

India prepares another anti-democratic election in Kashmir

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India formally announced last week that elections for the state of Jammu and Kashmir will be held in stages during September and early October. While the state and national governments are attempting to present the poll as an exercise in democracy, the process simply highlights the repressive nature of Indian rule of the Muslim-majority state where at least 35,000 people have died in a decade-long insurgency.

The elections will be held as more than one million heavily-armed Indian and Pakistani troops continue to confront each other across the border. Many of the Indian troops are stationed in Jammu and Kashmir along the Line of Control separating the Pakistani- and Indian-held areas of Kashmir—one of the most heavily militarised areas in the world. Tens of thousands of people have fled these areas over the past seven months amid fears that the military buildup following an attack on the Indian parliament in December would escalate to war.

The elections will be conducted under a massive military and police presence. The state government has called up an additional 35,000 paramilitary troops to bolster the security forces, which have a long record of abusing democratic rights. The ruling National Conference is notorious for rigging elections and has already used the police and paramilitary forces against its political opponents.

The three main leaders of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC)—a loose alliance of 23 parties that support either Kashmir's independence or incorporation into Pakistan—are already under arrest. Despite the fact that the APHC is a legal body, the state government is insisting on their continued detention, alleging that they would "disrupt" the election if released.

The Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) -led government in New Delhi supports the detentions. India's junior home minister, I.D. Swami, commented approvingly on July 20: "It is the state government that is detaining them. The state government is not concerned about whether they will contest or not. But yes, they do feel their being on bail or free would certainly hamper the peaceful election process."

One of the three, Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front leader Yasin Malik, was arrested under India's draconian new Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) on March 23 and then rearrested on July 20 under the Public Safety Act, just as he was released on bail by a special court. As of July 11, 113 people had been detained in Jammu and Kashmir under the POTA legislation, which provides

wide powers of detention without trial for anyone deemed to have any connection to alleged terrorist organisations.

On July 20, police arrested nearly 150 people including another APHC leader Javid Mir, in response to a demonstration organised by the alliance against the July 13 killing of Hindu migrant workers in Jammu. Police used tear gas and batons to break up the protest, injuring about 15 demonstrators. Another two senior APHC leaders were placed under house arrest.

A correspondent for the *Boston Globe* commented on the mood in Kashmir last week: "Residents in Srinagar, the summer capital of India's only Muslim majority state, were pessimistic that the vote would improve their lot. Previous elections have been marred by intimidation and vote-rigging."

Sayeeda Mallik, a student of political science at Kashmir University, told the newspaper that she believed that the elections would be a farce that would perpetuate the corrupt regime of the National Conference party. "My family and I have decided not to vote because these elections are not really going to be free or fair. Everybody knows what the result will be."

The APHC has already announced that it will boycott the election. "Elections provide no answer to the people's question," APHC chairman Abdul Ghani Bhat declared last week. "We seek a permanent settlement of this dispute in the interest of the people of the entire South Asian region... that can only be solved through negotiations." The APHC has repeatedly called for the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions calling for a plebiscite to decide the status of disputed Kashmir.

Armed Islamic extremist militia have vowed to disrupt the elections. According to police, these groups have been responsible for killing nine National Conference members over the past week.

In the last state elections in 1996, all the prominent local parties except the National Conference boycotted the poll and voter turnout was between 15 and 20 percent. The APHC also called for a boycott of the national elections held in 1999. The official turnout was just 32 percent, even though security forces were openly involved in driving people to the polls and there were widespread allegations of vote rigging.

The *Indian Express* commented at the time: "Concerted efforts by personnel of the BSF, CRPF, Rashtriya Rifles and the Special Operations Group (Indian forces) to 'enforce' a good voter turnout across the Kangan-Ganderbal-Downtown Srinagar have been paid with only marginal returns. At the end of the day, the turnout was below 25 percent."

