

Indian state intensifies repression of mass protests against anti-Muslim citizenship law

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India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is intensifying its repression of the wave of protests that have erupted across India against its Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)—a discriminatory, anti-Muslim law rushed through Parliament in just three days earlier this month.

In several of India's largest states, including Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, BJP-led state governments have imposed state-wide bans on all public gatherings of more than four people, under a British colonial statute, Section 144 of the Criminal Code. This is meant not just to intimidate opponents of the CAA, but to legitimize violent police repression of any anti-CAA demonstration, rally or meeting. Indian authorities have also cut off internet and mobile phone services for days at a time for tens of millions of people, including in parts of the national capital region, Delhi.

To date, at least 25 people have died in the protests. They include an eight-year-old boy trampled to death by a stampede of protesters fleeing a violent police assault in Varanasi, the city and district for which Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the local MP.

Police shot and killed two people in Mangaluru, Karnataka, on Friday, while repressing anti-CAA protests. One of the victims was a day-laborer who was bringing his children home from school.

Eighteen of the deaths have come from Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state and one of its most impoverished. All of these occurred since last Thursday, as police sought to quell the burgeoning opposition to the CAA and the Modi government.

Led by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a notorious Hindu supremacist under criminal indictment for inciting attacks on Muslims, Uttar Pradesh has gone the furthest of any state in illegalizing the opposition to the CAA. Last Thursday, it announced that it was placing the entire state and its 230 million people under Section 144 for the next 15 days.

According to an update supplied by the UP police yesterday, they have "bound down," that is taken into preventive detention, 5,400 people, and arrested more than 700 others. In an attempt to shift the blame for the violence and fatalities, police spokesman O.P. Singh said several hundred police have been injured in clashes with anti-CAA protesters. He even tried

to attribute the many protester gunfire-deaths to bullets supposedly shot at the police, but that went astray.

Modi and his BJP have cynically tried to dress up the CAA, which for the first time makes religion a criterion for determining Indian citizenship, as a humanitarian gesture. In fact it is a patently anti-Muslim measure and part of a broader scheme to place a question mark over the citizenship status and rights of all of India's more than 200 million Muslims.

The CAA effectively grants Indian citizenship to all non-Muslims who migrated or whose ancestors migrated to India from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh prior to 2015, ostensibly because they may have been victims of religious persecution. However, the same does not apply to people from minority Muslim sects that have also been targets of state repression and/or communal violence in these three countries, nor to the Rohingya, who were chased out of neighbouring Myanmar in 2017.

In fact, even as Modi and his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, boast about India providing a haven to Bangladeshi Hindus, the BJP government is detaining Rohingya refugees, whom it has labelled a "security risk," in camps and moving to expel them at the earliest opportunity.

The CAA is meant to pave the way for the government to establish a nationwide National Register of Citizens (NRC). Under the NRC, all of India's 1.3 billion people will have to document to the satisfaction of the BJP-led government that they are citizens. But, as a result of Muslims' exclusion from the CAA, only they will do so under the threat of being declared "stateless," losing their citizenship rights, and potentially being interned in detention camps or expelled.

In Assam, the only state hitherto subject to the NRC, Indian authorities have ruled 1.9 million people, most of them Indian-born Muslims, stateless.

The CAA and NRC are the latest in a long series of BJP provocations aimed at realizing the Hindu right's longstanding goal of transforming India into a Hindu *Rashtra* or state, in which Muslims and other minorities will have to defer to Hindu supremacy.

The sudden eruption of mass opposition to the CAA has surprised and shaken the BJP government. Muslim youth have been in the forefront of the protest movement. But it has

touched all parts of the country and cut across communal and caste lines, drawing Hindu, Sikh and Dalit youth and working people into the streets alongside their Muslim brethren.

The opposition parties, including the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's principal party of national government, and their Stalinist allies in the twin Communist parliamentary parties, are seeking to exploit the growing hostility to the BJP and to harness it to the reactionary framework of official politics. This includes boosting illusions that the Indian Supreme Court and other state institutions can be relied on as secular bulwarks against the BJP's Hindu communalism and authoritarianism. In fact, the Supreme Court, like the Congress Party, has a long record of capitulating to and conniving with the Hindu right and attacking democratic rights.

On Saturday, rail and road travel in Bihar, India's third most populous state, was crippled by an anti-CAA *bandh* called by the Rashtriya Lok Dal, a regionalist and caste-ist party that is the main opposition in the state legislature. Police reportedly detained more than 1500 people.

Yesterday, the Congress Party Chief Minister of Rajasthan, Ashok Gehlot, led a march against the new citizenship law of close to 300,000 people in the state capital, Jaipur.

Rajasthan and eight other state governments including those of West Bengal, Punjab, Kerala and Madhya Pradesh, have vowed that they will not implement the NRC. That the governments of Bihar and Odisha, which are led by BJP allies, have also felt compelled to declare their opposition to the NRC, after voting for the CAA in the national parliament, is a further indication of the widespread character of the opposition to the BJP government's Hindu supremacist agenda.

The BJP government is nonetheless insisting that it will go ahead with the NRC forthwith, and that any state that tries to block it will be violating the Constitution.

Yesterday, Modi gave a major address in Delhi, which has seen widespread anti-CAA protests.

Notwithstanding his own lifelong membership in the shadowy fascistic RSS and record of heinous communal crimes, including presiding over the 2002 anti-Muslim Gujarat pogrom as the state's chief minister, Modi claimed that India's Muslims have nothing to fear from the CAA.

He accused the Congress and "urban Naxals" of defaming the country and seeking to "push not only New Delhi but other parts of the country into a fear psychosis." "Urban Naxals" is a BJP smear term, meant to associate government opponents with the Maoist insurgency in highland jungle India, so as to justify their repression.

In an admission of the scope and scale of the unrest, Modi also charged the opposition of "trying every tactic to push me out of power."

Modi's rally was meant to kick off a BJP-RSS counter-offensive of press conferences, marches, and door-to-door campaigning through which it will seek to rally its fascist base.

The BJP government's Hindu chauvinist measures, including the CAA and NRC, are an attempt to whip up communal reaction and to split the working class and oppressed under conditions of growing opposition to the government's "pro-investor" policies and austerity measures and India's transformation, as the result of thirty years of neo-liberal reform, into one of the world's most unequal societies.

With India's economic situation going from bad to worse, both domestic and international capital are agitating for the Modi government to intensify its class-war assault. On a visit to India last week, the IMF's chief economist, Gita Gopinath, said the "extent of the slowdown of the Indian economy had surprised many, including us here at the IMF." She urged the government to reduce the budget deficit more quickly, even while diverting large sums to bailing out India's beleaguered banks, and to make it easier for businesses to lay off workers and acquire large parcels of land. "Politically," said Gopinath, "the time—early in the government's second term—is right for structural reform."

The Trump administration and the US political elite have said next to nothing about the latest communal and authoritarian actions of the Modi government, just as they have ignored the BJP government's constitutional coup against Jammu and Kashmir and the ongoing state-of-siege imposed on the disputed Muslim-majority region. This is because India is seen as critical to the US military-strategic offensive and war plans against China.

Last Wednesday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper met with their Indian counterparts, respectively S. Jaishankar and Rajnath Singh, in the second ever annual 2+2 meeting. They agreed to step up Indo-US strategic cooperation across the Indo-Pacific region, including through increased military cooperation between the Indian Navy and the US Indo-Pacific, Central and African Commands.



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