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INDIAN MUSLIMS AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN NORTH INDIA 2017-2022

Doctoral thesis in the field of political science, written under the supervision of Professor Marek Dziekan and Ph.D. Krzysztof Iwanek

Summary

This PhD dissertation aims to provide insights into the anti-Muslim component of identity politics in North India. In order to do that the author examines the role of the Hindutva in shaping the narrative about the Muslim minority in India, spawning ethnic violence and increasing support for far-right parties. It is also argued that between 2017 and 2022 anti-Muslim disinformation was disseminated through right-wing media, social media and statements of political leaders. Given the broad research material, the study has been narrowed to three conspiracy theories, namely population jihad, love jihad and corona jihad, and the political discourse around them. These are instances of the many iterations of jihad depicted by Hindu nationalists in Islamophobic conspiracy beliefs against Indian Muslims.

The first chapter seeks to locate the historical roots of anti-Muslim identity politics and analyses how Hindu nationalism and contemporary identity politics in India are intertwined. In this chapter, the author also discusses the relevance of Islamophobia to the current political discourse in India. The second chapter focuses on negative stereotypes of Indian Muslims rooted in Hindu perception and the role of conspiracy and rumour in politics. The author outlines how the term 'jihad' has been manipulated and exploited by politicians to demonise Indian Muslims. The third chapter explores the anti-Muslim discourse through three conspiracy theories: population jihad, love jihad and corona jihad. In three sub-chapters the author analyses them using the following conceptual apparatus: disinformation, fake news, Islamophobia and hate speech. In the first subsection, the author explores what the population jihad theory is about, who promotes it and whether the reproduction rates of Indian Muslims are radically different from other religious groups in India. Population jihad refers to the high birth rate among Indian Muslims, which is supposed to lead to a so-called 'population imbalance'. In the second subsection, the author examines the love jihad theory that Muslim men are luring Hindu women in a bid to convert them to Islam through means such as seduction, deception,

kidnapping or marriage. This is supposed to be part of a wider demographic conspiracy to dominate India and make it a Muslim country by 'stealing Hindu women', increasing the Muslim population and gradually 'replacing' the Hindu majority. The author also explores the history of love jihad in India, identifies socio-political actors spreading this theory and analyses the media discourse on it.

The author of the study formulates the following hypotheses: (1) Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) used anti-Muslim rhetoric as a tool of identity politics in North India between 2017 and 2022; (2) Hindutva supporters and the right-wing media have contributed to the spread of anti-Muslim conspiracy theories in Indian public discourse. In order to verify them, the author examines public statements of Indian politicians, spiritual leaders, activists and journalists referring to Islam, the total fertility rate in Muslim communities, Hindu-Muslim intermarriage and the role of Muslims in spreading the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. One can notice it by studying right-wing magazines, television programmes, viral videos, memes or cartoons circulating in the Indian media. The analysis is based on the most opinionated right-wing media outlets in India including social media such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). Due to the scarcity of scholarly publications on the corona jihad theory, the analyses relied heavily on media sources, journalistic investigations and reports.

The dissertation addresses a question of the role the ruling party politicians and right-wing media play in constructing and spreading anti-Muslim conspiracy theories. This PhD dissertation tackles this and other salient questions pertaining to the politicisation of population growth, interfaith marriages and coronavirus authorised by the ruling party in India. The perceived threat of population, love and corona jihad has been increasingly utilised as a Hindutva campaign tactic to foment sectarian discord, instigate Islamophobia and foster support for the pro-Hindutva political movement.

This dissertation also analyses how the archetype of the dangerous Muslim male is attributed to hostile intentions and betrayal of national interests. The historically constructed clash between Muslims and Hindus in India has been used by the members of the far right such as the Rāṣṭriya Svayamsevak Saṅgh (RSS) or the Viśva Hindū Pariṣada (VHP) to present the Muslim community as outsiders and ill-intentioned others willing to subjugate the Hindu majority. The author argues that these policies reflect Hindu paranoia of decreasing dominance vis à vis Indian Muslims. She also claims that this negative portrayal was exploited by politicians to shape India's securitisation strategies. In this dissertation, the anti-Muslim identity politics, including Islamophobic conspiracy theories is analysed through the lens of the securitisation theory. The study explores how violence against the Muslim minority was

justified in the name of achieving security. The focus is placed on the relationship between Indian Muslims and India's national security in the political and media narrative of today's India. The created threat gave the rulers more leeway to use 'special security measures' and acquiesce to a radical solution in the name of national security. In India, the point about security has also been eagerly resorted to in the context of the political debate on love and corona jihad. The aforementioned manifestations of anti-minority politics were part of India's identity politics, the paradigm of which has undergone a gradual shift towards Hindu majoritarianism between 2017 and 2022.

The author came to conclusion that anti-Muslim rhetoric, at times blatant and explicit, and at others veiled and indirect, was one of the main tools of identity politics in North India between 2017 and 2022. The claim that the Hindutva political milieu played a significant role in fuelling Islamophobia and fostering distrust of Indian Muslims seems to be fully legitimate. According to the data collected by the author, circles associated with Hindutva ideology, BJP politicians and the Indian media have given credence to and perpetuated the discourse of population jihad, love jihad and corona jihad. In conclusion, pro-Hindutva politicians, Hindu spiritual leaders and right-wing media outlets used tools such as disinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech to create a negative image of Muslims, which translated into a decrease in trust towards this group and its stigmatisation in society.