# Leicester’s cultural mosaic faces rising tensions amid historic rivalries



His kofia—the traditional flat cylindrical hat beloved by Somali Muslims—gleams brilliantly in the sunlight as Ahmed picks me up at the station, a flowing kameez tunic hugging his stature. “Welcome to Leicester, sharif!” he exclaims with a warm grin, setting the tone for my exploration of this vibrant city that wears its complexities on its sleeve.

Leicester, once the prosperous heart of the East Midlands known for its cathedral, markets, and glove factories, is evolving rapidly into a demographic mosaic that reflects shifting cultural narratives. Today, it stands as one of the first UK cities with a majority non-white population, alongside Birmingham. Yet, this evolving identity is entwined with deep-seated divisions, as rivalries among the large Muslim and Hindu communities have begun to exacerbate tensions reminiscent of historical conflicts from abroad—particularly those rooted in India and Pakistan.

Statistics drawn from the 2021 Census reveal that 23.5 per cent of Leicester's population identify as Muslim. While the city has long been a focal point for various Asian communities, its demographic landscape began to shift significantly in the 1990s when Somali migrants first arrived due to civil unrest in their homeland. Today, an estimated population of 15,000 Somalis inhabits a neighbourhood colloquially known as ‘Mashtown’, which Ahmed introduces me to at Island Dishes, a local eatery. Yet, the rich cultural tapestry belies an underlying discord, as illustrated by the rampant crime and hardship reported in areas like St Matthews, which has, at points, recorded the highest rates of deprivation in England.

Leicester encapsulates broader concerns regarding community cohesion in modern Britain. Recent unrest rooted in escalating tensions between Hindu and Muslim groups, particularly around the divisive subject of Kashmir, erupted in 2022 following an India-Pakistan cricket match. Violent clashes saw streets beset with protests fuelled by social media narratives that failed to portray the situation's complexities. The violence and subsequent investigations revealed not merely a localised disturbance but a symptom of an increasingly fraught multicultural society, where resentments cultivated abroad find a parallel expression in British streets.

Ahmed and I conclude our meal, joining his sons for a visit to the City Retreat, a masjid that embodies the burgeoning spiritual and communal life of Leicester's Muslims. Imam Shafi Chowdhury is an inspiring figure, advocating for understanding and patience amid discord. “When a fool speaks, don’t be concerned with how to respond to him,” he preaches, imparting wisdom that resonates within the gathering. It reflects the deep ties of community and faith that persist, even in the face of external pressures threatening to divide. Yet, such unity is increasingly countered by festering extremism and a permissive social atmosphere that allows extremist ideologies to flourish unchallenged.

Community leaders assert that segregation within and between ethnic groups is not merely a matter of individual choice but rather a systemic issue exacerbated by economic deprivation and a withdrawal of support services. The withdrawal from government-backed integration measures has left communities to fend for themselves, often retreating into echo chambers where cultural understandings and interpretations of identity become entangled. Arabic-script signs dominate some neighborhoods, and in parts of North Evington, the reality is stark: around 43 per cent of adults speak little to no English, highlighting a significant barrier to cohesion.

Rabbi Sam Lebens, who grew up in Leicester, reflects on this transition of the city’s multiculturalism. He notes that past interactions between communities have given way to a palpable climate of antisemitism and division among younger generations, often fuelled by geopolitical tensions transposed from their countries of origin. Such sentiments have not only shaped individual perceptions but have penetrated into political landscapes, with voting patterns increasingly reflecting these dichotomies. For instance, the election of independent candidate Shockat Adam, who focused on Gaza, suggested a fracture within the traditional Labour stronghold, largely attributed to local sentiments among Muslim voters.

As Leicester grapples with these multifaceted challenges, Ahmed's insights provide a glimmer of hope amid the strife. “I believe there can be a way forward for British Islam,” he asserts. “It’s about retaining who we are and embracing our identities as we strive for coexistence.” Yet, for this vision to materialise fully, there must be zero tolerance for the currents of extremism and intolerance that threaten to undermine a society founded on shared values.

As we walk through Leicester's streets, the contradictions of this city become evident: a place where vibrant cultures intertwine yet remain stubbornly apart. The path to unity may be fraught with obstacles, yet as Leicester’s diverse tapestry unfolds, it’s clear that progress requires acknowledging both its beauties and its fractures—a reflection of a country in the midst of redefining itself.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9
2. Paragraphs 4, 7, 10
3. Paragraphs 4, 10
4. Paragraphs 4, 10
5. Paragraphs 4, 10
6. Paragraph 10
7. Paragraphs 4, 10

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14696263/Inside-Britains-segregated-city-Areas-nearly-half-adults-speak-English-restaurants-women-eating-curtains-deprived-streets-imported-religious-warfare-threatens-break-DAVID-PATRIKARAKOS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/feb/08/unrest-leicester-muslim-hindu-revealed-britain-modi-india-2022> - This article examines the 2022 unrest in Leicester, highlighting the underlying tensions between the city's Muslim and Hindu communities. It discusses how the violence exposed deeper issues within British society and the influence of Hindu nationalism from India, particularly under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The piece also reflects on the broader implications for multiculturalism in the UK and the challenges posed by rising nationalism.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Leicester_unrest> - The Wikipedia page provides a comprehensive overview of the 2022 Leicester unrest, detailing the events that unfolded between August and September 2022. It covers the causes, including the India-Pakistan Asia Cup cricket match, the escalation of tensions, and the subsequent clashes between Hindu and Muslim communities. The page also discusses the aftermath, including arrests, investigations, and the broader social implications of the unrest.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/23/how-communal-unrest-flared-leicester-muslim-hindu-tensions> - This article delves into the escalation of communal tensions in Leicester, focusing on the incidents that led to the unrest. It highlights the role of social media in spreading misinformation and the perceived failure of local authorities to address the growing discord. The piece features insights from community leaders and residents, shedding light on the factors contributing to the violence and the challenges in restoring peace.
* <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leicestershire-63038691> - The BBC report provides an official perspective on the Leicester unrest, emphasizing that the disorder was not exclusively between Hindus and Muslims. It quotes the city's head of police, Rob Nixon, who cautions against oversimplifying the situation and highlights the complexity of the events. The article also touches upon the broader implications for community relations and the efforts to address the unrest.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/19/mayor-blames-leicester-hindu-muslim-unrest-on-social-media-disinformation> - In this piece, Leicester's mayor, Peter Soulsby, attributes the recent unrest to the spread of disinformation on social media. He points out that false narratives and distorted facts have exacerbated tensions between the city's communities. The article also discusses the challenges posed by misinformation and the efforts to counteract its effects on community relations.
* <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/fact-finding-report-on-leicester-clashes-warns-of-ethnic-enclaves-in-uk-8517398/> - This report presents findings from a fact-finding mission on the Leicester clashes, highlighting the existence of ethnic enclaves in the city. It discusses how these segregated communities have contributed to territorial tensions and localized majoritarianism. The report also emphasizes the role of social media in spreading false narratives that have intensified the unrest.