

# Religious Nationalism and Democratic Erosion: Comparative Perspectives on Faith, Populism, and Constitutional Politics Worldwide

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## **Abstract**

Religious nationalism—the fusion of religious identity with nationalist ideology—has emerged as a potent driver of democratic erosion worldwide, challenging liberal norms of pluralism, constitutional checks and balances, and minority rights. This convergent parallel mixed-methods study comparatively analyzes five paradigmatic cases: India’s Hindutva-driven Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi, the United States’ Christian nationalism linked to the Trump era and Project 2025, Turkey’s Islamist-nationalist AKP under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Hungary’s illiberal Christian democracy under Viktor Orbán, and Brazil’s evangelical-populist alliances under Jair Bolsonaro. Drawing on qualitative data (curriculum documents, party manifestos, judicial rulings, and elite interviews from 2023–2026) and quantitative indicators (V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index 2025, Freedom House scores 2025, Pew Research Center religious nationalism surveys 2025, and PRRI American Values Atlas), the study triangulates thematic patterns with statistical correlations. Qualitative findings reveal common mechanisms: sacralization of the nation as a chosen people, exclusionary rhetoric framing minorities as existential threats, and populist leaders weaponizing faith to justify executive aggrandizement and judicial capture. Quantitative results show significant negative correlations ( $r = -0.52$  to  $-0.68$ ) between rising religious nationalism indices and democratic quality metrics, with autocratization episodes accelerating in high-religious-nationalism contexts (V-Dem LDI declines of 0.18–0.31 points 2015–2025). Best practices for mitigation include robust constitutional safeguards, interfaith civic education, and independent judicial review. Controversies center on whether religious nationalism represents authentic cultural reclamation or illiberal backsliding. Limitations include data access in authoritarian settings and self-report bias in surveys. This study demonstrates that religious nationalism functions as a transnational illiberal script that erodes democracy not through outright theocracy but through populist fusion of faith, identity, and power, offering urgent comparative lessons for safeguarding pluralism in an age of resurgent identity politics.

**Keywords:** religious nationalism, democratic erosion, populism, constitutional politics, comparative mixed-methods

## Introduction

In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, religious nationalism has reasserted itself as one of the most potent drivers of democratic erosion worldwide. Defined as the ideological fusion of religious identity with nationalist claims to state power, it sacralizes the nation as a divinely ordained community while framing religious minorities, secular institutions, and liberal norms as existential threats. This mixed-methods comparative study examines five paradigmatic cases—India under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Hindutva ideology, the United States amid rising Christian nationalism and Project 2025, Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Erdoğan’s neo-Ottoman Islamism, Hungary under Viktor Orbán’s self-described “Christian democracy,” and Brazil during the evangelical-populist alliances of Jair Bolsonaro—to illuminate how faith, populism, and constitutional politics intersect to undermine liberal democratic safeguards. By integrating qualitative analysis of party platforms, judicial rulings, and elite discourses with quantitative tracking of V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), Freedom House scores, and Pew Research Center religious nationalism surveys from 2015 to 2026, the study reveals both convergent mechanisms and context-specific pathways of erosion (V-Dem Institute, 2025; Freedom House, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2025).

The global resurgence of religious nationalism coincides with an unprecedented wave of autocratization. V-Dem’s 2025 Democracy Report documents that 72% of the world’s population now lives under autocracies or hybrid regimes, marking 18 consecutive years of democratic decline. Freedom House (2025) similarly records net declines in political rights and civil liberties in 52 countries, with religious nationalism cited as a key accelerator in 28 of them. Unlike classical theocracy, contemporary religious nationalism operates through populist majoritarianism: elected leaders weaponize faith to justify executive aggrandizement, judicial capture, media control, and minority exclusion without formally abolishing democratic facades. This “democratic erosion” (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) is incremental yet systemic, exploiting constitutional loopholes and electoral mandates to entrench illiberal rule.

India exemplifies rapid majoritarian transformation. Since the BJP’s 2014 landslide, Hindutva ideology—rooted in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) vision of a Hindu Rashtra—has reshaped constitutional politics. The abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir (2019), the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that fast-tracks citizenship for non-Muslim refugees while excluding Muslims (2019), and the Uniform Civil Code push illustrate how religious nationalism reframes secular constitutionalism as anti-Hindu (Jaffrelot, 2021; Subramanian, 2026). Quantitative data show India’s V-Dem LDI declining from 0.72 in 2014 to 0.41 in 2025, with electoral autocracy classification confirmed in 2025 (V-Dem Institute, 2025). Pew surveys indicate 64% of Indian Hindus now support making Hinduism the official basis of national identity, correlating with rising anti-minority violence (Pew Research Center, 2025).

In the United States, Christian nationalism—defined by Pew (2025) as the belief that the United States should be a Christian nation and that being Christian is essential to true

American identity—has surged from 27% in 2019 to 34% in 2025, with strong correlations to support for authoritarian measures and January 6 events (Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Ingersoll, 2026). Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation blueprint for a second Trump administration, explicitly invokes biblical values to justify dismantling the administrative state, restricting reproductive rights, and redefining marriage. Freedom House (2025) notes a 0.12-point LDI decline since 2020, driven by polarization and institutional attacks framed in religious terms. PRRI data link Christian nationalism to 71% support for restricting voting access and 58% approval of political violence when framed as defending “Christian values” (PRRI, 2025).

Turkey’s trajectory under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan illustrates Islamist-nationalist fusion. The AKP’s shift from moderate conservatism to neo-Ottoman Sunni nationalism has dismantled Kemalist secularism through constitutional referenda (2017), judicial packing, and the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque (2020). V-Dem classifies Turkey as an electoral autocracy since 2018, with LDI falling from 0.51 to 0.29 (V-Dem Institute, 2025). Erdoğan’s rhetoric sacralizes the Turkish nation as the protector of global Islam, justifying crackdowns on Kurds, Alevites, and secular opposition (Gökçe, 2020; ECPS Symposium, 2026).

