

World

India's stance on Muslims threatens its goals

NEWS ANALYSIS
NEW DELHI

The nation is pushing for global clout, but Hindu nationalism is a concern

BY MARIA ABI-HABIB

Until recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's campaign to portray India as a rising power seemed to be ticking along despite troubles at home.

Much of the world remained quiet, or cautious, in recent months as India began locking up hundreds of opposition politicians and activists without charge across the country. Business executives say they are too afraid to speak out about shortcomings in the government's economic strategy. The press complains of government intimidation.

Still, there was President Trump late last month, embracing Mr. Modi in New Delhi, where streets were dotted with posters declaring the "world's oldest democracy meets the world's largest democracy."

But as the leaders celebrated each other in New Delhi, India's capital, Hindu mobs began going after Muslim protesters in neighborhoods just a few miles away while the police looked on or joined in. And it was those images — the return of sectarian violence on the streets, not the carefully crafted show of international partnership — that set the tone for India on the world stage in recent days.

On Wednesday, Freedom House, a nonpartisan democracy advocacy organization based in Washington, flagged India as a major concern.

"The Indian government has taken its Hindu nationalist agenda to a new level with a succession of policies," the group said, "threatening the democratic future of a country long seen as a potential bulwark of freedom in Asia and the world."

In a rare move, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights filed a petition in India's Supreme Court on Tuesday to challenge a citizenship law that critics say discriminates against Muslims. Some of India's closest partners have begun criti-

cizing its treatment of Muslims and migrants, with condemnations coming in from Iran, the United States, Bangladesh and elsewhere.

"If India loses that secular, democratic identity then it loses what makes it different than other countries in Asia. We are all watching the riots in Delhi and worry they are going down a dangerous road that makes it harder for us to be a strong advocate for India," said Representative Ami Bera, a California Democrat who is the longest-serving Indian-American in Congress.

Mr. Bera, who has long lobbied for closer U.S. relations with India, added, "If they want to become a global power, well, that comes with certain responsibilities."

Though there has been no sign yet that big doors are closing internationally, the violence in New Delhi has clearly opened a new chapter of international questioning of Mr. Modi's agenda, and, perhaps, of the investment climate in a country hoping to turn its weakening economy around. The current unrest threatens one of India's biggest appeals for investors or potential allies: that it is the world's largest secular democracy.

In private conversations, diplomats are worried that the rhetoric coming from Mr. Modi's governing Bharatiya Janata Party is creating an environment that could lead to more violence. They point out that B.J.P. members have been labeling protesters and opposition supporters as terrorists who were supported by Pakistan. One minister led crowds in chants of "shoot the traitors!"

One area where international officials believe that India may be particularly hurting itself is in its campaign to be granted a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council along with other nuclear powers. Speaking on condition of anonymity, several diplomats, including some from countries that have publicly called for an Indian seat on the Council, say that their governments are now reluctant to push the issue after India's domestic unrest has laid bare the effects of Hindu nationalism there.

During his first campaign for prime minister in 2014, Mr. Modi played down his Hindu agenda. His first term was marked by an energetic foreign policy



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A relief camp in Delhi. Some of India's closest partners have begun criticizing the nation's treatment of Muslims and migrants.

and alliance building. Domestically, he focused on development and economic reforms. He promoted himself as a globalizer and unifier, friends with everyone: the Israelis and Palestinians, the Russians and the Americans.

After winning a second term last year, Mr. Modi's government made issues that appealed to its Hindu-nationalist base a priority, and the prime minister talked less about economic reform.

In August, the government scrapped the statehood of India's only Muslim-majority state of Kashmir and locked up hundreds of its politicians and activists without charge. In December, the government approved a citizenship law that would expedite citizenship for every major religion in the region except Islam. Coupled with a citizenship test, observers worry that the policies will dis-

enfranchise India's 200 million Muslims, who make up 14 percent of the population.

Now, though none of the Western world leaders who have sought closer partnership with India have yet to issue strong warnings about the sectarian violence in India — at least publicly — more criticism is coming in.

On Tuesday, the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights filed its petition in India's Supreme Court to challenge the citizenship act, claiming the law undermines the country's "human rights obligations." India's Foreign Ministry has asked the Supreme Court to overturn it.

On Feb. 26 the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom condemned the violence in Delhi, after suggesting in December that the

American government consider sanctioning India for the passage of the citizenship law.

Iran, which has close ties with India and has typically refrained from commenting on others' affairs, issued a rare condemnation in the past week about India's treatment of Muslims.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation castigated the riots as "anti-Muslim" on Feb. 27. Just last year the organization had invited India as its guest of honor, which New Delhi hailed as a diplomatic victory.

While India's Muslims are a minority at home, its Muslim population is the second largest in the world. But it never had a voice at the organization until last year, coveted progress that is now at risk.

Allies worry that India's domestic tur-

moil is creating unnecessary tensions with its neighbors, which could help China in the long run as it tries to expand its influence in South Asia.

Relations with Bangladesh are at a low after India's powerful home minister, Amit Shah, called illegal immigrants from Bangladesh "termites" last year when justifying the need for the citizenship test.

Afghanistan, which rarely comments on other countries' affairs and has a warm relationship with India, has expressed its displeasure about the sectarian undertones Mr. Modi's government has recently taken, which includes jabs at Afghan migrants.

The country's domestic politics are now at risk of blowing up India's global ambitions. Two officials in the Ministry of External Affairs, who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid being punished, complained that when visiting foreign dignitaries arrive in Delhi, they spend most of their meetings defending their country's domestic policies instead of fostering bilateral ties.

India's faltering economy may also pose a threat to its ambitions.

The economy is experiencing its slowest growth in nearly a decade, with unemployment at a 45-year high. Government officials seem more focused on crushing political opposition than shoring up the economy, observers worry, and domestic turmoil might push more international investors away.

Foreign direct investment in India slid 1.4 percent last quarter, after foreign investment reached a 10-year low in 2019.

Mr. Modi's "party has always had two objectives: advancing Hindu nationalism and reforming the economy. There was this feeling that these two things had equal weight, but that is now dissipating and creating a lot of whiplash in corridors across Washington," said Milan Vaishnav, the director of the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"Modi wants India to play a more active role globally, but all of that without robust economic growth at home is an empty shell," Mr. Vaishnav said. "The nationalism is not only taking over the economic agenda but actively undermining it."