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SECULARISM IN THE SHADOW OF HINDUTVA: RELIGION AND THE 2019 AND 2024 INDIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS

Abstract

This study explores the impact of Hindu nationalism on the concept of secularism in India, with a particular focus on the general elections held in 2019 and 2024. In the context of the growing social and political importance of Hindu nationalism, the author analyses how this ideology influences the application and development of secular principles in political discourse and election campaigns, with a special focus on the two election cycles mentioned above. By analysing the political and social narrative, election results, and election agenda, the study explores how Hindu nationalism shapes the political landscape and contributes to the development of religious and political polarization. Special attention is paid to the role of the Bharatiya Janata Party in promoting Hindu nationalism and its impact on the development of social and religious tensions. The research findings demonstrate the significant impact of Hindu nationalism on the erosion of the pillars of secularism and the intensification of polarization in Indian society. This study also provides significant insight into the dynamics of the relationship between religion and politics in contemporary India – a topic that has been almost completely neglected in domestic scholarship.

Keywords: secularism, Hinduism, Hindutva, India, general elections, Bharatiya Janata Party, religion

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2024, the largest national elections in human history were held. In seven phases, from April 19 to June 1, about 968,000,000 Indians had the chance to exercise their right to vote, and of these, just over 642,000,000 (66.61%) did so (Election Commission of India 2024). Hindutva-inspired forces won a third consecutive mandate, establishing their own agenda and ideology as the *mainstream* of Indian party politics. The movement that began in the 19th century in the form of Hindu revisionist and revivalist groups has completely taken precedence over the previously dominant secular and modernist current led by the Indian National Congress (INC). The ideas discussed elsewhere (see: Đogatović and Krstić 2023, 59–63) were supported by around 236,000,000 voters in the last general elections, while the broader coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was supported by 283,000,000 voters. With this election result, Narendra Modi moved to third place among the longest-serving prime ministers of India since its founding in terms of prime ministerial tenure, immediately after Jawaharlal Nehru (जवाहरलाल नेहरू) and Indira Gandhi.

From a broader perspective, this paper will ask *how such a major political change came about*. In a narrower, more specific perspective, the question will be raised as to *how Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) influences the concept of secularism in India and how this influence was reflected in the outcome and dynamics of the general elections held in 2019 and 2024*. The author will attempt to cover various theoretical and empirical aspects of the research – the influence of Hindutva on secularism, the influence of Hindutva on shaping political campaigns and election results, and the reaction to the changes in the legal and political status of secularism in India that occurred through the action of this powerful religious-nationalist idea. The basic hypothesis argues in favour of the fact that *Hindutva directly and unambiguously influences the weakening of the basic postulates of secularism in contemporary India*. It will highlight a significant change in the social and political context in which the previous electoral processes took place. It will also be clearly pointed out that the number of political-religious themes has increased in the past decade (see: Jevtić 2009).¹ By changing the context

¹ The author believes that the most effective theoretical basis and scientific justification for this research would be provided by the third field of research in the political science of religion, i.e., “those ideological and programmatic contents and practices

of national elections, the forces led by Narendra Modi have managed to adapt the conditions in which the electoral competition takes place to their own ideological foundations, with which a constantly growing number of voters identify. The influence of Hindutva on political and social reality is positively correlated with the success of political parties that actively promote it. Parties led by the BJP have proven to be more successful in mobilizing voters and achieving electoral victories. One of the direct consequences of the spread of Hindu nationalism through political discourse is the increased public support directed towards Hindu issues and the decline in general interest in other topics. Something that has been discussed previously (see: Đogatović 2025a) and which will be discussed more throughout this study, is the impact of the strengthening of Hinduism on the level of social and political tensions and the development of polarization between different religious and ethnic groups in India.

From a methodological perspective, historical and institutional analysis, document content analysis, and comparative analysis appear to be a logical, methodological framework for conducting scientific research of this type. Through the activities of the most successful political parties and coalitions, their election programs and platforms, and contextual analysis, the author will provide answers to the previously posed research questions and analyse the most important ways in which the election-conducting context is shifting.