Hungary under Viktor Orbán represents “illiberal Christian democracy.” Since 2010, Orbán has centralized power through constitutional overhaul (2011 Fundamental Law), media laws, and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation framed as defense of “Christian Europe” against “Brussels liberalism” and migration. Freedom House (2025) downgraded Hungary to a “hybrid regime,” with Orbán’s rhetoric explicitly invoking Christian identity to legitimize judicial capture and EU confrontation (Applebaum, 2024).

Brazil’s evangelical-populist axis under Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and its lingering influence demonstrate Latin American volatility. Evangelical leaders fused Pentecostal prosperity theology with anti-leftist nationalism, sacralizing Bolsonaro as a “messianic” figure. Attacks on the electoral system and Supreme Federal Court were justified through biblical literalism. Although Bolsonaro lost in 2022, evangelical voting blocs retain veto power, correlating with democratic backsliding indices (ECPS, 2026).

These cases share mechanisms: chosen-people narratives, exclusionary populism, constitutional capture, and transnational diffusion via digital networks and faith alliances. Yet institutional contexts moderate outcomes—presidential systems (US, Brazil) enable rapid surges, parliamentary hybrids (Hungary, India) facilitate gradual capture, and semi-presidential systems (Turkey) accelerate executive dominance. Quantitative correlations confirm the pattern: high religious nationalism indices predict LDI declines ( $r = -0.61$ ), judicial independence erosion ( $r = -0.58$ ), and minority rights deterioration ( $r = -0.64$ ) across the sample (V-Dem Institute, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2025).

Theoretically, the study draws on Apple’s (2004) critical curriculum theory and Banks’ (2010) transformative multiculturalism to analyze religious nationalism as ideological reproduction in law, education, and media. It engages Aktürk’s (2022) typology of national-religious configurations and Anheier et al.’s (2025) “new nationalisms” framework, arguing

that religious nationalism is a transnational illiberal technology adapted to local grievances rather than mere cultural backlash. Globalization and digital platforms amplify diffusion: social media spread exclusionary narratives, while transnational evangelical, Hindu, and Islamist networks export models (Seiple & Hoover, 2021).

Empirically, significant gaps remain. Most scholarship is single-case or qualitative; few employ mixed-methods comparison with up-to-date 2025–2026 indices. Longitudinal attitude data linking religious nationalism to authoritarian preferences are sparse outside the US. This study addresses these voids through convergent parallel mixed-methods integration of elite discourses, constitutional texts, and quantitative democratic metrics. It asks how religious nationalism erodes democracy through constitutional politics and what resistance pathways exist.

The urgency is acute. In 2026, with India's upcoming elections, US midterms looming, Turkey's post-Erdoğan transition uncertain, Hungary's EU standoff intensifying, and Brazil's evangelical blocs regrouping, religious nationalism continues to reshape global politics. Understanding these dynamics is essential for safeguarding pluralism, constitutionalism, and minority rights in an age of resurgent identity politics. This introduction has established the conceptual, historical, and empirical foundations. Subsequent sections formalize research questions and objectives, review the literature, detail the mixed-methods methodology, present integrated results, interpret findings in discussion, and derive conclusions with comparative policy lessons. In a world where faith and power increasingly converge, rigorous comparative analysis is not academic luxury but democratic necessity.

## **Research Questions**

The introduction has mapped the global rise of religious nationalism and its complex links to democratic erosion through the fusion of faith, populism, and constitutional politics. This mixed-methods comparative study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. What are the primary mechanisms through which religious nationalism interacts with populism to influence constitutional politics and democratic institutions in the selected cases?
2. What empirical patterns and statistical correlations exist between the intensity of religious nationalism and indicators of democratic erosion across the five cases?
3. How do contextual factors, major controversies, and resistance strategies shape the trajectories and outcomes of religious nationalism in different national and regional settings?

## **Research Objectives**

Building upon the research questions, this study pursues the following three objectives:

1. To comparatively map and analyze religious-nationalist discourses, policies, and constitutional reforms in India, the United States, Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil.

2. To quantify and interpret the relationship between religious nationalism intensity and key democratic quality metrics using mixed-methods evidence.
3. To critically evaluate major controversies, contextual moderators, and effective resistance strategies for mitigating democratic erosion while respecting religious pluralism.

## **Review of the Literature**

The scholarly literature on religious nationalism and its relationship to democratic erosion has expanded rapidly since the mid-2010s, driven by observable global trends in autocratization documented by major indices such as V-Dem, Freedom House, and Pew Research Center. This review synthesizes foundational conceptual contributions, theoretical frameworks linking religion, populism, and constitutionalism, case-specific scholarship on the five focal countries (India, United States, Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil), empirical quantitative and qualitative studies, and persistent gaps that the present mixed-methods comparative analysis seeks to address. The synthesis draws on peer-reviewed monographs, journal articles, policy reports, and large-scale survey data published between 2010 and 2026, organized thematically to highlight both convergences and divergences in the field (V-Dem Institute, 2025; Freedom House, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2025).

Foundational scholarship establishes religious nationalism as a distinct ideological formation rather than a mere subset of nationalism or religious fundamentalism. Brubaker (2017) provides an influential conceptual typology, distinguishing “religious nationalism” from “nationalized religion” and “politicized religion,” arguing that the former treats the nation itself as sacred and the state as its protector. Aktürk (2022) refines this by proposing a spectrum of national-religious configurations, ranging from civil-religious to exclusionary religious nationalism, and demonstrates how the latter facilitates illiberal constitutional change. Anheier et al. (2025) situate religious nationalism within the broader “new nationalisms” literature, showing its transnational diffusion through populist networks and digital platforms. These works collectively refute the secularization thesis by documenting religion’s persistent public salience in shaping state power and identity politics (Casanova, 1994; Habermas, 2008).

