.

Inflammatory statements, often coming from senior government members, have further stoked religious tensions. A favored tactic among Hindu nationalists is adding 'jihad,' the Arabic word for struggle, as a suffix to various terms, using it as shorthand for imagined Muslim plots to dominate the country. The most prevalent among these is 'love jihad,' a conspiracy theory about Muslim men luring Hindu women to convert to Islam under the pretext of romantic relationships.¹⁵ At least 11 state governments, most of them ruled by the BJP, have passed laws banning religious conversions through marriage, lending credence to claims of 'love jihad.' During the COVID-19 pandemic, 'corona jihad' was a trending hashtag on X (formerly known as Twitter) with Hindu nationalists accusing Muslims of intentionally spreading the virus. The conspiracy theory gained traction after senior members within the BJP-led government dubiously connected an event organized by an Islamic missionary, the Tablighi Jamaat, to the spread of the pandemic within India.¹⁶ Other Islamophobic tropes include 'land jihad,' where Muslims are believed to systematically encroach upon public lands through illegally constructed mosques and *madrassas* (religious schools), and 'economic jihad,' where Islamic practices around the sale of halal meat are seen as a plot to financially deprive Hindus by excluding them.¹⁷ In Assam, where the BJP-ruled state government has forcibly evicted thousands of mainly Bengali Muslim families through anti-encroachment drives, a law against 'land jihad' found a place in the party's official manifesto for the state assembly elections.¹⁸

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the divisive rhetoric, combined with divisive policies, has polarized society along religious lines, triggering political violence in the form of riots between Hindu and Muslim mobs as well as violence targeting civilians from both religious groups (*see graph below*). ACLED records over 210 clashes between Hindus and Muslims in the second term of the BJP government. The deadliest of these took place in February 2020 in the national capital of New Delhi, when more than 50 people, mainly Muslims, were reportedly killed in clashes over the CAA. Delhi Police, which falls under the direct control of the BJP-led central government, was accused of enabling the Hindu mobs that targeted Muslim localities.¹⁹ In the days preceding the violence, senior BJP leaders, including ministers, made several incendiary speeches labeling anti-CAA protesters as "traitors" and calling for them to be shot.²⁰ In addition, low-intensity clashes erupting around major Hindu religious festivals have now become normalized.²¹ Such clashes are characterized by Hindu worshippers chanting provocative slogans and songs as their religious processions pass through Muslim localities.

Violence Between Hindus and Muslims in India

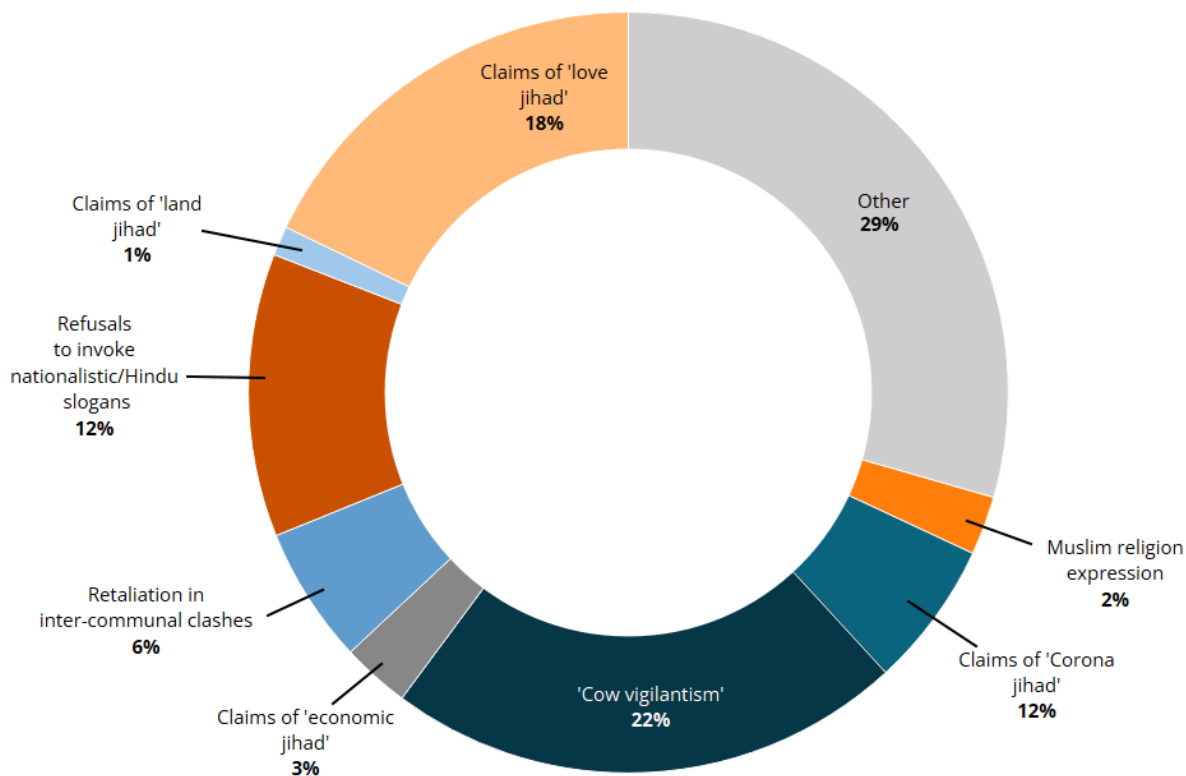
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Besides direct clashes between members of the two communities, ACLED data show that violence targeting civilians accounts for over half of all political violence between Hindus and Muslims. Over two-thirds of such violence has been carried out by Hindu mobs targeting Muslim civilians. Though motivations have varied, a large proportion of the violence in recent years has involved Hindus lynching Muslim civilians over suspicions of slaughtering cows or possessing beef (*see graph below*) — a phenomenon known as ‘cow vigilantism.’ Cows are revered as sacred animals in Hinduism, prompting many states to enact laws prohibiting the slaughter of cows.²² Vigilante action has further polarized society, acting as a trigger for clashes between the two communities. In July 2023, Hindus and Muslims clashed in Haryana’s Nuh town amid rumors that a wanted cow vigilante would join a Hindu religious procession.²³ Besides cow vigilantism, ‘love jihad’ conspiracy theories were another major reason for violence targeting Muslims, with mainly Muslim men bearing the worst of it. The government — which has most often responded to such vigilantism with silence or even condonation — has done little to curb the violence.²⁴

