

Indian government mounts brutal campaign of repression in Kashmir

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India's Congress Party-led Union government has launched a brutal crackdown in the north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in an effort to stamp out widespread, open defiance of India's decades-long de facto military rule over the state.

So as to preempt a potentially gigantic mass rally called by Kashmiri separatist organizations for Monday, August 25 in Srinagar, the state capital, the J&K state Governor, N.N. Vohra, deployed hundreds of thousands of heavily-armed police, paramilitary, and military forces beginning Aug. 23 and imposed an indefinite, round-the-clock curfew.

The 24-hour curfew, which remains in effect in all 10 districts of the Kashmir Valley, is exacting a terrible toll on the Valley's overwhelmingly Muslim population.

People have been prevented from purchasing food. All schools have been closed. The sick, elderly, and pregnant women have been unable to seek medical care. Economic life has been paralyzed, depriving workers, petty-hawkers and other toilers of even the "right" to eke out a living. Tourists, meanwhile, have been left stranded.

All the media, including mainstream corporate dailies and private television stations, have been unable to publish or forced from the air. The only exceptions are the Indian government-run Doordashan television network and the state-owned Radio Kashmir.

The Indian state has also sought to bar internet access to some news websites.

The Indian government, which invariably touts India as the world's largest democracy, has claimed that it is not prohibiting media from operating in the Valley. But this is belied not only by the authorities' refusal to grant journalists and other media personnel with passes exempting them from the curfew regulations, but also by the arrest and/or manhandling of a score or more journalists by security personnel.

In breaking up anti-government protests and otherwise enforcing the blanket curfew, security forces have used deadly force against unarmed civilians. At least ten people, including a teenage girl, have been killed by security forces since August 25. This brings the total death-toll in the state during the past two months of anti-government agitation and counter-agitation to at least 40. Hundreds more have been injured, many of them by gunshot.

Security forces have also staged frightening, dead-of-the night raids to take several prominent Kashmiri nationalist politicians into custody.

India's only Muslim-majority state is being subjected to "the most brutal crackdown ... in almost two decades," reports *The Hindu*, a liberal Chennai-based daily. Yet Washington, London, and other western governments who frequently posture as defenders of human rights have failed to make any criticism of New Delhi's actions.

The wave of repression in Kashmir was ordered, and is being directed, by the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and India's security establishment.

According to an article in the August 26 *Hindu*, plans for the crackdown, including the blanket curfew, were drawn up at a meeting

chaired by National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan two weeks ago. Narayanan, who heads India's National Security Council, and Intelligence Bureau Director P.C. Haldar, then flew to Srinagar to inform the local security-force chiefs of their plans.

The central government was reportedly persuaded not to immediately implement the crackdown by local officials, who argued that the anti-Indian government agitation was waning. But New Delhi was rattled when hundreds of thousands of people showed up for an August 22 rally called by Kashmiri nationalists and thereafter moved quickly to crush the anti-government agitation.

"Meltdown" in Indian-administered Kashmir

The crackdown is the response of the Indian elite to the political crisis that was triggered by the decision of the state's now-defunct Congress Party-led coalition government to give 100 acres of Kashmir Valley forest land to the board that manages the Hindu Amarnath shrine. (See Indian government resorts to armed repression in Kashmir, killing 21 and wounding hundreds)

The government's ostensible aim was to provide better facilities to the hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims who visit the shrine every year. The real reason was that the Congress Party wished to curry favor with Hindu communalist groups in the state ahead of assembly elections slated for later this year.

The land-grant provoked widespread protests by Kashmiri nationalist and Islamicist groups and on June 28 the Congress' coalition partner, the People's Democratic Party, withdrew from the government, depriving it of its parliamentary majority. Three days later the Congress government rescinded the land grant, but the PDP refused to rejoin the government.

Hindu communal and supremacist groups, including the VHP and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), responded by mounting a counter agitation in Jammu, the only one of the state's three regions that has a Hindu majority, to force the government to abide by its original decision. Ultimately this took the form of an "economic blockade" that cut the Kashmir Valley off from the rest of India, disrupting the transport of essential goods to the Valley and threatening the Valley's economically pivotal fruit exports.

The blockade in the state's southern Jammu region triggered mass protests in the Kashmir Valley, where the population has long endured savage repression at the hands of a massive Indian army force. A number of paramilitary posts were overrun or burnt to the ground.

Under these conditions, Narayanan and the Indian security establishment, says the *Hindu*, concluded that Jammu and Kashmir—which for the past six decades has been at the center of the geo-political rivalry between India and Pakistan—was rapidly approaching "meltdown."

Government denials notwithstanding, there is no question that the burden of the current crackdown is falling almost exclusively on the state's Muslim population. Initially the curfew did cover some parts of Jammu, but it was soon lifted there.

This is in keeping with the way the local Congress Party, the UPA

government, and the Indian security forces have acted throughout the shrine-land controversy. When compared with the vicious repression unleashed in the Kashmir Valley, the state response to the agitation by Hindu-communal groups in the Jammu region has been relatively muted. For example, during comparable confrontations, there have been far-fewer instances when security forces have resorted to live-fire. There have also been fewer arrests and far fewer curfews in Jammu.

