Popular unrest arising from religious differences has become increasingly commonplace in India over the last few decades. The proportion of Muslims in the country, which was recorded as 14.25% in the 2011 census, is increasing year by year, and the government, dominated by Hindus, is unwilling to face up to this reality. How long has this conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India been unfolding? And why is the Indian government reluctant to carry out a new census? What do the Muslims in the neighboring states of Pakistan and Bangladesh think about the attacks on their fellow believers? And how is this conflict being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic? What does the future hold in store for India’s Muslims?

The Mountbatten plan to divide British India into a Muslim state, Pakistan, and a Hindu one, India, which was set out and implemented in 1947, failed to take into account a large number of ethnic and political factors, and this failure led to a great deal of bloodshed and an endless stream of refugees. As a result of the Partition, as the division is known, more than 19 million people have been forced out of their homes with more than 4 million killed.

While Hindus living in the new state of Pakistan were regarded with hatred and large numbers of them were forced to migrate to India, in India Muslims were treated with a greater degree of tolerance. However, despite the fact that they are allowed to practice their faith openly and worship in mosques without restriction, their access to education was limited, and those working in government service were deprived of promotion opportunities. As a result of these policies, almost all India’s Muslims migrated to Pakistan. The Muslims remaining in India tended to be from the poorest parts of society - those who did not have enough money to relocate to the Muslim state.

Their communities thus became, as it were, Muslim “enclaves” in India. Few Muslims seek to obtain a higher
education, in many cases they do not send their children to school, and they tend to work mainly in Muslim districts. Naturally among India’s Muslims there are some people who are fully integrated into modern society, but they represent a fairly small population of their community, not least because Hindus are reluctant to work alongside Muslims, seeing them as having a lower social status. Inevitably, the above factors have had an impact on the standard of living enjoyed by the Muslim community, which is significantly lower than that of Hindus.

And as often happens, it is among the poorest sections of society that birth rates are the highest. India’s Muslim families tend to have more children than Hindu or Christian families. This situation is naturally of concern to India’s government, which is aware that some parts of the country may, in the future, become entirely Muslim, which would have a wide range of consequences.

To avoid drawing public attention to this issue, India’s government has decided not to carry out a new census, and, according to some sources, has failed to publish all the results of the last one, conducted in 2011. No doubt this decision is related to the fact that over the last fifty years the proportion of Muslims in India has increased by almost 50%, from 9% to 14% of the total population (which is currently 1.39 billion).

In order to increase the numbers of people who follow religions other than Islam, in December 2019 the Indian government issued a law simplifying the procedure for non-Muslim citizens of Pakistan and Bangladesh to obtain Indian citizenship. This decision was criticized by India’s Muslim community. In February 2020 the capital, New Delhi, was the scene of major anti-Muslim riots, in which radical Hindu nationalists attacked Muslim districts, killing more than 30 people and looting dozens of mosques. The riots clearly showed that the antipathy between India’s Muslims and Hindus is getting even stronger.

Pakistan’s politicians frequently talk about the need to support Muslims in India. After all, it needs to sow chaos in India in order to win the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. The authorities in Pakistan are highly critical of the discrimination against their fellow Muslims in India. But they are in no position to offer all of them a new home - Pakistan is a poorer country than India and is therefore unable to accept new citizens in need of housing and work.

As for the Muslim country of Bangladesh, its government is unwilling to spoil its relations with India, and therefore avoids commenting on India’s treatment of its Muslim population, preferring to maintain a strict neutrality on this issue. And Bangladesh’s position is understandable - the country is even poorer than Pakistan, and India is its second largest foreign trade partner after China. Unlike Islamabad, Dhaka has no territorial disputes with India and it is does not want to jeopardize its relations with its neighbor because of ideological issues.

The COVID-19 epidemic, which began in 2020, has halted the escalation of the conflict between India’s Hindus and Muslims. Many public organizations closed down and citizens were only allowed to go out of their homes except where this was absolutely essential. As a result, the number of religious clashes dropped to almost zero.

But sooner or later the pandemic will ease up. In August 2021 the Indian pharmaceutical company Panacea Biotech announced in a press conference that it planned to produce about 25 million doses of Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine under license. India’s government has imposed strict quarantine measures and is trying to limit the number of infections.

But it is likely that after the pandemic-related restrictions are lifted, the religious clashes will begin again. The lockdown has just put these outbreaks on hold for a while.

The future for India’s Muslims appears hazy and uncertain. There are not enough of them, for example, to form a majority in parliament or demand secession for their regions. But there are too many of them to remain as a religious minority with limited legal rights. India’s government needs to take appropriate measures to ensure that all Muslims are fully integrated into society. Otherwise, the religious conflicts that afflict India will get worse year by year, causing deep divisions in society and preventing the state from developing.

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