

International

Indian Hindu groups quietly put the temple plan on backburner

Modi's BJP seeks to partly switch focus to issues with Pakistan

NEW DELHI: Millions of Hindus will wake up at the crack of dawn this Saturday, five days before the start of India's general election, and march to nearby temples to chant a sacred hymn and renew a pledge to build a temple on the ruins of a 16th-century mosque. Hardline Hindu allies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) say they will mobilize more than 10 million people on April 6 - the start of the Hindu New Year - to shore up support for the contentious plan to build a temple in the northern town of Ayodhya.

But while the event will keep the focus on a core demand of India's Hindu nationalists, it will not overtly be part of the BJP's election campaign, signaling a softer approach by the ruling party, multiple sources familiar with discussions said. The commitment to construct a grand temple in Ayodhya to the Hindu god-king Ram has been part of the BJP's election manifesto since the 1990s and has helped the party garner Hindu votes in state and federal elections since then.

However, the BJP and its allies are concerned that focusing on the temple issue could be too hot to handle, especially since it is now the party in power. It could worsen communal tensions and trigger religious riots in the country, said a senior BJP leader. "We cannot underestimate the power of Hindu fringe groups, and it's best not to ignite these issues," said a BJP leader who is overseeing the party's election strategy.

The BJP leader and two other senior party members, two federal ministers and four members of hardline Hindu groups, who didn't wish to be identified due to

the sensitivity of the issue, said they reached a consensus to fold the temple issue into a broader religious and cultural discourse, without being too vocal about it. Following a meeting between senior religious leaders and BJP politicians in January, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or the World Hindu Council, which is leading the movement for building the Ayodhya temple, put its agitation on hold in February.

Details of the meeting have not been published previously. The VHP, which shares ideological ties with the BJP, would renew its demand only after the general election, its leaders said. "While we remain committed to the cause that is so close to the hearts of Hindus, we're unanimous in our view that it's not the right time to amplify the temple issue," said Alok Kumar, international working president of the VHP. "Politicization leads to controversies."

Hindu-Muslim riots

The VHP has distributed pamphlets and issued appeals on social media to participate in a chanting ceremony aimed at renewing the pledge to build the temple on the spot where many Hindus believe Ram was born, where the mosque stood. Sanjay Mayukh, a BJP spokesman in New Delhi, declined comment on the

April 6 event being organized by the VHP. "We wish them (VHP) a success and we will celebrate the Hindu New Year too," said Mayukh.

A militant Hindu mob tore down the mosque in 1992, sparking riots that killed about 2,000 people in one of the worst instances of sectarian violence in India since independence in 1947. The mosque, built by a Muslim ruler in 1528, has been one of the prime causes of conflict between India's majority Hindus and minority Muslims, who constitute 14 percent of the country's 1.3 billion people. India's Supreme Court is now in control of the site in Uttar Pradesh state and has been weighing petitions from both communities on what should be built there.

In March, the country's top court appointed an arbitration panel to mediate in the dispute. It's verdict is yet to come. BJP election candidates confirmed they are avoiding the temple issue in their campaigns. Former government minister and BJP lawmaker Sanjeev Baliyan, who is contesting the election from a constituency in Uttar Pradesh, said he has instructed supporters to "refrain from using the Ayodhya issue in any political rally."

At least 65 people were killed in clashes between Hindus and Muslims in Baliyan's constituency in 2013. "The danger of any religious tension spilling out of our

control would change the election mood. Best to keep religious issues away from politics for now," he said. Instead, Baliyan said, his campaign would focus on the BJP's achievements during its last five years in power and national security issues.

Most pollsters expect the BJP to emerge to win the highest number of seats in the election after recent military exchanges between India and arch enemy Pakistan led to a wave of nationalist fervor that has helped Modi. But the pollsters say the BJP is unlikely to repeat its sweeping victory of 2014 because of the government's inability to provide jobs to the millions of youngsters coming into the job market each year and depressed rural incomes.

The BJP is also under fire from small business owners, traditional supporters of the party, who say they have suffered because of a rocky start to the Goods and Services Tax, India's biggest tax reform, and Modi's shock move to ban high-value banknotes in 2016. The big question may be whether the BJP gets enough seats in the 544-member lower house of parliament to govern without having to form a coalition with other parties.

India begins voting on April 11 and the staggered election is scheduled to end on May 19. Results will be declared on May 23. Ambuj Nigam, the leader of the Vishwa Hindu Dal, a Hindu hardline Hindu group that came into existence in 2018, said the demand for a temple would again gain momentum after the general election. "We have put all our controversial works on hold," said Nigam. "But as soon as election results are out, we will bring Hindu nationalism back to the forefront." — Reuters



Hindus backing Modi tone down religious fervor

Sharia law around across the globe

HONG KONG: Brunei yesterday introduced harsh new sharia laws - including death by stoning for adultery and gay sex - despite a storm of global criticism from rights groups. Although most Muslim nations incorporate elements of sharia law in their legal systems, very few carry out the harsher punishments - known as hudud - which even Muslim scholars disagree on. Here are some facts about sharia law and how it is interpreted around the world:

What is sharia law?

