On January 10 the Supreme Court of India agreed to urgently consider a petition on “hate speech” against the country’s Moslem communities, with reference to specific incidents, most notoriously an incident in December 2021 in Haridwar - a city venerated in the Himalayan foothills on the banks of the River Ganges. Both the city and river are regarded as holy by Hindus.

Back in December, during a private three-day event held in Haridwar, a Hindu religious leader Yati Narsinghan made a speech which (assuming the transcripts published in the Indian press are accurate) it would be hard to describe as anything less than a call for Indian Muslims to be violently expelled from their country. But he went even further - after an investigation was launched into his conduct he lashed out at all India’s main state institutions. Among others, he was outspoken in his tirades against the Supreme Court, General Prosecutor, Army, Police and even the Constitution. The outspoken orator was promptly arrested.

Although one might think that his first speech alone - in which he praised India’s neighbor Myanmar for its policy towards Muslims - would have been enough to justify arresting him. Readers will remember that back in autumn 2017 the Myanmar military led a “counter-terrorist operation” in the border state of Rakhine, forcing most of the Muslim Rohingya people in the region to flee to Bangladesh. The refugees are still living across border from their former homes in Myanmar, stuck in a country which, to but it mildly, is far from prosperous.
Since then the Rohingya people’s plight had been the subject of considerable international attention, especially after the coup led by generals in the Myanmar army on February 1, 2021. The international attention has taken various forms, ranging from entirely well-meaning support to thinly-disguised propaganda attacks from the US and its close allies against a country that has been under the influence of the US’s main geopolitical rival, China, since long before the recent coup that returned the generals to power.

As for the anti-Muslim hate speech from a high-profile Hindu leader, it is worth looking in a little more detail at just what was said. Firstly, this is far from the first time that Yati Narsinghan has spoken out in this way. And while in the past he has been able to get away with his attacks, this time even the radical Hinduist Bharatiya Janata Party, which has been in government since 2014 and tends to share his views, has had enough.

But this clear provocation of the Muslim community, both in India and in neighboring countries, was too much for the BJP and its leader, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Although the problem of inter-faith relations is a universal one, in India the sheer size of the population gives these issues a special importance. If in Myanmar the Rohingya number just over a million (about 2% of the country’s population), India’s Muslim population numbers some 200 million, or 15% of all Muslims in the world.

It is clear that if only a small proportion of India’s Muslims are provoked by the excesses of certain adherents of the majority religion, then turbulent times lie ahead for the country. And, as the author has noted before any serious conflicts between India’s Muslims and Hindus could cause the opening of a dangerous rift in India - although it is by far from the only such fault line. And that could result in the fragmentation both of Indian society and of the country itself.

It is important not to forget the mass protests by farmers against (long overdue) laws passed in 2020 to reform the agricultural sector, which lasted more than a year, and the ongoing situation in Kashmir, which is still challenging, and which the fiery rhetoric of Yati Narsinghan risks further inflaming.

But the problem is by no means limited to Kashmir - in the second half of last year other states in India saw an increase in the number and seriousness of outbreaks of violence between Hindus and Muslims (for example the many ways in which Hindus sought to obstruct Muslims from performing namaz - ritual prayer- in the open air). The triumphant seizure of power in Afghanistan by the Taliban (a group prohibited in the Russian Federation) has clearly had an impact, albeit indirect, on the activities of radical Muslim groups.

It is important to note that in India the tensions between Hindus and Muslims are superimposed onto other domestic conflicts. There is for example the religiously-motivated Sikh separatist movement, as well as the more secular Tamil separatist movement. It was Sikh separatists who assassinated the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 - earlier in that year she had ordered the security forces to storm the Golden Temple in Amritsar, which is sacred to Sikhs. And, seven years later, her son Rajiv, also serving as Prime Minister, was killed by members of the Tamil movement.

However, as stated above, the population figures are a major factor: India has far more Muslim citizens that Sikhs or Tamils, and therefore the potential for a major conflict between Muslims and Hindus represents a far more serious risk for the country. To give an idea of the scale of the problem, it is enough to cite two examples - the consequences of the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya at the end of 1992, and the Gujarat riots of 2002. Each of these incidents resulted in the deaths of some 2000 people. Significantly, the Haridwar hate speech incident took place on the 29th anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque - a fact which attracted a great deal of comment in India.

And relatively recently, in February 2020, major riots in which a number of people were killed took place in several districts of the Indian capital. The immediate trigger for these riots was the passing by the Indian Parliament of amendments to the law on citizenship which Muslims saw as discriminatory. Some 50 people were killed in the riots.

However, as often happens in such cases, the investigation identified a number of different and seemingly unrelated causes for the riots. And a year ago, on January 26, 2021, this trend was confirmed by another serious incident of rioting - this time fortunately without any victims - during the Republic Day celebrations. The disorder was largely provoked by Sikh separatists among the protesting farmers who had been permitted to organize a tractor procession through the streets of the city.

In fact, in as complex a country as modern India, with its many different domestic problems, any internal disorder is inevitably the result of many different factors. Any excuse is enough.
It is important to remember that Muslims form an integral part of Indian society. They have always served in government at all levels, including at the very top, and it is hard to overestimate their contribution to the nation’s scientific and cultural achievements. It is enough to cite the Taj Mahal (an achievement that tends to be ignored by Hindu zealots).

But the difficult relations between India’s two main religious groups also has serious foreign policy implications, especially in view of the fact that India’s neighbors include the important Muslim nations of Bangladesh and Pakistan. And while the anti-Muslim hate speech incident risks inflaming relations with the friendly nation of Bangladesh, it also risks derailing the regular bilateral attempts to improve the generally poor relations between India and Pakistan, both of which are de facto nuclear powers.

Imran Khan, Pakistan’s Prime Minister, who is under pressure from radical Muslim movements in his own country, was naturally unable to ignore an inflammatory speech made by a senior Hindu priest. Yati Narsinghan’s speech was also noted in China, which expressed doubt as to whether the West, with its high-profile campaign against different manifestations of extremism, would take any notice of such a blatant example in pro-Western India.

In general, this latest outspoken anti-Muslim tirade by a senior representative of what is practically India’s state religion has been extremely inconvenient for the country’s government.

And many centuries of human experience have proved what the ancient texts tell us: that there are almost no circumstances in which hate speech is appropriate.

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