Indian state murdered Maoist peace envoy

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In their speeches to last month's Independence Day celebrations at Delhi's Red Fort, both India's president, Pratibha Patil, and prime minister, Manmohan Singh, offered talks to the Maoist Naxalite movement if it eschews "violence." Not surprisingly, neither of them mentioned the Indian state's recent summary execution of a top Maoist leader and "peace" interlocutor, Cherukuri Azad Rajkumar.

Rajkumar, who was commonly known as Azad, and freelance journalist Hemachandra Pandey, were killed by the Andhra Pradesh state police on July 1.

Azad was reportedly an envoy of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) appointed to explore the possibility of "peace-talks" with the Indian government. It is within this context that his killing acquires a singular significance.

The Andhra Pradesh police have claimed that Azad was killed on the evening of July 1 when a police party ran into an armed-group of Maoist guerillas in a forested part of the Adilabad district of Andhra Pradesh. According to the police, a 30-minute gun battle ensued between them and the Maoists, who were up on a hill, and during this battle Azad and Pandey were killed. Although the police claim to have been in a firefight with heavily armed Maoists on higher ground, they did not suffer any injuries.

From the beginning the Maoists and Azad's family members, including a colonel in the Indian Army, have challenged the police story, charging that the gun battle was a police fabrication and that Azad and Pandey, who was travelling with him, were summarily executed.

Azad's family have charged that he and Pandey were seized in Nagpur, a city in the neighbouring state of Maharashtra, transported to a forest area near Adilabad, Andhra Pradesh, then murdered in cold blood.

That the police's story is a lie and Azad the victim of a summary execution is demonstrated by an exposé published as the September 6, 2010 cover story of *Outlook India*, a prominent weekly news magazine. Titled "Death by an Inch … Lies by the Mile," the *Outlook India* report is based on a postmortem analysis of Azad's corpse carried out by forensic experts.

While the police claim to have killed Azad at a distance in a shootout, the July 3 forensic report clearly establishes that the bullet that killed the Maoist leader was fired from a handgun held less than 7.5 cm from his body. Moreover the bullet did not enter Azad's body at an angle, although he was purportedly shot by police firing from further down a hill.

The *Outlook India* article begins as follows: "Dead men tell no tales. But when the deceased is Chemkuri Azad Rajkumar, the manner of death can speak volumes. The Maoist leader's post-mortem report, which *Outlook* has now accessed, categorically establishes that he died in a fake encounter. Read along with the FIR [First Investigation Report] and inquest reports, it exposes the elaborate set of lies drawn by the Andhra Pradesh police to explain his death. The claimed encounter, a much-touted 'gain' in the [United Progressive Alliance—UPA] government's war against India's 'gravest internal security threat', was in fact a cold-blooded execution by the state. Azad, a key player in the planned negotiations with the government, was picked up and shot with a handgun from a distance barely more than the size of an outstretched palm. The official version, that the Maoists were atop a hill and fired at the police party and Azad died when the cops retaliated from down below, just doesn't add up." (For the full report see Death By An Inch... Lies By The Mile)

The UPA government, which is led by the Congress Party, has dismissed any suggestion that Azad was killed under suspicious circumstances or that the death of the Naxalite leader mandated to explore the possibility of talks with the government could in any way impact on relations between the Maoists and the state.

In an interview following the publication of the *Outlook India* exposé, Home Secretary G.K. Pillai declared, "We are with the report filed by the state [government] on the issue. If the court finds it all dissatisfying, then there will be an independent or magisterial inquiry as per the court directive. The home ministry will not initiate a separate inquiry."

In justifying this stance, the UPA government has advanced the novel argument that it legally cannot take any action since "law and order" is the responsibility of the states.

By this subterfuge, the UPA government is effectively condoning murder.

But the central government's involvement in Azad's summary execution may well extend far beyond this. Under conditions where the central Indian government and its security agencies are waging a massive, coordinated multi-state offensive against the Maoists—Operation Green Hunt—and there is evidence that Azad was seized in another state, there is little reason to believe the authorities' claims that the Andhra Police are alone responsible for the security-intelligence operation that culminated in his execution.

The Congress Party state government, meanwhile, is tenaciously sticking to the story concocted by the Andhra Pradesh police and has ruled out any judicial investigation of the circumstances surrounding Azad's death.

Successive governments in the state, under both Congress and Telugu Desam Party rule, have a long record of executing persons associated with the Maoist movement.

India's ruling elite claims to preside over the world's "largest democracy." But in practice it uses brutal and illegal methods—including torture, disappearances and summary executions—to suppress challenges to the state whether from nationalist-separatists in Kashmir and the northeast, Maoist insurgents, or Islamacist terrorists. Protests of ordinary workers and peasants, meanwhile, are frequently violently repressed.

UPA leaders claim to be interested in peace talks with the Maoists. But their support for the summary execution of the Maoist's peace interlocutor and insistence that any talks be conditional on the Maoists' not only agreeing to a truce but forsaking all violence, underlines that this is a smokescreen. India's Congress Party-led government is intent on widening the counter-insurgency war it has been waging since last fall across the eastern Indian states of Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, and West Bengal with tens of thousand of Indian Army-trained and -supported paramilitaries.

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CPM Stalinists support cover-up of Azad's execution

In keeping with its role as a political prop of the Indian bourgeoisie, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the chief component of the Left Front, has provided a "left cover" to the UPA government's Operation Green Hunt.

