

Modi government intensifies repression one year after its constitutional coup against Kashmir

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August 5 marked one year since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government illegally stripped Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), India's only Muslim-majority state, of its special, semi-autonomous status, under articles 370 and 35 (A) of the Indian constitution. At the same time, the BJP government bifurcated the state into two "union territories," J&K and Ladakh, effectively placing them under permanent central government control.

This anti-democratic move was carried out without forewarning by executive fiat in the middle of the night. It constituted both a frontal assault on the rights of the Kashmiri people, and a calculated geopolitical provocation, under conditions where the reactionary seven decades' old rivalry between India and Pakistan has been exacerbated by US imperialism's drive to harness New Delhi to its military-strategic offensive against China.

The coup against J&K was meant to demonstrate that New Delhi is determined to bring the three-decade long anti-Indian government insurgency in the Kashmir Valley and its dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir to an end entirely on its own terms. It was immediately followed by declarations from the Modi government that all the territories of the former British Indian princely state of Jammu and Kashmir now held by Pakistan are rightfully India's, and by statements from Indian military leaders that they stand ready to "liberate" them.

Last week, Pakistan's UN ambassador, Munir Akram, told the US magazine *Newsweek*, "The risk is real and present of a possible war between India and Pakistan."

Indian-held Kashmir's full incorporation into the Indian Union and its dismemberment were also directed at China. By transforming Ladakh, a remote region bordering China's strategically sensitive Aksai Chin region, into a Union territory and denying it even a token elected assembly, New Delhi has given itself a complete free hand to implement a major military buildup along its disputed Himalayan border with China.

In June, the heightened tensions over the border erupted in a clash in the Galwan Valley—which Beijing claims belongs to Aksai Chin and New Delhi to Ladakh—that left dozens dead. Both sides responded to their worst border confrontation in five decades by disavowing aggressive intentions. But they also rushed large numbers of troops, tanks, planes, and other war materiel to the border region.

Abrogation of J&K's special status was a longstanding demand of the RSS, the BJP's ideological mentor, and the Modi government's other Hindu communalist allies. A further aim of the August 5, 2019 coup against Kashmir was to whip up communalism and activate the

BJP's Hindu supremacist supporters under conditions where India's economy was already in a tailspin and opposition from the working class and rural poor was growing.

Anticipating mass opposition from the people of J&K, the Modi government coupled its constitutional coup with the imposition of a state-of-siege in a region that is home to more than 12 million people. It lasted well into 2020, and to a large degree continues to this day.

This included the deployment of tens of thousands of troops to what was already one of the world's most heavily militarized regions; the imposition of blanket curfews; the brutal suppression of any signs of opposition; the indefinite detention of thousands without trial; and the suspension of all cell phone and internet access.

So fearful was the BJP government of the potential for mass opposition that it even took most of the region's pro-Indian Muslim political elite, including three former chief ministers and dozens of elected officials, into preventive detention.

In May, the Home Ministry reported that 7,357 persons had been arrested in J&K since August 5, 2019. Although the majority have been released after suffering untold beatings and abuse, there are still at least hundreds, including minors, languishing in jails and prisons under "preventive detention." Many, if not most, are being held under the notorious Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), and the Public Security Act (PSA) under which a person can be imprisoned for up to two years without charge or trial.

Notwithstanding this sweeping repression, the Modi government feared that the first anniversary of its anti-Kashmir coup would trigger widespread protests. In the run up to August 5, Indian authorities deployed a further 10,000 heavily-armed paramilitary forces to the Kashmir Valley, re-erected barbed wire barriers in numerous towns and villages, imposed a near blanket curfew in Srinagar, the region's largest city from August 4-5, and once again severely restricted internet use and text messaging.

Despite the brutal repression, around 3,000 students from various universities across India participated in an online protest.

Big business, the corporate media, and the political establishment have given Modi their full support in his ruthless constitutional coup against the Kashmiri people, with even those few who dissented in the days immediately following the abrogation of J&K special status quickly falling silent.

Not only did the ruling elite applaud Modi's authoritarian actions as a means of asserting Indian dominance over an intractable Kashmir and strengthening New Delhi's hand against Islamabad and Beijing. They also saw Modi's draconian crackdown as useful in accustoming

the population to the arbitrary deployment of state power and suppression of basic democratic rights.

