

## ROLE OF MUSLIMS IN INDIA'S RECENT LOK SABHA ELECTIONS

By  
**Hafiz Usama Hameed**  
*Research Associate*  
*India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI*

Edited by  
**Dr. Khurram Abbas**

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



### Introduction

Following a long electoral process (7 phases, 44 days), the Indian electorate has delivered its verdict in the 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections. Muslims remained a pivotal part of the electoral discourse of major political parties—from the manifestos to the election speeches to media narratives. After the first round of voting on 19 April 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hardly delivered any major speech without mentioning the country's largest minority (i.e. Muslims) in one way or the other. What outcome this election result has brought forth for the Indian Muslims? What were the voting trends among Muslim voters across the country? How did Muslim candidates perform in the election? These are crucial questions to understand the political dynamics of India in relation to the Lok Sabha election and the role and place of the Muslim community in India broadly. This Issue Brief attempts to shed some light on the Muslim participation and vote share in the recently concluded elections.

### Muslim Candidates

In terms of candidature, the ratio of Muslims in the political process has consistently dropped as compared to the previous elections. A total of 78 Muslim candidates tested their fate in this

election, either from a party platform or independently; 37 less than the previous Lok Sabha election in 2019.<sup>1</sup> Major parties allocated little share for Muslim candidates. The Congress Party (INC) nominated 19 Muslim candidates in 2024, while in 2019 it had nominated 34 Muslims. The number of Muslims contesting from Trinamool Congress (TMC) dropped from 13 in 2019 to 6 in 2024. Interestingly, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), a much smaller party as compared to those mentioned above, fielded 10 Muslim candidates in 2024, while it had 9 Muslim candidates in 2019 elections.<sup>2</sup> The Smajwadi Party (SP) had nominated 8 Muslims in 2019, and only 4 in 2024. The Communist Party of India (CPI) did not give ticket to any Muslim, while it had 4 Muslim candidates in 2019. The Aam Admi Party (AAP) also did not nominate any Muslim candidates in the states where it contested election this year.

Within the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Janata Dal (United) had nominated one Muslim candidate each, none of them was elected. The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) had no Muslim among its contestants. Notably, the ruling NDA has no Lok Sabha member from among the Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs.

### **Muslim MPs in the 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha**

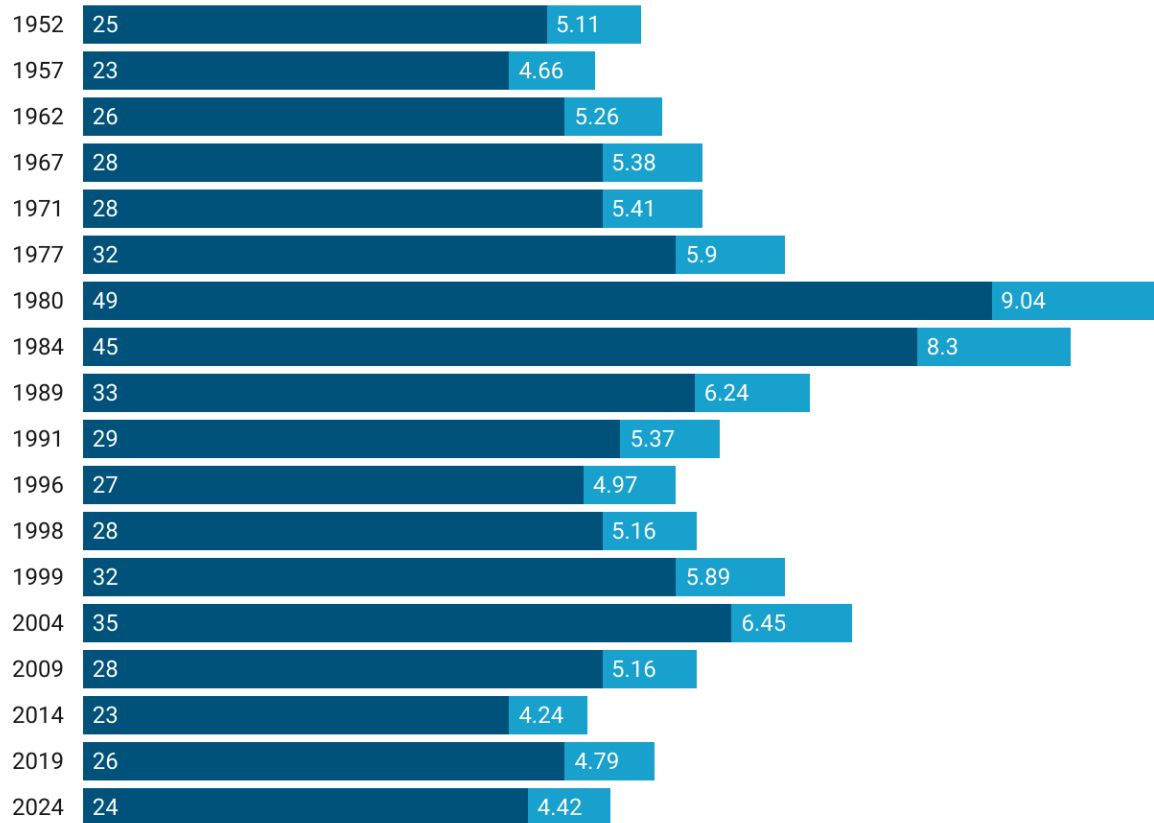
Out of 78 Muslim candidates, 24 have managed to get elected to Lok Sabha. As noted, none of the elected Muslim members of Parliament belongs to the ruling coalition (NDA). The Congress-led INDIA alliance is home to 21 Muslim MPs --with 7 coming from Congress, 5 from TMC, 4 from Smajwadi Party, 3 from Kerala-based Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), and 2 from National Conference of the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) region. Asaduddin Owisi's All-India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) has been able to win only one seat from Telangana's Hyderabad constituency. The remaining two Muslim MPs won the election in independent capacity from IIOJK's Baramulla constituency and Ladakh.