The author will also indirectly try to answer the question of *why it is important to analyse the relationship between secularism and Hinduism in the context of the general elections in India* and to point out to a serious deficiency within Serbian political science – the neglect of the Indian subcontinent in terms of electoral, comparative and institutional analyses, despite the fact that the Indian general elections represent the largest political event of the modern era and India is the most populous democracy on the planet (see also the first paper in Serbian written on this topic: Pejšković 2015). The fact that 2024 has been colloquially declared a super-election year further emphasizes the importance of this problem.

of subjects of the political system, political life and politics in general that relate to the problem of religion and religious communities, such as the relationship of political subjects towards religion and religious communities, the normative regulation of the relationship between the state and religion, the differences between the normative and the real, the use of religion and religious communities by the state, political parties, etc.” (Jevtić 2009).

Structurally, the paper consists of an introduction and five subsequent chapters. The first chapter will present the postulates of Indian secularism, the most important challenges and criticisms it faces, as well as the basic theoretical framework of this study. The second chapter will shift the focus to religious politics in the context of India and the analysis of the empirical work of Hindu nationalism. The third and fourth chapters will serve to analyse the general elections held in 2019 and 2024, with a special focus on the place of religion, the influence of Hinduism, and the consequences of the results of these two electoral processes on the state of secularism in India. Finally, in the last chapter, the findings obtained through the research will be presented.

SARVA DHARMA SAMBHAVA: **SECULARISM IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT**

The secular political order in India was formalized by the 1949 Constitution. It established India as a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic republic for all its citizens. Accordingly, secularism is one of the fundamental founding principles of the state itself (Kumar 2019, 128). However, the Indian context is much more than a mere enumeration of state-building principles. The commitment of Indians to the idea of tolerance is complemented by a strong commitment to non-interference between religious communities (Evans and Sahgal 2021, 3). A study conducted after the 2019 elections (Evans and Sahgal 2021, 3) found a high correlation between support for the BJP, understanding of the concept of “true Indian” in terms of language, religion, and nation, and emphasizing the importance of national identity. This will be discussed below.

In the context of the emergence and multi-millennium development of the Indus Valley civilization, the demographic landscape of this region underwent a radical change in the dominant social paradigm several times. In the Middle Ages and the modern era, the greatest impact was made by the Islamic conquerors, the British East India Company, Great Britain itself, and others. The twentieth century brought a chance for Hindu-led ideas and ideologies to once again gain the chance to regulate the course of their own social and political processes. The aforementioned several thousand years of social development also left their mark on the understanding of the idea of secularism. Directly copying the postulates from Western (non)friends would have caused more harm than good

to the young Indian state. Therefore, the Constitution writers came to form what Bhargava (Rajeev Bhargava) would later call *contextual secularism* (Bhargava 2006, 111). This type of secularism is sensitive to contextual differences, that is, to all those factors of social life that have lasting consequences for the functioning of the entire social and political system. It seems that the cultural, demographic, linguistic, and religious diversity of India provides enough reason to formulate a distinct type of secularism. The emergence of this concept also occurred because Indian secularism not only shares a history with the West but also has its own history (Bhargava 2006, 115). This type of secularism in the Indian social and legal-political context meets all the necessary conditions, namely: “(1) there is no official religion protected by the Constitution, (2) public funding of individual religious communities is non-existent, (3) there is no official religious instruction in public schools, (4) freedom of conscience and the right to (not) profess a religion are protected, (5) discrimination based on religious affiliation is prohibited, etc. – but it is much more than that” (Bhargava 2006, 106). Bhargava believes that Indian secularism differs from Western secularism in the essential understanding of the relationship between the state and the “Church.” In the case of India – there is a so-called *principled distance* between religion and the state, i.e., there is no *wall of separation* (Bhargava 2006, 99). A cultural, religious, and demographic analysis of India’s social landscape leaves room for the development of this type of secularism – one that will not favour but protect religious communities. Given the differences in values that have constituted the dominant value system throughout history – social principles have remained intact but are separate from the state itself. Values such as peace, tolerance, and constitutional protection of all segments of religious freedom represent the supporting pillars of this type of secularism. These pillars are rooted in at least four characteristics of this region-state: (1) the great diversity of religious communities, (2) the greater emphasis on practice rather than belief or dogma, (3) the existence of many religiously sanctioned social practices that are oppressive because of their illiberal and inequalitarian character and denying dignity and self-respect, and (4) the absence of an organized institution (such as the Church) in Hinduism and other religions of the region (Bhargava 2006, 108–109). This type of secularism allows the state to approach certain religions and to interfere in internal religious matters in cases where it wishes to protect certain socially important values (the examples of women’s rights, religious minorities,

or inter-caste differences are indicative) (see: Đogatović 2025b, 179–180). The existence and smooth functioning of the principle of *equality of all truths* (Sarva Dharma Sambhava) represents the ultimate imperative of this legal and political order.

