

# More than 600 dead in Indian Kashmir as election draws to a close

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Elections in India's border state of Jammu and Kashmir have seen ordinary people caught between a large and intimidating Indian military presence on the one hand, and bloody violence by Kashmiri separatists and pro-Pakistani groups seeking to disrupt the voting on the other. More than 600 people have been killed since campaigning began in late August.

In the most recent incidents, the Indian military killed 10 alleged separatist terrorists last week, as they sought to enter the state across the disputed "Line of Control" border with Pakistan. Over one million Indian and Pakistani troops have been deployed along the border since December and tensions between the two nuclear-armed states remain high. During the election the Indian government has stepped up its bellicose rhetoric against the Pakistani regime, accusing it of sponsoring terrorism and instability in Kashmir in order to split the state away from New Delhi's control.

Headed by the Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), the Indian government has declared it is doing everything possible to ensure a "free and fair election". In fact, in order to thwart the election boycott called by the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC)—a loose coalition of 23 legal Muslim, separatist or pro-Pakistani parties opposed to India's rule over predominantly Muslim Kashmir—and pressure the population into voting, the Indian government has placed Jammu and Kashmir under virtual military-police siege.

Some 45,000 extra troops have been deployed into the state, in addition to the permanent garrison of 600,000 military, paramilitary and police. The election itself has been regionally staggered, to allow an overwhelming presence of the security forces in each area on polling day. The first region voted on September 16, the second on September 24, the third on October 1 and the final region votes on October 8. The election result is scheduled to be announced on October 12.

While the APHC is continuing to call for negotiations on a referendum over Kashmir's status, none of the major parties contesting the election supports any change to the territory's inclusion within India. The current state government, the National Conference (NC), is part of the national Indian coalition government.

There are numerous allegations that Indian troops and police have engaged in coercion to push up the voter turnout,

particularly in majority Muslim areas. In the last state election in 1996, military intimidation and vote rigging were rampant. This year, the BJP national government has been determined to achieve a high turnout so that it can substantiate its claim that Indian rule has majority support.

At the same time, Islamic fundamentalists and separatist extremists are attempting to terrorise the population into staying away from the polling stations. One of the main Islamic fundamentalist movements opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir, the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, issued a reactionary threat to murder anyone participating in the election. The organisation and its offshoot, Al-Arifeen, have claimed responsibility for a series of political murders and violent attacks. On September 6, Sheik Abdul Rehman, an independent candidate in the Kashmir valley, was gunned down with two of his supporters. On September 11, Mushtaq Ahmad Lone, a minister in the NC government, was assassinated. Dozens of other candidates and campaigners for the ruling NC have been targeted.

Indiscriminate bombings, land-mining of roads and machine-gun attacks have killed and wounded not only Indian troops and police, but dozens of civilians. On October 1, nine polling stations in one area were attacked with grenades and machine-guns. On the same day, gunmen threw grenades and fired into a bus carrying Hindu pilgrims. Seven people died, including two rickshaw drivers who were shot as they attempted to assist the wounded.

Media reports have testified to the alienation, fear and loathing felt by ordinary people in Jammu and Kashmir toward both the Indian establishment and the terror campaign mounted by the separatists. Abdul Ghaffar, a shop keeper in the Baramulla border district, told the news portal *rediff.com*: "The Indian security forces come to our homes and say if you will not come to vote, we will kill you. But if you do go and vote, then the militants say we will kill you. This is their 'free and fair' election."

Ghulam Qadir, a shawl weaver in the village of Charangam, told the site: "The army came into our village at six in the morning and banged doors. We were not interested in voting, but they forced us out". In a nearby village, a middle-aged peasant woman said: "Militants [armed separatists] will be mad if we vote and if we do not, the army drags us out. Why don't

they kill us once for all?”

A young electricity department worker in the Hazratbal District told the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “Up through yesterday, you saw all kinds of people, politicians, coming here and promising to help solve our problems, but come tomorrow you won’t be able to find a single one. They fight to protect their jobs, not our rights.”

Another resident of the area, Farooq Ahmad, told the paper: “Things here have been bad for 50 years. Elections have come and gone. Another vote is not going to change anything. We want *aman* and *azadi* (peace and freedom), not to cast votes that will only help maintain unemployment, violence and suffering.”

