

India's Hindu supremacist government abrogates Kashmir's autonomy

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India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government illegally stripped Jammu and Kashmir, the country's only Muslim-majority state, of its special constitutional status Monday, and split it into two Union Territories. One is comprised of the Jammu and Kashmir divisions of the now abolished state, and the other of the sparsely populated, but geostrategically significant, Ladakh region.

Through actions that are tantamount to a constitutional coup, the Indian state has not just abrogated the broad autonomy that Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) enjoyed—at least on paper—under articles 370 and 35 (A) of the Indian constitution. The new governments of the bifurcated state have been given a status inferior to that of the Indian Union's remaining 28 states, enabling New Delhi to exercise wide powers over the territories' affairs in perpetuity.

Monday's actions have explosive international and domestic ramifications. They will further inflame tensions with Pakistan, and constitute a further stage in the Indian ruling elite's turn toward authoritarian forms of rule and the promotion of Hindu communal reaction.

Fearing mass popular opposition to its actions, the BJP government has poured tens of thousands of additional troops into Jammu and Kashmir, cut off internet, cell phone and landline access across much of the region, including in Srinagar, J&K's summer capital, and arrested prominent opposition politicians. As of midnight yesterday, several districts, including Srinagar and Jammu, have been placed under Section 144 of the Criminal Code, meaning all gatherings of more than four people are prohibited.

Kashmir and the Indo-Pakistani military-strategic rivalry

Control over the territories that comprised the former British Indian princely state of Jammu and Kashmir has been at the center of the reactionary military-strategic rivalry between New Delhi and Islamabad since the 1947 communal partition of South Asia, into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

As a result of the 1947-48 Indo-Pakistani war, Jammu and Kashmir was itself partitioned, splitting South Asia's Kashmiri-speaking population between Indian-administered J&K and Pakistani-held Azad ("Free") Kashmir. Ever since, both countries have vowed to "reclaim" the part of Jammu and Kashmir held by the other.

The abrogation of J&K's legal autonomy and its full "integration" into the Indian Union are aimed at demonstrating New Delhi's resolve to end the Indo-Pakistani conflict on its terms and to force a quick and

bloody end to the anti-Indian insurgency that has convulsed the state for the past three decades. Successive Indian governments—whether headed by the Congress Party, the BJP, or a "Third Front" of casteist and regional parties—have responded to the insurgency with massive state violence, including disappearances and summary executions of alleged insurgents and widespread torture of civilians. With more than half a million Indian army troops and paramilitaries in a state with a population of just 14 million, the mobilization of the repressive forces of the Indian state in Kashmir has been justly compared to that of Israeli security forces on the West Bank.

Pakistan, for its part, has sought to manipulate the mass alienation from New Delhi among the Muslims of the Kashmir Valley to further its own reactionary agenda. This has included sidelining secular Kashmiri nationalists, while providing arms and other logistical support to Islamist anti-Indian Kashmiri insurgents.

In 2016, two years after Narendra Modi and his BJP came to power in New Delhi, a new wave of mass protests erupted in J&K. The BJP government's response was twofold: to order a vicious crackdown, which left over a hundred dead and thousands of protesters, the overwhelming majority of them young people, blinded; and to ratchet up tensions with Pakistan. First in September 2016 and again this February, the Modi government ordered military strikes inside Pakistan in what it claimed was retaliation for Pakistan-supported terrorist attacks. The latter "surgical strike" resulted in a Pakistani counterattack and a dogfight over disputed Kashmir that brought South Asia's nuclear-armed rivals the closest they have been to all-out war since 1971.

Islamabad has condemned India's tightened control over J&K, saying no "unilateral" step by New Delhi can alter its "disputed status, as enshrined in United Nations Security Council resolutions," and is vowing to push back. As "party to this international dispute," declared a tersely worded Foreign Ministry statement, Pakistan "will exercise all possible options to counter [India's] illegal steps."

Subsequently, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary summoned the Indian High Commissioner (ambassador) and handed him what Islamabad characterized as a strong *démarche*, that "conveyed Pakistan's unequivocal rejection of these illegal actions as they are in breach of international law and several UN Security Council resolutions."

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, meanwhile, urged all parties to "exercise restraint," according to his spokesman, Stéphane Dujarric. Dujarric added that a UN Military Observer Group "has observed and reported an increase in military activity" along the Line of Control that separates Indian and Pakistani-held Kashmir.

