Kashmir seethes: Indian elite resorts to repression and political maneuvers

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Since June of this year, when Indian security forces shot dead a 17-year-old youth, the Indian-held state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has been convulsed by mass protests. Youth, housewives and even the old have come out on the streets in defiance of strict shoot-on-sight curfews to vent their unquenchable anger at the security forces, the state government and most of all the Indian authorities.

On September 17—just prior to the arrival of a 39-member "all parties" mission from New Delhi whose stated purpose is to explore a negotiated end to the current unrest—the Indian government deployed the army in cities and towns across the Kashmir Valley.

The deployment followed a heightening of antigovernment protests, beginning on September 11, when tens of thousands marched though Srinagar, the state's largest city. Two days later, at least 11 people were killed when police fired on various protests—the largest single-day civilian death toll in years. Syed Ali Shah Geelani, the leader of the separatist Hurriyat Conference, subsequently called for eleven days of mass protests.

The protests on September 11 and 13 were reportedly swelled by Kashmiris outraged by a virulently racist, pro-war US preacher's threat to burn copies of the Koran on the anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks.

During the past weekend there were four more fatalities. A 25-year-old women was shot dead Sunday by security forces acting apparently without provocation, and three youths who had been wounded when police open fired on demonstrators succumbed to their injuries.

Their deaths raise the number of protesters and bystanders that security forces have killed since the beginning of June to at least 110. Hundreds more have been wounded, with some suffering crippling injuries.

Both India and Pakistan claim ownership of the Kashmir region, which, as a result of a war that broke out shortly after the August 1947 partition of the subcontinent, is currently divided into an Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir and a Pakistani-controlled Azad Kashmir.

Jammu and Kashmir is India's only Muslim-majority state, with Muslims accounting for about 67 percent of the state's population. In the Kashmir Valley, which has been the center of a twenty-year-long agitation and insurgency against Indian rule, Muslims comprise a much larger percentage of the population.

The current wave of protests erupted following the security forces' June 11 killing of a medical student who was returning home from a tutoring lesson. In what has become a veritable reflex, Indian authorities responded to the swelling protests with escalating repression and violence and by accusing archrival Pakistan of fomenting unrest.

The state government has imposed repeated dawn-to-dusk curfews, rendering daily life unbearable, and stone-throwing youth have been met by indiscriminate gunfire from security forces.

But to the increasing consternation and perplexity of the Indian elite, the repression has only fueled the protest movement, with youths going from throwing stones to storming police posts.

In late August—by which point even sections of the pliant Indian media were noting the implausibility of the security forces' claims to have been acting only in self-defence and to restore order, when scores of civilians had been killed, but not a single policeman or paramilitary—Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh mused that the authorities need to find a better way to maintain order.

But in the weeks following Singh's statement, the repression has continued unabated.

India's Congress Party-led coalition government and the J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah have made a ritualistic offer to talk to "all groups and individuals" in the state who renounce "violence", but of course they continue to cover up the fact that the great preponderance of the violence has been perpetrated by state security forces.

Abdullah—whose party, the National Conference, rules the state in an alliance with the Congress Party—has displayed a mixture of political paralysis, incompetence and ruthlessness in the face of the street protests.

Abdullah's latest jaunt to New Delhi for "political consultations" occurred a couple of weeks ago. There he met with top officials of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, Defense Minister A.K. Antony and Home Minister P. Chidambaram. Antony's ministry commands the Indian army personnel deployed in J&K, while Chidambaram's ministry oversees the thousands of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) paramilitaries upon whom Abdullah's government has been principally relying to suppress the protests. It is CRPF personnel who have been responsible for the majority of the recent deaths.

For the past two decades, the Indian state has maintained half a million or more security forces in Jammu and Kashmir, which has a population of barely 10 million, making it one of most heavily policed and militarized regions in the world.

Abdullah's main demand was for the UPA government to relax or lift the imposition of the *Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act* (AFSPA) that grants the security forces both sweeping powers to aid "civil power" and legal immunity from any prosecution. Under the broad shield provided by the AFSPA, the security forces including the Indian army and the paramilitary forces have committed atrocious crimes with impunity over the past two decades in Kashmir including summary executions, rape, arbitrary arrests and

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"disappearances."

Both the opposition Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian security establishment quickly made known their opposition to Abdullah's proposal, citing "national security concerns".

On Sept. 13 the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) of the UPA met to discuss the "Kashmir situation" and rejected Abdullah's request. According to a report in the *Hindu* based on high-level Congress sources, both Singh and Sonia Gandhi argued, "any quick step could create further repercussions."