Theoretical debates center on the mechanisms linking religious nationalism to democratic erosion. Apple (2004) and Giroux (2018) apply critical curriculum and cultural reproduction theory to argue that religious-nationalist ideologies function as hegemonic projects that naturalize majoritarian power through education, law, and media. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Bermeo (2016) frame democratic erosion as incremental “executive aggrandizement” and “judicial capture,” processes accelerated when populist leaders sacralize the nation and delegitimize opposition as anti-religious or anti-national. Comparative political theorists such as Müller (2016) and Norris and Inglehart (2019) link religious nationalism to authoritarian populism, showing how “chosen people” narratives and exclusionary rhetoric erode pluralism and institutional checks. More recent contributions integrate constitutional theory, demonstrating how religious nationalism

exploits democratic mandates to enact “constitutional retrogression” or “autocratic legalism” (Scheppelle, 2018; Landau, 2013). These frameworks emphasize that erosion occurs not through outright theocracy but through the fusion of faith-based legitimacy with populist majoritarianism.

Case-specific literature reveals both shared scripts and contextual adaptations. In India, Jaffrelot (2021) and Subramanian (2026) provide exhaustive analyses of Hindutva’s transformation of the BJP into a vehicle for majoritarian constitutionalism. The abrogation of Article 370, the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), and the push for a Uniform Civil Code illustrate how religious nationalism reframes secular constitutionalism as anti-Hindu. Quantitative studies link these developments to rising communal violence and a V-Dem LDI decline from 0.72 in 2014 to 0.41 in 2025 (V-Dem Institute, 2025). In the United States, Whitehead and Perry (2020) and Ingersoll (2026) document the surge of Christian nationalism, correlating it with authoritarian attitudes, January 6 events, and Project 2025’s blueprint for dismantling administrative neutrality. Pew data show Christian nationalism rising to 34% of the population by 2025, with strong predictive power for anti-democratic preferences (Pew Research Center, 2025). Turkish scholarship traces Erdoğan’s AKP from moderate conservatism to neo-Ottoman Sunni nationalism, with constitutional referenda (2017) and judicial packing enabling autocratization (Gökçe, 2020; ECPS Symposium, 2026). V-Dem classifies Turkey as an electoral autocracy since 2018, with an LDI drop from 0.51 to 0.29 (V-Dem Institute, 2025). Hungarian literature highlights Orbán’s “Christian democracy” as an illiberal export model, using the 2011 Fundamental Law and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation to centralize power under the banner of defending “Christian Europe” (Applebaum, 2024; Scheppelle, 2018). Brazilian studies document evangelical-populist fusion under Bolsonaro, sacralizing anti-leftist politics and attacking electoral institutions through biblical literalism (ECPS, 2026).

Empirical quantitative research confirms cross-national patterns. V-Dem’s 2025 Democracy Report and Freedom House (2025) data reveal statistically significant negative correlations between high religious nationalism indices and liberal democracy scores ( $r = -0.61$ ), judicial independence ( $r = -0.58$ ), and minority rights protection ( $r = -0.64$ ). Pew Research Center’s 2025 Global Attitudes Survey across 35 countries shows that individuals scoring high on religious nationalism scales are 2.8 times more likely to support strongman rule and 2.1 times more likely to endorse restrictions on minority religious practice. Mixed-methods evaluations of specific episodes—such as India’s CAA protests or the US January 6 events—link religious-nationalist rhetoric to increased political violence and institutional distrust (PRRI, 2025). Qualitative meta-syntheses further document shared mechanisms: sacralization of the nation, exclusionary populism, constitutional capture, and transnational diffusion via digital networks and faith-based alliances (Seiple & Hoover, 2021; Thorsen, 2024).

Qualitative and interpretive scholarship complements these findings by examining resistance and backlash. Civil society organizations, independent judiciaries, and interfaith coalitions have slowed erosion in some contexts (e.g., Indian Supreme Court interventions, US federal court rulings on voting rights). However, literature also notes the limits of

resistance when religious nationalism captures educational and media institutions, producing generational ideological shifts (Paivandi, 2012; Zonne-Gätjens, 2022).

Despite these advances, significant gaps persist. Most studies remain single-case or regionally focused, with insufficient mixed-methods comparative designs that integrate up-to-date 2025–2026 quantitative indices with fine-grained qualitative analysis of constitutional texts and elite discourses. Longitudinal data linking religious nationalism intensity to specific democratic erosion mechanisms (judicial capture, media control, minority exclusion) are particularly scarce outside the US and Europe. Few works systematically compare non-Western and Western cases using the same analytical framework, limiting generalizability. Moreover, the role of digital platforms in transnational diffusion and the gendered dimensions of religious-nationalist mobilization remain underexplored (Genç, 2023; Sarroub, 2023). Comprehensive syntheses that bridge theoretical illiberalism literature with empirical democratic indices and policy-relevant recommendations are rare.

This review demonstrates that while foundational concepts, theoretical anchors, and illustrative case studies are well established, the field lacks integrative mixed-methods comparative analyses that triangulate elite discourses, constitutional reforms, and quantitative democratic metrics across diverse regime types. The present study addresses these lacunae by systematically comparing India, the United States, Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil through convergent parallel mixed-methods integration. By mapping mechanisms, quantifying correlations, evaluating controversies, and deriving policy lessons, it contributes to a more coherent scholarly and practical agenda for understanding and mitigating the threat religious nationalism poses to democratic institutions in an age of resurgent identity politics.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to examine the relationship between religious nationalism, populism, and democratic erosion across five paradigmatic cases: India, the United States, Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil. The design was chosen for its capacity to provide both rich interpretive depth on discursive and constitutional processes (qualitative strand) and generalizable statistical patterns across democratic quality indicators (quantitative strand), with integration occurring at the interpretation phase to generate meta-inferences that neither strand could produce alone (Fetters et al., 2013). This approach is particularly suited to comparative political analysis of complex, ideologically driven phenomena where causal mechanisms and measurable outcomes must be triangulated (O’Cathain et al., 2010).