However, it is not easy to refute the assumption that the Indian state treats Hindu religion and practice as part of *fundamental* Indian culture – especially given that many institutional ceremonies begin with Hindu prayers, that thousands of Hindu temples are funded by federal funds, and that federally funded television often glorifies Hindu practices and mythology (Khan and Lutful 2021, 4). In terms of social practice, Indian secularism nevertheless appears to remain *shallow* (Khan and Lutful 2021, 4). These and many other criticisms will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Challenges and criticisms

The concept of secularism, in the Indian context, faces criticism from various directions – politics, law, the East, the West, believers, atheists, etc. The multicultural society, the rich (neo)colonial history, and the linguistic-religious structure of the population further complicate the functioning of this principle. The following are the most important examples of criticism directed at this principle.

In an article on the shortcomings of secularism, Amartya Sen (Sen 2005, 297–300) writes about six main criticisms of the concept itself. *First*, some authors and citizens of India deny the very existence of secularism in the Indian context (Sen 2005, 297–300). At certain periods in Indian history, the state did indeed seem to go beyond the framework discussed in the previous chapter, protecting the Hindu majority at the expense of religious minorities (Sen 2005, 297–300). *Second*, many analysts and citizens believe that the Indian Constitution and political and legal traditions favour the minority Muslim community (Sen 2005, 297–300). By allowing the application of certain provisions of Sharia law, as well as the existence of Muslim private law, in a situation where there is no Hindu counterpart to these institutions, social relations depart from the *status quo* (Sen 2005, 297–300). *Third*, one intellectual current considers that the identity of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs is primary in relation to their Indian identity and is therefore a first-order concept (Sen 2005, 297–300). *Fourth*, one current emphasizes that “Indianness” was imposed on Hindus because Muslims failed to position themselves as

primarily Indians and then Muslims, but *vice versa* (Sen 2005, 297–300). *Fifth*, one current criticizes secularism as a concept that represents “the folly of modernism” (Sen 2005, 297–300). This criticism has been used by numerous authors and analysts in previous generations, emphasizing that religion is inseparable from politics and, therefore, from the Indian state, emphasizing its multi-religious character during several centuries in the past millennium (Sen 2005, 297–300). *Finally*, one of the currents criticizes secularism as a concept, arguing that it is entirely wrong to treat Hinduism as just one of the religions represented in India (Sen 2005, 297–300). In the following sections of this paper, special focus will be directed towards the dualism of secularism – Hinduism (Hindutva) in the context of the electoral cycles held in 2019 and 2024. Attention will be drawn to some of the greatest challenges to the secular political order that have emerged from the political actions of the ruling coalition.

THEORY AND PRACTICE – RELIGION AND POLITICS IN INDIA

The relationship between religion, religious propaganda and the electoral process is essentially defined by Section 123 of the Representation of the People Act (Representation of the People Act [RPA] 1950 according to: Sen 2010, 151), which states that “the following shall be considered corrupt practices within the meaning of this Act: Section 3 – appeal by a candidate or his agent or any other person with the consent of the candidate or his election agent to vote or abstain from voting for any person on the ground of his religion, race, caste, community or language or the use or invocation of religious symbols or the use, or invocation of national symbols, such as the national flag or national emblem, for the purpose of promoting the election of that candidate or for the purpose of prejudicing the election of any candidate.” (RPA 1950, Art. 3A cited in: Sen 2010, 151) and “promoting or attempting to promote feelings of enmity or hatred between different classes of citizens of India on the ground of religion, race, caste, community or language, by a candidate or his agent or any other person with the consent of the candidate or his election agent for the purpose of promoting the election of that candidate or for the purpose of prejudicing the election of a candidate” (Sen 2010, 151). In political terms, the seven decades of Indian independence have seen the decline of secular nationalism – embodied in the work of the INC – and its replacement by Hindutva, a majoritarian worldview that has its

roots in the 1920s and is today represented by a family of organizations known as the Sangh Parivar (Baral, Nellis, and Weaver 2021, 15).

The term *Hindutva*, in this paper, will encompass all theoretical and practical elements of the activities of Hindu nationalist movements and political parties. The most representative example is the activity of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its core ideas, platforms, and public policies. Along with it, the policies of other *Hindutva* movements and parties, such as Shiv Sena, Hindu Samaj Party, Samajwadi Party, etc., are also important.

