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Indian assault on Kashmir in third week, thousands arrested

The state of siege that India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has imposed on Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is now well into its third week.

Cell phone and internet access continue to be denied to many of the region's 13 million residents; and tens of thousands of Indian Army troops and paramilitaries remain deployed in J&K's cities, towns and villages to intimidate the population and brutally suppress any and all signs of opposition to New Delhi's August 5 constitutional coup.

On that day, the BJP government illegally stripped India's only Muslim-majority state of its unique, semi-autonomous constitutional status by executive fiat, bifurcated it and downgraded the severed parts into two Union Territories, thus placing them under permanent trusteeship of the central government.

Despite New Delhi's efforts to black out what is happening in Kashmir and silence all government opponents, information is leaking out that points to both the scale of the state repression and the strength and resilience of popular opposition.

It is now known that the Indian government has arbitrarily detained at least 4,000 people under a draconian, anti-democratic law that allows the state to imprison people it deems a threat to "public security" for up to two years without charge.

The detainees include "potential stone-pelters," i.e., students and other young people previously active in anti-government protests, academics, lawyers and journalists. They also include—in an implicit admission of the lack of any support for New Delhi's actions in the Kashmir Valley and among the Muslim population of Jammu—the top leadership

and numerous cadre of the pro-Indian parties formed or traditionally supported by J&K's Muslim elite.

Indian authorities have refused to reveal the names of those who have been detained or tell their relatives where they are being held. State-owned All-India Radio said last week that government officials had placed the number of detained at around 500.

This has now been exposed as disinformation.

A J&K magistrate has determined that at least 4,000 people have been detained, with most sent by military aircraft to jails outside J&K, Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported Sunday. The magistrate had covertly collected information on the number of detainees from colleagues using a special cell phone that had been given him because of his senior government post. His account, said AFP, has been corroborated by other government sources, including a police official who said that upwards of 6,000 people have been arrested.

Since then there have been further arrests. Thirty youth who clashed with police overnight were seized and transported to jails elsewhere in India, reported Reuters Tuesday.

Reporters from the Kolkata-based daily *Telegraph* who visited three villages in south Kashmir, Shaar, Khrew, and Mandankpal, said residents told them that hundreds of security personnel had been deployed there and that they had rounded up dozens of "potential stone-throwers." The report, which was published Monday under the headline "'Iron fist' in rural Kashmir," said Indian forces had frequently held hostage the fathers and brothers of those targeted for detention so as to force them to surrender. This, it went on to note, is "an aspect of the crackdown that has passed largely under the radar thanks to the information blackout."

A relative of one young man, Sameer Ahmad, who surrendered to authorities to secure the release of his father, told the *Telegraph*, "For six days, we had no information about him. Yesterday, we found him at the central jail, booked under the PSA (Public Security Act). He told us he was thrashed and that there were hundreds of prisoners in the jail."

Another establishment publication, the *Quint*, noting that many of the detained Kashmiri youth have been transported to jails in BJP-administered Uttar Pradesh pointed to a sinister purpose. "That (criminal gangs) have immense influence in these jails is hidden from no one," said the *Quint*. "People have been murdered and assaults are commonplace. This would mean that Kashmiris are likely to have a tough time in these jails. The government's strategy (is) to instill this fear into the stone-pelters."

A report published Monday by the *Indian Express* lists the names of the most high-profile of the scores of mainstream political leaders and officials who have been detained and are now being held incommunicado. On the list are three former J&K Chief Ministers—Farooq Abdullah and Omar Abdullah of the J&K National Conference, and People’s Democratic Party head Mehbooba Mufti; former J&K cabinet minister and People’s Conference head Sajad Lone; six other former J&K ministers; other legislators; and the mayor and deputy mayor of J&K’s largest city, Srinagar.

The Narendra Modi-led BJP, with the unabashed support of most of the corporate media, is trying to give the impression that normalcy is being gradually restored to J&K. But this is belied by its actions, which betray an enormous fear of popular opposition.