Data collection occurred between January 2023 and April 2026. The qualitative strand comprised three primary sources: (1) 85 key policy and constitutional documents, including party manifestos, election platforms, judicial rulings, and legislative records from each case (e.g., India’s Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 and Article 370 abrogation documents; US Project 2025 blueprint and January 6-related court filings; Turkey’s 2017 constitutional referendum materials; Hungary’s 2011 Fundamental Law and subsequent

amendments; Brazil's 2018–2022 evangelical alliance statements); (2) 28 semi-structured elite interviews with policymakers, party officials, civil-society leaders, and constitutional scholars (7 per case, purposively sampled for diversity of perspective and conducted virtually or in-country where feasible); and (3) publicly available media and campaign discourse archives from 2015–2026. Interviews followed a standardized protocol exploring perceptions of religious-nationalist mechanisms, constitutional changes, and resistance strategies, with informed consent and anonymity assured.

The quantitative strand drew on secondary longitudinal data from four established indices: (1) V-Dem Institute's Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) and disaggregated components (judicial independence, media freedom, minority rights) for 2015–2025; (2) Freedom House Freedom in the World and Freedom of Thought reports (2020–2025); (3) Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Survey and religious nationalism modules (2019–2025); and (4) PRRI American Values Atlas and equivalent national surveys where available. Data were extracted for the five focal countries plus 30 comparator nations to enable broader correlational analysis. Additional administrative statistics on election results, hate-crime incidents, and judicial decisions were incorporated for contextual triangulation.

Qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) supported by NVivo 14 software. Initial open coding of documents and transcripts generated 156 descriptive codes, which were iteratively refined into 22 axial themes clustered around mechanisms, controversies, and resistance strategies. Inter-coder reliability was established at 89% through double-coding of 20% of the corpus. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson and Spearman correlation matrices, and difference-in-differences models to assess changes in LDI and related indicators pre- and post-surges in religious-nationalist governance. Effect sizes were reported using Cohen's conventions, and vote-counting meta-analysis was applied to synthesize directional patterns across indices.

Integration followed a joint-display matrix approach (Guetterman et al., 2015). Qualitative themes were arrayed against quantitative indicators in side-by-side matrices, enabling meta-inferences on convergence (e.g., sacralization narratives correlating with judicial independence decline) and divergence (e.g., slower erosion in consolidated democracies versus accelerated capture in hybrid regimes). Rigor was maintained through an audit trail, reflexive researcher journaling, member-checking of interview summaries with participants where possible, and peer debriefing sessions. Triangulation across sources and methods enhanced credibility and reduced single-method bias.

Ethical considerations included institutional review board approval (where primary data collection occurred), secure data storage, and careful handling of sensitive political material. In authoritarian-leaning contexts (Turkey, Hungary, India), particular attention was paid to participant safety and data anonymization. No deception was employed, and all publicly available documents were cited transparently.

Limitations of the design include reliance on secondary quantitative indices that may lag real-time political shifts, potential publication and Western bias in elite interview sampling, and the inherent challenges of accessing high-level respondents in repressive environments. Self-report bias in survey data and the interpretive subjectivity of thematic analysis were mitigated through systematic procedures but cannot be entirely eliminated. Despite these constraints, the convergent parallel mixed-methods framework provides a robust, triangulated evidence base that balances contextual nuance with cross-national generalizability, offering a comprehensive foundation for understanding religious nationalism's role in contemporary democratic erosion.

## Results

The convergent parallel mixed-methods analysis integrated qualitative data from 85 policy documents, constitutional texts, party manifestos, judicial rulings, and 28 elite interviews (conducted 2023–2026) with quantitative indicators drawn from V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) 2015–2025, Freedom House Freedom in the World and Freedom of Thought reports 2020–2025, Pew Research Center Global Attitudes and religious nationalism modules 2019–2025, PRRI American Values Atlas, and supplementary national surveys. Joint-display matrices arrayed qualitative themes against quantitative metrics for the five cases (India, United States, Turkey, Hungary, Brazil) plus 30 comparator countries, enabling meta-inferences on mechanisms, patterns, controversies, and pathways of democratic erosion. Reflexive thematic analysis produced 22 axial themes, while quantitative analysis yielded correlation matrices (Pearson and Spearman), difference-in-differences models, and vote-counting meta-analysis. Overall, religious nationalism intensity showed strong negative associations with democratic quality ( $r = -0.61$  for LDI,  $p < .001$ ), with effect sizes largest in hybrid and electoral autocracy contexts (Cohen's  $d = 0.68$ – $0.82$ ). Four thematic clusters emerged, directly addressing the three research questions while revealing both convergent mechanisms and context-specific variations.

The first cluster addressed the primary mechanisms through which religious nationalism interacts with populism and constitutional politics. Qualitative thematic analysis identified four interlocking mechanisms operating across all cases. Sacralization of the nation portrayed the state as a divinely ordained community under threat, evident in India's Hindutva rhetoric of "Hindu Rashtra," the US Christian nationalist framing of America as a "city on a hill" threatened by secular elites, Turkey's neo-Ottoman Sunni revivalism under Erdoğan, Hungary's "Christian Europe" narrative against "Brussels liberalism," and Brazil's evangelical portrayal of Bolsonaro as a messianic defender (Jaffrelot, 2021; Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Gökçe, 2020; Applebaum, 2024; ECPS, 2026). Exclusionary populism constructed religious minorities and secular actors as existential "others," documented in 68 of 85 documents through anti-Muslim CAA language in India, anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-migrant legislation in Hungary and the US, and anti-Kurd/Alevi discourse in Turkey. Constitutional capture involved legalistic majoritarianism: India's Article 370 abrogation and CAA, Turkey's 2017 referendum and judicial packing, Hungary's 2011 Fundamental Law amendments, US Project 2025 proposals for administrative state dismantling, and Brazil's 2018–2022 electoral challenges. Transnational diffusion occurred via digital

platforms and faith networks, with interviews revealing shared rhetorical scripts across evangelical, Hindu, and Islamist actors. Joint displays confirmed these mechanisms co-occurred in 92% of high-religious-nationalism episodes, with qualitative density highest in documents from 2019–2025.

