

Global Opinions

India's BJP uses citizenship bill to stoke polarization and mobilize voters

By Rana Ayyub

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Rana Ayyub is an Indian journalist and author of “Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Coverup.”

On Jan. 8, the lower house of [India's Parliament](#) passed [controversial legislation](#) that would grant citizenship to minority non-Muslim communities from neighboring countries.

The bill intends to amend the 1955 Citizenship Act in order to provide citizenship to illegal migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who are Buddhists, Jain, Sikh, Parsi or Christians and have lived in India for at least six years.

But a week before the bill was passed in the lower house (Lok Sabha), [five Rohingyas from the northeastern region of Assam](#) were [deported](#) to Myanmar, where the Muslim community has faced intense persecution.

The government, led by the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party, has been deporting Rohingyas despite it being a violation of India's obligations under international laws that prohibit governments from returning individuals whose lives are under threat in their home country. Leaders of the ruling party have called Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh a national security threat, and [the president of the ruling party has labeled them termites](#).

The amended bill passed on Jan. 8 makes it clear that Muslims are not welcome in India, and it's a very transparent attempt to stoke

religious polarization before general elections scheduled for April-May.

The decision to grant citizenship based on religion goes against the letter and spirit of the Indian Constitution, [specifically Article 14](#). In northeastern states, which share a history of ethnic cleansing of minorities, the bill might have damning repercussions. Since its passage, [violence has erupted in Assam](#), driving a key government ally from the state [to withdraw its support](#).

The bill must also be seen in the context of the [controversial National Register of Citizens \(NRC\) in Assam](#), whose first draft released in July did not include 4 million people living in the state. The list, which has been called by activists one of the biggest exercises in disenfranchisement anywhere, was less anti-immigrant than anti-Muslim and anti-Bengali. If the amended citizenship bill is passed in the upper house of Parliament, non-Muslims who have not made it into the NRC, but have lived in India for more than six years, will qualify for citizenship by naturalization, while Muslims in the same situation will be excluded.

Assam and several other parts of northeastern India have a long and painful history of riots and ethnic cleansing directed against Bengalis, Muslim and Hindu, who have often been labeled Bangladeshis on the basis of their linguistic identity, regardless of their actual citizenship. In 1983, Bengali Muslims were targeted in what [became known as the Nellie massacre](#), in which more than 2,000 people were hacked to death overnight. Not a single person has been convicted for the massacre. The new citizenship bill will deepen the old fault lines in Assam, both religious and linguistic.

The legislation still needs approval from the upper house of Parliament, where the government does not have a majority. But even if it doesn't pass right now, the BJP will undoubtedly use the

bill as an emotive issue to excite the Hindu vote bank.

Two weeks ago, another bill was passed to criminalize Muslim men who abandon their wives. Supporters claim the bill seeks to liberate Muslim women, but the government has remained silent when those affected are Hindu women.

This week, the Supreme Court of India will also begin hearing arguments [on the contentious dispute over the Babri mosque, which was demolished by Hindu nationalists in 1992](#). BJP leaders have sought an ordinance to build a temple on the site, which they claim was the birthplace of Lord Ram.

It's clear that the amended citizenship bill is one more effort to stoke Hindu nationalist fervor before the elections. The government, having failed to deliver on its election promises of “vikas” (development), including employment for youths, is now going back to deploying fear and polarization.

The Indian government has made yet another sinister attempt at attacking the Indian constitution, whose very basis lies in the concept of secularism and equality.

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