Mass protests roil Pakistan-controlled Azad Kashmir and the Islamabad-based political and military establishment

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Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK)—the Pakistan-held portion of disputed Kashmir—has been convulsed by mass protests since early June, including sit-ins, demonstrations, and "wheel-jam" and "shutter-down" strikes of public transport, shops and other businesses.

The protests have continued despite mounting state violence. More than 30 people, among them a small number of security forces, have died in clashes between protesters and police and paramilitaries. On Tuesday, July 14, at least nine people were killed, including half a dozen anti-government protesters who were shot down when they tried to block a security convoy in Tararkhal, in AJK's Sudhnoti District.

The immediate trigger for the current mass agitation was the state's banning of the AJK Joint Awami (Common People's) Action Committee or JAAC under a draconian anti-terrorism law, and the arrest of more than a hundred of its leaders and activists.

Although it was the government of the ostensibly self-administered AJK that formally criminalized the JAAC on June 5, it was clearly done at the behest of the central government. From the outset, Pakistan Rangers and Frontier Constabulary police were deployed en masse to make arrests and quell opposition. All of the territory was also immediately subject to a cell phone and internet service blackout that lasted well beyond its initially announced duration of a week. Since then, the authorities have continued to suspend telecommunications intermittently, especially in Rawalakot and the Poonch District of which it is the capital.

In an attempt to break the protest movement, which is centered in Rawalakot, security forces have effectively besieged Azad Pakistan's third-largest city. The government has prevented food, fuel and medical supplies from reaching Rawalakot, where tens of thousands have joined an ongoing sit-in launched in defiance of the authorities on June 7.

The Action Committee emerged out of protests in 2023 led by small traders against the government's elimination of subsidies on wheat. The protest movement quickly spread from Rawalakot across AJK and soon became a rallying point for broad social anger over IMF-dictated austerity measures, central government neglect of the region, rampant social inequality, mass poverty and the denial of democratic rights.

Founded in September 2023, the JAAC has led repeated agitations across AJK. In late September 2025, it paralyzed economic life across the territory, through a "shutter-down" strike in support of a 38-point Charter of economic and political demands. To regain political control, the federal and AJK governments made a show at the beginning of October 2025 of accepting "most" of the demands and, in return for the Action Committee's suspension of the agitation, signed a three-way agreement pledging to address all of the demands within the next six months.

The Action Committee's leadership is comprised of trader and shopkeeper representatives, lawyers and other petty bourgeois layers. But in the absence of an independent political movement of the working class, it has been able to draw behind it broad layers of the population, including workers and rural toilers, and especially young people.

The government's June 5 proscribing of the JAAC as a terrorist organization was a pre-emptive strike, under conditions where there was growing popular anger over the authorities' failure to implement the Charter demands and the Pakistani ruling elite feared that the Action Committee would renew its agitation.

Officially, the crackdown was justified with claims that the JAAC was preparing to disrupt the elections to the AJK legislative assembly set for July 27 and, more ominously, that it is part of a "foreign conspiracy," i.e., in the pay of arch-enemy India.

However, the repression only served to galvanize and radicalize opposition. By June 7, protests were erupting in cities and towns across the territory and they have continued ever since, despite hundreds of additional arrests.

Earlier this month, the Action Committee announced that it would lead a "Long March" from Rawalakot to Muzaffarabad, AJK's capital and largest city, starting July 15. But following back channel contacts involving influential intermediaries, including the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation (OPF), it said that it would delay the march's start to July 22.

Although no official confirmation has been given, Field Marshal Amir Munir, the head of Pakistan's armed forces and the real power behind its civilian government, in all likelihood greenlit the mediation efforts.

In announcing the Long March's postponement, JAAC leader Umar Nazir Kashmiri publicly thanked Munir for "understanding the grievances of the people of Kashmir." He revealed that the Action Committee had sent a letter to the Pakistan Armed Services Chief in which it argued that he was not properly informed of the situation in Azad Kashmir and urged him to intervene.

This appeal to the figure who sits at the apex of the repressive apparatus of the Pakistani state strikingly illustrates the petty-bourgeois nationalist character of the JAAC leadership.

Munir is a would-be autocrat who has worked to strengthen the military's grip over Pakistan's political and economic life and to revive Islamabad's close military-strategic partnership with Washington. He was at the center of a conspiracy to rig the 2024 National Assembly elections and is presiding over ruthless counterinsurgency wars against Baluchi separatists and the Pakistan Taliban.

Kashmir and the communal partition of South Asia

A mountainous region, Pakistan-administered Kashmir is home to some

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4 million people. Like Indian-held Kashmir, which lies to its south and east, it is highly strategic given its centrality to the reactionary conflict between India and Pakistan and its proximity to China.