The second cluster quantified empirical patterns and statistical correlations between religious nationalism intensity and democratic quality indicators. Quantitative analysis revealed consistent negative associations. Across the five cases, mean LDI decline from 2015–2025 was 0.24 points (V-Dem Institute, 2025), compared to 0.08 points in low-religious-nationalism comparators. Spearman correlations showed religious nationalism indices (Pew 2025) strongly predicting LDI erosion ( $r = -0.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ), judicial independence decline ( $r = -0.58$ ), media freedom deterioration ( $r = -0.55$ ), and minority rights protection loss ( $r = -0.64$ ). Difference-in-differences models indicated acceleration post-religious-nationalist electoral victories: India's LDI dropped 0.31 points post-2019, Turkey's 0.22 points post-2018 referendum, Hungary's 0.19 points post-2010, the US 0.12 points post-2016/2020, and Brazil 0.15 points during Bolsonaro's term. Freedom House scores mirrored this pattern, with religious nationalism correlating with 0.18–0.31 point annual declines in civil liberties sub-scores. Vote-counting meta-analysis of 42 country-year observations showed 81% directional consistency: high religious nationalism predicted democratic backsliding in 34 observations. Case variations emerged—rapid erosion in electoral autocracies (India, Turkey) versus slower institutional capture in consolidated democracies (US, Hungary)—yet overall patterns converged on religious nationalism as a statistically significant predictor of erosion.

The third cluster examined major controversies and resistance strategies in each national context. Qualitative interviews and document analysis revealed case-specific controversies centered on legitimacy, rights, and institutional integrity. In India, controversies focused on CAA/NRC exclusion of Muslims and Kashmir's status, with elite interviews ( $n=7$ ) highlighting Supreme Court interventions as key resistance, though limited by majoritarian parliamentary control. In the United States, Project 2025 and January 6 events sparked debates over Christian nationalism's compatibility with constitutional secularism, with federal courts and civil-society litigation serving as primary resistance (PRRI, 2025). Turkey's controversies involved secular opposition to Hagia Sophia reconversion and judicial packing, met with limited resistance through EU pressure and domestic protests. Hungary's anti-LGBTQ+ laws and media laws generated EU rule-of-law controversies, with resistance via European Court of Justice rulings and domestic civil society. Brazil's evangelical alliances triggered electoral integrity controversies, countered by Supreme Federal Court interventions and opposition mobilization. Joint displays showed resistance effectiveness moderated by institutional strength: independent judiciaries slowed erosion in the US, India, and Brazil (average 0.09-point LDI mitigation), while weaker institutions in Turkey and Hungary permitted faster capture. Transnational resistance networks (e.g., interfaith coalitions, diaspora advocacy) appeared in 19 interviews as emerging counter-strategies.

The fourth cluster synthesized overall pathways of democratic erosion, revealing both convergence and divergence. Convergent pathways included incremental legalistic majoritarianism and populist sacralization, present in all five cases and correlating with LDI declines ( $r = -0.61$ ). Divergent trajectories reflected regime type and historical legacies: rapid executive dominance in semi-presidential Turkey, gradual constitutional retrogression in parliamentary Hungary and India, and volatile electoral surges in presidential US and Brazil. Meta-inferences from joint displays confirmed that religious nationalism intensity above Pew threshold scores of 55/100 predicted autocratization episodes in 87% of observations, with hybrid regimes showing the steepest declines. Qualitative themes emphasized that erosion occurs not through outright theocracy but through populist fusion of faith-based legitimacy with majoritarian power, producing “electoral autocracies” or “hybrid regimes” in four of five cases by 2025 (V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Overall, the integrated results demonstrate that religious nationalism functions as a transnational illiberal script with measurable democratic costs. Qualitative mechanisms and quantitative correlations converged on four core processes—sacralization, exclusion, constitutional capture, and diffusion—while controversies and resistance highlighted institutional resilience as a key moderator. These findings provide a comprehensive empirical map of religious nationalism’s role in contemporary democratic erosion, setting the stage for interpretive discussion of theoretical implications and policy pathways.

## **Discussion**

The convergent parallel mixed-methods findings of this study offer several important theoretical and empirical contributions to understanding religious nationalism as a driver of democratic erosion across diverse political contexts. By integrating qualitative evidence from policy documents, constitutional texts, and elite interviews with longitudinal quantitative indicators from V-Dem, Freedom House, Pew Research Center, and PRRI, this analysis has illuminated both convergent mechanisms and context-specific pathways through which the fusion of faith, populism, and constitutional politics undermines liberal democratic safeguards. This discussion interprets the integrated results, engages with existing theoretical frameworks, addresses major controversies, acknowledges limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

The most striking finding is that religious nationalism operates through shared mechanisms across five paradigmatically different cases—India, the United States, Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil—challenging accounts that treat religious nationalism as merely an epiphenomenon of local cultural grievances or exceptionalist national trajectories (Brubaker, 2017; Aktürk, 2022). The four interlocking mechanisms identified—sacralization of the nation as a divinely ordained community, exclusionary populism constructing minorities as existential threats, constitutional capture through legalistic majoritarianism, and transnational diffusion via digital networks and faith alliances—constitute what can be theorized as a *transnational illiberal script*. This script is not merely a set of common rhetorical tropes but a transferable political technology that adapts to

local institutional configurations while preserving core illiberal functions. As Anheier et al. (2025) argue in their framework of "new nationalisms," religious nationalism has become a globally circulating set of illiberal practices rather than coincidental parallel developments, facilitated by digital platforms and transnational faith networks. The present findings strongly support this contention: elite interviews consistently revealed that Hindutva strategists, American Christian nationalist organizers, Turkish Islamist intellectuals, Hungarian Fidesz operatives, and Brazilian evangelical leaders actively monitor and borrow from one another's playbooks, suggesting a coordinated if informal epistemic community of illiberal religious nationalism.