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<sup>1</sup> "Yusuf Pathan To Iqra Choudhary: 24 Muslim MPs Who Made It To Lok Sabha," *Abp News*, June 5, 2024, <https://news.abplive.com/elections/muslim-mps-lok-sabha-2024-yusuf-pathan-iqra-choudhary-asaduddin-owaisi-1693508>.

<sup>2</sup> Harsh Mander, "Excluded by the BJP, Shunned by the Opposition: Indian Muslims and the Crisis of Non-belonging," *Scroll.in*, June 24, 2024, <https://scroll.in/article/1069251/excluded-by-the-bjp-shunned-by-the-opposition-indian-muslims-and-the-crisis-of-non-belonging>.

## Number and Percentage of Muslim MPs in each Lok Sabha



Source: Election Commission of India • Created with Datawrapper

### ***Performance of Muslim Political Parties***

There are a number of political parties that claim to voice Muslim issues in India. Mainly, these are active in one or two states due to which they are legally considered regional parties. They include AIMIM, IUML, and All-India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), among others. These parties fielded a number of candidates in their stronghold states. The AIMIM, while refusing to join INDIA or NDA alliances, fielded 10 candidates in Bihar, 5 in Maharashtra and 1 in Telangana. It could only win in its traditional constituency in Telangana. The IUML was a part of the INDIA alliance and had fielded 2 candidates from Kerala and 1 from Tamil Nadu. The party managed to win all three seats. The third party, AIUDF, was contesting for 3 Lok Sabha seats from Dhubri, Karimganj, and Nagaon constituencies of Assam but it has not won any of them. Evidently, the Muslim parties faced this shock owing to the fact that the Muslim voter in general was focused more on defeating BJP candidates rather than favouring the candidates from his own community.

### ***Shrinking Political Participation***

Despite notable gains for the 'secular' forces in this election, the issue of shrinking political space for Indian Muslims is palpable. With 24 Muslim MPs in the incoming Lok Sabha, this tally is the second

lowest since the 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (2014-19) in which there were mere 22 Muslim members. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, Muslim MPs come from only nine states/UTs across India.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Discouraging Gestures***

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi directly targeted Muslims in his electoral speeches, e.g. calling them 'infiltrators' and those 'having more children', the BJP fielded only one Muslim candidate, M. Abdul Salam, from Kerala's Malappuram constituency. Yet, he was not allowed to join Prime Minister Modi during an electoral roadshow in his own constituency.<sup>4</sup> With Salam's defeat in the election, the 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha is devoid of any Muslim MP on the treasury benches.

Narendra Modi has tried to accommodate many less privileged factions of the society in his cabinet. In his 71-member cabinet, he took 7 women, 10 Dalits, 27 from Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and 5 from religious minorities. Even 2 Sikh representatives who lost their bid for the Lok Sabha have been sworn in as ministers. A Christian minister had not even contested the election. Yet, no individual of the Muslim community, the largest of minorities in India, was lucky enough to win Modi's confidence for a ministerial portfolio.<sup>5</sup>

The opposition INDIA alliance believes it has marched forward to decelerate the pace of 'Hindu nationalism' through electoral means. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has attributed this achievement to "the poor and marginalised people who came out to save the constitution" including "workers, farmers, Dalits, adivasis and backwards".<sup>6</sup> However, the opposition leader could not bring himself to mentioning 200 million Muslims who are believed to have extensively voted for INDIA alliance and other parties especially in UP in order to pose a challenge to the politics of hate and division. Arguably, this is part of Congress's decade-old strategy to avoid directly talking of Muslim community, its contributions, and the issues it has been facing since 2014.

