

# TRACKING HATE



Monitoring hate speech during India's  
2024 election campaign



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Cover Photo: New Delhi protest (2021), Rupinder Singh

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## Table of contents

Introduction.....	3
Methodology.....	4
Key findings.....	5
Why is hate speech prevalent in Indian politics? .....	6
How is hate speech legislated in India? .....	7
India's international legal obligations.....	8
Documented cases of hate speech.....	9
Conclusions and observations.....	13
Policy recommendations.....	15





## INTRODUCTION

India, the world's biggest democracy, recently held the largest election in history. Over 640 million people cast a vote in the seven-week poll and re-elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a third term.[1] With attendance just one percent lower than the last election in 2019, this suggests a healthy democratic country.

But all is not well in India. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other groups and individuals associated with Hindu nationalism and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have sought to use hate speech against India's Muslims to divide communities along religious lines. The United Nations has gone so far as to issue a warning to New Delhi about the threat to Muslims and other minorities as cases of hate speech have dramatically increased before and during the 2024 election campaign. Documented instances of violence against these groups after hate speech occurs have only justified these fears.[2]

India has a proud history of democracy and pluralism, and the use of hate speech for political gain threatens this history. It also has real life consequences for India's Muslim communities, who are subject to economic, political and social marginalisation as well as threats and violence. For this reason, it is important to document the prevalence of hate speech during the recent election campaign, investigate why hate speech has become a mainstay of Indian politics, and analyse the consequences for Muslims and its effect on the 2024 election campaign. The present report furthermore includes policy recommendations to help solve what has become a systemic problem in India.



## METHODOLOGY

The Platform for Peace and Humanity's Indo-Pacific programme has employed a diverse range of qualitative and quantitative methods to document instances of hate speech before and during the 2024 election campaign. This includes the use of open-source information and secondary data from domestic and international civil society organisations, such as Citizens for Justice and Peace, Hindutva Watch and South Asia Justice Campaign.

The scope for this report will cover Indian politicians and associated public and religious figures affiliated with political parties and movements, particularly those from or close to the ruling BJP-led alliance. For the purposes of this report, hate speech will be defined as abusive or threatening speech that expresses prejudice on the basis of ethnicity and religion, or on similar grounds, to attempt to accurately identify relevant cases of hate speech. This will include:

- Direct physical threats or calls for violence, including sexual violence
- Dehumanisation and degradation, including avoiding direct reference to Muslim identity
- Creating fear and panic amongst Hindu majority communities through stereotypes, tropes and misinformation.



## KEY FINDINGS

- Between March and May 2024 there were a total of 380 cases of hate speech recorded in India by political and religious figures.[3]
- The BJP was the political party with the highest prevalence of hate speech use, with 287 cases recorded (76%) by its politicians and members.[4]
- The states with the highest prevalence of hate speech were Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal.[5]
- The politician with the highest number of hate speech cases is BJP politician and Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath (73). The politician with the second highest number of hate speech cases is Prime Minister Narendra Modi (61).[6]
- Open source data reveals most hate speech cases were defined as creating fear and panic in Hindu majority communities. The second highest number of cases were defined as direct physical threats or calls for violence.
- Overall, there has been a 600% increase in hate speech compared to the 2019 general election.[7]
- The use of hate speech by BJP politicians did not correspond with a higher number of seats won in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal. The BJP won 33 seats in Uttar Pradesh (down from 62 in 2019), 9 in Maharashtra (down from 23 in 2019) and 12 in West Bengal (Down from 18 in 2019).[8]
- More broadly, the BJP's seat tally fell from 303 to 240 between the 2019 and 2024 general elections. Most losses were concentrated in four states with a strong history of Hindu nationalism: Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and Haryana.[9]
- While there are several economic and political factors to be considered for the poor showing by the BJP in hate speech prevalent states, results suggest the use of hate speech did not have a positive impact on the performance of the BJP in key states.

## WHY IS HATE SPEECH PREVALENT IN INDIAN POLITICS?

The Partition of British India in 1947 into India and Pakistan unleashed widespread communal violence against Hindu and Muslim communities throughout the sub-continent, ending centuries of peaceful co-existence between the two groups. However, the first decades of post-independence India saw the 200 million remaining Indian Muslims live under a secular and multi-religious plurality, with equal rights for all people and legislation to protect minority groups.