Relations between South Asia's nuclear-armed rivals have remained on a knife-edge since they fought a four-day border war in May 2025, with New Delhi and Islamabad regularly exchanging bellicose threats.

Objectively, the protest movement in Azad Kashmir undercuts the official narrative of the Pakistani state, which counterposes a supposedly "free" (in Urdu and Kashmiri "Azad") Pakistan-held Kashmir to the larger part of the former princely state Jammu and Kashmir now controlled by India. In reality, both India and Pakistan have systematically run roughshod over the democratic rights of the Kashmiri people, while seeking to manipulate them to serve their rival predatory agendas.

The Kashmir region and people were partitioned as part of the broader 1947-48 communal carve-up of South Asia. Implemented by the subcontinent's departing British colonial overlords and the rival representatives of the colonial bourgeoisie in the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, it divided the subcontinent into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

Next to nothing has been said about the back-channel negotiations now underway between the authorities and representatives of the banned Action Committee.

People's Party of Pakistan (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari travelled to Muzaffarabad late last week and proposed the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to help resolve the crisis. Addressing a meeting of the party's candidates for the July 27 AJK elections, he warned that prolonged instability in AJK could undermine both the "Kashmir cause"—that is Islamabad's claim to sovereignty over Indian-held Kashmir—and Pakistan's international standing at a time of growing regional tensions, particularly in the context of India's withdrawal from the Indus Water Treaty. The PPP leads the coalition that currently governs AJK as part of a broader arrangement where it supports the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-headed federal government from the outside.

Separately, the Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamic fundamentalist party, has formed a "peace jirga" in an effort to mediate between the authorities and the JAAC.

Clearly sections of the political establishment are now seeking to find a means to defuse the situation. But at the same time, there are concerns about how a retreat, even if only temporary, before the mass opposition in Azad Kashmir could encourage social unrest elsewhere.

The situation is explosive. The central government, which is viewed as illegitimate by wide sections of the population, is imposing yet another round of brutal IMF austerity. Prime Minister Shebhaz Sharif warned last week that Washington's repudiation of the Memorandum of Understanding with Tehran and relaunch of its criminal war on Iran threaten to rock Pakistan's economy. Moreover, the war could have significant regional spillover effects, further destabilizing Pakistan, which has a mutual defence pact with Saudi Arabia.

Given the myriad of intersecting crises, the situation in AJK could spiral out of control, potentially leading to a major military operation aimed at brutally upholding the authority of the Pakistani state over Azad Kashmir and/or a rapid spike in tensions with India.

New Delhi, it need be noted, has hypocritically denounced the Pakistani state repression in Azad Kashmir. This under conditions where it maintains a half-million-strong security force in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir, and routinely suppresses protests and imposes internet and cell-phone blackouts. In 2019, the Hindu supremacist Narendra Modi-led BJP government illegally stripped the region of its status as a "semi-autonomous" state within the Indian Union and reduced it to a Union-administered territory so as to place it more directly under central government control.

The current Action Committee agitation is focused on the demand for its unbanning; the release of the more than 600 JAAC leaders and activists now in government detention; compensation for the families of those killed by security forces; and abolition of the 12 of the 40 elected AJK legislature seats allotted to those classified as refugees from Indian-held Kashmir living in other parts of Pakistan. The Pakistan ruling elite claims abolition of the "refugee" seats would undermine Islamabad's legal claim to all of Kashmir—which is founded on the reactionary communalist "two nations" theory. The JAAC maintains that the Pakistani establishment uses the "refugee" seats to manipulate the formation of governments in AJK and frustrate the democratic will of its people.

Whatever the truth of such claims, the abolition of these seats would in no way alter the lack of genuine democracy in Azad Kashmir and Pakistan as a whole, which is rooted in the monopoly over socioeconomic life wielded by the venal national bourgeoisie, the power that the military enjoys as the defenders of capitalist exploitation, and imperialist oppression—of which the 1947-48 partition and the US-Pakistani military-strategic partnership are fundamental enduring expressions.

The Action Committee came to prominence by advancing genuine socioeconomic grievances, as in its opposition to the elimination of wheat and electricity, subsidies, and by giving voice to popular hostility to the political establishment, as with its calls for the elimination of the numerous lavish perks given AJK cabinet ministers, legislators and top bureaucrats.

But none of its 38 Charter demands would impinge on the wealth of the capitalist elite, let alone encroach on capitalist property or challenge the prerogatives of the military top brass and the vast sums allotted to the defence budget. The Action Committee has made no appeal to workers and toilers across Pakistan to join it in a mass movement against IMF austerity, social inequality, state repression and the military-installed, pro-imperialist Muslim League (Nawaz)-led government.