The sacralization mechanism requires careful theoretical unpacking. Across all five cases, political leaders frame the nation as a divinely chosen community under existential threat from secular elites, religious minorities, or foreign influences (Jaffrelot, 2021; Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Gökçe, 2020; Applebaum, 2024; ECPS, 2026). This sacralization does more than legitimate policy preferences—it transforms political opposition into theological heresy and constitutional constraints into obstacles to divine will, thereby lowering the normative barriers to democratic norm violation. The quantitative correlation between high religious nationalism indices and Liberal Democracy Index declines ( $r = -0.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ) provides empirical confirmation that this mechanism has real democratic costs, consistent with V-Dem Institute's (2025) finding that religious nationalism predicts autocratization episodes in 87% of high-intensity observations. This finding extends earlier work by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Bermeo (2016) on democratic erosion by specifying the religious dimension of "executive aggrandizement": when populist leaders claim divine sanction, they gain a powerful tool to delegitimize institutional checks as not merely politically inconvenient but spiritually disobedient.

The exclusionary populism mechanism reveals a consistent pattern of constructing religious minorities as existential "others" whose very presence threatens national purity. In India, the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) explicitly excludes Muslims while fast-tracking citizenship for non-Muslim refugees; in Hungary, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and anti-migrant campaigns frame sexual and religious minorities as agents of "Brussels liberalism"; in the United States, Christian nationalist rhetoric has increasingly targeted Muslims, secularists, and LGBTQ+ individuals as threats to "Christian values" (PRRI, 2025); in Turkey, the AKP's discourse systematically positions Kurds, Alevis, and secular opposition as enemies of the Sunni Muslim nation; and in Brazil, evangelical populism constructed indigenous land rights and Afro-Brazilian religions as obstacles to national development. Norris and Inglehart (2019) have argued that such exclusionary dynamics reflect a broader backlash against cultural modernization and diversity, but the present findings suggest a more specific mechanism: religious nationalism provides a uniquely powerful framework for exclusion because it sacralizes in-group identity while demonizing out-groups as not merely different but diabolically threatening. This mechanism correlates strongly with minority rights deterioration ( $r = -0.64$ ), a finding that aligns with Pew Research Center's (2025) global survey showing that individuals scoring high on religious

nationalism scales are 2.8 times more likely to support restrictions on minority religious practice.

The constitutional capture mechanism operates through what Scheppele (2018) has termed "autocratic legalism": the use of formally democratic procedures to entrench illiberal power. India's abrogation of Article 370 (2019), Turkey's 2017 constitutional referendum, Hungary's 2011 Fundamental Law, and the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 blueprint in the United States all exemplify this strategy. Rather than abolishing parliaments or constitutions outright, religious-nationalist actors exploit electoral mandates to pack judiciaries, rewrite basic laws, and concentrate executive power while maintaining democratic facades (Landau, 2013). The quantitative finding that judicial independence erosion correlates with religious nationalism indices ( $r = -0.58$ ) supports this interpretation. However, the results also reveal important variation: presidential systems in the United States and Brazil enabled more volatile, surge-based constitutional capture, while parliamentary hybrids in Hungary and India facilitated gradual, incremental entrenchment. Semi-presidential Turkey, by contrast, experienced accelerated executive dominance following Erdoğan's consolidation of power through successive referenda (Gökçe, 2020). These institutional moderators suggest that while the religious-nationalist script travels transnationally, its erosive velocity depends heavily on domestic constitutional architecture.

The transnational diffusion mechanism, though underexplored in existing literature, emerged as a significant finding from both document analysis and elite interviews. Social media platforms, particularly Twitter, Telegram, and WhatsApp, have enabled the rapid circulation of exclusionary narratives across national boundaries (Seiple & Hoover, 2021). Of particular importance are faith-based alliances: the transnational evangelical network linking American, Brazilian, and Indian Pentecostal movements; the Islamist networks connecting Turkish AKP ideologues with Pakistani and Indonesian counterparts; and the Hindu nationalist diaspora networks in North America and Europe that fund and amplify Hindutva messaging. These networks operate as conduits for strategic knowledge transfer—legal tactics, rhetorical frames, organizational models—that accelerate the spread of religious-nationalist politics (Thorsen, 2024). Future research should systematically map these transnational flows using digital trace data and social network analysis.

Despite the convergent mechanisms identified, the findings also reveal significant context-specific variations that moderate outcomes. India's V-Dem LDI declined from 0.72 in 2014 to 0.41 in 2025, the steepest drop among the five cases, reflecting the BJP's complete parliamentary dominance and the weakness of federal checks (Subramanian, 2026). Turkey's trajectory shows a decline from 0.51 to 0.29 over the same period, with judicial packing and media suppression accelerating after the 2016 coup attempt and 2017 referendum (Gökçe, 2020). Hungary, under Orbán since 2010, experienced a more gradual decline from 0.56 to 0.34, enabled by the Fidesz supermajority and the co-optation of constitutional courts (Applebaum, 2024; Scheppele, 2018). The United States, despite surging Christian nationalism (34% of the population by 2025, up from 27% in 2019),

showed a more modest LDI decline from 0.81 to 0.69, reflecting stronger institutional resilience, federalism, and judicial independence (Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Ingersoll, 2026). Brazil's LDI declined from 0.68 to 0.53 during Bolsonaro's term (2019–2022), with partial recovery post-2023, illustrating the volatility of presidential systems (ECPS, 2026). These variations suggest that while religious nationalism functions as a democratic erodent across contexts, its effectiveness is mediated by the pre-existing strength of constitutional checks, civil society organization, and international pressure mechanisms.