Rewriting the constitution by executive fiat

The domestic implications of the BJP government's actions are no less incendiary.

J&K was stripped of its special status, dismembered and transformed into two Union territories through a presidential order, that illegally excised some sections of the constitution and rewrote others, and through two motions rammed through parliament Monday in a matter of hours.

Prior to yesterday, the constitution stated that Article 370 could only be abrogated with the “concurrence of the Government of the State of Jammu and Kashmir.” But by executive fiat, India's BJP government, which suspended the state's elected legislature in June 2018 and since then has been ruling J&K via the central government-appointed governor, changed this to read with the “concurrence” of the governor—that is with the “concurrence” of its own local satrap. So much for the democratic will of the people of Jammu-Kashmir!

Not only were the people of the state not consulted. Up until the very moment Monday that the BJP launched its constitutional coup, the government was publicly insisting no moves to change J&K's constitutional status were imminent. It claimed that the deployment of thousands of additional troops to the state and cancellation of the annual Hindu pilgrimage to the Amarnath cave shrine were in response to threats from Pakistan-backed insurgents.

Abrogation of J&K's autonomy and its full “integration” into the Indian Union are longstanding demands of the Hindu right wing and an integral part of its push to transform the officially secular Indian Republic into a “Hindu Rashtra” (state).

A further motivation for the BJP government's constitutional coup against Jammu and Kashmir is to whip up communal reaction and bellicose Indian nationalism under conditions where India's economy is beset by multiple crises—including falling consumer demand, widespread agrarian distress, and a banking sector weighed down by bad corporate loans—and where social opposition, especially within the working class, is growing.

As intended, ultranationalist and outright fascist forces like the RSS and Shiv Sena took to the streets to hail the BJP's stripping of special status and statehood from what hitherto has been India's only Muslim-majority state.

The government's illegal powerplay also won the backing of broad sections of the ostensible opposition, underscoring the strong support within Indian ruling circles for a drive, no matter how reckless, to assert Indian hegemony in South Asia. Those supporting Modi's “surgical strike” on the constitution included the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Biju Janata Dal, (BJD) and Telugu Desam Party (TDP).

“Far-reaching and dangerous consequences”

The leaders of the two pro-Indian parties of Kashmir's Muslim elite issued statements warning that Monday's actions will only fuel separatist sentiment. Mehbooba Mufti, whose PDP headed a BJP-supported coalition government in J&K until the spring of 2018, tweeted, “Unilateral decision of GOI (Government of India) to scrap Article 370 is illegal & unconstitutional, which will make India an

occupational force in J&K. It will have catastrophic consequences for the subcontinent.”

Omar Abdullah, the head of the National Conference and like Mufti a former J&K chief minister, said the BJP's actions were “a total betrayal of the trust that that the people of Jammu and Kashmir had reposed in India ... and will have far-reaching and dangerous consequences.”

The Modi government responded to the comments of Mufti and Abdullah by ordering their arrest.

The Congress Party, which has its own long history of violating the rights of and brutally suppressing the Kashmiri people, denounced the BJP's rewriting of the constitution as “illegal,” and joined the West Bengal-based Trinamool Congress in charging that the central government was arrogating the right to change the powers and borders of India's states at will.

“We anticipated a misadventure,” said senior Congress leader P. Chidambaram, “but did not think in our wildest dreams that they will take such a catastrophic step. Today is a black day in the constitutional history of India.”

The Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India—similarly denounced the BJP's actions as an attack on the constitution and the rights of the states, without issuing any warning that the promotion of communal reaction and assault on democratic rights is above all directed against India's workers and toilers. An integral part of the Indian establishment for decades, the Stalinist CPM and CPI have aided and abetted the growth of the Hindu right by suppressing the class struggle and harnessing the working class to the Congress and other rightwing parties, committed to neoliberal reform and a “strategic partnership” with Washington.

The Congress speaks for those sections of the ruling class that fear the BJP's stoking of communalism and increasing open break with legal-constitutional norms could reap a whirlwind at home, while doing damage to India's stature and legal claim to Kashmir abroad.

The Modi government, however, calculates that its provocative steps in Kashmir and incitement of communal reaction will occasion no more than handwringing from the Western powers—and above all US imperialism—which are assiduously promoting India as a military-strategic counterweight to China. According to news reports, New Delhi is on the verge of signing the third and final of three “foundational” documents with Washington providing the framework for joint Indo-US military operations. India has already agreed to open its military bases for use by US warplanes and battleships.



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