

To enforce Monday's constitutional coup

# India dramatically intensifies repression in Kashmir

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India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is mounting an unprecedented military-security crackdown in the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region to quell popular opposition to the patently illegal changes that it has made to the region's government and relations with the central government.

In what is tantamount to a constitutional coup, the BJP government issued a presidential order early Monday morning stripping Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), India's only Muslim-majority state, of the special semi-autonomous status it has had since independent India's constitution came into force in 1950. It then ordered J&K bifurcated, hiving off the sparsely populated but strategically important Ladakh area, and proclaimed that Ladakh and the remainder of J&K will henceforth comprise two Union Territories, with significantly diminished powers. In effect, J&K has been placed under the legal-political thumb of New Delhi and its stridently Hindu communalist government.

Underscoring the BJP government's reactionary antidemocratic aims, these changes were conceived in secret and implemented by stealth, in a conspiracy orchestrated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his henchman, Home Secretary Amit Shah, and the country's president, Ram Nath Kovind, himself a long-time cadre of the far-right Hindu chauvinist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), together with the most senior members of the state bureaucracy and the army and intelligence agencies.

Not only were the people of Jammu and Kashmir not forewarned and their elected representatives not consulted about the impending changes. India's so-called supreme law was modified behind the backs of the entire population, including the most senior leaders of the opposition and the BJP's own allies in the governing National Democratic Alliance. To provide a pseudo-democratic cover for this conspiracy, the BJP subsequently had parliament pass two motions endorsing the changes to J&K's constitutional status, borders and government, but even then debate was limited to just a few hours.

## Kashmir under a state of siege

In the weeks prior to Monday's coup, the BJP government poured tens of thousands of additional troops into J&K under the pretext that Pakistan-supported anti-Indian insurgents were poised to launch a major strike.

Since Monday, the J&K region has been subject to a military-security lockdown that is unprecedented even within the context of the anti-Indian insurgency that has convulsed the region and exacerbated Indo-Pakistani tensions since 1989.

Indian authorities have cut off all internet, cell and landline phone and

regular television service. Schools have been shut down, and much of J&K has been placed under Section 144, a British colonial criminal code provision under which all gatherings of four or more people are illegal. At least a hundred prominent political leaders, including the foremost spokesmen of the traditional pro-Indian section of J&K's Muslim elite, have been arrested. These include two former J&K chief ministers—People's Democratic Party leader Mehbooba Mufti and J&K National Conference head Omar Abdullah—and the chairman of the J&K People's Conference, Sajjad Gani Lone.

An eye-witness report published yesterday by the pro-BJP *Indian Express* gives a chilling description of the current situation in Srinagar, J&K's largest city: "The (Kashmir) Valley's connection with the inside and the outside world has been cut... Residents are not allowed outside their neighbourhoods. The administration hasn't issued curfew passes to even its own employees, and security personnel don't accept government IDs as passes.

"The press isn't welcome. Most of the TV crew that have flown in are parked in a 1-sq-km area of Zero Bridge in the city... [M]ost government buildings, schools, colleges, courts have been occupied by paramilitary forces flown from outside the state... Roads are closed ... and daily essentials are drying up across homes."

The three authors of the *Indian Express* report acknowledge that those to whom they have been able to speak, including government employees, are overwhelmingly opposed to the Indian state's actions and fear that they are aimed at "changing the demography of Jammu and Kashmir" so as to "reduce the share of Muslims in the population."

## The geostrategic and domestic aims of Modi's constitutional coup

The BJP government's assault on Jammu and Kashmir has multiple aims.

First, it is meant to signal that New Delhi is determined to bring a quick end to the Kashmir insurgency on its terms, and that, to do so, it is ready to dispense with legal-constitutional norms and intensify the "dirty war"—replete with "disappearances" and summary executions—which the Indian state has waged in J&K for the past 30 years.

A second, related aim is to strengthen New Delhi's hand vis-à-vis both Pakistan and China. The "constitutional strike" the Modi government has mounted on Kashmir complements the air strikes it ordered deep inside Pakistan in late February, ostensibly in response to a Pakistan-supported terrorist attack. That strike and a subsequent retaliatory Pakistani air raid on J&K brought South Asia's rival nuclear-armed powers the closest they

have been to all-out war since 1971.

By “fully integrating” J&K into the Indian Unions—despite its internationally recognized status as a disputed territory—New Delhi is announcing that it will no longer entertain Pakistan’s calls for J&K’s status to be part of any “peace dialogue” between Islamabad and New Delhi.

“The Modi government has taken a risky but much needed step in the long-term interest of the country,” wrote former Indian Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal in the *Hindustan Times*. “Now, there is no scope for discussing the ‘outstanding issue’ of Kashmir with Pakistan in any ‘comprehensive’ dialogue, which means that the likelihood of any resumption of dialogue to normalise relations has receded further. Pakistan has been outflanked by India.”

