

**SPECIAL REPORT****Reputation Reversal**

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The world's largest democracy has voted, with 417 million Indians choosing a new parliament. The most important victors may be Christians and other religious minorities in India.

The Congress Party led a weak coalition government and was expected to narrowly win re-election. But it triumphed by an unexpectedly large margin. Among the most important reasons for Congress's big victory appears to be public rejection of the politics of Hindu nationalism.

India learned parliamentary democracy from the British. But even a fulsome commitment to free elections has not delivered a fully free and liberal society: Freedom House marks India down on both political rights and civil liberties.

Moreover, decades of democracy have not erased deep religious and ethnic divisions going back to the violent partition of India and Pakistan into Hindu and Muslim states, respectively. Particularly vulnerable are India's roughly 25 million Christians, who make up 2.3 percent of the population.

Discrimination against Christians is one problem. Of greater concern are more direct attacks on the legal rights and physical safety of Christians. For instance, last year the State Department reported: "The national government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, some state and local governments imposed limits on this freedom." More specifically, "Some state governments enacted and amended 'anticonversion' laws and police and enforcement agencies often did not act swiftly to effectively counter communal attacks, including attacks against religious minorities."

In 2007 and 2008 the state of Orissa hosted many of the bloodiest attacks. Reported State: "Hindu extremists attacked Christian villagers and churches in the Kandhamal district over the [2007] Christmas holidays. Approximately 100 churches and Christian institutions were damaged, 700 Christian homes were destroyed causing villagers to flee to nearby forests, and 22 Christian-owned businesses were affected." In mid-2008 successive and intensive assaults by Hindu militants wreaked even great destruction, with 100 Christians murdered, 50,000 displaced, and 4,000 homes destroyed.

Yet, observed International Christian Concern (ICC), which ranks India among the top ten persecutors in its Hall of Shame, "The central government of India, however, has failed to respond adequately to this enormous crisis because most of those affected by the violence are outcasts." Not that anyone could be surprised at the attacks. In 2007 Human Rights Watch reported: "For several years, extremist Hindu groups in Orissa have been conducting an anti-Christian campaign that has grown violent at times, while government officials have looked the other way." Complained the ICC's Samuel Wallace, "It looks like the only defense these Christians have is God himself, because the Indian government has proved itself unable to stop the violence."

However, violence against Christians is a national problem. The ICC said that it "receives more persecution reports from India than from any other country." In its latest "Hall of Shame" report the organization spent 45 pages detailing abuse of Christians across India. There are beatings, unjust arrests, harassment, theft, vandalism, destruction of buildings and other property, legal discrimination, home evictions, interference with church construction and worship services, church closures, arson, kidnappings, rape, death threats, bombings, poisoning, murder, forced conversions, and government cover-ups.

The attacks reflect conscious policy. Explained the State Department: "Some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that communal violence against religious minorities is part of a larger Hindu nationalist agenda and corresponds with ongoing state electoral politics." Similarly, reported the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "Attacks on Christian churches and individuals [are] largely perpetrated by individuals associated with Hindu nationalist groups." ICC warned that "A growing Hindu nationalist movement, however, is threatening this nation-wide policy of tolerance and making deep inroads in several state governments."

Indeed, communal attacks were most likely to occur in states governed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a forthright political grouping for Hindu nationalists. For instance, Orissa was governed by a coalition including the BJP.

As a result, reported USCIRF, "perpetrators are rarely held to account by the state legal apparatus." The Commission recounted numerous cases where police ignored attacks or were even complicit in anti-Christian violence.

Discrimination and persecution continue. In recent months media reports detailed a Hindu temple being built on the site of a destroyed church, the beating of a minister and an evangelist, mob attacks on refugees in Orissa, police harassment of church fellowships, vandalism of churches, multiple arson attacks on churches, threats against witnesses in the case of a Christian who had been raped, arrests of pastors for "fraudulent" conversions, police interference with church services, a gang assault on a Christian convert, and mob attacks on church, prayer, and revival services.

Still, few of these assaults compare to the 1999 attack by Hindu radicals on Australian missionary Graham Staines and his eight- and ten-year-old sons. The three were burned alive in their car after participating in a Bible study. Staines' widow forgave the murderers and continued his hospital and leprosy clinics before leaving the country in 2004.

Although state governments bear the greatest blame, the USCIRF noted that "Under the previous leadership of the [BJP], the Commission in prior years found the Indian government's response to increasing violence against religious minorities in the state of Gujarat and elsewhere to be inadequate." In particular, "the BJP-led national government clearly did not do all in its power to pursue the perpetrators of the attacks and to counteract the prevailing climate of hostility against these minority groups, especially at the state and local levels."

The Commission went on to laud the Congress Party-led coalition, which took power in 2004, for acting "decisively to prevent communal violence in situations where it has erupted in the past." However, the government, weakened by internal infighting, was less successful in dealing with Orissa. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called the attacks on Christians a "national shame," but his government did little to intervene.

Still, in the recent election the BJP unashamedly incorporated Hindu extremists committed to the use of violence. Among its victorious candidates in the recent election for Orissa's state legislature was Manoj Pradhan, accused of involvement in anti-Christian riots and murder last year. Arun Gandhi, a cousin of Congress Party heir apparent Rahul Gandhi, inflamed the election campaign by giving a well-publicized speech threatening to cut off the hands of non-Hindus. BJP leader Narendra Modi is banned from entering the U.S. because of his involvement in deadly anti-Muslim riots in 2002 that continue to poison communal relations.

While the Congress victory does not guarantee the end of anti-Christian violence, it does indicate that the Indian electorate has tired of politicians who attempt to use religious tensions for political gain. Journalist Vijay Simha argued that "The election result is a statement against the persecution of non-Hindus" and "a strong rejection of extremist religious programs." John Dayal of the All India Christian Council pointed out that the BJP was "defeated not by Christians or Muslims, but by secular Hindus."

Christian leaders expect the national government to do a better job protecting religious minorities. They are less certain that the BJP has learned that intolerance and violence don't pay. Samha warned: "extremist groups often step up activities to garner funds and patronage when they are on the retreat." After all, the violence in Orissa occurred after the defeat of the national BJP government.

Ultimately, the persecution problem needs to be confronted at the state level. But the national government could help. For example, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy has recommended that New Delhi push for abolition of "anti-conversion" laws aimed at evangelism, and the training of police officers "to remain unbiased during their investigations and the manners in which they handle interreligious violence and tension." The inefficient court system also requires an overhaul to ease prosecution of those who use violence.

The Congress victory is good news for India's religious minorities, including Christians. While Washington can do little directly to intervene directly, it can reinforce the new Indian government's good instincts by pointing out that if New Delhi desires great global

influence, it needs to reduce the communal violence that continues to mar the country's international image. For India, protecting Christians, Muslims, and other religious minorities from violence is not only the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do.

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