The Indian bourgeoisie's fear of working class opposition has only been intensified by the coronavirus pandemic, which all governments at the all-India and state levels have failed miserably to contain. After refusing to provide adequate assistance to tens of millions of impoverished workers during a hastily-imposed lockdown, which resulted in mass suffering and destitution, Modi has now pledged to undertake a "quantum leap" in pro-business reforms to attract foreign investment. This will inevitably result in a headlong collision between the working class and his government, which will seek to savagely enforce its anti-worker agenda by resorting to measures akin to those now used in Kashmir.

The ruling elite's endorsement of Modi's anti-democratic coup has been graphically illustrated by the Indian Supreme Court's approval of, and connivance in, the BJP's brutal state repression in Kashmir. For months, the Supreme Court delayed hearing a case filed by *Kashmir Times* editor Anuradha Bhasin against the state suspension of the internet and "strict restrictions on the freedom of movement of journalists and media personnel in Kashmir," arguing they violated constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press. First India's highest court admonished her to have "faith" in the claims of the BJP government and the security services that "normalcy" would soon be restored, then they countenanced all sorts of delays. Finally in January, the court issued a ruling that asserted there is a "democratic right" to the internet, but in the name of "state security" gave the government enormous latitude to violate it. (See: India's Supreme Court greenlights Modi government's internet shutdown in Kashmir)

Over the past year, de facto Indian military rule has converted the Kashmir Valley region into a giant prison mirroring the reality faced by the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip under the Zionist Israeli regime. Human rights abuses are endemic, with arbitrary arrests, torture and disappearances routine. Under the guise of hunting militants and insurgents, Indian troops frequently conduct raids in which they burst into villages in large numbers, terrorize the populace, and kill youth they suspect of giving aid to or being part of armed separatist groups.

All aspects of life including access to medical care and education and the ability to make a living have been severely impacted by the Modi government's cutoff of internet communication. Only the essentially useless low-speed 2G internet was restored in "phases" starting in the second week of January this year. Even this access is sporadic, since the authorities often terminate even 2G and cell phone services, citing some "ongoing" security threat. As a result of the pandemic and internet shutdowns, tens of thousands of youth are going without proper schooling as the dated 2G internet technology is totally inadequate for online education.

The Western imperialist powers, above all the United States, have remained almost totally silent on the savage repression of the Kashmiri people and the government's total disregard of their democratic rights. This speaks volumes about the hypocrisy of the political establishment and corporate-controlled media in the US and Europe, which never tire of invoking "democracy" and "human rights" when authoritarian measures are adopted by their geostrategic rivals. Consider, for example, the ongoing anti-China campaign over its anti-democratic national security law, which Beijing is seeking to impose on Hong Kong to strengthen its control over the city of some 7 million inhabitants. While Beijing's assertion that Hong Kong is an "internal affair" has provoked strong denunciations from the US, and Trump has seized on the repression in Hong Kong to ratchet up his

military threats and economic bullying of China, Washington has remained full-throated in its defence of the Modi regime under conditions of violations of democratic rights that are arguably much worse than in Kashmir.

On August 7, the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Relations addressed a letter to the Modi government that declared Washington's emphatic support for New Delhi following a failed Chinese attempt to place the situation in Kashmir on the agenda of the UN Security Council. Eliot Engel and Michael McCaul, respectively the ranking Democrat and Republican on the committee, wrote in their joint letter: "Members of both parties recognize the impact that a strong US-India partnership will have on the trajectory of the 21st century. As Prime Minister Modi said in February of this year, our ties 'are no longer just another partnership. It is far greater and closer relationship.' This closer relationship is all the more important as India faces aggression from China along your shared border, which is part of the Chinese government's consistent pattern of unlawful and belligerent territorial aggression across the Indo-Pacific.

"The United States will remain steadfast in support of India's efforts to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Only after this provocative proclamation of US support for India in its border conflict with China did Engel and McCaul note in passing, "(W)e note with concern that conditions in Jammu & Kashmir have not normalized one year after India's repeal of Article 370 and the establishment of Jammu & Kashmir as a Union Territory."

Washington's refusal to tolerate any meaningful criticism of its Indian ally is bound up with its predatory geostrategic interests in the Asia-Pacific. While Trump expresses most bluntly US imperialism's animosity towards the rise of China, his adoption of trade war measures and military build-up in the region enjoy bipartisan support. India plays a key role in Washington's preparations for war against nuclear-armed China, both as a military-strategic partner that is tied to the US through a web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral partnerships, also involving Japan and Australia; and as an aspiring regional power in its own right that can act as a counter-balance to Beijing.



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