

Rep. James P. McGovern
Congressional briefing in honor of India's Republic Day
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As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon. I am Congressman Jim McGovern and I thank the Indian American Muslim Council for inviting me to say a few words in honor of India's Republic Day.

Today is the 72nd anniversary of the entry into force of the constitution of the Republic of India, the final step in India's transition from a British colony to a fully independent state.

Like all anniversaries, Republic Day gives us the opportunity to celebrate but also to reflect.

The constitution adopted by the Indian Constituent Assembly in 1949 was a momentous achievement. After decades of struggle marred by tragic episodes of inter-communal violence, the constitution enshrined secularism and equal rights for every person without regard to identity.

For more than seven decades, the constitution has provided a framework for democracy to flourish in a country that Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and members of other religions all call home. India today is the most populous democracy in the world. That is cause to celebrate.

But, as all of you are very aware, there are worrying signs that secularism in India is being eroded, and with it, Indian democracy.

For the first time in 2019, a law was passed that linked citizenship to religious identity. There is every reason to fear that this change, combined with the proposal for a National Register of Citizens, institutionalizes discrimination against Muslims.

Last December, the Indian government declined to renew the foreign-funding license for the Missionaries of Charity, the Christian organization founded by Mother Teresa to assist the poor. Earlier this month that decision was reversed. But even so, it raised the spectre of discrimination against Christians.

In fact, the concerns about discrimination based on religious identity are so great that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended that India be designated a country of particular concern. In making the recommendation, USCIRF said the current government "promoted Hindu nationalist policies resulting in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom."

The treatment of Kashmir is another warning sign. The government's unilateral decision in 2019 to change the status of Kashmir has been followed by repression and persistent human rights abuses of the kind that can radicalize entire populations – and lead to unacceptable violence like the killings of several Hindus and a Sikh last October in Srinagar.

Just a few days ago I received reports of the detention of Khurram Parvez, a handicapped Kashmiri human rights defender who was arrested under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act.

That Act allows authorities to conduct warrantless searches, arrest individuals, and designate them as terrorists without a trial or bail. It has been used on journalists, activists, and politicians in Kashmir and throughout India.

This kind of misguided “anti-terrorism” legislation is not the sign of a healthy democracy.

So as we rightfully celebrate the seven decades of democracy that the Indian constitution has made possible, we must also do all we can to prevent a return to the violence of the past.

We cannot be silent when measures are taken that discriminate against whole populations. Or when inflammatory language is used that could incite violence against those populations.

India is a long-standing ally of the United States. That alliance has been based in great part on our shared democratic values.

Here in the United States we are facing our own challenges of rising authoritarianism. For exactly that reason, criticism of human rights abuses must not be reserved only for our adversaries.

If democracy is to prevail in India and around the world, those of us who truly believe in democracy and the secularism that makes it possible must make common cause, at home and abroad. We must stand together against polarization, discrimination, dehumanization and persecution.

We have our work cut out for us.

Let's use this Republic Day to renew our shared commitment to liberal democracy, and the respect for the universal human rights of every person that makes it possible.

Thank you.