



Prophet Remark row: Religious, political freedom in Muslim Nations

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NEW DELHI: India has been facing a major global backlash for the last two days over the controversial remarks made by two BJP spokespersons, one of whom has been suspended while the other removed.

Nupur Sharma and Naveen Kumar Jindal caused a furor in the Arab world with their derogatory remarks against Prophet Muhammed. As many as 15 countries, including Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Kuwait and Qatar, strongly condemned the statements made by Sharma — the spokesperson of India's largest political party — during a TV debate.

While the central government has gone into a firefighting mode to quell any ill will with some of these nations, several people have pointed out that the countries criticising India aren't really ambassadors of religious freedom themselves.

On its part, India has staunchly rejected criticism from Pakistan and bodies like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) with a tough rejoinder.

Referring to criticism by Pakistan, the external affairs ministry said the "absurdity of a serial violator of minority rights commenting on the treatment of minorities in another nation is not lost on anyone."

"The world has been witness to the systemic persecution of minorities including Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Ahmadiyyas by Pakistan. The world has been witness to the systemic persecution of minorities including Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Ahmadiyyas by Pakistan," the MEA said.

On the remarks by OIC, the MEA said that India accords "highest respect" to all religions and that the statement by the 57-member grouping exposed its "divisive agenda" which is being pursued at the behest of "vested interests."

Religious, civil freedom in other countries

Indian diplomats, who were summoned by countries like Qatar, Iran and Kuwait, did the bulk of the firefighting by distancing the central government from the inflammatory comments.

The central government is careful not to draw further ignominy which could hurt long-standing diplomatic ties with these countries.

However, the human rights and liberties records of these countries don't paint a rosy picture either.

In fact, according to the Freedom House 2022 report, India (66) scores better on political and civil liberties than all these 15 countries.

According to the Freedom in the World report, which assesses the real-world rights and freedoms enjoyed by individuals, Saudi Arabia has a score of just 7 out of 100.

Bahrain (12), UAE (17), Oman (24) and Qatar (25) don't rank much higher themselves. Notably, these were among the first countries to lash out at India over the remarks.

In Cato Institute's Human Freedom Index 2019, most of the Muslim-majority nations that erupted in furor rank lowly when it comes to personal freedom.

Here too, countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran score way below the global average with extremely low levels of freedom.

A not-so-bright record

The US State Department, in its annual International Religious Freedom report, has also pointed out several examples of religious discrimination in these nations.

From religious violence to prohibition on conversion, most of these countries have drawn the scrutiny of NGOs and human rights organisations for showing intolerance towards minorities.

For instance, in Iran, Shia clerics and prayer leaders reportedly continued to denounce Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements.

In Jordan, religious leaders reported continuing online hate speech, frequently through social media, directed towards religious minorities and those who advocated religious moderation.

In Libya, religious minorities said converts to other religions, as well as atheists, agnostics, and other non-religious persons, faced threats of violence or dismissal from employment and from their families and communities because of their beliefs or lack of belief.

The State Department report listed an example from Indonesia where, in April and May, reports of a "worldwide Jewish conspiracy" spread on social media that claimed Jews, Christians, and communists were using Covid-19 and related restrictions on public gatherings to destroy Islam.

In other hardline Islamist countries like Saudi Arabia, people reported that individuals who converted from Islam to Christianity almost always did so in secret, fearing the reactions of family members and the threat of criminal charges, up to and including "execution".

While the report also mentions instances of communal violence in India, several other think-tank indices show that the country is relatively more tolerant towards minorities than many other Islamic nations — especially those who have erupted in anger at the Prophet controversy.