



India Elicits Condemnation and Diplomatic Backlash Following Anti-Muslim Remarks by Government Officials from the Ruling Bharatiya Janata Party

India has garnered a wave of condemnation and diplomatic backlash this week following anti-Muslim remarks by government officials from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Nupur Sharma and Naveen Jindal, both prominent spokespersons for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP, made derogatory references to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad on multiple occasions. The comments drew heavy criticism, with experts and analysts pointing out that they risk damaging India's international standing, particularly in Muslim-majority nations. The bigoted remarks also raise continued concerns about the BJP's destructive role in fueling religious intolerance in India. Observers have noted how violence targeting the country's significant Muslim minority has been on the rise since Modi took office, with extremists being emboldened by the government's inflammatory rhetoric.

Multiple nations including Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Pakistan expressed outrage over the remarks and initiated formal protests with India. This spurred Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to fire the two BJP officials in a scrambling attempt to save diplomatic face. India has substantial business ties with countries in the Middle East, and thus some experts have highlighted that the BJP seemed forced to take action against the two officials due to the considerable backlash regarding their bigoted remarks. Representatives from many of the countries who denounced the comments outlined how they are destructive and would only lead to further incitement of religious hatred and intolerance. The 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also criticized the remarks and drew attention to the fact that they come at a particularly vulnerable time of "intensifying hatred and abuse toward Islam in India."

The rise of religious intolerance in India in recent years has been a worrying development for freedom and rights activists. A couple of months ago back in April, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom urged the U.S. State Department – for the third straight year – to place India on a list of countries of particular concern in terms of religious freedom. The reputable and nonpartisan group expressed that India under the Modi government is "engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom." They also found that over the course of the last 12 months, authorities have escalated the "promotion and enforcement of policies – including those promoting a Hindu-nationalist agenda – that negatively affect Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, and other religious minorities."

The Modi government has adopted multiple laws and policies that discriminate against Muslims in India. These include citizenship laws making religion the basis for citizenship and the revoking of the constitutional autonomy granted to the only Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir. This growing trend of anti-Muslim policies and sentiment, coupled with the increasing authoritarian leanings of the Modi government, has alarmed humanitarian observers around the world and incited a notable uptick in troubling Hindu extremist violence against Muslims. Mobs chanting slogans inciting genocidal actions, physically assaulting Muslim citizens, and desecrating mosques have all become far too common in the preceding months and years. The Modi government and the BJP have rightly been criticized for their inaction in combatting this and for downplaying the rise in religiously-motivated violence – both of which have emboldened extremists. In addition to promoting divisive policies that inflame religious tensions, the BJP has also been condemned for looking the other way while Hindu vigilante groups operate more freely within contemporary Indian society.