Protests across India against new Hindu chauvinist Citizenship Act

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Protests have erupted across India against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019 which the ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rammed through parliament in just four days last week.

Dressed up as a "humanitarian" gesture, the CAA is yet another provocation initiated by the BJP and its ideological mentors in the shadowy RSS to assert that India is first and foremost a "Hindu nation"—one in which Muslims are "tolerated," but only in so far as they accept Hindu supremacy.

The CAA extends citizenship rights to all non-Muslims—Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians–who migrated to India from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan before 2015.

Muslim migrants from the three countries are conspicuously excluded, and will be treated like "termites," to use the words of Home Minister Amit Shah. Also excluded are all migrants from other countries in the region. This includes Sri Lankan Tamils and Rohingya from Myanmar, both of whom have been the targets of state persecution and communal violence.

Passage of the CAA is preparatory to the BJP realizing its plan to extend the National Register of Citizens (NRC) across India, thereby forcing all of the country's more than 1.3 billion residents to prove to the authorities' satisfaction that they are entitled to Indian citizenship. Muslims—who as a result of the two-pronged CAA-NRC attack will be uniquely threatened with being declared stateless and subject to internment and expulsion if they are unable to "prove" their citizenship—rightly fear that it will be used to intimidate, harass, and victimize them (see: India adopts Hindu supremacist citizenship law).

Beginning last Friday, there have been large-scale protests against the CAA in Delhi, India's capital and largest city, and parts of West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu, as well as smaller protests in states throughout the country. Today, Mamata Banerjee, West Bengal's chief minister and the head of the rightwing Bengal regionalist Trinamool Congress, is to lead a demonstration in Kolkata against both the CAA and NRC. Meanwhile, in the southern state of Kerala, the ruling Stalinist-led Left Democratic Front and the official opposition Congress Party-led United Democratic Front are to mount a series of joint protests.

On Friday and again on Sunday, the thousands who took to the streets of Delhi to protest against the CAA were set upon by police with *lathis* (batons) and tear gas. Violence erupted in south Delhi yesterday, when police blocked demonstrators' path. Police subsequently invaded the campus of Jamia Millia Islamia University (JMI), without permission, and, according to University Chief Proctor Waseem Ahmed Khan, beat up students and staff members. More than fifty protesters had to be treated, some for severe injuries, at a nearby hospital.

Delhi authorities have ordered all schools in southeast Delhi closed today. Earlier, in an attempt to defuse the situation and no doubt to curry favour with the government, the JMI administration had postponed end-of-term exams and ordered the university closed until early January.

Police also invaded the campus of Aligarh Muslim University in Aligarh, Utter Pradesh, Sunday evening after using tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets to disperse protesters. At least sixty students were injured. Early Friday, in response to an announcement from the Aligarh Muslim University student union that it would hold an anti-CAA protest, district authorities had shut down internet service and placed Aligarh under Section 144 of the Criminal Code, thereby criminalizing any gathering of more than four people.

There have also been large protests in Gaya and Patna, the two largest cities in the eastern Indian state of Bihar. The JD (U), which leads the Bihar state government and is a close ally of the BJP, supported passage of the CAA. But in the face of a public outcry, it is now claiming to oppose extending the NRC to Bihar.

In West Bengal, which has a large Muslim minority, there have been violent protests, expressing popular outrage over the latest BJP provocation. On Saturday, protesters blocked motorways and attacked several trains and train stations. The authorities have suspended internet services in parts or all of five districts: Howrah, which lies on the outskirts of Kolkata, Malda, Murshidabad, North 24 Parganas, and parts of South 24 Parganas.

In Chennai and other cities in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu there were also anti-CAA protests. These denounced both the law's discriminatory exclusion of Muslims and its denial of citizenship rights to Tamils who fled the Sri Lankan state's anti-Tamil war and its ongoing Sinhala-chauvinist policies. More

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than 100 protesters were detained in the city of Salem.

There have also been widespread protests in the northeast state of Assam, although these have been of an ethno-chauvinist character, attacking the CAA, for granting citizenship to Hindus born in Bangladesh and their descendants.