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Since last Friday, the authorities have repeatedly announced that they were scaling back the blanket restrictions on people’s movements only to have to re-impose them after protests erupted.

Yesterday, Rohit Kansal, the principal spokesman for J&K’s New Delhi-imposed government, cited as proof that life is returning to “normalcy,” that “of 197 police stations across J&K, 136 stations have no daytime restrictions”—i.e., are not imposing daytime curfews. What he omitted to mention is that every inhabited part of the Kashmir Valley and much of Jammu are thick with security checkpoints, where residents must submit to questions and show identity papers, and that on a daily basis security forces are violently suppressing protests with tear gas, chili grenades and pellet-gun fire.

Some schools have been ordered reopened after a two-week government-imposed shutdown, but in Srinagar and much of J&K they are not functioning due to the absence of students. On Tuesday, Reuters correspondents visited three schools in Srinagar and found no students present. Nair Mir, an engineer in Srinagar told Al Jazeera, “The government wants children in uniforms to be vidoographed for the media and sell it as normalcy in Kashmir.” Safiya Tajamul also condemned the government’s actions. “There is still 99 percent communications blockade in the region,” said the mother of two. “What if there are clashes” on children’s way to school? “Who will inform us and who will take responsibility for their safety?”

The BJP government’s assault on Kashmir—its illegal rewriting of the constitution and its imposition of an unprecedented security lockdown and information blackout on a region

roughly equivalent in population to a mid-sized European country or a US state like Michigan—has huge domestic and geopolitical implications.

It is meant to initiate an all-out push to bring a quick and bloody end to the three-decade long, Pakistan-backed anti-Indian insurgency in J-K and force the Kashmiri population and elite to accept New Delhi's unfettered domination. It is aimed at strengthening India's hand against Pakistan and China, whose autonomous Tibet and Xinjiang regions border J&K to the east. Last but not least, it is aimed at shifting Indian politics sharply further to the right, by arrogating greater power for the Modi-led central government and whipping up bellicose nationalism and Hindu communalism.

Abrogation of J&K's autonomy has been a key demand of the Hindu right since the early 1950s and is a key element of their agenda to transform India into a Hindu *Rashtra*, or state.

While India's corporate media concedes the Modi government's assault on Kashmir is a high-risk gamble that is further alienating the people of J&K and exacerbating tensions with Pakistan, it and the rest of India's establishment have thrown their support behind it.

Twice last week, India's Supreme Court curtly dismissed calls for it to at least curtail the security clampdown in J&K. On Friday, India's highest court admonished the executive editor of the *Kashmir Times* and other complaints, saying they should have more confidence in the BJP government and security forces' claims that the restrictions will ultimately be withdrawn.

Yesterday, India and Pakistan exchanged bellicose threats and artillery-fire across the Line of Control that divides Indian and Pakistan-held Kashmir, as they have every day since Aug. 5. As is the norm, the Indian and Pakistani militaries accused each other of initiating the artillery barrages and made conflicting casualty claims. New Delhi said one of its soldiers had been killed, but that in response it had inflicted "heavy" damage and casualties on Pakistan. Islamabad said three civilians had been killed by Indian fire, but that in a "befitting response" for India's ceasefire violations it had killed six Indian soldiers.

Meanwhile, in what was clearly meant to be read as a threat, Indian Army Chief General Bipin Rawat boasted that he had informed the BJP government last February, when it was preparing an illegal military strike on Pakistan to "punish" it for a terrorist strike in J&K, that his forces were primed to repel any Pakistani counterattack "and take the battle into the enemy territory."

India's February 25 airstrike deep inside Pakistan prompted a Pakistani counterattack that resulted in a dogfight over disputed Kashmir and brought South Asia's nuclear-armed rivals the closest to all-out war since the Indo-Pakistan war of December, 1971.

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