Motivators for Violence by Hindus Targeting Muslims in India

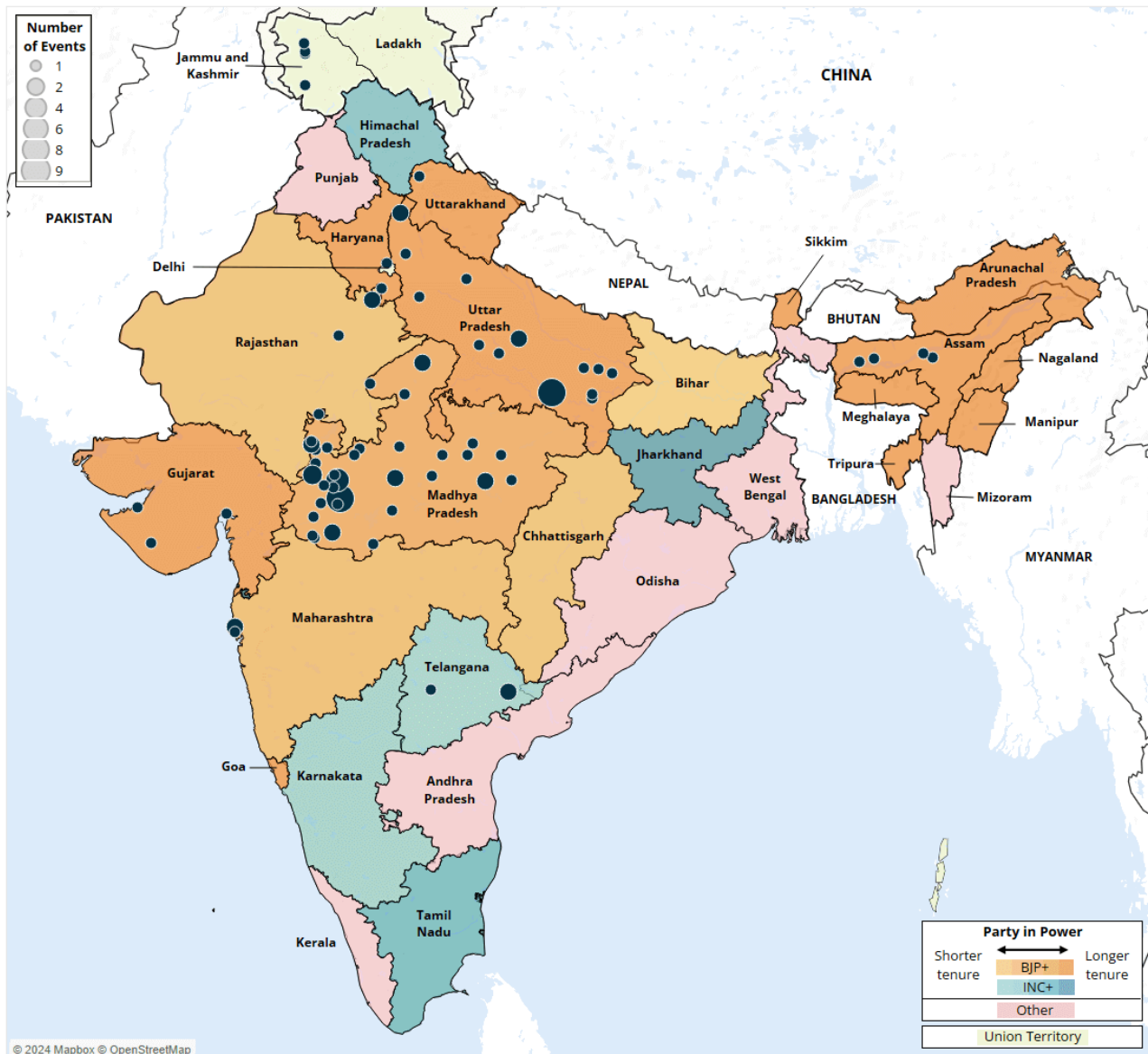
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A more explicit example of state complicity in violence against Muslims is the phenomenon that has come to be known colloquially as 'bulldozer justice,' referring to the punitive demolition of the houses of perceived offenders under the guise of planning regulations.²⁵ Such action, taken unilaterally by government authorities without following due process, has predominantly targeted Muslim homes after incidents of communal violence or activism by Muslims, prompting some to call it state-sanctioned collective punishment of the Muslim community.²⁶ A recent report by Amnesty International showed that in several instances, Hindu-owned properties located in the same vicinity were spared despite the involvement of both communities in the rioting, highlighting the discriminatory impact of the demolitions.²⁷ ACLED data show no less than 100 instances of so-called bulldozer justice being carried out since 2019, with the phenomenon only gathering pace over the years. Such events have been overwhelmingly centered in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh (*see map below*), where BJP-led state governments have been in power since 2017 and 2020, respectively. This is despite widespread condemnation from independent human rights bodies and refrains from the judiciary.²⁸ Following bulldozer action in the aftermath of the 2023 Nuh riots, the Punjab and Haryana High Court questioned whether the targeted demolitions of Muslim houses amounted to "an exercise of ethnic cleansing ... by the State."²⁹