“Even this is suspect since the *Indian Express* was numerous instances of Kashmiri voters prodded to the ballot box by AK rifle-wielding jawans [Indian soldiers]. In the evening, these ‘voters’ would be made to show their [marked] fingers to the security forces as testimony of having renewed their membership of democracy. They call it the ‘nail parade’.”

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee hinted in June that his government may impose presidential, that is direct, rule over the state in the name of holding “free and fair elections”. Vajpayee is no more interested in democratic elections in Jammu and Kashmir than the National Conference. Such a move, which now appears to have been put on hold, would be used to justify even tougher security measures during the poll and to enhance the chances of Vajpayee’s Hindu chauvinist BJP at the expense of its ally, the National Conference which has a base among Kashmir’s Muslim voters. The BJP is planning to contest all 46 assembly seats in Kashmir and 37 seats in Jammu bringing it into direct electoral conflict with the National Conference.

The National Conference, which calls for “greater autonomy” for Jammu and Kashmir as a means of shoring up its own waning support, vehemently opposed direct rule. But while Vajpayee needs to keep the National Conference on side to maintain his parliamentary majority in New Delhi, he is also under pressure from Hindu extremists allied to his BJP who are opposed to any special position for Kashmir.

The Hindu chauvinist Rastriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS) has proposed a multi-party front to contest the state elections on the basis of the “trifurcation” of Jammu and Kashmir—that is, a communal carve-up of the state into Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist areas, a proposal which would provoke further violence. Vajpayee and other BJP leaders have been longstanding RSS members. Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, known for his Hindu extremism, ruled out support for “trifurcation,” at present, saying it would only strengthen Pakistan’s claim to the Muslim portion of the state.

Vajpayee has attempted to balance between his coalition allies and the demands of the BJP’s Hindu chauvinist constituency. During a visit to the state, the prime minister outlined a limited package of economic measures and hinted that he might consider “autonomy” for Kashmir but nothing has eventuated. The government also formed a committee to hold talks with the APHC in order to encourage them to participate in the elections and thus provide some credibility to the poll but to no avail.

The Bush administration, which has been developing close relations with the Vajpayee government, has intervened directly into the Kashmir poll as part of a broader push for a greater US role on the Indian subcontinent.

During a visit to New Delhi on July 28, US Secretary of State Colin Powell offered to send international observers to oversee voting in the state. “Elections can be a first step in a broader process that begins to address Kashmir grievances and leads India and Pakistan back to dialogue,” he said. Powell also called for the release of political prisoners in Kashmir, saying: “Moderate elements should be encouraged. There should be the release of those who have been detained who can play a positive role in generating turnout.”

The Bush administration is not concerned about the democratic rights of the Kashmiri people. As Powell’s comments make clear, Washington is worried that a low voter turn-out will undermine the legitimacy of the elections and thus of the next state government. Behind the scenes, the US has been engaged in encouraging sections of the APHC to participate in the poll as part of broader plans for talks between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

In the last week of June, a defense attaché and a political officer from US Embassy in New Delhi made an unpublicised visit to Jammu and Kashmir. While not providing any details, the US embassy confirmed the visit had taken place and admitted that its officer had met with APHC and other political parties in Kashmir for discussions. According to the *Kashmir Observer*, however, US officials bluntly told the APHC to “take part in the elections”.

Despite its close relations with Washington, the Vajpayee government is highly sensitive to any direct US involvement over Kashmir. India has long maintained that Kashmir is an internal issue and has rejected any international involvement or mediation. Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha turned down Powell’s offer of international observers and indicated that “the necessary conditions [do] not exist at present” for talks with Pakistan. BJP president M. Venkaiah Naidu criticised Powell’s comments as “interference,” as have opposition parties.

Whatever the outcome of the political manoeuvring in India and internationally prior to the poll, the election in Jammu and Kashmir will be a thoroughly anti-democratic exercise. The continuing dispute over Kashmir and the lack of basic democratic rights is itself rooted in the reactionary partition of the subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India more than 50 years ago. Within that communal division of the region there is no solution to the conflict.



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