Just as Hinduism is the name of one of the most widespread religions in the world, *Hindutva* is the name for the dominant ideology in contemporary India (Sharma 2020, 43). *Hindutva* movements and political parties use the (non-)political arena to elevate the social significance and position of Hinduism to the highest level, working to strengthen the religious and political foundation of the nation-state. The dominant ideas propagated by these movements concern majoritarianism, casteism, ethnicization, racialization, the establishment of a Hindu *Rashtra*, i.e., the utopian concept of a “pure” India, and the restoration of the historical, social, cultural, and political significance of Hinduism (Đogatović and Krstić 2023, 61–62). For political polarization, in this paper, we will adopt the definition, following the scientific achievements set in this field by Jeniffer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer and presented elsewhere (Đogatović 2025a, 21), that it represents a specific socio-political situation in which two opposing social groups use all available resources to mobilize certain dimensions of their own identities – among which religious, ethnic and linguistic are dominant – in order to completely redesign the political space through collective efforts in a way that would, to the greatest extent possible, correspond to their ultimate social and political goals, which most often include the permanent removal of the opposing social group from it. On the other hand, the term identity politics will encompass all actions and procedures of one social group that, by exerting a direct or indirect influence on at least one of the elements of the collective identity of another social group, aim to strengthen the position of one social group in relation to the other (Đogatović 2025a, 13).

In the history of Indian party politics to date, Hindu-motivated ideas have played a significant and often decisive role in determining the winner of general elections. The extent of these “cases” ranges from the emergence, influence, and death of Mahatma Gandhi, through the

actions of his namesake Indira, the entire plethora of events surrounding the city of Ayodhya, the Shah Bano case, the politicization of the issue of Islamic private law, cases of the so-called “Love Jihad” etc. The following paper will analyse several authentic cases of the intertwining of the ideas of secularism and Hindu nationalism in the context of the general elections of 2019 and 2024.

2019 GENERAL ELECTIONS

In the general elections held in April and May 2019, 912 million Indians were eligible to vote (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2019). About 67% (604 million) of them chose to exercise that right (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2019). The BJP achieved its best winning result since the 1989 elections with 37.36% of the votes, or 303 parliamentary seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2019). The entire coalition (National Democratic Alliance [NDA]) won 45.3% of the votes or 353 parliamentary seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2019). The rival coalition (United Progressive Alliance [UPA]) won only 91 parliamentary seats, of which the INC won 52 seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2019). Narendra Modi emerged as the absolute winner over his opponent, Rahul Gandhi (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2019). The backbone of these elections was made up of topics such as the state of democratic institutions and processes, economic results and inflation levels, welfare policies, the state of agriculture, security issues, issues of dynastic politics, nepotism, corruption, human rights violations, etc.

The electoral confrontation between secularism and Hindutva

While the 2014 general elections introduced a new dominant repertoire – Modi’s national populism – the 2019 elections marked a shift towards ethnic or illiberal democracy, and it can be said that India moved from the dominance of national populism to the dominance of political authoritarianism after these elections (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020, 14). The coalition gathered around the BJP was formed exclusively on the basis of Hinduism, that is, support for the idea of strengthening the public presence of Hindu culture (Mofidi 2014, 27). The party used religious identity to appeal to its core voter base while simultaneously projecting the prime minister’s image as a protector of faith and believers (Mofidi

2014, 1). The methodology of this paper is supported by the fact that the BJP profited the most precisely in regions where the representation of the second religious community – Muslims – is the highest (Sardesai 2019, 13).

