



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Citizenship Laws and Religious Freedom

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Anurima Bhargava USCIRF Commissioner

Thank you very much, Vice Chair Manchin. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing. I'd also like to express a note of gratitude for the interest in citizenship laws and the communities impacted by those laws, and our appreciation to those of you who have submitted statements to the record and shared your own stories and experiences.

Over the past year, through the work of the Commission, I've witnessed firsthand how the threat to and withdrawal of citizenship has transformed the lives of the Rohingya, who without citizenship, have been denied the freedom to move, to work, to receive an education, to access health care or to feed and support themselves. Their journey, and recent events in India, have helped bring a spotlight to the import of citizenship to our sense of belonging, identity, and collective dignity, and to the horrors that ensue when citizenship of certain targeted communities come into question.

In 1982, Burma redefined citizenship to be based on membership in one of 135 recognized ethnic groups, or the residency of a person's ancestors in Burma prior to 1824. This new law excluded the Rohingya, who were not listed among recognized groups, leaving millions with their citizenship in question. The Rohingya continue to face the violence unleashed by this action. The loss of citizenship serves at the foundation of their ongoing persecution – genocidal violence at the hands of the military and the mass forced migration of the majority of Rohingya to refugee camps abroad. In Burma, the government continues to refuse to recognize the Rohingya, which has constrained those Rohingya remaining in the country from possessing any form of identity documents, including birth certificates. Like their fellow Rohingya displaced abroad, Rohingya residing within Rakhine State in Burma are confined to camps with little access to education, employment, healthcare, and other rights in clear violation of international human rights standards.

Recent actions by the Indian government are likewise troubling. In December 2019, the Indian parliament passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act which provides a fast track for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who are already in India to apply for and gain Indian citizenship. The stated purpose of the law is to protect individuals facing religious persecution in India's neighboring countries— yet it excludes Muslim communities facing persecution such as Ahmadis in Pakistan and Shi'a in Afghanistan. Nor does it account for the Hindus persecuted and displaced in other neighboring countries like the 445 Hindus in the Rohingya camps. Indian officials have stressed that the CAA will not impact those already residing in India.

Yet the fear is that this law in conjunction with a planned National Population Register and a potential nation-wide National Register of Citizens, or NRC, could result in the wide-scale disenfranchisement of Indian Muslims. This would leave them vulnerable to prolonged detention, deportation, and violence. We are already seeing this process being conducted in the northeastern state of Assam, which we will hear more about in this hearing. The NRC is claimed as a mechanism for identifying migrants in the region. Many Indian citizens, in particular Muslims, have had their citizenship questioned and challenged by local authorities by being excluded from the National Register of Citizens despite their families having lived in India for generations. A number of citizens fear being sent to detention camps and effectively rendered stateless. With the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in place to protect non-Muslims excluded from the NRC, this process will largely impact Muslims.

Many Indians of all faiths have been exercising their peaceful right of protest to express their opposition to this law. Yet, since its passage we have seen a deadly crackdown by government authorities against the protestors and recent communal violence in Delhi targeting Muslim communities that has resulted in the deaths, beatings, and burnings of Muslims and a few Hindus as well.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how citizenship laws and the details of citizenship processes in Burma, India, and more broadly, are leveraged as a weapon against religious communities and how the United States government and the international community can more effectively ensure that individuals of all faiths can freely live without fear of losing their citizenship and the many rights that come from citizenship and the difficulties and violence that come from its loss.

Thank you, and I will now turn the floor back to Chair Perkins.

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