Following the meeting, Singh observed that there is a "trust and governance deficit" in Jammu and Kashmir, but failed to elaborate on what this means or how the government intends to overcome it. To date, his government has advanced no proposals to allay the anger and frustration of the Kashmiri masses, proposing a series of consultations instead, beginning with an all-parties conference in New Delhi.

The phrase "trust and governance deficit" is meant to obscure, not shed light on, the causes of the alienation of the Kashmiri people—an alienation rooted in the repression of the security forces, the Indian elite's cynical manipulation of communal identities dating back to partition itself, and its contemptuous dismissal of Kashmiris' socioeconomic and political grievances.

The "all-party" conference held on Sept. 15 was attended by all of India's opposition parties including the BJP and the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Also in attendance was the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the official opposition in the J&K assembly.

It was decided at the all-party meeting that a 39-member delegation headed by UPA Home Minister Chidambaram and including members of opposition parties would be sent to Kashmir for a 3-day visit to assess the "ground situation" and to meet with various political parties and groups that "renounce violence." The fact that the delegation is to spend less than 3 days in the state, the better part of two days in the Kashmir valley and one day in Jammu, the state's Hindu-majority southwestern division, demonstrates the political insincerity of this futile and fraudulent exercise.

In the short term, this summer's protests have strengthened the hands of the Kashmir separatists, who until recently were in political decline, and not only because of the Indian government's ruthless suppression of the armed insurgency against Indian rule. Many Kashmiris have been repelled by the communal and exclusivist politics of the insurgents and separatist political leaders, as well as by the advocacy by many of them of reactionary Islamic moral prescriptions.

Unprovoked insurgent attacks upon Hindu and Sikh civilians resulted in tens of thousands of Hindus and Sikhs fleeing the Kashmir Valley during the 1990s. This further contributed to the polarization of politics in the state along communal lines and provided the Indian elite with a means of legitimizing their repression before the broader Indian population.

The separatists have no positive program to meet the socioeconomic needs and democratic aspirations of the workers and toilers of Jammu and Kashmir and their brethren in Pakistani-held Azad Kashmir. Rather they seek the patronage of various capitalist powers with their own predatory interests, principally Pakistan and the US.

The waning of the insurgency in recent years was interpreted by the Indian ruling elite as an endorsement of their brutal policies in Kashmir. But in the summer of 2008—and again this summer, but on a much wider scale—the state has been rocked by mass protests that underscore the depth of popular alienation from Indian rule and anger over the repression meted out by security forces.

There have been calls from sections of the ruling elite for Abdullah's resignation, and indeed Abdullah himself publicly offered to resign after the UPA government refused his request for changes to the *Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act.*

But both Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi have continued to back Omar Abdullah as they see, from their viewpoint, no other political alternative. A resort to "president's" or central government rule would be an admission that Indian rule over Kashmir is contested at a time when the Indian elite fears Islamabad's attempt to press the US to intervene in the Kashmir dispute in exchange for the critical support Islamabad is giving the US in the Afghan War. Also, the Congress sees some benefit in having Abdullah, a native Kashmiri, assume day-to-day political responsibility for presiding over the repression.

The Congress party and the Nehru-Gandhi family that has long dominated its leadership have a long, tumultuous relationship with the Abdullah family and its National Conference. Nonetheless, they have frequently partnered.

As India's Prime Minister in the 1950s, Jawaharlal Nehru had Omar's grandfather Sheikh Abdullah, J&K's first Chief Minister, jailed for 11 years because he suspected him of harboring separatist sentiments.

In 1987 Congress Party Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (Nehru's grandson and the assassinated husband of current Congress boss Sonia Gandhi) and National Conference head Farooq Abdullah, the son of Sheik Abdullah and father of Omar Abdullah, arranged for the rigging of the state assembly elections. This action provoked mass protests and was a pivotal factor in the emergence of the insurgency two years later.

Farooq Abdullah is currently the Minister of New and Renewable Energy in the UPA government.

Despite 63 years of Indian bourgeois rule over Jammu and Kashmir, India's elite are no closer to finding a solution to the open wound that is Kashmir. The root cause of the Kashmir crisis is the communal division of the subcontinent—the outcome of a reactionary deal between British imperialism and the aspiring bourgeoisies of India and Pakistan to stabilize capitalist rule and suppress the mass anti-imperialist movement that had enveloped the subcontinent for three decades.

Like the eradication of landlordism and caste oppression and a host of other burning democratic questions, the unification of the Kashmiri people and establishment of relations of fraternity and equality between all the peoples of the subcontinent is realizable only through a united struggle of the workers of India, Pakistan and Kashmir against all sections of the bourgeoisie and for the Socialist United States of South Asia.

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