

# Anger as Modi brings in citizenship law considered discriminatory

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NEW DELHI

Narendra Modi's government has implemented a law on Indian citizenship that has been widely criticised as discriminating against Muslims and sparked massive protests when it was enacted four years ago.

The official announcement by the home affairs ministry yesterday of the rules for use of the 2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act came just days before the government is expected to set a date for the next general election.

Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party is seeking to increase its parliamentary majority and to secure the 73 year-old leader a third five-year term at the election, which is expected to be held in April and May.

The act provides a fast track to Indian citizenship for Hindus and members of four other minority religions who arrived in India before 2015 from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, India's Muslim majority neighbours, and who experienced persecution in their home countries.

The act, which also covers Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists, Jains and Christians, extends no such rights to Muslims, many of whom were angered by legislation they saw as discriminatory.

The home affairs ministry said it would now be accepting online applications for citizenship under the law.

When India passed the act in December 2019, protests involving hundreds of thousands erupted in New Delhi and beyond. Dozens were killed during the protests. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said the legislation was "fundamentally discriminatory".

India has the world's largest Muslim minority population of approximately 200mn.

Amit Shah, India's home affairs minister, has insisted the act does not take away citizenship, describing it instead as a law to "provide citizenship" to persecuted people from neighbouring countries.

The legislation was part of the ruling BJP's manifesto for India's last election in 2019, but the Modi government had held off on implementation.

Opposition politicians criticised the move.

"This is nothing but the BJP's [attempt at] publicity before elections," pointed out Mamata Banerjee, head of the All India Trinamool Congress, which is the country's second-largest opposition party.

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, a writer and expert on Hindu nationalist politics, said yesterday's announcement on the law was "aimed at showing that all Hindu-first policies are being implemented".

"This is the standard dogwhistle politics of the BJP," he added.

Modi's critics have accused him of degrading India's secular values during nearly a decade in power and of presiding over a surge in anti-Muslim hate crime and discrimination.

In January, the prime minister attended at the consecration of the Ram Mandir Hindu shrine in Ayodhya in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. The shrine was built on the site of a mosque which was torn down by religious zealots in 1992.