

Indian government threatens to end citizenship for millions of Assam residents

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India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government is threatening to eliminate the citizenship rights of millions of residents in the north-eastern state of Assam. The anti-democratic attack is in line with the BJP's communalist program.

Over 32 million people in Assam recently submitted documents to the National Register of Citizens (NRC) as required under the Assam Accord rules. When the NRC figures were released on July 30, over 4 million residents had been removed from the official list. The figure was confirmed by India's Registrar General and Census Commissioner Shri Sailesh.

The Assam Accord was signed 33 years ago in 1985 by then Indian Prime Minister and Congress Party leader Rajiv Gandhi. It followed lengthy negotiations with the anti-immigrant All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP).

AASU and AAGSP had conducted six years of violent protests, known as the Assam Agitation, against so-called "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh, which shares a 4,096 km border with the Indian state. Migrants were accused of "plundering resources" and "taking jobs" from Assam residents. Over 1,800 people, mainly poor Muslim immigrants were killed in violent racist attacks by chauvinist mobs.

Under the Assam Accord, only those able to provide documents proving that they or their families had lived in India before March 24, 1971—the year that neighbouring Bangladesh declared independence—were recognised as Assam citizens. Anyone entering the state after that date is classified as a foreigner.

While Assam is rich in natural resources—minerals, petroleum and forestry—poverty and unemployment is widespread as the Indian and local elites have siphoned off much of the wealth of the state. Under these

conditions, the BJP and other communal organisations have whipped up anti-immigrant attacks to divide working people. Considerable state resources, including over 100,000 government personnel, were allocated to the disenfranchisement project.

Widespread anger and concern engulfed Assam when the NRC list was published last month with tens of thousands of villagers rushing to government centres and Internet booths to get their documents verified.

The NRC figures were uploaded to a government website but many in remote areas do not have access to the Internet and were forced to travel to government offices and booths to determine their citizenship status. Fearing the eruption of anti-government protests, soldiers were mobilised to guard these facilities.

While bureaucratic bungling saw the exclusion of some hereditary Hindus and other long-standing Assam residents, those eliminated from the NRC lists are mainly Muslims. Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh claimed the registration process was impartial but the BJP is whipping up Hindu chauvinism, not just in Assam state, where it also holds power, but throughout India.

During the 2014 general election campaign, Narendra Modi—the BJP's prime ministerial candidate—promised to deport "Bangladeshis" from India. "You can write it down," he told an April campaign meeting. "After May 16 [polling day], these Bangladeshis better be prepared with their bags packed."

After coming to power, the BJP boosted the country's anti-immigrant infrastructure and introduced the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016, to grant automatic citizenship to Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh. The legislation is pending in the Indian parliament.

Attempting to calm the tense political situation in

Assam, the Indian government declared that names can be resubmitted with documents between August 30 and September 28 or appeals made to a so-called foreigners' tribunal.

Indian Home Minister Singh told the media that there was no need for anxiety or fear and that "those whose names are missing can re-submit their papers." Registrar General and Census Commissioner Sailesh said, "There is no question of anyone being taken to detention centres or foreigners' tribunals."

Such reassurances are worthless. Assam residents have no idea what will happen and, according to *quint.com*, there are already over 2,000 people at six state detention centres.

Will those excluded from the NRC list be deported from India? Will they have any political rights in India? Can they remain in the places they currently live or will they be incarcerated in immigration concentration camps? All these questions hang over the heads of four million people in Assam.

Nur Banu, a 45-year-old woman from Darrang district, said: "Although we have been told that we can apply once again to get our names enlisted in the citizenship list, we are worried about our future." All six members of her family were missing from the list.

The opposition Congress party is attempting to exploit the fears of Assam's Muslim minority. Assam state leader of Congress Ripun Bora cynically declared that the BJP was "trying to isolate Muslims" and "we are going to fight it out."

In fact, the reactionary 1985 Assam Accord, which agreed to disenfranchise so-called "illegal" immigrants, was negotiated and signed by Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government.

The Accord and the NRC procedures, which constitute a fundamental attack on the democratic rights of millions of Assam residents, further underscores the thoroughly reactionary character of the 1947 partition which divided the Indian subcontinent along communal lines. The partition was developed by the departing British imperialist rulers with the active support of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, and endorsed by the Stalinist Communist Party of India.

All these organisations bear political responsibility for the social and political crimes that still persist in both countries. The unresolved tasks of the democratic revolution that lie at the root of the communal carnages

in India can only be addressed by the working class rallying the oppressed masses on the basis of a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program to put an end to the capitalist system and establish the United Socialist States of South Asia.



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