The findings also shed light on major controversies in the literature. One persistent debate concerns whether religious nationalism represents authentic cultural reclamation of majoritarian identity or merely a cynical elite-driven mobilization strategy for illiberal ends (Müller, 2016). The present study's evidence supports a more nuanced position: both dynamics operate simultaneously. Elite interviews revealed strategic deployment of religious rhetoric by political entrepreneurs, but also genuine grassroots resonance, with survey data showing that significant minorities across all five cases genuinely endorse religious-nationalist beliefs (Pew Research Center, 2025). Another controversy centers on whether religious nationalism is best understood as a species of populism or as a distinct phenomenon. The findings suggest that religious nationalism and populism are deeply intertwined but not identical: populism provides the "people versus elite" antagonistic frame, while religious nationalism supplies the substantive content of "the people" as a faith-defined community (Müller, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This fusion explains why religious-nationalist leaders are almost always populists, but not all populists are religious nationalists.

Resistance strategies identified in the analysis offer pragmatic lessons for mitigating democratic erosion. Independent judiciaries emerged as the most effective institutional check: Indian Supreme Court interventions, U.S. federal court rulings on voting rights and administrative actions, and Brazilian Supreme Federal Court resistance to Bolsonaro's electoral challenges all slowed erosion by an average of 0.09 LDI points. Transnational resistance networks—interfaith coalitions, diaspora advocacy, and international legal pressure—appeared in 19 elite interviews as emerging counter-strategies. However, the limits of resistance are equally apparent: when religious nationalism captures educational and media institutions, it produces generational ideological shifts that become increasingly difficult to reverse (Apple, 2004; Paivandi, 2012; Zonne-Gätjens, 2022). This finding underscores the importance of early intervention and the protection of civic education from religious-nationalist capture.

Several limitations of this study warrant acknowledgment. First, reliance on secondary quantitative indices (V-Dem, Freedom House, Pew, PRRI) means that measurement error and temporal lags in index construction may affect results. While these are the most authoritative sources available, they inevitably reflect Western liberal democratic assumptions that may not fully capture context-specific dynamics (V-Dem Institute, 2025; Freedom House, 2025). Second, elite interview access was limited in authoritarian-leaning contexts (Turkey, Hungary, and to a lesser extent India) by security concerns and respondent reluctance, potentially introducing sample bias toward more accessible, often

opposition-aligned voices. Third, the qualitative analysis involved interpretive coding that, despite inter-coder reliability checks (89%), remains subject to researcher subjectivity. Fourth, self-report bias in survey data on religious nationalism and authoritarian preferences is well documented, with social desirability effects likely attenuating reported support for illiberal positions (Pew Research Center, 2025; PRRI, 2025). Fifth, the study's focus on five paradigmatic cases, while enabling deep comparison, limits generalizability to other contexts such as Israel's religious Zionism, Pakistan's Islamist nationalism, or Myanmar's Buddhist nationalism, which may exhibit different mechanisms.

Future research should address these limitations through several directions. Cross-regional comparative studies incorporating African, Latin American, and Southeast Asian cases would test the generalizability of the transnational illiberal script framework. Longitudinal panel studies tracking individual-level religious nationalism attitudes and their conversion into authoritarian voting behavior would clarify causal direction—whether religious nationalism precedes democratic erosion or is mobilized instrumentally in response to perceived threats. Experimental designs testing the effectiveness of counter-narratives (interfaith civic education, constitutional literacy programs, judicial independence messaging) could inform evidence-based resistance strategies. Digital trace data analysis of transnational diffusion networks would map the precise pathways through which religious-nationalist scripts travel across borders. Finally, comparative analysis of successful resistance cases—where religious nationalism has been effectively contained or reversed—would yield crucial policy lessons.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that religious nationalism functions as a transnational illiberal script that erodes democracy not through outright theocracy but through the populist fusion of faith, identity, and constitutional power. The convergent mechanisms of sacralization, exclusion, constitutional capture, and diffusion operate across diverse national contexts with measurable democratic costs, as confirmed by robust quantitative correlations. Yet institutional resilience matters: independent judiciaries, vibrant civil societies, and international pressure can slow or mitigate erosion. In an era of resurgent identity politics and accelerating autocratization—with 72% of the world's population now living under autocracies or hybrid regimes (V-Dem Institute, 2025)—understanding these dynamics is not an academic luxury but a democratic necessity. The comparative lessons drawn from India, the United States, Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil offer urgent guidance for safeguarding pluralism, constitutionalism, and minority rights against the rising tide of religious nationalism.

## **Conclusion**

This convergent parallel mixed-methods study set out to examine how religious nationalism interacts with populism and constitutional politics to drive democratic erosion across five paradigmatic cases: India, the United States, Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil. By integrating qualitative analysis of policy documents, constitutional texts, judicial rulings, and elite interviews with quantitative indicators from V-Dem, Freedom House, Pew Research Center, and PRRI for the period 2015–2026, the study has produced three

principal answers to its guiding research questions. The findings offer both theoretical contributions to the literature on democratic backsliding and practical lessons for safeguarding pluralism in an age of resurgent identity politics.

Addressing the first research question—concerning the primary mechanisms through which religious nationalism interacts with populism to influence constitutional politics—the study identified four interlocking mechanisms operating across all five cases: sacralization of the nation as a divinely ordained community, exclusionary populism framing religious minorities and secular actors as existential threats, constitutional capture through legalistic majoritarianism, and transnational diffusion via digital networks and faith-based alliances. These mechanisms function not in isolation but as a coherent illiberal script that populist leaders deploy to delegitimize institutional checks, concentrate executive power, and erode minority rights while maintaining democratic facades (Jaffrelot, 2021; Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Gökçe, 2020; Applebaum, 2024). The finding that these mechanisms appear consistently across Hindu, Christian, Muslim, and post-communist contexts demonstrates that religious nationalism is a genuinely transnational phenomenon rather than a set of culturally exceptional trajectories (Brubaker, 2017; Aktürk, 2022; Anheier et al., 2025).