This changed with the rise of the BJP as a political force and Hindu nationalism as an attractive ideology in the past three decades. The BJP is the political head of a right-wing movement that embraces Hindutva ideology, which seeks the creation of a Hindu state at the expense of the rights of Muslims and other minority groups. Founded in 1925, the RSS is the overarching body for the movement and is involved in political, religious and paramilitary activities, including involvement in the BJP.[10]

Since Narendra Modi was elected as the BJP's first Prime Minister in 2014, there has been a surge in religion-based discrimination and violence against Muslims, Dalits and Christians. The Modi administration in New Delhi and BJP Chief Ministers have continued to adopt various methods to discriminate and suppress religious minorities. This includes legislation targeting the rights of Muslims, coining terms such as 'love jihad', a conspiracy theory concerning Muslim men marrying and converting Hindu women, to spread tropes or fear, demolishing mosques and houses of Muslim communities, and openly inciting communal violence against Muslims.[11] A prominent recent example is Prime Minister Modi's public inauguration of the controversial Ram Temple in Ayodhya, built on a mosque destroyed in 1992 by a Hindu nationalist mob. Many have seen Modi's attendance at the ceremony as a clear signal to Hindu nationalists that his government intends to continue to prioritise Hindus over India's minorities.[12]

The intention of the BJP can be summarised as two-fold. The BJP and its affiliates have sought to use hate speech to divide Indians on religious grounds as a political strategy to win votes in Hindu heartland regions. In the 2019 and 2024 election campaigns, the BJP has targeted particular states with hate speech, including Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar. More broadly, Modi and the BJP aim to complete their ideological mission to create a Hindu state in India that socially, culturally and politically preferences one group – Hindus – over all others.[13]



## HOW IS HATE SPEECH LEGISLATED IN INDIA?

India does not have specific legislation dedicated to hate speech, instead relying on a number of provisions in Indian law that deal with hate speech along with other discriminatory matters. The Indian government and its judicial system also do not have an official definition of hate speech. The provisions that do arguably cover hate speech, are:

### The Indian Constitution

Article 19 (2) of the Indian Constitution does provide for an exception to freedom of speech and expression under Article 19 (1) (a). The article has provisions to impose reasonable restrictions in the “interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India”, referring to incitement of an offence, public order, decency and morality.[14]

### The Indian Penal Code

Section 153A of the penal code prohibits promoting enmity between different groups on the grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence and language, as well as committing acts prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony.

Section 295A prohibits deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings by insulting a group’s religion or religious beliefs and Section 298 also deals with speech that is deliberately intended to wound religious feelings.[15]

### The Representation of Peoples Act 1951

Section 125 of the Act prohibits any person in connection with an election promoting or attempting to promote enmity or hatred between classes of citizens on the basis of religion, race, caste, community or language. This offence is punishable with imprisonment.[16]

### The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989

Section 3 (1) (x) of the Act prohibits any person intentionally insulting or intimidating a caste or tribe with intent to humiliate, with the offence punished with imprisonment.[17]

### The Election Commission of India

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is the body that oversees India’s election campaigns, and its Model Code of Conduct comes into effect at the beginning of every campaign. The Code includes rules concerning the regulation of conduct, meetings, processions and polling, including policing hate speech. However, the guidelines are not legally binding, with moral sanction and censure the only outcomes.[18]



## INDIA'S INTERNATIONAL LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

Like India, the United Nations does not have an official legal definition of hate speech, and as a result, what is 'hateful' remains debated. However, the UN's Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines it as "any communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or another identity factor." [19] In June 2019, the UN Secretary-General launched the Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech. The Strategy leads the UN's effort to combat discriminatory statements nationally and globally and sets out strategic guidance for the UN system to address hate speech. This includes efforts to address root causes and drivers of hate speech and to enable effective UN responses to the impact of hate speech. [20]

Direct and public incitement to genocide and advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, which includes hate speech, are prohibited under international law, and are considered the "severest forms of hate speech" by the international legal system. [21]

As part of this legal system, India has legal obligations as a state party to the following treaties:

### The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Article 20(2) of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights prohibits 'any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence'. [22]