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<sup>3</sup> Shaheen Abdulla, "Muslim presence in Lok Sabha shrinks to 4.42%, 24 MPs from nine states in dwindling representation," *Maktoob Media*, June 5, 2024, <https://maktoobmedia.com/features/muslim-presence-in-lok-sabha-shrinks-to-4-42-24-mps-from-nine-states-in-dwindling-representation/>.

<sup>4</sup> Abdul Latheef Naha, "Malappuram BJP candidate Abdul Salam kept away from Modi's roadshow", *The Hindu*, March 19, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/malappuram-bjp-candidate-abdul-salam-kept-away-from-modis-roadshow/article67969230.ece#:~:text=Abdul%20Salam%20was%20denied%20permission,Dr.>

<sup>5</sup> Harsh Mander, "Indian Muslims and the Crisis of Non-belonging," *Scroll.in*.

<sup>6</sup> Saif Khalid, "India election results: Did 'secular' parties let Muslims down, too?", *Aljazeera*, June 5, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/5/india-election-results-did-secular-parties-let-down-muslims-too.>

### ***Vote Consolidation***

An important factor at work in this election was the consolidation of Muslim vote against the BJP and its electoral allies. Historically, the Muslim community has hardly been a monolithic voting bloc in India's electoral process, as opposed to the popular perception.<sup>7</sup> Political forces have exploited their internal fault-lines like caste, sect and regional identity for electoral gains. For example, the BJP has traditionally projected its comfort level with the Shia Muslim community, reflecting a divisive sectarian angle.<sup>8</sup> The Congress party, on the other side, is believed to enjoy support from Deobandi faction.

The 2019 election results were the earlier instance when socio-political insecurities accentuated by the BJP-led government resulted in a more concentrated Muslim 'vote bank' as compared to the past.<sup>9</sup> The latest election results have proved this factor with even greater strength. Muslims rejected even parties with apparent Muslim posture in order to vote for leading opposition figures. In Assam's Dhubri constituency, for instance, a long-standing Muslim cleric and sitting MP Maulana Badruddin Ajmal conceded defeat with second highest margin [more than a million votes] to Rakibul Hussain, himself a Muslim candidate from Congress.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, four out of five AIMIM candidates in Maharashtra lost their deposits as they collectively managed to secure a total of 6,192 votes only.<sup>11</sup>

In certain constituencies, Muslims joined Dalits and Other Backward Communities (OBCs) to oust the BJP candidates. This was most evident in Uttar Pradesh's Faizabad constituency where 14.80 percent Muslim population contributed to the victory of a Dalit candidate from Smajwadi Party in a shock for Hindu nationalists.<sup>12</sup> Faizabad is the place where the Ram Temple was built at the site of Babri Masjid. That the BJP failed to win a seat there is telling.

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<sup>7</sup> Hilal Ahmed, *Siyasi Muslims: A Story of Political Islam in India*, (Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Sanya Dhingra, "Origins & evolution of BJP's dalliance with Shia Muslims, the 'minority within minority,'" ThePrint, February 28, 2024, <https://theprint.in/politics/origins-evolution-of-bjps-dalliance-with-shia-muslims-the-minority-within-minority/1979683/>, Retrieved June 2, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> "Mapping Muslim Voting Behavior in India," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, n.d., <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/02/mapping-muslim-voting-behavior-in-india?lang=en>.

<sup>10</sup> "Congress's Rakibul Hussain defeats AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal by record 10.12 lakh votes in Assam's Dhubri: EC", *Times of India*, June 4, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/congresss-rakibul-hussain-defeats-aiudf-chief-badruddin-ajmal-by-record-10-12-lakh-votes-in-assams-dhubri-ec/articleshow/110712329.cms>.

<sup>11</sup> Mohammed Akhef, "AIMIM candidates lose deposit in 4 of 5 seats contested in Maharashtra", *Times of India*, June 6, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/aurangabad/aimim-candidates-lose-deposit-in-4-of-5-seats-contested-in-maharashtra/articleshow/110750928.cms>.

<sup>12</sup> Deepanjali Bhas, "The 'Ayodhya' Setback: Don't Discount the Demographic of Faizabad Constituency", *Swarajya Magazine*, June 13, 2024, <https://swarajyamag.com/politics/the-ayodhya-setback-dont-discount-the-demographics-of-faizabad-constituency>.

## Conclusion

In the 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections, Muslims — the largest minority of India — have been able to bounce back somewhat and use their electoral influence to the community's larger benefit. Pushing their internal fault-lines, lack of a mutually agreed national leadership, and exploitation by the national parties, Muslims overwhelmingly voted on the agenda of pushing back divisive politics. The parties championing Muslims rights remained ineffective due to their solo-flight. Consolidation of Muslim vote along with Dalits and OBCs will be useful in the efforts to safeguard secular identity of the country's Constitution. It is now for the secular forces to play their part in protecting Muslims' basic rights inside and outside Parliament in the wake of blatantly 'Hindutva' driven politics and policies of BJP.