

# RELIGION AND FREEDOM: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON INDIA AND COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

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Religious freedom is of paramount importance, not because it is about religion, but because it is about freedom. The [characterisation by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom \(USCIRF\)](#) of India as a country of particular concern, in its annual report, is not entirely surprising, considering its dim and known views about sectarian violence and aggravating governmental measures over the last year. The Indian government not only repudiated the report but also ridiculed the USCIRF. The autonomous, bipartisan commission's influence over any U.S. executive action is limited and occasional but its presumption of global authority appears amusingly expansive. Whether or not the U.S. government acts on its recommendation to impose targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials depends on American strategic interests. The U.S. has used arguments of freedom, democracy, tolerance, and transparency as tools in its strategic pursuits, but there is no proof of any uniform or predictable pattern of enforcement of such moral attributes. The process can be selective and often arbitrary in spotlighting countries. Mirroring this pattern, India selectively approaches global opinions on itself, embracing and celebrating laudatory ones and rejecting inconvenient ones. The frantic, and relatively successful, efforts to raise its Ease of Doing Business ranking by the World Bank is a case in point. Many of these reports have a circulatory life — the USCIRF report quotes U.N. Special Rapporteurs to buttress its point on the discriminatory outcome of the National Register of Citizens in Assam. Overall, such reports contribute to the construction of an image of a country, and the Indian government is cognisant of this pattern. In March, the Indian government told Niti Aayog to track 32 global indices and engage with the bodies that measure them, to advance reform and growth.

India advertises itself as a multi-religious democracy and as an adherent to global norms of rule of law. It also aspires to be on the table of global rule making. For a country with such stated ambitions, its record on religious freedom as reflected through events of the last one year is deeply disconcerting. The catalogue of religious violence, incitement and wrecking of the rule of law in several parts of the country remains an unsettling fact. The partisan nature of the ruling dispensation is also difficult to wish away. Reputation is important for a country's economic development and global standing but beyond that instrumental perspective, rule of law and communal harmony are essential for any functioning democracy.

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