**Limits and new frontiers of Hindutva**

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In a TV debate on the controversy surrounding the Varanasi-based Gyanvapi Mosque and Kashi Vishwanath Temple on May 27, Nupur Sharma, a central spokesperson of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), gave hateful and utterly blasphemous remarks about Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Soon after, the video clip of her remarks went viral on social media, sparking a wave of anger among Muslims in India. The outrage soon spilled over beyond the borders of India among other Muslim-majority states.

Starting with Qatar on June 5, a total of 17 Muslim-majority states condemned the remarks and asked the Indian government to tender an apology and take strong action against Sharma. The countries issuing official condemnations included Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE. Alongside these state governments, two international organizations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also issued statements of condemnation against these blasphemous remarks.

Initially, the government of India tried to downplay the importance of the remarks by terming them individual remarks by ‘fringe elements’. The Indian government even brushed aside Pakistan’s condemnation by stating that it did not want to be lectured on minority rights by “a serial violator of minority rights.” The government of India even snubbed the OIC by stating that the latter should “stop pursuing its communal approach and show due respect to all faiths and religions.”

The gravity of the situation quickly started to sink into the Indian mind, though, as the Indian government was forced to sack Sharma as the party spokesperson, suspend her party membership, and make her tender an apology. It stopped short of taking any further legal action against her for stoking communal hatred and hurting the religious sentiments of Muslims who constitute over 14 per cent of the total population of the country. To the contrary, Sharma released a video clip in which she thanked Indian Home Minister Amit Shah – who was supposed to take legal action against her – for supporting her through her difficult times.

As the sentiments boiled over due to the reluctance of the Indian government to arrest Sharma, thousands of Muslims in various cities and towns of India held protest demonstrations on June 10, some of which led to clashes. In response, the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh, led by its firebrand Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, not only jailed hundreds of Muslims across various cities but also razed the houses of some of the leaders of the protest demonstrations – an act termed “totally illegal” by former Allahabad High Court CJ Govind Mathur.

The post-Nupur Sharma drama in India has exposed certain realities about the mindset behind the Hindutva juggernaut of the BJP. As evidently exhibited by the backward step by the BJP government – even if half-hearted and limited – the Indian government is susceptible to international pressure when its vital interests are at stake. The Indian stakes are quite high when it comes to the Gulf countries.

Indian trade with the Gulf states is well past the $100 billion mark and 65 per cent of its crude oil imports come from the Gulf countries. The Middle East is also home to around eight million Indian expats who send remittances worth billions of dollars home each year. Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are key sources of remittances to India. According to CNN, non-resident Indians (or NRIs as they are called in India) send remittances to the tune of $20 billion home from the UAE alone, which constitute 33 per cent of the total Indian remittances. Just for references, the total remittances received by Pakistan from Pakistanis working abroad were $29.45 billion in FY2020-21.

No little wonder then that the right-wing Hindu nationalist Indian government was forced to take a step backward and suspend the senior party cadre over something that it would have otherwise condoned. The very fact that the Indian government initially tried to sidestep the criticism is evidence enough that it would not have done anything about it if it had not been for the pressure from the rich Gulf states.

Notwithstanding its about-turn on the subject to placate international sentiment, India’s disregard of the rights of minorities and its atrocities against Muslims at home appear likely to intensify rather than decrease. The evidence for that was provided by the crackdown initiated by the state authorities against the June 10 protesters, which included the illegal demolition of the houses of the leaders of the protesters.

The hatred exhibited in the statements of Nupur Sharma and Naveen Jindal, the former media head of the BJP’s Delhi unit, was not a new phenomenon. Every day, Twitter and other social media accounts of Hindu extremists spew hatred against Muslims and abuse against Islam. Some of those accounts are even followed by the top leadership of the BJP, including Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. The Indian government’s superficial action against Sharma was aimed at averting the crisis. It is already back to targeting the Muslim population of the country and is likely to intensify its operations against them in the weeks and months to come.

While the solidarity of the leaders of the Muslim world regarding the disrespectful and hateful statements by the BJP spokespersons is commendable, it needs to be sustained to rein in the Indian government against condoning such behavior. Since public outrage among Muslims all around the world against India is quite high, the first step in the right direction could be a reconsideration of the issuance of work visas to Indians by the Muslim-majority countries of the Gulf.

The first couple of weeks of this month have shown that international pressure does work on India. Therefore, it needs to be intensified and diversified. Since the atrocities against Muslims in India – not just restricted to Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) – have become routine, the Muslim world will have to show a similar resolve and solidarity against them as well.

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