

India stages “martial law” elections in Kashmir

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Omar Abdullah was sworn in as the chief minister of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir Monday, ending six months of central government or “president’s” rule.

India’s lone Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir has for two decades been convulsed by a popular insurgency against Indian rule.

Indian authorities recently reported that 47,000 people have died in the conflict, including 20,000 civilians and a like number of anti-Indian insurgents. The Coalition of Civil Society, a prominent Kashmiri-based human rights group, says the true death toll is in excess of 70,000.

Abdullah leads a coalition that was patched together after last month’s state assembly elections produced a fractured verdict. The coalition unites his National Conference, a Kashmiri regionalist party, with the Congress Party, the traditional governing party of the Indian bourgeoisie and the dominant partner in India’s United Progressive Alliance government.

The National Conference captured 28 assembly seats and the Congress 17, meaning that the coalition has only a bare majority in the 87-member state legislature.

Neither party improved its standing from the last election. The National Conference won the same number of seats as it secured in the 2002 election when it fell from power, while the Congress suffered a net loss of 3 seats.

The Kashmiri-based People’s Democratic Party (PDP), which co-governed the state with the Congress from 2002 till last June, won 21 seats, five more than in 2002, and thereby supplanted the Congress as the state’s second largest party. The Hindu communalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 11 seats, all of them from the Hindu-majority Jammu region. Smaller parties took six seats and four were won by independents.

India’s political establishment and corporate media have proclaimed the staging of state assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir, the installation of a new coalition government, and the lifting of president’s rule a triumph for “democracy.”

The reality is that Jammu and Kashmir, especially the Kashmir Valley, remain under military occupation, with half a million security forces deployed in a state whose total population is little more than 10 million. Since 1990 the state has been under the *Armed Forces Special Powers Act*, which gives the military sweeping powers. These include the right to use deadly force and raid any premises without a warrant, as well as immunity from prosecution.

The elections were held in seven phases, stretching from November 17 to December 24 so as to maximize troop deployment in areas during and immediately before voting.

Curfews, declared and undeclared, were imposed by security forces so as to prevent anti-Indian government protests and those protests that were mounted were brutally suppressed. Several dozen prominent opponents of Indian rule were kept under house arrest throughout the election campaign, under the draconian Public Safety Act, which authorizes police to detain people for up to two years without trial.

The state of siege was intensified following the commando-style terrorist attack on Mumbai in late November. BBC correspondent Chris Morris, reporting from Srinagar on the eve of polling in the state’s largest city, said, “Every 50 meters or so, on every main street, stand several men (or very occasionally women) armed with assault rifles and—more often than not—big sticks.”

Indian authorities continue to adamantly oppose any serious investigation of the horrific human rights abuses, including torture and summary executions, perpetrated by security forces—some of them former insurgents who have been coerced into becoming police “auxiliaries”—in Indian-controlled Kashmir. The “disappeared” number in the thousands, if not tens of thousands.

Much has been made of an increase in the election turnout from the 2002 state election. Although the advocates of union with Pakistan or an independent Kashmir called for an election boycott, 61.5 percent of the electorate voted as compared with just 43 percent in 2002. In the Kashmir Valley, the state’s most populous region, and the center of both its Muslim population and the opposition to Indian rule, half or more of the electorate voted.

The increased voter turnout came as a welcome relief to the Indian elite. Indeed, in announcing last fall that the Jammu and Kashmir state elections would be held on schedule, the head of India’s election commission conceded it was a calculated risk.

In June, the PDP had withdrawn from its coalition with the Congress, forcing the imposition of president’s rule, after popular protests broke out against a state government decision to cede 100 acres of Kashmir Valley land to a Hindu shrine. The shrine has become a major pilgrimage site in recent years, at least in part because of the efforts of Hindu supremacist organizations who view its veneration as a means of asserting Indian/Hindu control over the valley. The protests quickly mushroomed into a mass popular movement against the police-military occupation of the state and to a considerable degree Indian rule itself. State authorities brutally suppressed the protests, killing dozens of people. Meanwhile the Hindu right, with the connivance of local Congress leaders, whipped up a Hindu communal counter-agitation. (See: Indian government mounts brutal campaign of repression in Kashmir)

More astute and less-biased observers concede that the increased turnout in the 2008 election is not indicative of any new-found enthusiasm for the repressive rule of the Indian state among Kashmir’s Muslim majority. Rather, the populace seized on the elections as a means of trying to influence government decisions concerning economic development. “In their approach to the elections,” wrote *The Hindu’s* Siddharth Varadarajan, “it is apparent that the people in the valley made a distinction between the ‘masla-e-kashmir,’ or the problem of Kashmir, and ‘kashmiriyon ke masail,’ or the problems of Kashmiris.”