Sharia is a religious law forming part of the Islamic faith derived from the Koran and the hadiths - the words or actions of the prophet Mohammed. The manner of its application in modern times has been a subject of dispute between conservative and liberal Muslims, and it remains a contested topic around the world. Some aspects have been widely accepted - such as how it applies to banking - with even Western companies introducing Islamic finance products to attract Muslim customers. Hudud, which means "boundaries" in Arabic, is the punishment meted out for sins such as adultery, rape, homosexuality, theft and murder. Extreme punishments are rarely carried out as many offences must be proved by a confession or by having been witnessed by several adult Muslim males. Countries which follow extreme sharia law include:

Saudi Arabia

Sharia is the basis for all Saudi law and until fairly recently extreme hudud punishments carried out in public were common. Homosexual acts are not only illegal but punishable by execution - although the usual penalty has been limited to flogging and imprisonment. Beheadings and amputations by sword were usually carried out on Fridays, before midday prayers. In extreme cases, such as the rape of a child, the condemned man is sometimes ordered crucified after execution. The law also allows for literal eye-for-an-eye punishment, known as "qisas", in cases of personal injury. The family of a murder victim can pardon a condemned person - often in exchange for blood money.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan's constitution is based on Islamic law but how that is interpreted has a complex history influenced by local custom and tribal traditions. The Taliban followed a brutal interpretation



BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN: Muslim women listen to Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah's speech during an event in Bandar Seri Begawan yesterday. —AFP photos



BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN: Children perform ablution before praying at the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin mosque in Bandar Seri Begawan.

of Sharia law during their rule from 1996-2001. For instance, they confined women to their homes, only allowing them outside with a male escort and hidden beneath a burqa. Hudud punishments were widely practiced all over the country. The militants now control more territory in Afghanistan than any time since 2001, and again are imposing their strict interpretation of Sharia, although they have also recently indicated they could loosen some of their strictest interpretations if they return to power.

Indonesia

Indonesia's conservative Aceh is the only province in the world's biggest Muslim-majority country that imposes Islamic law. Public flogging is common for a range of offenses in the region at the tip of Sumatra island, including gambling, drinking alcohol, adultery and having gay sex. Despite calls for it to end, the practice has wide support among Aceh's mostly Muslim population. Aceh adopted religious law after it was granted special autonomy in 2001, an attempt by the central government to quell a long-running separatist insurgency. While Indonesia has the death penalty, the government last year warned that Aceh's plan to usher in beheading as a punishment for murder was banned under existing national laws.

Sudan

Sudan adopted sharia law in 1983 but since then has implemented it randomly, activists say. Death by stoning remains a judicial punishment but has not been implemented in decades - although activists claim that hundreds of women are flogged every year for "immoral behavior" under the criminal code. In recent weeks several women protesters were sentenced to flogging for participating in protests against President Omar Al-Bashir's rule, but an appeals court overturned the sentence.

Pakistan

In 1979, military dictator Zia ul Haq introduced the widely-criticized Hudood Ordinances, part of a sweeping Islamisation of Pakistan. Sharia courts implementing the laws ran parallel to the mainstream British-influenced Pakistan Penal Code, and covered adultery, false accusations in court, property crimes and prohibition of drugs and alcohol. Women were not allowed to testify in the most severe cases, involving stonings or amputations, and the laws on rape or adultery required four adult Muslim males of good character to testify to the act. In 2006, MPs overwhelmingly approved the Women Protection Law, voting that rape and adultery cases should no longer be heard under the harsh religious system, but in the mainstream courts. Rulings in sharia courts can also now be appealed in the mainstream courts.

Nigeria

Some 12 of Nigeria's 36 states have extended Sharia to criminal matters and courts can order amputations - although few have been carried out. The rest of Nigeria has a mixed legal system of English common and traditional law.

Qatar

Flogging is still used in Qatar as a punishment for alcohol consumption by Muslims or illicit sexual relations. The punishment for adultery is 100 lashes. Adultery is punishable by death when a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man are involved.

The Islamic State

Although not a country, under its "caliphate", declared vanquished on March 23, the Islamic State group ran its own courts and implemented its brutal interpretation of Islam in areas it controlled in Syria and neighboring Iraq. It punished alleged crimes including theft, alcohol consumption, adultery, and homosexuality. The extremist group carried out beheadings, stonings and amputation, and threw men suspected of being homosexual off buildings. — AFP

Rising Thai political star faces fresh legal woes

BANGKOK: The telegenic leader of a Thai political party who rode to prominence during last month's election on a wave of millennial support stands accused of inciting unrest, he said yesterday, calling his latest legal woes "politically motivated" by the junta. Billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit heads up the youth-oriented Future Forward Party, which came out of nowhere to amass more than six million votes in the March 24 vote, the first since a 2014 coup.

Future Forward has joined an anti-junta coalition with six other parties claiming the right to form a government in the aftermath of the disputed vote whose full results will not be ratified until May 9. But the tycoon said on Facebook he has now been summoned to appear at a Bangkok police station on Saturday to hear incitement charges against him that carry a maximum sentence of seven years.

He wrote on the Facebook page, where he posted the summons, the

move was "an old political game" that he expected to intensify after the party's strong election showing. Speaking to reporters later, Thanathorn hit back at the junta government, which filed the complaint. "It is not the Future Forward Party which causes divisiveness of the people but the military who wants to hold on to power," he said. "I am calling for a restoration of democracy in Thailand... these cases are politically motivated."

Police investigator Charoensit Jongitthi said there were two charges in total that related to Thanathorn's actions in 2015, though he would not elaborate. "That is what I can say for now," he told AFP. Thanathorn is already being investigated under Thailand's Computer Crimes Act for allegedly spreading false information when he criticised the junta in a Facebook Live discussion last year. Future Forward is a key member of the anti-junta political coalition led by Pheu Thai, the party linked to self-exiled premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

The so-called "democratic front" says it has more than a majority of seats in the lower house, but the junta-backed Phalang Pracharat Party won the popular vote. Inconsistent counting, inaccurate figures and more than two million invalidated ballots have fuelled doubt over the poll. The party aligned with the junta put forward 2014 coup leader Prayut Chan-O-Cha as its candidate for prime minister. — AFP

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