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Indian government uses police, paramilitaries to repress protests at Jawaharlal Nehru University

India's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has escalated its years-long attack on the students and staff of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), whom it has repeatedly vilified for holding "anti-national" views and targeted for repression.

Earlier this month, the government deployed a company of more than 120 paramilitaries from the Central Reserve Police force (CRPF), alongside at least as many police, at JNU's New Delhi campus to intimidate students protesting steep hikes in hostel, canteen and other fees.

Founded in 1969, JNU is India's premier public university. Its students and staff have been a particular target of the Hindu communalist autocrat Narendra Modi and his BJP since they came to power in 2014. This is because JNU students have a long history of left-wing activism.



Indian students shout slogans during a protest march towards the Parliament in New Delhi, India, Saturday, Nov. 23, 2019. Hundreds of students of the Jawaharlal Nehru University were joined by students from other universities, activists and members of civil society as they marched towards India's parliament to protest the hostel fee hike along with their other demands. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

Moreover, they and much of the JNU staff have very been public in their opposition to the Modi government's relentless push to promote its Hindu supremacist ideology and otherwise cultivate reaction and irrationalism. The BJP government has attacked the autonomy of higher education institutions and is systematically placing Hindu nationalist ideologues in top administrative positions at universities and leading educational and cultural organizations across India.

On several occasions over the past month, police have run amok attacking JNU students striking and demonstrating against the fee hikes. Scores of students, including some simply returning to their residences, have been savagely beaten. This repression notwithstanding, JNU students have vowed to continue their agitation until the fee increases are completely reversed.

On November 4, the paramilitary CRPF was deployed at the JNU campus, recalling the events of July 1975, when it helped Delhi Police arrest leftist students, teachers and other staff during the Indira Gandhi-led Congress Party government's Emergency.

Comprised of specially trained armed police, the CRPF is reputedly the largest paramilitary force in the world. The Modi government has deployed tens of thousands of additional CRPF troops to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) since early August to violently suppress mass opposition to its illegal abrogation of J&K's special semiautonomous status and its degrading of what had been India's only Muslim-majority state into two central government-controlled Union territories.

In October, the JNU administration announced a doubling of hostel fees, including food, from around Rs. 30,000 (\$420) to over Rs. 60,000.

The Modi government and its henchmen in the JNU administration justify the fee hikes with claims that education is too heavily subsidized by the state. In fact, the various levels of India's government spend less than 3 percent of GDP on education.

The not unintended consequence of the fee hikes will be to further limit access for low-income students. Leaders of the JNU Student Union (JNUSU) estimate that up to half of all students could be forced to quit the university altogether.

In a further provocation, the JNU administration has unilaterally come up with a new hostel manual that prescribes, in the fashion of a military school, dress codes, an 11:30 PM curfew, and various other strictures.

The Modi government has charged that JNU is a breeding ground of “urban Naxals,” a concocted term for so-called urban supporters and enablers of the Maoist guerilla insurgency that continues to affect remote jungle districts of eastern and central India. In fact, the Modi government gratuitously hurls the “urban Naxal” term at a vast array of left-wing activists, so as to criminalize opposition to its Hindu-communal ideology, sweeping attacks on democratic rights, and ruthless pro-big business measures.

Last week, the BJJ Minister of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries, Giriraj Singh, venomously attacked the JNU students, saying their protests were “politically motivated” and aimed at making JNU an institute of “urban Naxalism.”

The Modi government and its Hindu right allies have made JNU a chief battleground in their campaign to shift the political atmosphere on India’s campuses sharply right. In 2016, top government ministers connived with the local chapter of the RSS-BJP aligned Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (AVBP: All-India Student Organization) to have JNU students expelled and jailed for sedition for mounting an antigovernment protest.

In February 2016, a group of JNU students held an event to mark the anniversary of the secret 2013 execution of a 43-year old Kashmiri man, Afzal Guru, on the orders of India’s then Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Guru had been framed up on terrorism charges, based on a confession extracted through torture, for the as yet unexplained assault on the Indian parliament in December 2001.

At the behest of then BJP Home Minister Rajnath Singh, the Delhi police arrested JNUSU President Kanhaiya Kumar and two other JNU students, Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya, on trumped up sedition charges for supposedly raising “anti-national” slogans.

Rajnath Singh was so oblivious to the constitutionally protected right to free speech, he shamelessly tweeted, “If anyone shouts anti-India slogan (sic) & challenges nation’s sovereignty & integrity...they will not be tolerated or spared.”

In fact, there is video evidence that the “anti-national” and “pro-Pakistan” slogans were shouted out by Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad supporters, so as to provide a pretext for the subsequent persecution of the protesters. Such right-wing provocations have become the stock in trade of the BJP and its Hindu supremacist allies.

So threadbare is the legal case against Kumar, Khalid, and Bhattacharya, the prosecution has for the past three years repeatedly postponed hearings before the Delhi High Court.

The Modi government systematically seeks to intimidate and silence all its critics. It routinely accuses its bourgeois political opponents of being “anti-national” and pro-Pakistan. Leftwing opponents are threatened with sedition charges and/or accused of being “urban Naxals.”

For the past 14 months nine activists, whom the government has labeled “urban Naxals” have been held in prison on bogus terrorism charges, under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). They are accused of inciting a riot at a Dalit (ex-“untouchable”) conference in December 2017. In fact, the violence was instigated and a riot provoked by Hindu communalists linked to the BJP, using a modus operandi frequently employed by the ABVP at universities across India.

The nine include the lawyer and trade-unionist Sudha Bharadwaj, 79-year old poet P. Varavara Rao, labor activist Vernon Gonsalves, writer Arun Ferreira, and Gautam Navlakha, a leader of the People’s Union for Democratic Rights.

Earlier this month Amit Shah, Modi’s chief enforcer and the Home Minister, visited CRPF headquarters and ominously directed it to mount an “effective and decisive campaign against Left Wing Extremism in the next six months. *Action needs to be taken against the urban Naxals and their facilitators.*” (Emphasis added)

Given that the CRPF is a paramilitary force, it cannot be ruled out that Shah’s demand the CRPF take “action” against “urban Naxals” will be realized in part through extrajudicial executions of leftists. Amit Shah was implicated in the organization of extrajudicial killings, when under Modi’s chief ministership he was Gujarat’s Home Minister, but, due to the complicity of Indian’s courts, has thus far escaped murder charges.

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