A second factor in the widespread spurning of the anti-Indian opposition’s boycott call is increasing popular disaffection with the insurgency. Not only do the insurgents advance no progressive program to

address poverty and economic backwardness, they have become ever-more explicitly communalist and Islamic fundamentalist in program and orientation. Pakistan, it should be noted, played an important part in this process, as it viewed Islamicist elements as the most malleable in its efforts to exploit the grievances of the Kashmiri people to serve its own predatory ends.

The National Conference, which favors increased autonomy for Kashmir within the Indian Union, placed economic issues at the center of its election campaign, promising to improve the state's dilapidated or non-existent infrastructure and create jobs. "If voted to power, National Conference will usher an era of unparalleled development in the state and open new avenues of employment," declared Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah's father, and himself a four-time Jammu and Kashmir chief minister.

The central theme of the PDP election manifesto was "Make Self-Rule Happen." In a 2006 address to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think-tank, Mufti Mohammad Syed, the father of PDP head Mehbooba Mufti, and the party's official "patron," argued that autonomy for Jammu and Kashmir and the development of cross-border ties with Pakistan-controlled Azad Kashmir, would allow the state to become the hub of a thriving Indo-Pakistani capitalist trade.

The Kashmiri regional parties speak for rival sections of the local elite. Their autonomy demands and maneuvers with New Delhi—the National Conference was aligned with the Hindu supremacist BJP from 1998 to 2002—have nothing to do with meeting the socio-economic needs and fulfilling the genuine democratic aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, be they Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist.

Neither of them challenge the reactionary 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent. Imposed by the Congress and Muslim League in connivance with British imperialism, Partition is at the root of the ordeal of the Kashmiri people, on both sides of the Line of Control that divides Indian- and Pakistani held Kashmir, and of the geo-political rivalry between India and Pakistan—a rivalry that has repeatedly erupted in war.

The Congress and National Conference have had a tumultuous, decades-long association, involving periods of partnership and confrontation. The founder of the National Conference, Omar Abdullah's grandfather, Sheikh Abdullah, supported the accession of the princely state of Kashmir to India and became the Indian state's first chief minister. He was jailed by the Congress from 1953 to 1964, after he balked at declaring the state an integral part of the Indian Union.

In 1984, a Congress central government through the centrally-appointed state governor maneuvered to dismiss a National Conference ministry, only to prod the National Conference into an electoral alliance three years later. The joint efforts of the Congress and National Conference to rig the 1987 elections did much to discredit the Indian state and fuel the eruption two years later of mass protests against Indian rule.

If the Congress has rushed to forge a new governmental coalition with the National Conference, agreeing that Abdullah will serve as chief minister for the government's full prospective six-year term, it is because it is anxious to give the state the appearance of a stable, democratic government. It is leery of the PDP's more assertive position on autonomy, what many in the press have termed "soft separatism."

More importantly, it and the Indian elite as a whole have been rattled by last summer's sudden eruption of mass protests and want to ensure that there is a democratic fig leaf for the continuation of its two decades-long campaign to stamp out opposition, whether in the form of an armed insurgency or civil unrest, to Indian rule.

At the same time, New Delhi, with the full support of the official opposition BJP, has seized on the recent Mumbai terrorist atrocity to push through even more draconian "anti-terrorism" legislation and to ratchet up pressure on Pakistan to end its political and logistical support for the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir.

Several factors account for this belligerence. India's military-security establishment and the Hindu right have long been pressing for a more belligerent stance against Pakistan and various national-ethnic and Naxalite (Maoist) insurgencies within India. With national elections looming, the Congress is anxious to counter any attempt by the BJP to cast it as "soft" on terrorism. The campaign against Pakistan also serves to divert attention from, and channel in a reactionary direction mounting frustration over, the deepening economic crisis.

That said, the Indian government's attempt to cast Pakistan as a nexus of international terrorism is also clearly aimed at preempting any attempt by the incoming US administration of Barack Obama to take a greater role in the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir. A number of Obama aides have suggested that as a quid pro quo for Islamabad intensifying its efforts to eradicate support within Pakistan for the insurgency against the US-installed government in Afghanistan, Washington would facilitate a settlement of the Kashmir dispute. Obama himself told *Time* magazine last October that he wants to "devote serious diplomatic resources" to the Kashmir dispute, including getting "a special envoy in there, to figure out a plausible approach."

India has long opposed any outside intervention in the Kashmir dispute, since it believes that bilaterally its economic and military power far outweighs that of Pakistan. Obama's suggestion was, consequently, pilloried in the Indian press and quietly but firmly rejected by Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

The strength of the reaction from India has been duly noted by members of Washington's geo-political establishment. Speaking Tuesday, Selig Harrison, a longtime US think-tank specialist on South Asia declared, "A US Kashmir initiative, however veiled, would poison relations between New Delhi and Washington."



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