

India adopts Hindu supremacist citizenship law

By Rohantha De Silva and Keith Jones
13 December 2019

In the face of widespread popular opposition and warnings that India is rending its “secular” political-constitutional order, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government have rammed through legislation that effectively redefines Indian citizenship in Hindu supremacist terms.

Tabled in the lower house of India’s bicameral parliament only on Monday, the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2019 or CAB was given presidential assent last night.

Passage of the CAB sets the stage for the BJP to proceed with its plans to draw up a National Register of Citizens (NRC), under which all of India’s more than 1.3 billion residents will have to prove, to the authorities’ satisfaction, that they are Indian citizens. Those unable to do so will be declared stateless and subject to detention and expulsion.

The NRC’s ostensible purpose is to identify “illegal immigrants.” In truth—and the CAB makes this manifestly evident—the aim of the NRC will be to harass, intimidate, and victimize India’s Muslim minority.

Adding insult to injury, the BJP is cynically trying to dress up the CAB, to use Modi’s words, as an act of “compassion and brotherhood.”

The CAB grants Indian citizenship to non-Muslims from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who entered India prior to 2015, on the grounds that Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, and Christians in those countries have been subject to religious persecution.

Conspicuously left off the list are members of minority Muslims groups, such as Pakistan’s Ahmadiyas or Afghanistan’s Shia Hazaras, who are victims of state discrimination and/or communal violence. Also, notably absent are the Rohingya, more than one million of whom had to flee Myanmar (Burma), which borders India to the east, in late 2016. Claiming the Rohingya are a “security threat,” the BJP government has held those that fled into India in detention camps and is deporting them to Myanmar.

When coupled with the CAB, the NRC’s essentially fascistic anti-Muslim purpose becomes clear.

Given that much of India’s population is illiterate and impoverished and state services are limited to non-existent, hundreds of millions of people will likely find it difficult to come up with the papers needed to “prove” their Indian citizenship. But only Muslims will face the threat of being rendered stateless, with all that entails, for the others will be accorded citizenship under the discriminatory terms of the CAB.

With its CAB, wrote *Indian Express* columnist Harsh Mander, “the government is clearly messaging that if people of any identity except Muslims are unable to produce the required documents, they will be

accepted as refugees and given citizenship. This means that the real burden to prove that they are Indian citizens (under the NRC) ... is only thrust on Muslims, because only they risk statelessness. Most Indians would find it impossible to muster the required documents to prove their citizenship, but only document-less Muslims will face the prospect of detention centres, or being stripped of all citizenship rights.”

The NRC in Assam

A foul taste of what the Modi government intends has already been provided by recent events in the northeastern state of Assam. On the orders of the Supreme Court, and in keeping with the terms of a reactionary agreement the Rajiv Gandhi Congress Party government entered into in 1985 to end an exclusivist Assamese agitation, the state’s 30 million residents were forced to prove that they or their ancestors lived in India prior to the March 1971 eruption of the Bangladesh national struggle against repressive Pakistani rule.

Millions suffered psychological torment, financial hardship, and official abuse as they struggled to “prove” they are Indian citizens. Not only did they have to prove their citizenship claim to the satisfaction of ethno- and Hindu chauvinist officials. Under the terms of the NRC, third parties have the right to challenge an individual’s claim to citizenship. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and other groups filed close to 200,000 such objections.

Ultimately, when the “final” NRC was published last summer, 1.9 million people, most of them poor Muslims, were excluded—i.e., deemed non-citizens. Of these, the overwhelming majority had been born in India (See: India labels 1.9 million Assam residents “foreigners” as prelude to their mass expulsion).

However, this outcome failed to satisfy either the Hindu supremacist BJP or the ethno-exclusivist Assamese organizations like the AASU. The former was angered that up to a third of those left off the NRC were Hindus; the latter that “only” 1.9 million of Assam’s residents were declared illegal migrants.

Now the NRC is to be extended across India. Speaking in Monday’s debate on the CAB in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India’s parliament, Modi’s chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, vowed the government will rapidly move forward with the national NRC. Shah, who has repeatedly described “illegal” Muslim “immigrants” as “termites,” told the Lok Sabha, “Once the NRC is implemented, we will ensure no infiltrator remains in the country.”

As part of the national NRC, and in accordance with the newly enacted CAB, the Modi government is also intending to redo the NRC process in Assam.

Taken together the CAB and NRC effectively reduce India’s 200

million Muslims to second-class citizens.