The Stalinists blithely ignore Prime Minister Singh's frank admission that the purpose of the counter-insurgency campaign is to assert government control over the country's tribal areas so that their mineral and forest wealth can be exploited by big business.

This support has included the CPM and West Bengal's CPM-led Left Front government denouncing Mamata Banerjee, the head of the West Bengal-based Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the UPA government's railway minister, for urging talks with the Maoists and condemning Azad's death as "murder."

Speaking last month at a rally in the Lalgarh region of West Bengal, the center of the Maoist insurgency in the state, Banerjee declared, "Azad has been murdered … It was an injustice. Azad had started a peace process. His initiatives should be restarted."

The Indian police and security forces have a long and sordid history of summary executions cloaked as "encounter killings" or firefights. Yet an editorial in the CPM's English language weekly *People's Democracy* was indignant that Banerjee challenged the official story. Banerjee, complained the Stalinists, "has gone to the extent of asserting that Maoist leader Azad was 'murdered' and not killed in an encounter as claimed by the security forces."

West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and other top officials of the Left Front government and CPM even held discussions as to whether they could bring some form of legal action against Banerjee on the grounds that she had violated the constitution by speaking on a matter that falls under the purview of the Home Ministry and for violating cabinet discipline by publicly urging the pulling back of security forces from Lalgarh.

"We are consulting lawyers on the matter [as to] whether a Cabinet Minister can stand against the decision of the government," a senior CPM leader told the *Indian Express*. "The joint operation against the Maoists follows the decision of the Union government, but the Railway Minister has been talking against the operation publicly. Moreover, at the Lalgarh rally she has expressed a different view about Azad's death. We think her remarks and statements are a gross deviation from the Constitutional directives."

The CPM is utterly indifferent to the vital democratic and constitutional issues involved in the state's use of summary execution. Indeed, with their denunciations of Banerjee for charging that Azad was murdered and urging his death be investigated, the Stalinists are aiding and abetting this heinous crime.

For months, the CPM has been appealing to the Congress Party leadership to sack Banerjee from her UPA ministry on the grounds that she does not subscribe to Manmohan Singh's claim that the Maoists constitute India's "greatest internal security threat" and has been colluding with the Maoists.

Fearing defeat in next year's West Bengal state election, the CPM leadership is desperate to persuade the Congress Party—the Indian bourgeoisie's premier party of government and principal enforcer of its neo-liberal agenda—to break its electoral alliance with the TMC, the Left's main electoral rival in the state.

In making this appeal, the CPM is openly arguing that it is a more reliable partner for the Congress Party and UPA government than the TMC because of its fulsome support for Operation Green Hunt and ruthless pursuit of pro-investor policies.

At a function held in June to mark 33 years of Left Front rule, West Bengal Chief Minister Bhattacharjee promoted the CPM as the guarantor of order in the state, asserting that "change being sought" by the opposition parties "will result in anarchy." Referring to the Trinamool Congress's attempt to exploit peasants' anger over the state government's expropriation of their land for a Tata car manufacturing plant at Singur, Bhattacharjee asked, "Will West Bengal be witness to only Singurs where investment will be turned away?"

Mamata Banerjee is, unquestionably, a reactionary demagogue, who is merely posturing as a friend of the tribals of Lalgarh, just as she previously postured as a supporter of the peasants in Nandigram and Singur who opposed the expropriation of their land by the CPM-led West Bengal government for big business Special Economic Zones.

But her posturing would have no political traction were it not for the Stalinists' ruthless pursuit of pro-investor policies—policies that have produced growing anger and disaffection among the state's workers and toilers as social inequality and economic insecurity mount.

And the Left Front government's treatment of the state's tribal peoples has been little different from that of India's other governments.

Under both colonial and independent bourgeois rule, the tribals have suffered from state indifference—the government has failed to provide them with schools, health care and other facilities—and brutality. In the name of development, 8.5 million tribal people have been driven during the past two decades from the lands that historically provided them with their livelihood and are at the root of their culture and identity and transformed into wandering casual laborers.

Operation Green Hunt is an instrument for the intensification of the oppression of the tribal peoples, to reassert state control over their lands so as to facilitate big business resource extraction projects and the transformation of the tribals into wage-laborers.

To recognize this and oppose the Indian state's counter-insurgency war does not in any way imply that the Maoists' armed struggle is progressive. Decades ago the Maoists turned their backs on urban India, thereby helping reinforce the political hold of the Stalinist parliamentary parties over the working class. And while they and the CPM are involved in a bitter, oftentimes armed, conflict they share a common Stalinist heritage in the pre-1964 Communist Party of India (CPI) and both continue to insist, as did and does the CPI, that the struggle for socialism is not on the agenda in India. Rather, they insist, "socialists" must align with the "progressive" sections of the national bourgeoisie to complete the "democratic," that is capitalist, revolution.

Thus the Maoists have developed an alliance with the UPA minister and former ally of the Hindu supremacist BJP Mamata Banerjee and her TMC and have made it clear that they support her bid to come to power in the state.

It is essential to draw a balance sheet of over six decades of bourgeois rule in the subcontinent: Only the development of a politically independent and internationally oriented working class movement in India that rallies all the toilers in a struggle against capitalism can liberate the tribals from oppression and exploitation.

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