

# Indian security forces crack down on Kashmiri protests

Arun Kumar  
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Protests and strikes are continuing in Indian-ruled Kashmir despite the deployment of Indian troops to the state and the deaths of at least 17 civilians in clashes over the past six weeks. Most shops, businesses and schools in the Kashmir Valley were closed on Monday after the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) called for five days of strikes and demonstrations.

The latest round of protests erupted last month following the killing of Tafil Matoo, a 17-year-old student, on June 11 by a police teargas shell during a demonstration in the state capital of Srinagar. A further 16 people died in subsequent clashes with police and the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force. The youngest was just nine years old.

The Congress-led government in New Delhi and its ally—the National Conference-led state government in Jammu and Kashmir—have responded with further repression. Earlier this month, the national Cabinet Committee on Security ordered army troops to clamp down on further protests in Kashmir for the first time in more than a decade. Home Secretary G.K. Pillai was also sent to advise the state government on the handling of protests and strikes.

Tens of thousands of troops were used to patrol the streets of Srinagar and other towns, and enforce a curfew. Indian security forces are notorious for their use of arbitrary detention, torture and extra-judicial murder to suppress opposition by armed separatist groups over the past two decades.

More than 600 people have been arrested in Jammu and Kashmir since the protests erupted in June. Of those, at least 40 are being held under the notorious Public Safety Act (PSA), which provides for detention without trial for

one year. Among those held under the PSA are APHC leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani and two prominent lawyers—Mian Abdul Qayoom and Ghulam Nabi, president and general secretary respectively of the Kashmir High Court Bar Association. Sheikh Akram, a 15-year-old school student, is being detained under the PSA for stone throwing and “hatching a conspiracy against the state” by taking part in the funeral procession for Tafil Matoo.

The current protests in Kashmir are not simply a continuation of previous movements by separatist groups seeking independence from India or a merger with Pakistan. The involvement of young people points to the deteriorating social conditions in the state, with rising prices, growing poverty and worsening unemployment, particularly among youth.

An article in the *Economist* magazine explained: “The underlying cause of the latest violence is the disenchantment of mostly jobless young people after two decades of street battles, bandhs, and curfews. They have been disappointed in hopes for both economic development and some form of autonomy from the government in Delhi.”

The first-ever economic survey by the Jammu and Kashmir government in 2007 revealed that the state lags behind others on many indices, including health care, communication and literacy. The state’s per capita income is just 17,174 rupees (\$US367)—two thirds of the national average. The unemployment rate estimated by National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) stands at 4.21 percent compared to national rate of 3.09 percent.

Earlier this month, Congress Party spokeswoman Jayanthi Natarajan blamed Pakistan for the protests,

saying: “Elements from across the border and the separatists inimical to the unity of our country are trying to create tension and violence in the Valley.” The Indian establishment routinely uses Pakistani support for Islamist separatists to divert attention from their decades-long suppression of basic democratic rights and lack of economic assistance in creating widespread opposition to Indian rule.

The heavy deployment of security forces to suppress protests has been matched by a crackdown on the media. For four days up to July 4, nearly 60 newspapers in Kashmir suspended publication to protest against restrictions on the movement of journalists. On July 3, the police filed a case against a New Delhi-based television news channel, News-X, for airing allegedly incorrect news about a police killing in Kashmir’s Pulwama district.

*Greater Kashmir* reported: “Amid a complete media shutdown for nearly four days, the people, mostly youngsters, were left with the only option of reaching to the world through social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter and Orkut to disseminate information regarding the ongoing situation in the Valley.”

The state government responded with police summonses to charge several youth under the Public Safety Act for “instigating violence and justifying stone-pelting through Facebook”. In a further attempt to suppress protests, it shut down the networks of most mobile service providers, including Airtel, Aircel, Tata Indicom, Reliance and Vodafone. Only the state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) continued to operate.

In a bid to defuse the highly-charged political situation, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah convened an all-party meeting on July 5. In all, 11 state and national parties attended. The main Kashmiri opposition party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), boycotted proceedings, obviously hoping to exploit the widespread popular hostility to the police repression.

The only outcome of the meeting was a resolution calling for an inquiry into the police killings. All parties present, with the exception of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), voted in favour. The right-wing BJP objected that any investigation would only demoralise the country’s security forces.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist, which has a long history in backing the Indian government’s repressive policies in Kashmir, took part in the meeting. In an effort to deflect widespread anger, the party’s state secretary Mohammad Yusuf Tarigami appealed to “all political parties in the state not to indulge in the blame-game...”

None of the parties in Kashmir has any progressive solution to the decades of political turmoil that has plagued the region. The rivalry between India and Pakistan for control of the region stems from the reactionary communal partition of British India in 1947. Just months after independence, the two countries fought their first war over Kashmir—Pakistan claimed the state on the basis of its Muslim majority, while India insisted on control based on the formal accession to India of the state’s Hindu maharaja.

The result was the de facto division of Kashmir along the so-called Line of Control. Faced with widespread opposition to its rule, India has only maintained its control of Jammu and Kashmir through anti-democratic methods, provoking armed insurgency from the late 1980s.

Sections of the Kashmiri opposition support either an “independent” Kashmir or integration into neighbouring Pakistan—neither of which will resolve the aspirations of working people for democratic rights and decent living standards. Only a unified struggle of the working class and oppressed masses, independent of all factions of the bourgeoisie, against the reactionary capitalist state structures established in 1947 and for the establishment of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia can resolve this festering economic, social and political crisis.



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