

What Happens to Christians if Hindu Nationalist Wins Election?

India is gearing up for the largest show of democracy on earth. Ahead of national elections, the silent Christian community in India—reportedly 2.3 percent of its 1.2 billion people in 2001, though experts say this was an underestimate—has become restive and alert.

An electorate of 814 million—much more than the population of the whole of Europe—is eligible to cast the ballot in the staggered polls (scheduled in nine phases from April 7 to May 12) to choose India's 14th Parliament.

The national alliance of all the mainline churches, the National United Christian Forum, has come out with an appeal: the Catholic Church (which accounts for two thirds of the 28 million plus Christians) has issued a voter guideline, and regional ecumenical Christian bodies have also come out with similar advisories in the last few days.

Two major alliances—the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the “secular” Congress Party (that has ruled the nation for the past two terms) and the National Democratic Alliance, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—are the main protagonists.

Apart from these two alliances, 25 or so regional parties make the combat tougher for each of the 543 seats in “Lok Sabha” (“House of the People”—the lower House of the Indian parliament) that will decide who will rule India for the next five years.

With the opposition alliance led by the BJP (known for espousing a Hindu nationalist agenda) being projected by the

pre-poll surveys as front runner in elections that are forecast to produce a fractured verdict, there is growing unease in the Christian community.

This is written large in the voter guidelines and statements the churches have made in the run-up to the elections.

The Catholic Church calls for prayer “for divine assistance for all the citizens of India so that we may elect the best persons ... uphold the democratic and secular character of our great nation and selflessly work for the peace and prosperity of all the people of India.”

In fact, the churches’ penchant for “parties upholding a secular character” began with the emergence of the BJP as a major player in Indian politics from the 1990s.

2014’s vociferous BJP campaign has been built around its “mascot” Narendra Modi, chief minister of the western state of Gujarat, who is projected as prime minister in waiting.

While the Hindu nationalist lobby hails Modi as an able administrator who can accelerate India’s sagging economy, secular parties dub him as a polarizing personality. He carries the stain of the 2002 carnage of over 1,200 Muslims in Gujarat—the homeland of Mahatma Gandhi—when Hindu mobs targeted Muslims following the torching of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims.

The connivance and inaction of the police under Modi’s command, and his persistent refusal to express regret for the deaths, has made Modi the target of many secular groups.

“There is (also) a fear in the minds of (Christians),” admitted the Rev. Roger Gaikwad, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), a network of 30 Orthodox and Protestant churches. “Some fear that difficult are days ahead.”

However, outspoken Jesuit activist Father Cedric Prakash, based in Gujarat state, asserted that “the fears are misplaced. The Modi hype is built on propaganda. Once the mask is exposed, the hype will be gone.”

In fact, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (Congress Party)—known for his moderate reaction to his opponents—made an uncharacteristic comment in the run-up saying “It will be disastrous for the country to have Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister.”

Despite a media blitz over Modi’s much acclaimed “Gujarat model of development” (in which the state he governs has seen fast economic growth), Father Prakash noted that “contrary to the rise in economic data, the social indicators rank badly here.”

As the election drew closer, even national media have started spotting gaping holes in Modi’s model. *The Week* in its March 31 cover story questioned Modi’s ‘deafening silence’ on the neglect of social development and the poor, at the cost of big industrial houses.

The *Indian Express* English daily in a lead article on April 3 too has raised doubts about Gujarat’s growth story: “State is high on growth, low on development,” it noted, pointing to low growth rates of the state in alleviation of poverty, malnutrition and farmers’ health.

The BJP has tried its level best to break the ice with Christians. It made a quiet effort for an audience for Modi with top Catholic leaders at the CBCI General Assembly of 190 bishops in Kerala in February. But the Catholic Church refused.

The BJP is trying desperately to shed its “anti-Christian” image. When the Election Commission fixed the polling date for Goa—a former Portuguese colony along India’s west coast—for April 17 (Maundy Thursday), Catholic Archbishop Filipe Neri of

Goa was not alone in demanding a date change. Manohar Parikar, BJP Chief Minister of Goa, too endorsed the Church demand, forcing the Election Commission to bring the polls forward in a state where 40 percent of election officials are Catholics.

Despite such gestures, many a Christian remains sceptical of the BJP. States under BJP rule have routinely witnessed a rise in incidents of anti-Christian violence, while some BJP State governments have shown eagerness to rush through anti-conversion legislation. Assailants in brutal attacks on Christians and the rape of nuns have been defended by BJP leaders.

However, two Bishops of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (which traces its roots back to “doubting” Thomas, believed to have reached India) in January angered the majority Christian community with praise of Modi and his Gujarat model of development.

When the two, from southern Kerala state, hailed Modi after calling on him, the BJP camp was elated. But most Christians were furious. “It is unfortunate that the Bishops have decided to meet the man behind the Gujarat genocide,” fumed one.

“Election 2014 offers us (Christians) little freedom of choice. The only option is between corruption and communalism,” lamented Rev. Valson Thampu, principal of New Delhi’s prestigious St Stephen’s College run by the Church of North India.

While the BJP-led coalition is branded as ‘communal’ for espousing the Hindu nationalist agenda, corruption scandals have taken the sheen off the ruling UPA Coalition that returned to power in 2009 with a bigger mandate.

“Both main parties are unacceptable and meaningless,” quipped Rev. Thampu. Apart from that, he is “worried about the media playing for the political galleries and tarnishing the sanctity of the and media power has reached its nadir in this

election. It is a media-powered election with the results being declared even before the voting has begun. This is an insult to democracy.”

However, he went on to note that “the Indian electorate may not be fooled by the media ... Modi’s hype is built on publicity. This could fall apart like the ‘India Shining campaign’ of 2004 (when the BJP-led ruling coalition called for early polls with an aggressive campaign. However, the results stunned poll prophets and catapulted the opposition Congress Party into power).

“Due to the power of money, many in the mainstream media do not speak about the sad reality,” also added Fr Prakash, a bitter critic of Modi. The election outcome should be known by the mid-end May.