

Mass protests continue in Indian-held Kashmir

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Despite savage state repression—including curfews, mass arrests and indiscriminate firing on demonstrations—protests continue to rock the north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. J&K, frequently referred to simply as Kashmir, is India's lone Muslim-majority state.

Since the current wave of protests began in mid-June, the Indian paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and state police have shot dead at least 58 protesters (some reports claim 80 or more dead) and injured hundreds more.

The trigger for the protests was the police killing of a 17-year-old youth last June 11.

Far from attempting to bring to book any of the state personnel responsible for that killing, the state and Congress Party-led national government have given carte blanche to the CRPF and police to open fire on unarmed protesters and even funeral processions.

The savagery of the state violence has itself become a major factor in sustaining the agitation. There have reportedly been more than 900 clashes between demonstrators and security forces. The successive curfews have made daily life for workers, small traders, and all those with meager and insecure incomes extremely difficult, further stoking popular anger.

Indian authorities have sought to justify the repression by claiming that the protests are serving as cover for pro-Pakistani and Kashmiri separatist terrorists and by pointing to repeated instances of rock throwing. But in more than two months of clashes with protesters, not a single policeman or paramilitary has been killed.

The latest fatality occurred on Tuesday, August 17, when a protester shot the week before succumbed to his injuries. His death immediately sparked further protests.

The beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, on August 13, has brought no respite in the state violence.

Three teenagers and a 65-year-old man were shot dead that day after they joined an anti-government protest that erupted after Friday prayers. The next day, police opened fire on an unarmed demonstration killing two more people. This brought the two-day toll of state violence to six dead and 70 injured.

The protests have been spearheaded by young adults, many of them unemployed. But they have involved a wide cross-section of people in the Kashmir Valley, the traditional center of

opposition to Indian-rule in the state, including the elderly, mothers and high school students.

When the state's chief minister, Omar Abdullah, who leads a coalition between his (Kashmir) National Conference and the Congress Party, made an August 5 visit to a hospital where injured demonstrators were being treated, he was attacked by distraught relatives. "Where have you been all this time?" said a mother of one of the injured, seizing the chief minister by the collar and shaking him. Her action precipitated a melee that only ended when Abdullah's security guards intervened and whisked him to a waiting helicopter.

The popular defiance of Indian and J&K authorities is fueled by anger born of decades of repression in what is essentially a police state.

For two decades, the Indian state has deployed more than half a million security forces in J&K, which has a population of slightly more than 10 million people. With a ratio of one security personnel for every 20 residents, J&K is one of the world's most heavily militarized regions.

Moreover, in suppressing a Pakistani-supported insurgency that only gained traction due to the central government's repeated rigging of elections, the police, paramilitary and Indian army forces have used savage violence, including torture, rape, summary executions, "disappearances" and arbitrary arrests.

According to the government's own admission, more than 47,000 people, most of them unarmed civilians, have died in the conflict. Human rights organizations say the true death toll is more than the 80,000.

Security forces have been able to act with impunity because they are protected by two draconian anti-democratic laws. Under the Indian government's Armed Forces Special Powers Act, Jammu and Kashmir state forces are provided immunity for crimes committed in suppressing the insurgency. The J&K Public Safety Act allows detention without trial for up to two years.

The outburst of popular anger in J&K has come as a blow to the Indian government, which for several years has been boasting about a return to "normalcy" in the Valley, and has shocked the India media, which normally trumpets the government line on J&K.

An editorial in the August 1 *Hindustan Times* Delhi “to consider that the latest rupture between the Kashmir Street and the Valley’s administrators is also a genuine show of frustration and protest, not just manufactured dissent fuelled by professional secessionist groups under the tutelage of Pakistan.”

The *Hindu*, for its part, chastised the state government for presiding over wanton violence: “Much of the killing on Kashmir’s streets came about not because the protests threatened to overwhelm authorities, but because lethal force was indiscriminately used by panicked, wretchedly led police.”

An op-ed piece in the August 14 *Times of India* titled “Clueless in Kashmir” concluded, “The generation out there on the streets of Kashmir is not only angry but well informed and radicalized. Unlike the older generation, this one is politically educated and acutely aware of international currents and trends. It is on Facebook and Twitter and other social networking sites and refuses to be taken for granted. The time for playing games in Kashmir is over.”

The *New York Times* routinely parrots the line of the Obama administration and of the Bush administration that preceded it that India is the “world’s largest democracy” and a “natural ally” of the US. But last week it ran an article expressing concern about the crisis in J&K, which as it borders China and Pakistan is a highly strategic region. The *Times* report described the wave of protests in J&K as the “Kashmiri intifada,” alluding to the mass uprisings of Palestinians against the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Predictably, the Indian government has blamed Pakistan for this summer’s unrest.

In late June Indian Home Minister P. Chidambaram said the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET), which was implicated in the November 2008 commando-style terrorist attack on Mumbai, was behind the agitation in Kashmir. In a debate on the protests in Kashmir in the Indian parliament on August 6, Chidambaram made a more substantive statement, this time expanding the blame to Pakistan itself. The home minister made the following statement:

“Pakistan,” said Chidambaram, “appears to have altered its strategy in influencing events in Jammu and Kashmir. It is possible that they believe that relying upon civilian unrest will pay them better dividends. But I am confident if we are able to win the hearts and minds of the people [those] designs can be foiled.”

How the Indian government aims to win the “hearts and minds” of the Kashmiri masses was amply demonstrated the same day. The Indian government dispatched three companies, comprising approximately 300 personnel, of the elite Rapid Action Force (RAF) to the state. This was in addition to 21 companies of additional CRPF personnel the government deployed to the area in early August.

The Pakistani government does have a long history of trying

to ~~advise~~ manipulate events in J&K, as part of the reactionary geopolitical conflict between the two states that arose from the communal partition of South Asia in 1947. An immediate consequence of the partition was the outbreak of a war between India and Pakistan over the fate of Jammu and Kashmir. This led to the bifurcation of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir into Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir and the sundering of the Kashmiri people.

For decades Pakistan’s attempts to influence politics in J&K had little impact. In attributing alienation and unrest in Kashmir to the machinations of Pakistan, India’s elite seeks to perpetuate tensions with its historic rival and contemptuously ignore and dismiss the longstanding and genuine grievances of the Kashmiri people.

After ignoring developments in J&K for weeks, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has demonstrably changed course. On August 10, he convened an all-parties conference in the state and made a televised address in Urdu. This speech was supplemented by remarks on J&K in his address to the nation on Indian independence day, August 15.

In his speeches Prime Minister Singh said that the central government will sponsor a jobs program in the state, is ready to talk to any Kashmiri leader who renounces violence, and will consider granting J&K greater autonomy and the eventual withdrawal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

In his August 10 address, Singh claimed to “feel the pain and understand the anger and frustration that is bringing the young people out on the streets of Kashmir,” but then went on to express his appreciation for the murderous security forces. They are, declared Singh, “performing an extremely challenging task in difficult circumstances.”

The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party quickly rebuked Singh for speaking of greater autonomy for J&K. The reality is that India’s constitution already grants J&K a special status within the Indian Union, but these provisions have been violated virtually from the beginning by India’s central government and ruling elite.

Even many commentators in the corporate media had to concede that Singh’s promises are akin to those made by India’s governments for years—promises that have only served as a cover for continuing state repression.

The authors also recommend:

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