Demolitions as Collective Punishment in India

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Toward a Hindu *rashtra*?

Religious polarization is likely to get worse in the run-up to the elections, with the BJP well-positioned to benefit electorally from the consolidation of a Hindu voting bloc.³⁰ At a campaign event during the ongoing elections, Modi himself stirred up communal tensions by referring to Muslims as “infiltrators” and raising alarms that the opposition planned to redistribute the country’s wealth to Muslims, a claim that was widely dismissed as misleading.³¹ A recent report by the Washington, DC-based India Hate Lab found that hate speech, mainly directed against Muslims, peaked during campaigning for Indian state elections in 2023; the BJP won three of the five states that went to polls.³² Anti-Muslim sentiment in the aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat riots, where Hindu mobs reportedly killed hundreds of Muslims, also helped Modi, then the chief minister of Gujarat, remain in power for over a decade before propelling his rise to the national level.³³ Besides the ‘Hindi heartland’ states of North and Central-West India, which have historically seen high levels of communal violence, religious polarization can also be expected to drive an increase in violence in states such as Kerala and West Bengal, as the BJP seeks to capitalize on Hindu pride to expand its political footprint.³⁴ The BJP’s plans to make inroads in these states have also increased tensions with opposition parties dominant there, further prompting violence.

Meanwhile, the government’s unequivocal embrace of Hindu nationalism has heralded a shift in Indian society, moving the political discourse firmly to the right with regard to religion. Several members of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), a coalition of around 20 opposition parties led by the progressive INC, now follow what has come to be known as ‘soft Hindutva.’ This involves endorsing some of the more moderate demands of Hindu nationalism and practicing a more

performative Hinduism, in the hopes of clawing back some Hindu voters from the BJP.³⁵ The strategy has so far proven to be relatively unsuccessful, as the BJP continues to dominate the electoral landscape.

A victory for the BJP in the upcoming general elections, as is the most likely outcome, will only strengthen the Hindu nationalist movement. Some analysts speculate that the CAA will be followed by an exercise to compile the National Register of Citizens, requiring everyone to provide evidence of their citizenship and declaring those unable to do so as foreigners.³⁶ Combined with the CAA, this would effectively render those Muslims who are unable to provide citizenship documents stateless. Also in the works is a 'Uniform Civil Code,' through which a common law governing civil relations would replace the existing system, where respective religious laws govern relations among members of the same community. Minorities, including Muslims, fear that a common law would curtail their rights to freedom of religion and culture.³⁷ For its part, the BJP maintains that the CAA is primarily a humanitarian gesture intended to benefit those facing religious persecution abroad and would not impact the citizenship of Muslims born in India, while a uniform civil code would further gender equality by eliminating "regressive" personal laws.³⁸

Visuals in this report were produced by **Ana Marco**

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