Meanwhile, India has provocatively reiterated its own claim to sovereignty over “Azad Kashmir,” the part of the former British Indian princely state of Jammu and Kashmir currently controlled by Pakistan. Jammu and Kashmir came to be divided as a part of the 1947-48 communal partition of South Asia into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. Ever since, the Kashmir dispute has been at the center of the reactionary strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan—a rivalry that has led to four wars and countless border skirmishes and war crises.

Modi, since coming to power in 2014, has made clear that he is determined to “change the rules of the game” with Pakistan and is ready to court war to do so. He has surrounded himself with officials known for supporting “bold” steps against Pakistan. Shortly before being named Modi’s national security advisor, Ajit Doval called for India to respond to any future large-scale terror attack from Pakistan by dismembering Pakistan. “You do one more Mumbai,” Doval declared, “you lose Balochistan.”

The changes in J&K are also aimed at China. Publicly, the BJP government has justified separating Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir by pointing to its ethno-linguistic composition. (The majority of the population in Leh, one of its two administrative districts, speak Ladakhi, a Tibetan language, and are Buddhist.) But even much of the Indian media concedes this argument is a transparent ruse.

Ladakh—which borders Pakistan to the northwest and China’s Tibet and Xinjiang “autonomous regions” to the east—has repeatedly been on the front lines of India’s wars, border clashes and border standoffs with both Pakistan and China.

By splitting off Ladakh, and, in contradistinction to the new Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, denying it even an elected assembly or elected territorial government, New Delhi is giving the Indian military the widest berth possible under India’s current constitution to carry out its operations free from any public scrutiny.

Shortly after the changes in Ladakh’s status were made public, Beijing denounced them, pointedly noting that the region is part of its unresolved border dispute with India. New Delhi replied by denouncing Beijing’s interference in its “internal affairs” and repeating Home Secretary Amit Shah’s declaration from earlier in the day that India holds fast to its claim on all the territories of the defunct princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. This includes the Aksai Chin region, bordering Ladakh, which Pakistan transferred to China as part of a 1963 agreement.

A third key aim of the BJP-led, Indian state-implemented constitutional coup is to whip up Hindu communalism and bellicose nationalism so as to intimidate and split the working class and mobilize the most reactionary forces in Indian society behind an intensified push for pro-investor “reforms” and a more aggressive pursuit of the Indian elite’s great power ambitions. Abrogation of J&K’s special constitutional status and its “full integration” into the Indian Union have been key demands of the Hindu right for decades, and are an intrinsic part of their project to transform India into a Hindu *rashtra*, or state.

India’s ruling elite has, for the most part, rallied behind the state assault on Jammu and Kashmir, even while conceding that it is a “roll of the dice,” fraught with risk. The opposition Congress Party initially came out against J&K’s legal-constitutional subjugation. But soon a raft of senior figures, including Jyotiraditya Scindia, who is widely considered a front-runner to succeed Rahul Gandhi as Congress Party president, declared they stood “in the country’s interest” with the BJP on this issue.

A host of regional and caste-based parties have also voiced their support, including the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which postures as the political voice of India’s Dalit (ex-Untouchable) minority.

At most, the BJP’s running roughshod over the constitution to realize one of the foundational demands of the Hindu right has caused handwringing in some of the liberal press. Typical was the comment of Sanjaya Baru, a political and strategic commentator and former secretary general of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FCCI). “While the BJP,” said Baru, “may have had its own political reasons to take the steps it took this week, the Indian state too has its reasons. Having exhausted soft options, a hard solution has been opted for. It is significant that most political parties, including many senior leaders of the Congress, have backed the government’s action. They are not necessarily defending the government but are defending the interests of the Indian state.”

## Rumblings of war

While India’s moves in Jammu and Kashmir can only inflame relations with Pakistan, heightening tensions in a region that came close to cascading into war less than six months ago, the reaction from Western governments, beginning with the US, has been subdued. On Monday, Washington issued a formalistic appeal for calm on all sides.

A key calculation of India in its drive to establish itself as South Asia’s regional hegemon is that Washington, Japan and the European Union are all looking to it to serve as a military-strategic counterweight to China. In exchange for “strategic favours” from Washington, including access to advanced weaponry and acknowledgment of New Delhi’s leading role in policing the Indian Ocean, India under Modi has dramatically increased Indo-US military-strategic cooperation to the point that India is increasingly serving as a front line state in the US military-strategic confrontation with China.

Yesterday, in response to India’s provocative steps in Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan expelled the Indian ambassador, High Commissioner Ajay Bisaria, suspended bilateral trade and further downgraded relations with India. Earlier, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan said that with the abrogation of J&K’s autonomy, an attack on Indian security forces like that in Pulwama in Indian-held Kashmir last February is “bound to happen,” while repeating Islamabad’s denials of any involvement in the Pulwama bomb blast. The Modi government, with US backing, cited the Pulwama attack as justification for its reckless air strikes inside Pakistan.

“I can already predict this will happen,” Khan said in an address to Pakistan’s parliament Tuesday. “They will attempt to place the blame on us again. They may strike us again, and we will strike back.”



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