### The International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination prohibits "propaganda" and "dissemination of ideas" about racial superiority and racial discrimination, including from public authorities or public institutions. [23]

### The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide

The Convention specifies that genocide is a crime that can take place in times of war or peace, and it obliges States to take measures to prevent it and punish perpetrators. The Convention covers incitement to genocide, which is an extreme form of hate speech. [24]

## DOCUMENTED CASES OF HATE SPEECH

The Platform for Peace and Humanity has documented numerous instances of hate speech during the election campaign by politicians and religious or nationalist figures. A brief summary of these findings is included below:

### March 2024

- 3 March: Hindu nationalist and right-wing activist Kajal Singhala delivered a speech at a Hindu Janakrosh rally in Kolhapur, where she spread misleading tropes against Muslims, including 'love jihad' and forced religious conversion, and accused Muslims of plotting to take over India.[25]
- 10 March: Nitesh Narayan Rane spoke at an event organised by the Sakal Hindi Samaj in Ghatkopar, where he indirectly referred to Muslim hawkers as Jihadis and illegal Bangladeshi Rohingyas, urging members of the Hindu community to boycott them.[26]

### April 2024

- 6 April: Prime Minister Narendra Modi used a rally in Ajmer, Rajasthan to compare the Congress Party to the Muslim League and claimed the opposition threatened to tear the country apart over its support for Muslims.[27]
- 15 April: Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma linked the Congress Party to Muslims and against Hinduism while also spreading the 'love jihad' conspiracy theory.[28]
- 17 April: BJP politician Sakshi Maharaj addressed a rally at Bhagwantpur, Uttar Pradesh propagating tropes against Muslims and claiming that Muslim men have "4 wives and 40 children".[29]
- 17 April: Dhananjay Desai, head of Hindu Rashtra Sena, delivered an anti-Muslim speech in Thane, Maharashtra that stated "Lord Ram is the only thing that will ensure that India remains to be India" and called for the demolishing of mosques.[30]
- 21 April: Prime Minister Narendra Modi called Muslims "infiltrators" during a campaign in Rajasthan, alleging the Congress Party would distribute Hindu property, land and gold to Muslims.[31]
- 22 April: Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke at a rally in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, claiming the Congress Party and Muslims "had their eyes" on the earnings and property of Hindus.[32]

## DOCUMENTED CASES OF HATE SPEECH

- 23 April: Mahant Balaknath, BJP Member of the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly, addressed a rally in Sirohi, Rajasthan, accusing the government of favouring a “particular” religious community while unfairly discriminating against Hindus in his speech. He also accused the previous Congress government in Rajasthan of appeasing Muslims.[33]
- 23 April: Prime Minister Narendra Modi used a rally in Madhopur, Rajasthan to target Muslims.[34]
- 24 April: BJP Home Minister Amit Shah repeats Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s talking points by falsely claiming that the Congress Party will give the country’s resources to Muslims.[35]
- 25 April: BJP President JP Nadda echoed comments made by Modi on 21 April 2024, alleging the Congress Party has a hidden agenda to give away the rights of Hindus to Muslims.[36]
- 25 April: Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed a rally in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, attacking Muslims and the Congress Party.[37]
- 27 April: Prime Minister Narendra Modi used a public rally in Kolhapur, Maharashtra to claim the Congress Party was “collaborating” with Muslims in the lead-up to the election.[38]
- 28 April: Prime Minister Narendra Modi used a rally in Uttar Kannada, Karnataka to claim the Congress Party would distribute the wealth of Hindus to Muslim communities.[39]
- 30 April: Prime Minister Narendra Modi used an election rally in Zaheerabad, Telangana to claim the Congress Party would preference Muslims over lower caste Hindus.[40]
- 30 April: Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath attended a rally in Berhampore, West Bengal, where he claimed Muslims are “infiltrators” and threaten to change the demographics of the state. Adityanath also threatened anyone who dares to interrupt Hindu festivals, stating they would be dealt with “harshly”. [41]
- 30 April: Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, used a rally in Asansol, West Bengal, to claim Bengali Hindus had taken part in the destruction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya in the 1990’s.[42]
- 30 April: Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath claimed “Muslims reservation will lead to partition” at a rally in Birbhum, West Bengal and also claimed Muslims would seize the assets of Hindus.[43]