The Congress Party's state unit has openly supported the Hindu communal agitation over the land-shrine issue. The approach of the UPA government, meanwhile, has been governed by its concern that the Hindu supremacist BJP not be allowed to cast itself as the better defender of the "Hindu" and "national" cause against "Muslim separatists."

While it loudly proclaims its support for a secular India, the Congress party has a long and unseemly history of pandering to, and conniving with, Hindu communal forces stretching back at least to the 1947 partition of the subcontinent into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

On Sunday, J&K Governor Vohra announced a "settlement" of the land shrine issue that caves into the demands of the Hindu communal forces. Under the settlement reached with the *Shri Amarnath Yatra Sangarsh* Samiti or shrine board, the government has agreed to place the land at the board's disposal with the proviso that it only be used for a few months during the pilgrimage season, that no permanent structure be built, and that the J&K government retain title to the land. As a result of the deal, the Hindu communalists have called off their two-month long agitation in Jammu.

India angrily dismisses UN Commissioner's concerns

So brutal has been the repression in Kashmir that even the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a statement of concern, "calling on the Indian authorities and in particular security forces to respect the right to freedom of assembly and expression."

It urged the Indian authorities to "comply with international human rights principles in controlling the demonstrators" and called for "thorough and independent investigations into all killings that have occurred in Indian-administered Kashmir."

The Indian government, which in two decades of military occupation of J&K has accumulated an atrocious record on human rights by killing and disappearing tens of thousands, reacted with predictable bluster and defiance. A statement issued by the Ministry of External Affairs admonished the OHCHR: "We regret that the OHCHR has issued a statement on the situation in Jammu and Kashmir. This is uncalled for and irresponsible." It further thundered that "India does not need any advice in respect of the protection and promotion of human rights of its citizens."

Famed Indian writer Arundhati Roy has noted that prior to 1989 the Amarnath shrine attracted only about 20,000 people per year. By 2008 the number had swollen to over 500,000. While some of this increase is likely due to better transportation and the increased income of sections of the middle-class, many of the pilgrims, says Roy, have had their passages paid for by Indian businesses that patronize Hindu communal groups that promote travel to the shrine as both a religious and "Hindu national" duty.

1989 was a turning point in the history of Kashmir. The national Congress government rigged the state elections and, when large sections of the population protested, Indian authorities resorted to bloody repression. These events, chronic economic backwardness, and the rise of Hindu chauvinism across India, led a section of Kashmiri youth to take up arms against the Indian government.

Pakistan, which took control of the northern half of the princely state of Kashmir in 1947-48, had long sought, albeit unsuccessfully, to foment opposition in Indian-controlled Kashmir. It now used political and military support to the insurgents to tie them to its reactionary geo-political agenda and to propel into the leadership of the insurgency the

most communally-minded elements.

India, in turn, has used Pakistan's involvement to claim that the unrest in Kashmir is nothing but a foreign-exported terrorist problem.

A rude shock

The events of the past month have come as a rude shock to the Indian establishment. It had thought it had succeeded in pacifying Jammu and Kashmir through savage repression and by pressing Pakistan, with Washington's support, to deny the Kashmiri separatists military-logistical support.

There is no question that the insurgency has declined sharply in recent years. While repression has undoubtedly played a role in this, so too has the revulsion of ordinary Kashmiris at the communal atrocities Islamacist insurgents have perpetrated and the Kashmiri nationalists' manifest failure to advance any program that seriously addresses the socio-economic problems facing people across that state, whatever their religion.

The Indian elite, as National Security Advisor Narayanan conceded, mistook the success of its recent pacification efforts for a strengthening of its base of popular support in the state. "I think the [situation is] is far less serious than what is being portrayed," Narayanan told a television interviewer. "But at the same [it is] time certainly something that we are very unhappy about.

"What is causing us concern is that [after] four years of improvement in the situation, [we] believed that we [had] reduced levels of alienation, [there were] substantial signs of normalcy in the State. People had forgotten about issues."

The occupation of the Jammu and Kashmir and more particularly the Kashmir Valley by a huge contingent of Indian security forces for two decades has made life for ordinary people unbearable. Further fuelling the popular anger and frustration is the fact that the Indian government refuses to undertake any serious investigation of the innumerable rapes, disappearances, and other human right abuses committed by its security forces.

Given the reactionary role played by Stalinism and Maoism in the subcontinent, it is retrograde nationalist and separatist groups that have benefited from the pent-up mass anger in Kashmir.

In the final analysis it is the Indian ruling elite and their imperialist sponsors that are responsible for the ongoing nightmare that is Kashmir, and for the myriad of other national-ethnic and communal conflicts that afflict the country.

A progressive solution to the Kashmir crisis will be found only when the working class leads a movement of the toilers of the subcontinent aimed at overthrowing capitalism and the reactionary nation state-system imposed on South Asia by imperialism and the aspirant national bourgeoisies of India and Pakistan in 1947.



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