Despite having implemented the reactionary communal partition of South Asia at independence in 1947, into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India, India's Congress Party-led government rejected the demand of the BJP's Hindu supremacist precursors, the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS, that India be declared a *Hindu Rashtra* or Hindu nation. The 1955 Citizenship Act, which the CAB amends, made territoriality (i.e., birth in India or the pre-1947 British Indian empire), not religion, the criteria of citizenship.

The Hindu right has always rejected this, claiming that India is a first and foremost a Hindu nation. V.D. Savarkar, the principal ideologue of *Hindutva* and hero of the contemporary Hindu right, argued that India's Muslims were not true Indians, because for them—unlike India's Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists—India is their “motherland,” but not their “holy land.” During the late 1930s Savarkar urged India's Hindus to treat Muslims like the Nazis treated the Jews. If he dropped such rhetoric during World War II, it was only because he and the Hindu Mahasabha were hoping to form an “Anglo-Hindu” alliance with the British colonial state so as to combat the Muslim “menace.”

In according preferential treatment to non-Muslims from select neighbouring states, while setting up a process whereby only Muslims must establish their Indian citizenship, the BJP government has gone a long way to realizing the Hindu right's longstanding goals of asserting Hindu dominance and making religion and not territoriality the criteria of citizenship.

The inclusion of Christians who migrated or fled to India from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan among those to be accorded citizenship under the CAB is a ruse. It is meant to camouflage the legislation's Hindu supremacist motivation, no doubt with an eye to currying favor with the White House and the US Christian right.

Shah defended the concept of “religious-based” citizenship in the Lok Sabha debate on the CAB, claiming it “has been happening in India since the partition of this country.” Revealing more of his mindset than he perhaps intended, he also declared, “India will never be Muslim *mukti* (free).”

The BJP's campaign of Hindu supremacist assertion

Since winning re-election last May, the Modi government has moved aggressively to realize key elements of the agenda of the Hindu right. In this it has had either the explicit support or acquiescence of the other institutions of the Indian state and the rest of India's venal ruling elite,

On August 5, Modi and Shah working in close tandem with the top brass of the military and intelligence agencies carried out a constitutional coup, abrogating the special semi-autonomous status of India's lone Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir, and reducing it two Union Territories, thus placing the contested region under permanent central government control.

Modi's coup against Kashmir has been enforced with a security clampdown that has seen thousands, including much of the traditional pro-Indian Muslim Kashmiri elite, detained without trial; the deployment of tens of thousands of additional security forces to what is already one of the world's most heavily militarized regions; and a months-long communications blackout, including the suspension of internet and cellphone service.

Bowing to the wishes of the BJP and the RSS, India's Supreme Court last month instructed the government to oversee the

construction of a Hindu temple on the site where the Babri Masjid mosque stood until Hindu activists at the instigation of top BJP leaders razed it to the ground on December 6, 1992. This crime provoked the bloodiest wave of communal violence since Partition.

Modi and Shah are systematically whipping up communal hostility against Muslims with the aim of channeling the social tensions produced by rapacious social inequality and a rapidly deteriorating economy behind reaction and a bellicose foreign policy, and splitting an increasingly restive and militant working class.

With the passage of the CAB and its vow to rapidly launch the NRC, the BJP is dramatically accelerating its drive to transform India into a Hindu *rashtra* and reduce Muslims to second-class citizenship. This is giving some sections of the ruling elite pause. They fear the Modi government's actions will incite mass opposition, discredit and delegitimize the Indian state, and destabilize key state institutions, including the military.

Already the government has rushed troops to Assam, imposed an indefinite curfew on the state capital, Guwahati, and suspended cellphone service in ten Assam districts after mass protests erupted against the CAB. The protests are being led by Assam ethno-chauvinist organizations opposed to the CAB's granting of citizenship to Bangladeshi Hindu migrants, some of whom were victims of communal violence. According to press reports, at least two people were killed and many injured Thursday when security personnel fired at protesters defying the Guwahati curfew.

Having promoted communalism and casteism for decades as a key strategy for politically controlling and suppressing India's workers and toilers, transformed the toxic Hindu supremacist BJP into its largest party, and attacked democratic rights, the Indian bourgeoisie and its political representatives are entirely complicit in the growth of Hindu supremacism and the putrefaction of Indian “democracy.”

To defeat communal reaction and defend democratic rights, the working class must be mobilized as an independent political force, rallying the oppressed toilers behind it in the fight against capitalist rule and on the basis of a socialist internationalist program.

The authors also recommend:

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