

Growing popular unrest in India's Ladakh region as New Delhi makes it a forward base for war with China and Pakistan

Rohantha De Silva, Kranti Kumara
29 October 2025

In the wake of the recent killing by Indian security forces of four unarmed protestors and the wounding of 150 other persons in the strategically critical Ladakh region, India's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has belatedly opened talks with local political leaders.

On September 24, security forces opened fire on protestors opposing the Indian central government's oppressive rule of the region and demanding that Ladakh be granted statehood.

India's northernmost territory, Ladakh borders both of New Delhi's principal geo-strategic rivals, China and Pakistan, and is central to New Delhi's ongoing disputes with Beijing and Islamabad over its northern border.

Pakistan claims parts of Ladakh rightfully belong to it, as part of its larger claim to virtually all the territory that once comprised the Muslim-majority, British Indian princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Beijing, meanwhile, asserts that those parts of Ladakh not claimed by Pakistan are Chinese territory.

New Delhi has its own counter claims. It insists that Pakistan-held Azad Kashmir and the even more northerly Gilgit-Baltistan rightfully belong to India, and it claims all the approximately 38,000 kilometers of Aksai Chin, the Chinese territory adjacent to Ladakh.

Clashes in 2020 between Indian and Chinese troops along the contested Line of Actual Control that divides Ladakh and Aksai Chin led both countries to forward deploy tens of thousands of troops, tanks and fighter planes, resulting in a tense border stand-off that they have only recently begun to de-escalate.

Two days after it violently suppressed the September 24 protest, the Narendra Modi-led BJP government detained its principal organizer, the political and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk, under the National Security Act, which allows the Indian state to detain political opponents without charge for up to a year.

Although Wangchuk has repeatedly shown his readiness to work with the far-right BJP government, the authorities have suggested he is working with foreign powers to subvert India. As proof, it has spuriously raised his attendance at a conference in Pakistan examining the impact of climate change, including the melting of Himalayan glaciers.

While Wangchuk continues to languish in jail, the BJP government has agreed to resume talks with the pro-statehood Leh Apex Body (LAB) and Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA).

All indications are that the Modi government intends to allow the talks to drag on so as to undercut the LAB and KDA's demand for statehood under the Sixth Schedule of India's constitution, which

provides a certain measure of autonomy to areas traditionally peopled by tribal groups.

New Delhi is opposed to giving Ladakh statehood because it would lessen the central government's control and power over this strategic region, most crucially the ability of the Indian military to seize tribal lands at will.

The LAB and the KDA are unelected bodies comprised of representatives from various petty bourgeois tribal, civil society and religious groups. Nevertheless, they have become the de facto political representatives of Ladakh under conditions where the BJP government has refused to allow Ladakh to have elections for a territorial assembly (which is the norm in all other Union Territories), let alone statehood.

This demand for statehood predates Ladakh's spinning off in 2019 from the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), as part of a constitutional coup in which the Modi government stripped India's lone Muslim-majority state of its special autonomous status and reduced both it and Ladakh to Union Territories.

Since then, the governance of Ladakh, which is home to some 300,000 people, and to J&K, where more than 13 million reside, has effectively been in the hands of the Home Ministry, headed by Modi's chief henchman, Amit Shah.

While the BJP government has reneged on its pledge to restore statehood to the bifurcated Jammu and Kashmir, it ultimately felt compelled to allow an election for a territorial assembly—if only to calm ruling-class complaints that its actions have failed to stabilize Indian-rule over Kashmir.

In practice, however, there is little difference between the manner in which the Modi government treats the two territories. In both, the military-security forces have free rein, using state violence, internet shutdowns and curfews to smother even peaceful protests against repressive rule and widespread economic hardship.

The Ladakh statehood demand reflects the interests and aspirations of the local elite. They are using it as a means to deflect widespread anger, especially among the youth, over the Modi government's repressive rule over the territory, and the lack of access to jobs and public services, even as New Delhi and the military spend massive sums in Ladakh on building military bases, fortifications, and transport links.

After sustained protests, the BJP government agreed at the beginning of 2023 to hold talks with the LAB and the KDA, which are respectively located in the towns of Leh and Kargil, the former being the summer capital and the latter the winter capital of Ladakh.

With the talks stalled, Wangchuk, along with 14 others, launched a 15-day hunger strike on September 10 to press their statehood demand.