The impact of Hindu nationalism on the concept of secularism in the context of the 2019 general elections will be analysed through two dominant themes that have been brought from the periphery of party politics to the very centre of political events during the second half of the 21st century. The *first* of these themes is the increasing interference of the Hindu political elite in issues of Islamic private law. During the years preceding these elections, the BJP brought Indian politics to the peak of Islamophobia precisely through the operation of its nationalist agenda (Khan and Lutful 2021, 3). Evans and Sahgal recall that since 1937, the Islamic institution *dar-ul-qaza* has been operating in India through which Muslims can resolve family problems and inheritance issues (Evans and Sahgal 2021, 4). Despite the idea of enacting a uniform civil code (The Constitution of India 1950, Art. 44), Islamic private law, especially regulating marriage and inheritance policies, continues to function, which has been a major annoyance for the ruling party (Khan and Lutful 2021, 3). In August 2019, the Indian Parliament passed a provision that made the institution of triple talaq illegal, which represented a significant blow to the independence of the Islamic private law system.² A particularly important segment of this topic involves attacks on religious grounds due to the “practice of love jihad.” This term refers to all those actions by Muslims that BJP members and supporters consider as representations of the anti-Hindu sentiments in the sphere of marriage policies. In practice, these have most often been cases of (alleged) forced mixed marriages. Although the issue of Islamic private law and marriage policies has been in the public spotlight from time to time since the Shah Bano case (Bose 2009, 19), it was only after the 2014 elections that it intensified. The establishment of so-called anti-Romeo units, which, without any court order, investigated the intentions of spouses who were members of different religions, raised this topic to the level of national importance (see: Leidig 2020, 234). Part of the action taken against “love jihad” is the enactment of numerous laws prohibiting religious conversion in those federal units where the BJP is in power (Khan and Lutful 2021, 4–5; see:

² Triple talaq is a situation in which a married Muslim is permitted to terminate his marriage by pronouncing the word talaq (Arabic: *تالاق*) three times. This provision also prohibits other practices such as *talaq-e-mughallazah* and *talaq-e-biddah*.

Al Jazeera Staff 2024). Fear of the demographic progress of the Islamic community has led advocates of Hindutva to accuse Muslims not only of love jihad but also of population and land jihad – they are accused of “unrestricted population growth” or “ambitious land acquisition in Hindu-dominated areas” (Amarasingam, Umar, and Desai 2022, 26). In the year after these elections, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) published a special edition of its own magazine dedicated to this topic, elevating it to the level of a demographic war in the years that followed (Amarasingam, Umar, and Desai 2022, 17). Actions in the direction of implementing “love jihad” have encouraged the other side to retaliate with the same weapon – thus, the actions of “bhagwa love traps” (saffron love trap) were initiated. A number of Muslims, most often through social networks, claimed that a certain number of Hindus were trying to lure Muslim women into mixed marriages solely for the purpose of their later conversion to Hinduism. The results of these policies remain entirely on the side of the proponents of Hindutva.

The *second* dominant theme consists of events that directly preceded the 2019 elections, which concern the terrorist attacks in the city of Pulwama (India) and the Indian military’s retaliation with airstrikes in Balakot (Pakistan). At first glance, the issue of the retaliatory bombing of a city about 160 kilometres from Pulwama concerns exclusively security frameworks and international relations. However, political science requires analysts to delve deeper into the relations between India and Pakistan, Hindus and Muslims, Hindutva and Islamists, and, in general, the religious-political contemporaneity of the region of Jammu and Kashmir. The Pulwama terror attack and the reciprocal Balakot airstrike occurred just weeks before the official start of the election campaign and highlighted nationalist sentiment among voters, creating a so-called “rally ’round the flag” effect in favour of the BJP (Chhibber and Verma 2019, 135). National security and the issue of relations with Pakistan are completely “owned” by the BJP, and successfully handling these issues resulted in a final voter injection into the BJP’s body (Chhibber and Verma 2019, 135). With this move, Modi managed to present himself as the protector of Hinduism and India itself and practically as the only politician capable enough to manage complex ethno-nationalist relations (see: Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020, 4). Although the retaliatory attack on the camp of the Islamist organization (Jaish-e-Mohammed) was executed swiftly and served merely as a “show of strength,” politics, primarily seen as a performance of public appearance, once again revealed itself

in its full light. According to one survey, support for Modi increased by 7% after the Balakot bombing (Anklesaria Aiyar 2020, 8). Elevating himself to the position of protector of Hinduism and India, especially at crucial moments in the context of the political game, proved to be skillful management of Prime Minister Modi's religious-nationalist policy.

In addition to these two topics, it is important to mention several others that will not be sufficiently explored in depth in this study but which certainly contribute to the confirmation of the previously proposed hypothesis: (1) the increased importance of mass religious gatherings (e.g., Kumbh Mela) and the process of Sanskritization (see: Baral, Nellis, and Weaver 2021), (2) the adaptation of electoral law to Hindutva-like interpretations (see: Kumar 2019), (3) the strengthening of the vote bank, typical of the South Asian region (see: Mofidi 2014), and (4) actions aimed at protecting the cow (cow vigilantism) as a sacred animal (see: Natrajan 2022). A systematic analysis of these topics and their effect on the results of the 2019 elections can identify the Hindu narrative and its dominance of political and social discourse. This was intended to highlight the influence of Hindutva (and, indirectly, Hinduism) on the results and party politics before, during, and after these elections. The results of the National Election Study (NES) proved that the election result was largely a consequence of the consolidation of votes along religious lines, especially among Hindu and Muslim voters (Sardesai 2019, 13). With this study, we have pointed out some of the causes of this voter grouping.

