

India: Mass protests against Modi's anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act continue

Deepal Jayasekera**24 January 2020**

Mass protests against the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which India's Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government rushed into law last month, have now entered their sixth week.

Frequently defying brutal state repression, the protests have brought millions into the streets and touched all parts of India. While initially spearheaded by Muslim youth, the anti-CAA protests have cut across the religious-sectarian, ethno-linguistic, and caste divides long cultivated by India's ruling elite as a means of diverting social opposition and splitting the working class.

The CAA makes religion a criterion for determining citizenship for the first time in the history of postcolonial India. It effectively grants Indian citizenship to all immigrants from three predominantly Muslim countries—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan—who came, or whose ancestors came, to India before 2015, with the very conspicuous and calculated exception of Muslim immigrants.

The CAA's principal authors—Modi and his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah—intended it to set the stage for their sinister, communally motivated scheme for a National Register of Citizens (NRC), under which all India's 1.3 billion residents will have to prove to the authorities' satisfaction their entitlement to Indian citizenship.

Forced onto the back foot by the mass protests against the CAA, Modi and Shah have been forced to temporarily avow, despite their numerous previous public statements to the contrary, that they never said the NRC, currently confined to the northeastern state of Assam, would be extended nationwide.

To the government's consternation, life in the national capital, Delhi, continues to be perturbed by daily anti-CAA protests. For more than a month, a thousand protesters, most of them Muslim women, have been occupying a stretch of a main road that connects the capital with the satellite city of Noida, near to Shaheen Bagh, a working-class Muslim neighborhood. Every day hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of people from different faiths join the protest, and often take up the chant, "Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Issai—aapas mein hain bhaai bhaai," which means "Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians are brothers."

Police have tried to force an end to the occupation on the

grounds that it is blocking traffic. But the protesters remain defiant, allowing only school vehicles and ambulances to pass.

Students are also continuing to protest at Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi and Aligarh Muslim University in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, forcing the authorities to postpone scheduled examinations. In a bid to suppress the anti-CAA and anti-NRC protests, police invaded both universities on Dec. 15 and ran amuck assaulting students, dozens of whom had to be hospitalized.

The BJP, particularly through the BJP-led state governments in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, and Assam has responded to the groundswell of opposition to the CAA with brutal repression—including lethal violence, blanket bans on all public gatherings of more than four people, and suspensions of internet access. It has also lashed out against the protests, labelling them as "violent" and whipping up communal animosity, including with claims that the protesters are in cahoots with Pakistan.

The repression has been especially savage in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's most populous and one of its most impoverished states. Some 20 protesters have been killed in UP, most as the result of police gunfire.

In what is clearly preparation for a crackdown on the ongoing protests in Delhi, the BJP-appointed Lieutenant Governor of the National Capital Territory has given police the power, as of January 19, to detain individuals without charge under the draconian National Security Act, 1980. The authorities have tried to downplay their repressive designs, by claiming that the Delhi police are periodically given such powers.

Senior BJP leaders have repeatedly signaled that they are ready to use even greater repression.

UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has denounced anti-CAA protesters as "anti-nationals" and ordered police to seize the property of those who allegedly damaged public property during anti-CAA protests. Government opponents claim that under the cover of this order police are arbitrarily targeting better-off Muslims. On Wednesday, Adityanath said those who raise "azadi" slogans "like they used to be raised in Kashmir"—i.e. those who demand "freedom" and condemn the Indian state—will be treated as "treasonous" and face "stringent" government action.

Earlier, Dilip Ghosh, the president of the BJP's West Bengal

state unit, publicly chastised West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee “for not opening fire and ordering *lathi* (police-baton) charge” on those protesting against the CAA. “Our governments in Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Karnataka,” he went on to boast, “shot these people like dogs.”

After Ghosh’s remarks provoked a nationwide uproar, the BJP was compelled to disassociate itself from them. But even then, BJP officials could not contain themselves. BJP General Secretary Anil Jain said the BJP “does not agree” with Ghosh’s statements, but in the very next breath sought to explain them away, by saying they were “reactions” to “objectionable slogans and posters” against Modi and Adityanath.

Later Ghosh, who retains his post as the head of the BJP in India’s fourth most populous state, reiterated his incendiary attack on the anti-CAA protests, “I stick to my comments,” he declared, “I am not bothered about the criticism.”

The sudden eruption of mass opposition to the BJP government has given sections of the ruling elite pause. Especially the prospect—as underscored by the participation of tens of millions of workers and youth in a one-day general strike called by ten central labour federation unions to protest the Modi government’s “pro-market” economic policies and the CAA—that opposition to the BJP government’s communal agenda will intersect with a broader working-class upsurge

An editorial in *The Hindu* on January 14, titled “Unhelpful combativeness: On concerns about CAA,” urged Modi “to address the concerns about the CAA instead of (deliberately) misinterpreting them.”

The *Times of India*, the country’s largest English-language daily, is exhorting the BJP government to backtrack on elements of its Hindu communalist agenda and instead focus on pushing through a new wave of “Big Bang” reforms to attract global capital and pull India out of a steep economic downturn.

The Modi government, for its part, views the promotion of “Hindu supremacy” as key to mobilizing its Hindu communalist supporters against growing opposition, above all from the working class, and diverting social anger over mass unemployment, endemic poverty and ever-widening social equality behind reaction.

The opposition parties, beginning with the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie’s party of government, and various regional parties like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu and Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, are seeking to politically exploit the mass opposition to the BJP. While they posture as defenders of secularism, all have a history of conniving with the Hindu right and have implemented the bourgeoisie’s agenda—the transformation of India into a cheap-labour haven for global capital and the forging of an anti-China “global strategic partnership” with US imperialism.

The main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of

India (CPI)—are playing a particularly pernicious role. They are working to chain the mass opposition to the BJP government’s Hindu supremacist measures to the “secular” Congress and other rightwing bourgeois parties. They are also urging working people to oppose the BJP through the putrefying institutions of the capitalist state, like the Supreme Court, that have green-lighted sweeping attacks on worker and democratic rights, including the BJP’s August 2019 constitutional coup against Kashmir and its violent campaign for the building of a Hindu temple on the site of the razed Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya.

To fight against the Modi government and communal reaction, the Indian working class must consciously repudiate the politics of the Stalinist parties and their union affiliates, which in the name of opposing the BJP have suppressed the class struggle, including by supporting a succession of rightwing Congress-led governments. As the WSWS explained in its December 21 Perspective, “The struggle against communal reaction must be animated by a socialist internationalist perspective...

“It requires the intensification of class struggle. The working class must forge its political independence in opposition to the bourgeoisie and all its political representatives, and rally the rural poor and oppressed masses behind it in the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government, as part of the development of an international working-class offensive against world capitalism and imperialist war.”

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