On September 24, two elderly hunger-strikers were admitted to hospital in serious condition. In response, youth organizations called for protests and a shutdown of normal activities. In Leh protesters set fire to the BJP's Ladakh regional office.

Wangchuk and his colleagues immediately distanced themselves from the street protests, denying any involvement and appealing for calm.

Intent on revenge, the Modi government quickly deployed dozens of security forces who without any warning opened fire on the protesters killing four and injuring over 150.

The security forces latter claimed that they had fired in "self-defence," a standard refrain from the authorities to justify killings of unarmed protesters.

Padma Stanzin, one of the hunger strike organizers, told the BBC on September 25 that their movement has always been peaceful and they "had no idea that it would turn out like this."

The living conditions of the masses in Ladakh are abominable. The official unemployment rate for university graduates is 39.6 percent, more than triple the national average of 12.4 percent.

Despite this, the Modi government has left 5,000 government jobs vacant since 2022. Climate change also threatens agriculture and pastoralism which, in addition to tourism, are the main economic pillars in Ladakh. These conditions have fueled widespread hatred and opposition to the ruling BJP which was why the disillusioned and alienated youth set fire to the BJP office in Leh.

Wangchuk is a petty bourgeois political operative, who has never criticized the Modi government and Indian ruling class's broader predatory geo-strategic agenda, beginning with the anti-China Indo-US Global Strategic Partnership.

He profusely praised Modi and his government for stripping J&K of its special constitutional status on August 5, 2019, in a move carried out in the dead of night and in flagrant violation of India's constitution.

After protests broke out in J&K the same night and hundreds of Kashmiris were arrested in a violent crackdown, Wangchuk cheered on the Modi government:

"THANK YOU PRIME MINISTER for fulfilling Ladakh's longstanding dream," he wrote on his X (Twitter) account.

Prior to his arrest, Wangchuk had cordial ties with the BJP and Indian military. He has appeared in BJP promotional campaigns in Ladakh, and other BJP-led state governments sought his educational advice.

Despite this, Wangchuk is being subjected to all the anti-democratic machinations of the government and security forces. He was arrested on September 26 under India's draconian National Security Act and sent 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) from his home to a jail in Jodhpur, in the state of Rajasthan.

Wangchuk's wife, Gitanjali Angmo, told Al Jazeera on October 7 that in just a month, the same administration that had decorated him was now branding him "anti-national." This, she said, is to silence and intimidate him.

Abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional status (Article 370) was long a demand of the Hindu right, and since the early 1950s a core element in its program to transform India into a *Hindu rashtra* or Hindu state, where Muslims and other minorities will have to defer to Hindu supremacy.

However, Modi's 2019 constitutional coup, and especially as it pertained to Ladakh, was largely driven by geostrategic aims.

Ladakh has been central in many of India's wars and border clashes with both China and Pakistan, including the 1999 Kargil War, which New Delhi and Islamabad waged over the Siachen Glacier.

With the creation of Ladakh as a separate Union Territory in August 2019, the Modi government and military massively expanded their military construction campaign in Ladakh, investing more than 5,000 crore rupees or \$600 million.

The subsequent Indo-Chinese border clashes were clearly bound up with increased Indian military activity in the region and Chinese apprehensions about it. Ladakh abuts Aksai Chin which connects China's autonomous Xinjiang and Tibet regions both geographically and strategically via road and rail links. Ladakh is also proximate to Gilgit-Baltistan, through which the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passes.

Because of the bleak economic prospects facing Ladakh youth, they are being recruited into the military to serve as cannon fodder in future wars against Pakistan and China. They are valued by the Indian high command because as locals they possess intimate knowledge of the mountainous terrain and harsh weather conditions, which severely impact combat in the region.

Ladakh has the highest per capita recruitment into the armed forces in all of India. So dependent is the Indian military upon the locals, that it has showered over 300 gallantry awards upon them.

That is why there is deep concern within the Indian military that the alienation of the people of Ladakh could have dangerous repercussions for its effectiveness.

A former Indian Army commander who served in Ladakh told *Frontline* magazine. "If there is unrest in Kashmir, Pakistan will exploit it. The same holds true for Ladakh. If there's unrest, China will certainly try to exploit it."

He further warned: "If tensions keep simmering, Pakistan may eventually try to shift its focus here as well. Even in times of peace, there are always competitive and economic conflicts between nations, and to have such instability in Ladakh, from a defence perspective, is one of the most dangerous scenarios imaginable."



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