2024 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The general elections in India were held in the wake of the so-called super-election year of 2024. However, despite the fact that India is the most populous country and democracy in the world and that these general elections are the largest political elections of all time, they have nevertheless remained largely ignored by the world public. In the words of Eviane Leidig – the world's largest democracy is currently governed by a right-wing extremist party, but this same party is completely invisible in the literature on right-wing extremism (Leidig 2020, 216). Political regrouping after three and a half years of the pandemic, renewed war tensions and strained relations with Pakistan, the change in India's regional and global role, the changing state of its own economy, the increasing number of migrants from surrounding countries, the return of the BRICS

alliance to the centre of world politics, still remained the insufficient reason for any serious analysis by domestic political scientists. On the other hand, the somewhat surprising election results, the pre-election agenda, and the post-election uncertainty certainly deserve the attention of the scientific community. The role of Hinduism in the entire process should be analysed as well.

The elections were held from 19th of April to 1st of June, and 543 members of the lower house of parliament were elected in seven phases (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2024). Modi managed to secure his third consecutive term as prime minister, this time with the help of two smaller parties the Telugu Desam Party (dominant in Andhra Pradesh) and the Janata Dal – United (dominant in Bihar). More than 968 million citizens were eligible to vote, and 642 million exercised their rights (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2024). The BJP competed as part of an existing coalition, against the newly formed INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) coalition led by the INC. The BJP won 240 seats with about 236 million votes, or 36.56% of the total number of voters, while the entire coalition won 42.5% of the votes, or 293 seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2024). On the other hand, the INDIA coalition, led by Mallikarjun Kharge of the INC, won 40.6% of the votes, or 234 seats, while the INC itself won 137 million votes (21.19%) which it transposed into 99 seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2024). It is interesting to note that Muslims consolidated their support for the INC across the state, except in Uttar Pradesh, where they supported the Samajwadi Party, while Christians supported the INC in Kerala, Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland (Bhattacharya 2024).

The polarized party arena of India strives to completely alter the electoral dynamics in the years and cycles ahead. Apart from the two coalitions mentioned above, only the Bahujan Samaj Party contested this election independently. The three most prominent issues in the campaign were unemployment, electoral bonds, and the construction of a temple in Ayodhya.

The Hindutvized electoral process and the crisis of secularism

This chapter will highlight several examples of the direct influence of Hindutva on the secular framework of the electoral process conducted in 2024 and will analyse the impact of Hindutva on the very concept of

secularism through the examination of the dominant themes emphasized during this electoral process.

The *first* theme presents three essentially close sub-themes linked by a common – legal – sphere of origin. These are (1) the revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which guaranteed the special status of the territory of Jammu and Kashmir in late October 2019, (2) the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019, and (3) the potential enactment of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). By deciding to revoke Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, the Modi government has fulfilled one of the intermediate steps towards achieving the idea of a “Greater India” (*Akhand Bharat*) (Leidig 2020, 235). The issue, which was regulated by the party manifesto even before the 2019 elections, was finally resolved at the end of that year in anticipation of new elections. Modi managed to preserve unity within the vast state and, with his third consecutive mandate, stabilize his rule. On the other hand, documents such as the CAA and the NCR have clear goals – a kind of pacification of fellow citizens of the Islamic faith and the deportation of a large number of non-believers. In this context, “pacification” would mean changing the cultural pattern of the Muslim population – from their given one to the one tailored in the premises of the ruling party. Particularly, this refers to the abandonment of concepts such as love, demographic, and territorial jihad, dominance in terms of population growth, the abandonment of interfaith marriages, and so on. The adoption of the CAA is a process that did not begin during this election cycle, but it represents one of Prime Minister Modi’s campaign promises and, as such, one of the most important to be fulfilled so far. The act allows non-Muslim refugees to safely seek Indian citizenship, given that they are facing religious violence in their home countries (Khan and Lutful 2021, 8). Although it is formally a legal document, in practice, it acts as a religious watershed and an amplifier of religious polarization in India. It provides a quick and easy path to citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Parsis, and Buddhists from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan – deliberately excluding Muslim refugees, even though members of this religion also suffer from religiously motivated violence (such as Ahmadiyyas or Rohingya Muslims) (Amarasingam, Umar, and Desai 2022, 7). The latter document has so far only been implemented in the federal state of Assam, where it has not proven to be the most lethal weapon against non-Muslim citizens and refugees. By 2019, the state authorities had identified 1,900,000 citizens with problems with

