

Indian troops kill dozens of protesters in Kashmir

Kranti Kumara
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In an unrelenting campaign of mass repression, Indian military and paramilitary forces have repeatedly fired on civilian protesters for the past week in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the country's northernmost and only Muslim-majority state.

The official death toll, as of this writing, is 39, with young people between the ages of 16 and 26 accounting for almost all the dead. A further two thousand people have been injured, with some sustaining crippling and even life-threatening injuries.

Despite this savage state violence and the imposition of blanket curfews in many areas, large numbers of Kashmiris have continued to come onto the streets.

This latest bout of anti-Indian government protests erupted in the aftermath of the cornering and killing of Burhan Muzaffar Wani—the 22-year-old commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), a Kashmiri separatist and Islamist group—by Indian troops Friday, July 8.

Partly as a reaction against decades of state repression and violence, Kashmir has been convulsed for more than a quarter-century by an insurgency mounted by groups calling either for an independent Kashmir or its merger into Pakistan.

The past week of mass protests in Kashmir has rattled India's government, which is currently led by Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as it has once again exposed Kashmiri Muslims' deep disaffection with the Indian state.

By the beginning of this week, Home Minister Rajnath Singh felt compelled to postpone a visit to the US, while Modi's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, cut short his participation in Modi's four-country Africa trip to return to New Delhi to "take stock" of the situation.

Pakistan, which has manipulated the Kashmir insurgency as part of its reactionary geo-political conflict with India, has lauded the dead separatist leader as a "freedom fighter," accused India of state terrorism, and intensified its efforts to "internationalize" its 69 year-long dispute with India over control of Kashmir.

As the fatalities mounted in Jammu and Kashmir this week, Islamabad approached the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and the European Union calling on them to intervene to stop what it cynically termed human rights atrocities in Kashmir.

On Thursday, India's UN ambassador responded with a blistering denunciation, in which he indicted Pakistan as a state that "uses terrorism as state policy," "extols the virtues of terrorists," and "provides sanctuary to U.N.-designated terrorists."

In a move that will undoubtedly enflame the already fraught relations between the rival nuclear-armed states, Pakistan's government proclaimed Wani a "martyr" on Friday and announced that the country will observe a "black day over violence in Kashmir" next Tuesday.

Western governments have refrained from criticizing the Indian government's repression in Kashmir. The Obama administration essentially gave the Modi government a greenlight to continue using lethal force against civilians. On Tuesday, the US State Department publicly declared the disturbances in Kashmir to be "an internal matter of India," although the Kashmir dispute has officially been before the UN since the late 1940s. Later in the week Washington issued a pro forma call for talks between New Delhi and Islamabad.

The US's blithe reaction to the state repression in Jammu and Kashmir is a further sign of Washington's downgrading of its traditional alliance with Pakistan so as to consolidate an Indo-US "global strategic partnership" and integrate India into its anti-China "Pivot to Asia." Recently, the Modi government finalized an agreement allowing the Pentagon to make routine use of Indian military bases and ports for refuel and resupply.

The Indian government has a long history of using deadly violence against civilians in Jammu and Kashmir. Half-a-million heavily armed Indian troops and para-militaries are currently deployed in the state, which has a population of less than 14 million. Under the "Indian Armed Forces

(Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act” (AFSPA) they have sweeping police powers and legal immunity from prosecution. Under this blanket legal protection, Indian security forces have committed atrocious crimes with impunity over the past two decades, including summary executions, rape, arbitrary arrests and “disappearances.”

The anger of the Kashmiri population is not just directed at India’s BJP government, but also at J&K Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti, whose People’s Democratic Party (PDP) rules the state in a shaky political alliance with the Hindu-communist BJP.

A party of Kashmir’s Muslim elite that seeks “self-rule,” the PDP unexpectedly struck a coalition deal with the BJP after state assembly elections in December 2014 produced a highly-fractured result. A traditional also-ran in J&K elections, the BJP made gains in the 2014 assembly elections in Jammu, where the state’s non-Muslim population is concentrated, using rank communal appeals.

It was Mehbooba’s father, PDP-founder Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, who played the chief role in stitching together a marriage of convenience with the BJP. Sayeed justified this alliance by claiming that the BJP had agreed to a “common minimum program” that would bring “peace, prosperity and economic development”. He subsequently became the state’s Chief Minister, only to be replaced by his daughter after his death last December.

Predictably, the promises of peace and economic development have proven hollow. Mass unemployment and poverty remain endemic and the central government and Indian military have refused to repeal or make any substantive changes to the AFSPA.

In the meantime, the Modi government has whipped up anti-Muslim communalism. This has included: venerating the 20th Century *Hindutva* ideologue V.D. Savarkar, who declared India’s Muslims to be outside the Indian nation; encouraging BJP-led state governments to outlaw beef-eating; and excusing and covering up for anti-Muslim communal violence perpetrated by the BJP’s Hindu nationalist allies.

So deep and widespread is the anger of the Kashmiri masses towards the PDP for its alliance with the BJP that very few people turned up for Sayeed’s funeral.

By contrast, tens of thousands, especially young people, came out on the streets to mourn Wani. Under conditions where there is no progressive opposition to the rule of the Indian bourgeoisie, a section of alienated Kashmiri Muslim youth were attracted by Wani’s daring defiance of the Indian government and its security forces. Wani regularly used social media, including video and Facebook posts, to promote the communalist separatist and pro-Pakistan politics of the Hizbul Mujahideen. Unlike other insurgents, he did

not cover his face.

In the days that followed Wani’s funeral, protests engulfed wide parts of J&K including the state’s summer capital, Srinagar, and the Anantnag, Kulgam, Shopian, Pulwama and Doda districts. Angered by the brutality of the security forces, protesters attacked police stations, government offices and other signs of government authority.

Adding insult to injury, the security forces have boasted they are using “non-lethal” or “less-lethal” pellet guns to reduce fatalities. In reality the pellets, which form an explosive spray when fired, are inflicting horrific casualties, with scores suffering wounds to their eyes.

Indian authorities claim Burhan Wani died in a gun battle. But much of the local population believe he was hunted down, captured and then summarily executed, since for decades this has been the standard practice of Indian forces when dealing with Kashmiri separatists.

The horror that is contemporary Kashmir is the outcome of the reactionary 1947 communal partition of South Asia into an explicitly Muslim state of Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India—a crime carried out jointly by the Indian National Congress of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the Muslim League, and the subcontinent’s departing British colonial overlords. Partition precipitated mass communal violence in which more than a million people died; resulted in some 14 million people fleeing from one state to the other; institutionalized communalism in South Asia’s state structure, fueling the incendiary strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan that continues to this day; and led, soon after, to the partition of Kashmir into Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistani-occupied Azad Kashmir and the enforced division of the Kashmiri people.

Only an independent movement of the Kashmiri working class in an organic political partnership with their class brothers and sisters in India and Pakistan and animated by a socialist perspective can find a way out of the historic impasse created by Partition and seven decades of the reactionary rule of the Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisies.



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