## DOCUMENTED CASES OF HATE SPEECH

May 2024

- 1 May: Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath spoke at a rally in Solapur, Maharashtra, accusing the Congress Party of trying to cause violence between Hindus and to make India an Islamic nation.[44]
- 2 May: Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended a rally in Bardhaman-Durapur, West Bengal and claimed the Congress Party would take away the wealth of Hindus and distribute it to Muslims.[45]
- 4 May: Kajal Hindustani, a social media influencer and Hindu nationalist, used hate speech at a rally in Mukhdedh, Maharashtra, urging the Hindu community to forcibly convert Muslims. [46]
- 7 May: Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed a rally at Dhar, Madhya Pradesh alleging the Congress Party's manifesto preferences Muslims and other minorities and claimed Congress would put a 'Babri lock' on the Ram temple in Ayodhya.[47]
- 7 May: Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended a rally in Beed, Maharashtra and claimed the Congress Party would appease Muslims and that this was "dangerous news" for the country. [48]
- 8 May: BJP Lok Sabha candidate Navneet Rana used an election campaign in Shadnaga, Telangana, to refer to Muslims as belonging to Pakistan, calling them 'Pakistan ki aulad'.[49]
- 9 May: BJP leader and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma told an election rally in Khalikote, Orissa that the Congress Party would allow Muslims to take Hindu land and build religious buildings.[50]
- 11 May: Home Minister Amit Shah used a rally in Telangana to link the Congress Party with Muslims and claimed Muslims would rob Hindu religious sites.[51]
- 12 May: BJP leader and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma used a speech in New Delhi to claim Muslims would destroy Hindu sites and replace them with mosques.[52]
- 13 May: Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered a speech at a rally in Muzaffarpur, Bihar where he claimed the Congress Party was trying to appease Muslims.[53]



## DOCUMENTED CASES OF HATE SPEECH

- 15 May: Prime Minister Narendra Modi used a rally in Kalyan, Maharashtra, to claim Muslims will have “first rights to resources” under the Congress Party and that 15 percent of the budget would go to Muslims if Congress won power.[54]
- 18 May: BJP leader and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma used a speech in Raghunathpur, Bihar to state that Muslims should not be allowed to have land in the state or build religious buildings.[55]
- 19 May: Prime Minister Narendra Modi told a rally in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand that the Congress Party was “going to change the constitution” in preference to Muslims.[56]
- 19 May: Prime Minister Narendra Modi told a rally in Purulia, West Bengal that the Congress Party encourages Muslim “infiltration” into India through its opposition to the BJP’s controversial citizenship law.[57]
- 20 May: Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, used a speech in Sirsa, Haryana, to claim that the Congress Party would distribute Hindu wealth to Muslims and that the party was closely linked to Muslims.[58]
- 20 May: General Secretary of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Surendra Jain, made a vitriolic speech claiming “wherever Hindus are a minority, they are in danger” and that “we (Hindus) are under attack from Muslims and Christians.”[59]
- 22 May: BJP leader and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma used a rally in Bokaro, Jharkhand, to claim Muslims were “infiltrators” and that Muslim sites should be shut down. [60]
- 23 May: BJP leader and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma used a rally in Keonjhar, Odisha, to claim that only the BJP would prioritise Hindus and stop Muslims from “marrying 4 women”. [61]
- 25 May: Prime Minister Narendra Modi made another provocative speech at a public meeting in the Patina Lok Sabha constituency when he alleged that the INDIA alliance would snatch the SC/ST/OBC reservation and give their vote bank to those who do ‘vote jihad’.[62]
- 25 May: Home Minister Amit Shah used a rally in Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh to claim the Congress Party did not attend the Ram Temple inauguration because it was pressured by Muslim voters. Shah also labelled Muslims as “Rohingya infiltrators”. [63]

## CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

### **The BJP increasingly relied on hate speech towards the end of the election campaign**

Data collected reveals cases of hate speech increased from March onwards, to become most prevalent in April and May 2024. This includes both months seeing the most hate speeches by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Yogi Adityanath and the highest number of cases in states with the highest prevalence: Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal.[64] While Modi and the BJP began the campaign focusing on a broad range of policy issues, such as infrastructure, the economy and welfare reform, hate speech was increasingly used in key states in an attempt to win votes and seats due to the other issues not cutting through with voters.