At a rally last Friday, Samujjal Bhattacharya, the chief adviser to the All Assam Students Union, the group that has been leading the anti-CAA agitation, denounced Modi for "betraying" his promise to "deport all illegal immigrants." "He did not send back a single illegal Bangladeshi," Bhattachary complained. "Instead he is now welcoming them."

The Indian state has responded to the protests in Assam with its characteristic brutality, including using lethal force and taking more than 2,000 people into preventive detention. At least four people have died from security force bullets. A fifth person, an oil truck driver, was reportedly killed by protesters. Late Sunday, authorities announced that order had been sufficiently restored in the state capital, Guwahati, to "relax" a blanket curfew between 6am and 9pm.

The Assamese ethno-chauvinists have been able to exploit widespread anger over chronic poverty and mass joblessness. For decades, the Indian bourgeoisie and a small local elite have drained wealth from the state, which is rich in natural resources, while leaving Assam largely undeveloped.

Modi and his BJP have responded to the protests against their Hindu supremacist CAA with rabid denunciations of the opposition parties, accusing them of inciting violence and echoing India's archrival Pakistan. Dilip Gosh, the head of the BJP's West Bengal state unit, vowed his party would bring people into the streets to oppose "Bangladeshi Muslim violence." "Backed by the Trinamool Congress," ranted Gosh, "Bangladeshi infiltrator Muslims are indulging in anti-national activities in West Bengal. It's unprecedented. What's more shocking is that the police have not arrested anybody."

Facing a rapidly deteriorating economic situation and growing popular opposition, especially from the working class, the Modi government is pressing forward with its drive to transform India into a Hindu *rasthra* or state. It aims to mobilize its Hindu supremacist base as shock troops and use communalism to divert mounting social anger and frustration into reactionary channels, so as to intimidate and split the masses.

The Indian bourgeoisie rallied behind the BJP after the Indian economy faltered at the beginning of the decade, making the BJP under Modi its premier national party, with a share of power in a majority of states as well as control of the national government and presidency. Whilst some sections now wring their hands over the BJP's implementation of its longstanding Hindutva program, fearing Modi may soon reap a whirlwind, big business still clings to the Hindu "strongman," calculating that he is the best bet to assert its predatory interests on the world stage and push through social incendiary pro-investor "reforms."

Last week's enactment of the CAA has disrupted the Modi government's diplomatic calendar. Because of the open anti-Muslim and anti-Bangladeshi thrust of the CAB and NRC, Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abdul Momen and Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan were forced to cancel their respective visits to India last Thursday and Friday.

But so as not to antagonize India and jeopardize New Delhi's political support and investments, they did not mention the CAA as the reason their visits have been put off.

Modi was scheduled to hold an annual summit with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Guwahati over the past weekend, but it could not be held due to the ongoing anti-CAA protests. India had wanted to transfer the summit to another location, but Japan declined. It wanted to use the summit to highlight its investments in northeast India, a strategic region bordering China to the north, and which New Delhi and Tokyo are intent on making the linchpin of dramatically enhanced trade between India and southeast Asia.

The Modi government's CAA and plans to initiate a national NRC underscore the artificial and thoroughly reactionary character of the 1947 communal partition of the Indian subcontinent. With the support of the Indian National Congress and Muslim League, South Asia's departing British imperialist rulers, divided it into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a largely Hindu India in defiance of history, culture and economic logic.

The immediate impact of Partition was mass communal violence that left more than a million dead and uprooted close to 20 million from their homes. But more than that, it created a reactionary communal state system that has served as a means for imperialism to continue to dominate the region; given rise to reactionary inter-state rivalries that have led to numerous wars and wars crises and today threaten the region with a conflict fought with nuclear weapons between India and Pakistan; and has been used by South Asia's reactionary ruling elites to incite communalism and divide the masses.

The only way forward out of the social misery and reactionary cauldron of state, communal and caste divisions created by imperialism and the region's rival bourgeois elites is to unite the working class across the Indian subcontinent on an international socialist program.

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