

Indian state bans polygamy in 'anti-Islam' reform

India

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Marriage, divorce and inheritance laws have been unified for the first time since independence in India, banning Muslims from practising sharia in one state.

The reforms in Uttarakhand, implemented yesterday, mean polygamy is outlawed, marriage is not allowed until the age of 21 for men and 18 for women and sons and daughters must have equal inheritance.

India's many religions had previously

applied their own rules, most notably the country's 200 million Muslims.

Uniform laws are contentious in a country with such vast religious diversity. It is perhaps no surprise that Narendra Modi's Hindu government chose a state with a small Muslim population, of around 14 per cent, for the change.

The state's chief minister, Pushkar Singh Dhami, is a member of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and hopes to emerge as a prominent figure after being the first to implement the rules.

For the BJP, the new uniform civil

code is an experiment that, if deemed a success, may be extended to other states governed by the party. The code has been a principle of BJP ideology for decades and Dhami has sold it as a victory for women. "We are attempting to bring uniformity in all laws relating to personal civil matters that discriminate on the basis of caste, religion, sex," he posted on X.

Islamic theologians and clerics oppose any uniform civil code as a violation of their right to practise their faith, granted under the constitution.

Neerja Chowdhury, a political analyst, said the state was chosen because it had a Hindu ethos and a small population of Muslims. "It's unlikely there will be a concerted reaction," she said.

Even liberal Muslims and women's rights groups who see sharia as a way to oppress women are unlikely to support the code. Zakia Soman, a Muslim women's rights activist, said: "Why has the government not introduced it in all states if it is committed to gender justice? It makes you wonder about [the] real motive."