### **Hate speech leads to communal violence**

The use of hate speech during the election campaign overwhelmingly focused on creating fear and panic, and it has had real world consequences. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project reported a spike in cases of violence in the second half of 2023 and early 2024, which corresponds with the uptick in hate speech by politicians and religious figures before and during the election campaign. January and February 2024 saw more than 25 cases of civilians targeting Muslim events, 15 clashes between Hindu and Muslim groups, and 2 acts of religiously motivated vandalism.[65] The inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya was a notable flashpoint, leading to attacks by Hindu nationalist groups against Muslims throughout the country and mob violence in Mumbai's Mira Road. The latter saw one person attacking participants with a knife, 24 people injured throughout the unrest and authorities demolishing 'illegal' shops and homes.[66] Post-election and during Eid, there have been reports of vandalism, beatings and lynchings by Hindu mobs against Muslims across the country.[67]

### **Politicians are not being held to account for using hate speech**

Politicians and religious figures are using hate speech with impunity, The ECI Model Code of Conduct came into effect at the beginning of the election campaign and exists in part to police hate speech. However, the ECI has come under fire by human rights groups for not acting against hate speech, such as ignoring breaches by BJP politicians, which has led to these groups launching a joint campaign and filing complaints to chief electoral officers in Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, Mumbai, Hyderabad and New Delhi.[68]

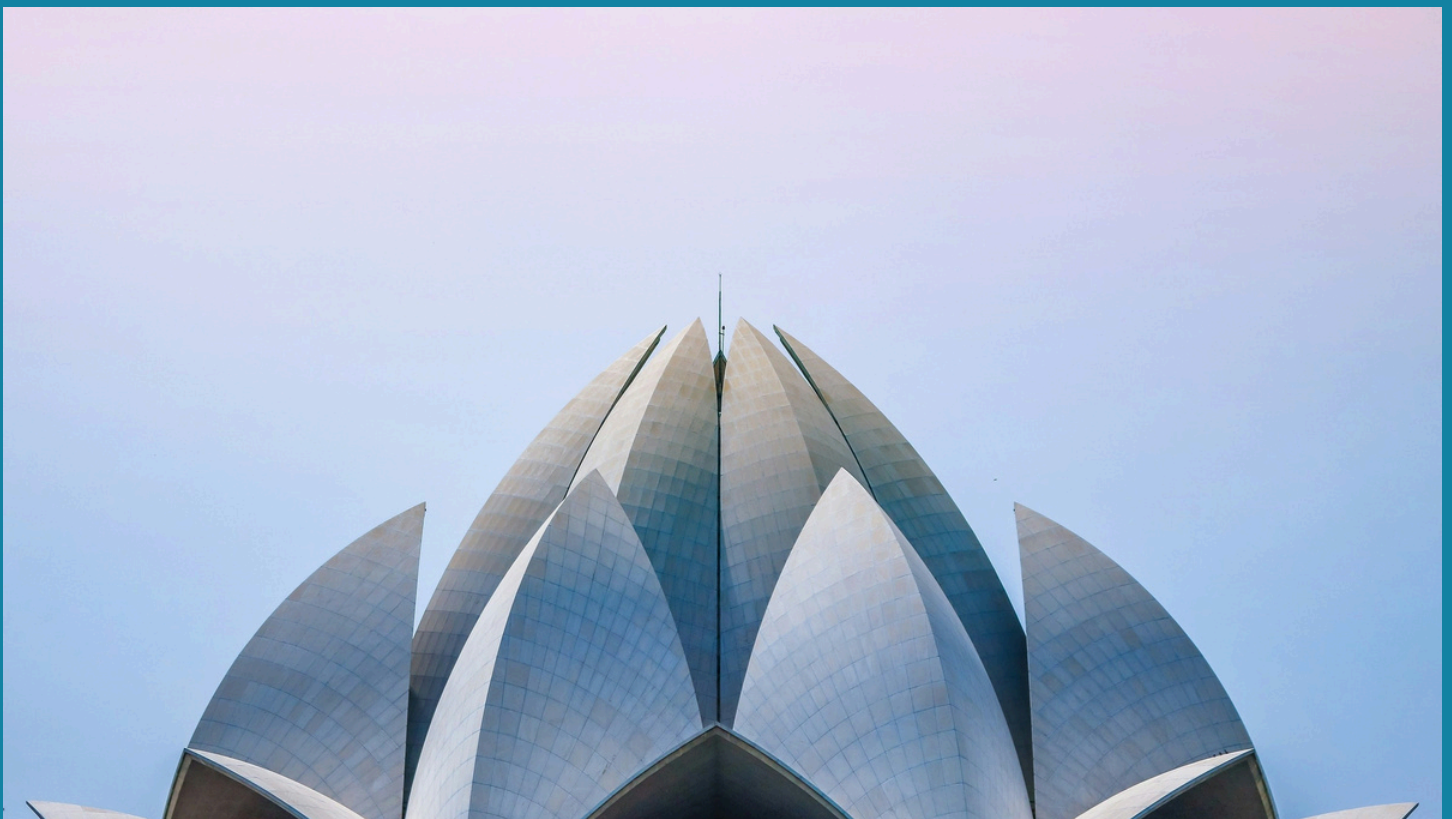
India's judicial system has also been found wanting over hate speech. In May 2024, the Supreme Court refused to entertain a petition that sought to direct the ECI to take action against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Minister Anurag Thakur for hate speech during the election campaign. In making its decision, the court justices questioned why the petitioners had not

## CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

approached the ECI, a confounding decision considering the petitioners had, and the ECI had also been criticised prior for not taking action against the use of hate speech. Politicians have made hate speech purposely difficult to prosecute, with the ECI toothless and politically compromised, while the judicial system is unwilling to delve into matters where it feels – rightly or wrongly – it has no relevance.

### **Hate speech did not have a positive impact on the BJP's election campaign**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP-led alliance suffered a setback in the 2024 poll, counter to pre-election polling, which suggested a comfortable 300-seat majority. Instead, the BJP's seat tally fell from 303 to 240 between the 2019 and 2024 general elections and most losses were concentrated in four states with a strong history of Hindu nationalism: Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and Haryana. The use of hate speech by BJP politicians in target states also did not correspond with a higher number of seats won. The BJP won 33 seats in Uttar Pradesh (down from 62 in 2019), 9 in Maharashtra (down from 23 in 2019) and 12 in West Bengal (Down from 18 in 2019).[69] This suggests that voters in Hindu majority states were either not attracted to hate speech, or were more concerned with other issues, such as cost of living or welfare programs. The answer is likely both and shows that the use of hate speech did not have a positive impact on the performance of the BJP in key states.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Prime Minister Narendra Modi has an opportunity to change course**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will begin his third term somewhat diminished due to the election setback, with his coalition having to deal with a resurgent Congress Party. With voters not attracted to hate speech and division, Modi has an opportunity to pivot and focus on issues that affect all Indians, such as cost of living pressures and the broader economy. This includes scrapping the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, which was passed this year and prevents Muslims from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh from becoming Indian citizens if they entered the country prior to December 2014.<sup>[70]</sup> Legislation like this is targeted and punitive, and will not solve the social, political and economic problems Indians face. Modi should, therefore, enter his third term seeking to unite, not divide Indians.

### **The international community needs to confront India over human rights concerns**

The international community, particularly Western governments like Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, have been guilty of fawning over Modi in the pursuit of the political and economic benefits modern India offers. With the UN raising concerns over the targeting of minority groups, these governments need to raise concerns over the human rights of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Dalits with New Delhi. They should also not be afraid to take more punitive measures, such as sanctions on BJP politicians if Modi and the BJP continue to target the rights of Muslims and other groups through hate speech, legislation, and constitutional change. Like all states, India has international legal obligations when it comes to respecting all groups of people and it is the job of India's international friends to remind its government of this.

### **India needs better protection against hate speech**

India is the world's largest democracy but it has serious flaws when it comes to judicial freedom and protections for minority groups. The ECI is toothless, beholden to the government of the day, and cannot properly police hate speech. The judicial system also seems reluctant to challenge the status quo and make legal determinations on hate speech that hold politicians to account. The solution, if unlikely, is for the Modi government to pass legislation that clearly defines and prohibits hate speech. This would also allow the ECI to actively pursue and punish people guilty of hate speech during election campaigns. These reforms are desperately needed and failure to act will put Muslims and other minority groups at risk of violence.



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