The official turnout has been low in the three regions that have voted so far. In the districts of Poonch and Rajouri in Jammu, Kargil in Ladakh, and the Kupwara and Baramulla districts in Kashmir—all of which border Pakistan—just 46 percent of the population voted, compared with 61 percent in 1996. In the Srinagar, Jammu and Budgam districts, the turnout was 42 percent, while in the Pulwama, Anantnag, Kathua and Udhampur districts, the figure was just 41 percent.

Low as they are, boycott advocates are disputing the official figures, claiming the actual turnout has been no higher than 20 percent. In some areas where the Islamic fundamentalists are known to be active, less than a dozen out of several thousand registered voters took the risk of casting a ballot. In the Muslim city of Saphore, turnout was just five percent. The Pakistani military dictatorship, while issuing multiple declarations that it opposes the terrorist violence and has sought to prevent incursions by separatists over the border, has already declared the elections in Kashmir to be a “farce” and unrepresentative.

While the election boycott call by Hurriyat, combined with the terrorism of the separatists and Islamic fundamentalists, appears to have been successful in keeping voter participation down, the two campaigns are guided by an utterly venal political perspective. Both are aimed at pressuring the Indian government to accept a re-division of the state’s borders that will benefit a narrow Kashmir Muslim elite that has been marginalised under New Delhi’s rule.

There have been signs during the election that the BJP government is considering such an agenda, under conditions where both India and Pakistan are being pressured by the US Bush administration to reach a settlement in their conflict. The BJP has backed calls for the formation of new “regional councils” with “administrative and financial powers” in the largely Hindu Jammu and Muslim Kashmir, and possibly the Buddhist region of Ladakh. The main opposition party, Congress, has given tentative support to talks on the issue.

This would amount to a de-facto implementation of the policy of the national Hindu extremist organisation, the Rastriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS), which calls for the “trifurcation” of Jammu and Kashmir into three, communally-based states, all under Indian control.

A Muslim-controlled Kashmir “regional council” may satisfy the aspirations of many of the organisations within Hurriyat. Despite the boycott, the organisation has continued talks with the “Kashmir Committee”, a non-governmental body led by former law minister Ram Jethamalani and operating with the approval of New Delhi. Even before the election, the prospect of talks led to a split in Hurriyat, with a rebel group from the Peoples Conference party deciding to reject the boycott and take part.

The governing National Conference (NC) opposes any cantonisation of the state, fearing it would benefit the more extreme communal forces, both Hindu and Muslim, and undermine the current ruling strata in Jammu and Kashmir. Instead, the NC has made “greater autonomy” its main election plank. NC president Omar Abdullah, who is a minister in the national government, told a press conference on September 30 that he would resign from the BJP-led coalition after the elections. He said that the NC would not form a coalition with either the BJP or Congress in Jammu and Kashmir.

Although the NC’s well-oiled political machine will probably win the election, the low voter turnout undermines its ability to claim any legitimacy or broad popular support. Its call for autonomy is utterly devoid of any concern for the democratic and social aspirations of the masses and is viewed with considerable cynicism. The NC based its 1996 election campaign on the autonomy demand, but dropped it in 1998, after entering a national coalition with the BJP. The NC only resurrected its interest in the issue in mid-2001, when the BJP-led government suggested it would hold talks with Muslim separatist groups over some type of settlement.

Whatever the final outcome of the election, it has highlighted the organic incapacity of any section of the bourgeoisie on the Indian subcontinent to provide any solution for the people of Kashmir. Since the bloody 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent into a Hindu-dominated India and Muslim Pakistan, Kashmir’s status has remained unresolved. But neither redrawing the borders established by British imperialism, nor leaving them intact, will end the conflict that has raged for more than 50 years. Both paths leave the masses at the mercy of competing bourgeois factions, using communalism and sectarian violence to gain control over privileges, resources and territory.

The only solution lies in the development of a unified political movement of the working class and oppressed masses of the entire subcontinent, fighting for the complete abolition of all existing borders and the reorganisation of society on the basis of genuine social equality.



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