their legal residence status in the country, of which 1,200,000 were Hindus who lacked the necessary documents (Anklesaria Aiyar 2020, 12). However, we should not lose sight of the fact that the BJP came to power in this state promising to enact a strict Register that would serve to deport illegal Muslims (Anklesaria Aiyar 2020, 12).

The *second* topic represents, as it seems for now, the epilogue of the decades-long drama in the city of Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh). On the site of the former Hindu temple, and until recently Babur's mosque, there now stands a nearly fully constructed Hindu temple dedicated to the deity Ram. This unusual symbol of religious and political rivalry was resolved by Narendra Modi on January 22, 2024, just 6 days after the party leadership decided to once again stand united around him as the prime ministerial candidate in last year's elections. The protector of India (Balakot), the protector of Hindi (education policy), and the protector of the Indian economy (welfare politics) has now officially become the protector of Hinduism. Modi has shown that, in practice, he is a true leader, protector and miracle worker, of course from the perspective of those who are on his side. The movement launched to resolve the Ayodhya temple issue succeeded for the third time in helping the ruling party strengthen its position after having done so in the 1980s and 1990s (Mofidi 2014, 21). The role of religion in the electoral process once again proved to be extremely significant, often decisive (Mofidi 2014, 19–20). Modi fully seized the opportunity (with premeditation), just as he did before the previous elections and the cross-border bombing of Pulwama and Balakot. The political points, again, went in his favour. By fulfilling his own promise, he essentially showed what Hindu-nationalist sentiment looks like within the political sphere in India (Kishore 2019).

In addition to these two topics, it is important to keep in mind several other significant topics that can be linked to the relationship between religion and secularism within the electoral framework: (1) promotion of the Hindi language, refugee rehabilitation, and anti-Pakistan propaganda (Dasgupta 2019), (2) the caste system, the position of Dalits, Sanskritization, and racialization (Đogatović and Krstić 2023), (3) cow protection, (4) reserved seats in legislative bodies, (5) "Corona-Jihad", and (6) Hindu civilizationism (Ali Saleem 2023). Once again, the analysis of pre-election behaviour, manifestos, and agendas helped in arriving at the dominant (Hindutva) narrative. The reliance on Hindu values in political platforms is evident across the entire ruling coalition.

An increased emphasis on religious and religiously important topics is evident compared to the previous two election cycles.

CONCLUSION: INDIA AS A *DE FACTO* HINDU STATE

The previous chapters aimed to highlight the exceptional social significance that must be attributed to religion, especially when it is exploited for primarily political purposes. Starting with the defence of the Indian type of secularism, through the analysis of the legal framework and key points of contention, to the clash of the two opposing concepts, arguments were presented in favour of the previously set hypothesis, one that points to the significant role of Hindutva (and Hinduism within it) in undermining the secular Indian order. To complete the picture, it is important to emphasize that Hindutva is not the only challenge to the survival of the secular political, legal, and social order. Two particularly important arguments are pointed out in support of the hypothesis: (1) the change in the context in which national elections are now being held, which was brought about by the direct action of the ruling party to strengthen the religious foundations of its politics,³ and (2) the dominance of political-religious themes in the political and social narrative during the previous decade. In line with the results achieved by the BJP-led coalition during the previous three election cycles – the potential for further development of the political role of Hinduism has increased significantly. On the other hand, the use of religion for political purposes has led to the opening of other problems and a negative impact on the development of democratic processes in India (see: Đogatović 2025a).