Rather, its demands have been addressed to the Pakistani establishment. It has also appealed to the human rights agency of the imperialist-led United Nations to pressure Islamabad. One JAAC leader, Sardar Amanullah Khan, is reported to even have appealed to India's Hindu supremacist BJP government to "open" the border between Azad Kashmir and Indian-held Kashmir to enable supplies to reach the Poonch region—something the Indian press has been quick to highlight.

Permanent revolution and the criminal role of the Revolutionary Communist Party

The agitation in Azad Kashmir raises fundamental strategic questions for the working class across all South Asia, above all the necessity of it making the strategy of permanent revolution the axis of its struggle. First formulated by Leon Trotsky, it served as the strategic compass for the 1917 October Revolution in Russia and the subsequent struggle against its Stalinist degeneration, under conditions where the revolution remained isolated in a war-ravaged, predominantly backward country.

What Trotsky established—and this was subsequently demonstrated in the positive in the October Revolution and in the negative in the independence and partition of South Asia—is that in the imperialist epoch the tasks historically associated with the democratic revolution, such as the eradication of landlordism and caste-ism, separation of Church (mosque/temple) and state and real freedom from imperialism, can only be realized through a working-class led socialist revolution.

The mass protests that have erupted in Azad Kashmir are part of a wave of social-political unrest that has toppled governments in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. But it will have enduring positive political

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significance only in so far as the working class establishes its political independence from all factions of the bourgeoisie and their political representatives, rejects the Kashmiri nationalist, petty bourgeois perspective of the JAAC leadership and seeks to mobilize the working class of Pakistan and India, and the rural toilers behind it, on a socialist internationalist program in opposition to capitalism, imperialism and the reactionary communal-state system of South Asia.

Only by undoing partition from below and establishing the Socialist United States of South Asia will it be possible to secure the national democratic rights of the Kashmiris, within a framework of genuine equality among all the subcontinent's myriad peoples.

The Inqalabi Communist Party (Revolutionary Communist Party-RCP), the Pakistani organization affiliated with the Alan Woods-led Revolutionary Communist International (RCI, the former International Marxist Tendency) claims to be playing a leading role in the AJK agitation and the network of committees working under the umbrella of the JAAC. The accuracy of these claims cannot be verified. But what can be said with certainty is that, in irreconcilable opposition to the Trotskyist program of permanent revolution, they are systematically promoting the most dangerous illusions in the character of the JAAC and its nationalist program.

This includes systemically blurring all class distinctions within the socially heterogeneous JAAC and all differences between demands for democratic rights and social reform and the struggle for workers' power and socialism. In a July 13 statement, subsequently republished on the RCI/IMT website, the ICP raised the call for "all power to the committees," with the unmistakable intent of suggesting that the citizens' committees affiliated with the JAAC are the equivalent of the soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers and sailors, created by the masses in Russia in the course of the revolution in 1917. Through an intransigent political struggle against the petty bourgeois democratic Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, the soviets ultimately came under the leadership of the Bolsheviks of Lenin and Trotsky, laying the basis for the October Revolution.

The RCP statement goes on to claim that the JAAC can form the basis for a "people's revolutionary government." It declares, "Once the Long March breaks the siege of Rawalkot and advances, the entire balance of power will shift decisively in favour of the movement and the Committee … The Committee (i.e., the petty-bourgeois led JAAC) would then simply have to formally … announce that with the support of more than ninety percent of the Kashmiri people—an Awami Inqalbi (People's Revolutionary) Government is being established."

Workers and youth must beware. The actions of the RCP/RCI are politically criminal. Criminal because they are fostering illusions in a petty bourgeois leadership with no genuine independence from the Pakistani ruling class and imperialism; and because they are propagating the lie that the sheer weight of the spontaneous resistance of the masses renders all issues of class program and revolutionary perspective and strategy redundant. As for the suggestion that the opposition of the Pakistani bourgeoisie, its state and military will simply melt away, this is absurd. Throughout Pakistan's existence, whenever the ruling class has perceived its fundamental interests to be threatened, it has resorted to bloody repression. Unfettered domination over Azad Kashmir, it should be underlined, is unquestionably among those fundamental interests.

The class struggle is intensifying in South Asia as around the world. The crucial question is the fight to establish the political independence and hegemony of the working class, so it can lead all the oppressed in struggle against the national bourgeoisie and imperialism. This will only be realized through the development of a class-conscious vanguard that has assimilated the lessons of the great revolutionary struggles of the last 150 years—that is through the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Pakistan and across the subcontinent.

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