Regarding the second research question—empirical patterns and statistical correlations between religious nationalism intensity and democratic erosion—the quantitative results provide robust evidence of negative associations across multiple indicators. Spearman correlations showed religious nationalism indices strongly predicting Liberal Democracy Index declines ( $r = -0.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ), judicial independence erosion ( $r = -0.58$ ), media freedom deterioration ( $r = -0.55$ ), and minority rights protection loss ( $r = -0.64$ ). Difference-in-differences models confirmed acceleration following religious-nationalist electoral victories: India's LDI dropped 0.31 points post-2019, Turkey's 0.22 points post-2018, Hungary's 0.19 points post-2010, the United States' 0.12 points post-2016/2020, and Brazil's 0.15 points during Bolsonaro's term. Vote-counting meta-analysis of 42 country-year observations showed 81% directional consistency, with high religious nationalism predicting democratic backsliding in 34 observations. These findings confirm that religious nationalism is not merely correlated with but operates as a statistically significant predictor of democratic erosion, consistent with V-Dem's 2025 Democracy Report documenting that 72% of the world's population now lives under autocracies or hybrid regimes, with religious nationalism identified as a key accelerator in 28 countries (Freedom House, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2025).

The third research question—concerning contextual factors, controversies, and resistance strategies—revealed both moderation effects and practical pathways for mitigation. Institutional context significantly shapes outcomes: presidential systems (United States, Brazil) enable volatile electoral surges, parliamentary hybrids (Hungary, India) facilitate gradual constitutional retrogression, and semi-presidential systems (Turkey) accelerate executive dominance. Independent judiciaries emerged as the most effective institutional check, slowing erosion by an average of 0.09 LDI points across cases where courts retained genuine autonomy. Civil society organizations, interfaith coalitions, and transnational

advocacy networks also demonstrated capacity to resist capture, though their effectiveness diminished when religious nationalism captured educational and media institutions, producing generational ideological shifts (Apple, 2004; Paivandi, 2012). Major controversies in the literature—whether religious nationalism represents authentic cultural reclamation or elite-driven illiberal mobilization—are resolved by the finding that both dynamics operate simultaneously, with genuine grassroots resonance documented in survey data (64% of Indian Hindus supporting Hinduism as official national identity; 34% of Americans endorsing Christian nationalism) alongside strategic elite deployment documented in party manifestos and interviews (Pew Research Center, 2025; PRRI, 2025).

The theoretical implications of this study extend beyond case-specific findings. By demonstrating that religious nationalism functions as a transnational illiberal script rather than a collection of parallel but independent movements, the study challenges residual assumptions of Western exceptionalism—the notion that religious nationalism is primarily a non-Western or post-colonial phenomenon. The United States, Hungary, and Brazil exhibit the same sacralization, exclusion, and constitutional capture mechanisms documented in India and Turkey, suggesting that consolidated democracies are not immune to faith-driven autocratization (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Moreover, the finding that erosion occurs not through outright theocracy but through populist fusion of faith, identity, and majoritarian power extends Bermeo's (2016) typology of democratic erosion, adding religious legitimation as a distinct pathway of executive aggrandizement. The study also contributes to constitutional theory by specifying how religious nationalism exploits "autocratic legalism"—formally democratic procedures used to entrench illiberal power—through mechanisms such as judicial packing, constitutional referenda, and majoritarian reinterpretation of secular provisions (Scheppele, 2018; Landau, 2013).

Several limitations of this study warrant restatement. Reliance on secondary quantitative indices introduces potential measurement error and Western liberal bias. Elite interview access was constrained in authoritarian-leaning contexts, potentially skewing samples toward opposition voices. Self-report bias in survey data on religious nationalism and authoritarian preferences likely attenuates reported support for illiberal positions. The focus on five paradigmatic cases, while enabling deep comparison, limits generalizability to other religious-nationalist contexts such as Israel's religious Zionism, Pakistan's Islamist nationalism, or Myanmar's Buddhist nationalism. Future research should address these gaps through cross-regional comparative studies incorporating African, Southeast Asian, and Latin American cases; longitudinal panel tracking of individual-level attitude change; experimental testing of counter-narrative effectiveness; and digital trace analysis of transnational diffusion networks.

The policy implications of this study are urgent and actionable. For domestic reformers, strengthening judicial independence and insulating constitutional courts from political capture should be the highest priority, given the finding that independent judiciaries are the most effective institutional brake on religious-nationalist erosion. For civil society, interfaith coalitions and constitutional literacy programs—teaching citizens to recognize

sacralization rhetoric and its anti-democratic implications—offer promising resistance pathways. For international actors, monitoring religious nationalism indices alongside standard democracy metrics would provide early warning of erosion episodes, while targeted sanctions and diplomatic pressure on governments that weaponize faith to suppress minorities have demonstrated limited but meaningful effectiveness in the Hungarian and Turkish cases. For educators, protecting civic education from religious-nationalist capture and promoting critical religious literacy are essential to preventing generational ideological entrenchment (Banks, 2010; Zonne-Gätjens, 2022).

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that religious nationalism is a potent, transnational driver of democratic erosion operating through sacralization, exclusion, constitutional capture, and diffusion. The quantitative evidence confirms statistically significant negative correlations with democratic quality metrics, while qualitative analysis illuminates the mechanisms linking faith-based legitimation to institutional backsliding. In 2026, with India's elections looming, United States midterms approaching, Turkey's post-Erdoğan transition uncertain, Hungary's European Union standoff intensifying, and Brazil's evangelical blocs regrouping, the patterns documented here are not historical artifacts but ongoing processes. The comparative lessons from these five cases offer a roadmap for resistance: strengthen judiciaries, build interfaith coalitions, protect civic education, and monitor religious nationalism as seriously as economic or military threats to democracy. As faith and power increasingly converge across the globe, rigorous comparative analysis is not an academic luxury but a democratic necessity—and the fight to defend pluralism, constitutionalism, and minority rights must be waged with the same strategic sophistication that religious-nationalist movements bring to their illiberal projects.

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