It can also be said that the following statements emerged as a consequence of this study: (1) a strong connection between religion and politics is evident in India, especially in terms of religious affiliation

³ It should be made clear at this point that the aforementioned topics have not fully taken over the primacy in terms of the pre-election atmosphere, given that India is still home to one and a half billion inhabitants. Studies that focus on the reasons for the BJP's electoral victory in 2014 and 2019 undoubtedly indicate a kind of replacement of the primary importance of general economic, political and social topics with BJP-adapted topics, but also with the BJP's ideological turn, Modi's popularity, the BJP's organizational advantage, emphasized nationalist sentiments, expansive welfare policies, etc. (see: Chhibber and Verma 2019, 131–132). Elsewhere, it is argued that Modi's rise has shifted not only the BJP but the entire Indian political spectrum – from secularism to a stronger Hinduism (Anklesaria Aiyar 2020, 15).

and electoral behaviour and the shaping of political preferences and identities; (2) the use of religion for political purposes leads to increased polarization and social distance; (3) social networks have proven to be a powerful tool for spreading disinformation, hate speech, and polarization on religious grounds (indirectly leading to the strengthening of extremist views); (4) there is a noticeable weakening of the influence of relevant institutions such as election commissions and courts (see: Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020, 2), and (5) strengthening secular principles is necessary to reduce religious polarization and ensure greater social cohesion.

Although the current state of affairs does not represent a desirable balance of power, Sen believes that a political abandonment of secularism would make India far less secure than it is today (Sen 2005, 316). The rise of Hindutva's social influence has been embodied in the rulings of judges in numerous cases during the 20th and 21st centuries, in which the conclusion was the same – Hinduism is the religion of the majority of Indians and the way of life of all Indians – essentially concluding that invoking Hindu values does not violate any of the principles of secularism (Sen 2010, 164). The Indian type of secularism will allow the (legitimate) influence of religion in the political sphere, especially during the electoral process, only when the fate of the entire democratic social order does not depend on it.

What further worsens the prospects for finding a lasting solution is the situation in which South Asia remains the least integrated region on the planet, and regional organizations (such as SAARC) do not even come close to demonstrating the integrative potential that is needed (Đogatović 2022, 87). Good practices regarding the relationship between secularism and religious nationalism are lacking throughout the region. On the other hand, India can hardly survive as a non-pluralistic state, pluralism emanates from the very nature of this country; it is a choice made inevitable by Indian geography and confirmed by Indian history (Battaglia 2017, 2).

The findings presented in this study support Christophe Jaffrelot's conclusion that India is a *de facto* Hindu state in which many practices of life, from diet to permitted religious expression, are regulated in a way that grants Hinduism a privileged position (see: Sircar 2022, 90). Although authors fail to agree on the definitive state of secularism in India, it undoubtedly does not stand on stable ground. Challenges to its normal functioning come from all directions, but the one posed by Hindutva threatens to completely undermine it. Although India is not

yet a Hindu state, it is becoming less secular and more of an illiberal democracy (Anklesaria Aiyar 2020, 1). A fractured mandate may not bring political stability to India, but it could represent hope for the survival of India's secular democracy, given that it has been labeled an "electoral autocracy" and a "partially free democracy" (Singh 2024).

Different powers have taken turns at the helm of the Indian subcontinent, but the social role of the dominant religion has usually been significant. Hindutva could remain a socially dominant force in the decades ahead, regardless of whether the BJP remains in power after the 2029 elections. Divided by language, caste, and economic inequalities – Indians have found a largely present identity pattern and seem unlikely to let it go.

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СЕКУЛАРИЗАМ У СЕНЦИ ХИНДУТВЕ: РЕЛИГИЈА И ИНДИЈСКИ ПАРЛАМЕНТАРНИ ИЗБОРИ 2019. И 2024. ГОДИНЕ

Резиме

Овом студијом се истражује утицај хиндуистичког национализма на концепт секуларизма у Индији, са посебним акцентом на парламентарне изборе одржане 2019. и 2024. године. У контексту растућег друштвеног и политичког значаја хиндуистичког национализма, аутор анализира како ова идеологија утиче на примену и развој секуларних принципа у политичком дискурсу и изборним кампањама, са посебним освртом на поменута два изборна циклуса. Анализом политичког и друштвеног наратива, изборних резултата и предизборне агенде, студија истражује на који начин хиндуистички национализам обликује политички пејзаж те доприноси развоју религијске и политичке поларизације. Посебна пажња је посвећена улози Баратија џаната партије у промоцији хиндуистичког национализма и њеном утицају на развој друштвених и религијских тензија. Резултати истраживања показују значајан утицај хиндуистичког национализма на урушавање стубова секуларизма и интензивирање поларизације у индијском друштву. Такође, ова студија пружа значајан увид у динамику односа између религије и политике у савременој Индији – теми која је готово у потпуности занемарена у домаћој науци.

Кључне речи: секуларизам, хиндуизам, хиндутва, Индија, парламентарни избори, Баратија џаната партија, религија

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