

SITUATIONER



150 DAYS

The Kashmir Lockdown



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A Jinnah Institute Publication

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More than 150 days have passed since the inhabitants of Indian occupied Kashmir were stripped of normalcy in their daily lives. Life remains grim and the mood somber in the Himalayan nest. Despite intermittent ease in movement and restrictions, mosques remain closed, schools empty, businesses shut and several thousand Kashmiri leaders, men, women and children under arbitrary arrest.

The lockdown arrests and protests of Kashmir have now spread to several cities of India, where thousands of people have braved police brutality to protest against the citizenship which, like Kashmir, is designed to exclude Muslims in India. As the situation worsens in several cities, 72 companies of paramilitary have been shipped out of Kashmir to bolster police forces in Assam and UP, where curfew remains in place.

With the information blackout continuing, sparse information trickles out from the valley. Continuing oppression and political manipulation are being used as state tools to orchestrate a new political reality in Indian occupied Kashmir, one that remains removed from the sentiments of the majority of Kashmiris who continue to reject the abrogation of Article 370 and Indian rule. This essay knits together disparate news from Kashmir to understand the situation on ground four months into the Kashmir lockdown.

The Situation on Ground

The few urban localities where restrictions have been eased have begun experiencing a return to the basic necessities of life, but normalization remains a dream too far. Most marketplaces continue to close after a couple of hours in what is being termed as civil disobedience, a form of protest in face of the harshest security measures in decades. Most educational institutes and offices remain empty despite the government encouraging people to attend. Media, human rights groups, and foreign diplomats have been repeatedly barred from free movement and reporting on the situation inside Kashmir. The Jamia Masjid in Srinagar has been closed for Friday prayers for seventeen consecutive weeks. On November 10, authorities barred all roads leading to the Hazratbal Shrine and imposed restrictions under section 144 of the CrPC, in view of the Supreme Court ruling of the Ayodhya Case. Kashmiri Muslims were discouraged from celebrating Eid Milad Nabi. The traditional Khoje-Digar prayers at the shrine of Hazrat Naqshband Sahib at Khojebazar area of Srinagar's old city were also not allowed amongst many other religious events, including Moharram processions earlier in the month.

Access to hospitals has become an even more challenging aspect of life under occupation, with barricades and security check posts along all the main routes. Medical help is often delayed leading patients to critical conditions, if not death. Buying medicines is becoming increasingly difficult with the bleak economic conditions prevalent in occupied Kashmir. According to the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI), trade loss had surpassed the \$1 billion mark several weeks ago. Tourism, farming, horticulture and handicrafts have been gravely affected due to restrictions imposed upon the Kashmiris.

Draconian measures are not restricted to citizens alone. Even government departments that are being allowed to reopen their internet connections have a rider; the head of office will bear the responsibility for any misuse of the service after signing an undertaking to be submitted to the local police station.

Reorganisation Act

The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, which officially bifurcated IOK into two union territories, became effective from October 31st, 2019. With it has come the BJP's infamous re-naming spree, already impacting several major sites on the directions of the Centre. Proposals to rename the 'Kashmir Public Health Engineering' (PHE) Department as the 'Jal Shakti Department', 'Chenani-Nashri Tunnel' as the 'Syama Prasad Mookerjee' and 'Sher-e-Kashmir Cricket Stadium' as 'Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Stadium' have already been approved.

Section 47 of the new Reorganization Act empowers the legislative assembly to adopt "any one or more of the languages in use in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir or Hindi as the official language or languages to be used for all or any of the official purposes". Replacing the Urdu language with Hindi means a massive rebranding of state assets and official documents. But more so, its impact is likely to hit deep into the cultural and social fabric of the Kashmiri people. According to Srinagar-based historian Ashiq Hussain, "The purpose [of the renaming] is to polarise and give a sense of victory to the majority population across India."

The long held fear that the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A would be a precursor to a concerted effort to change the demography of the disputed territory is now coming true. On October 22, a few days before the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act came into force, a new department for the registration of immovable property was announced in Indian occupied Kashmir. Under the new reorganization act, the bar on non-state subjects from purchasing property in Kashmir has been removed. The new registration act also changes the authority responsible for registration of land transactions from the judiciary to the revenue department.

Orchestrating a New Political Reality

Faced with continued resistance from Kashmir's traditional political leadership, several activists and politicians have raised concerns about a concerted effort by New Delhi to prop up an entirely new set of pro-India politicians. This effort, not too dissimilar to earlier politicking by Indian intelligence agencies in Kashmir, is meant to lend a false sense of popular support for the abrogation of Article 370. So far, the Indian government has resorted to a carrot and stick policy coercing second tier political leaders through detentions and offering benefits to others.

The first such attempt was made a month after the August 5th decision when five unknown Kashmiri persons held a press conference in Srinagar and announced the formation of a new political party called the Jammu and Kashmir Political Movement (Independent) led by 49 year old Peerzada Syed who claimed to be a former political worker of the National Conference. But despite getting privileged access to the government's press room at a Srinagar hotel and announcing their allegiance to India, the party failed to get any momentum.

Since then, Indian police officials have been reported to be coercing members of PDP and NC into breaking ranks and joining a third front. Former MLA's have now been subjected to regular 'body searches' and have been shifted to a new sub-jail.

Iltija Mufti, the daughter of former chief minister Mehbooba Mufti, has alleged that recently a former MLA has been released on the assurance that the politician will join the new political front. For now, it seems that reports of regular visits by Intelligence Bureau personnel to sub-jails lend credence to allegations that all former pro-India political leaders from PDP, NC and Congress are being told that

their release will be subject to agreeing to form a new political front that supports New Delhi's widely discredited decision to abrogate Article 370.

Meanwhile, occupied Kashmir's most popular political leadership represented by the All Parties Hurriyat Conference faces judicial engineering meant to break the will of resistance in the Kashmir valley. Several Hurriyat leaders have been called by the court in a 21 year old case for allegedly planning protests in Srinagar in 1998. Meanwhile, Yasin Malik, who heads the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front has been indicted in a 29 year old case for the murder of four Indian Airforce officers. Others, like the veteran Syed Ali Gilani have been rounded up in a Terror Funding Case that has accused Hurriyat leaders of receiving money from abroad and funding stone pelting in Kashmir.

The Resistance Grows

On November 12, in an emotional letter, Syed Ali Gilani, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) Chairman, thanked the people of Pakistan for their continued support in their struggle against oppression from Indian government. The APHC leader added that mass blinding of the Kashmiri youth has not stopped and Indian authorities continue to subjugate detainees to molestation, sexual harassment, sodomy and dishonoring the Kashmiri Muslim women under state policy. Appealing to the prime minister of Pakistan, Gilani called on Pakistan to withdraw from all aspects of the Tashkent, Shimla and Lahore agreements since these were unilaterally upended by the August 5th decision of India. He also called on re-designating the Line of Control as the Ceasefire Line.

Across South Kashmir, thousands of small protests and incidents of stone pelting continue. According to reports in the New Yorker, New York Times, The Guardian and Al Jazeera, young men are regularly picked up by Indian paramilitary and subjected to electrocution, sodomy and beatings. According to the National Federation of Indian Women over 13,000 men and boys as young as 7 years old have been detained by Indian authorities in jails across Kashmir and India. Anger and resentment are rife within the Valley. Backlash by Kashmiri militants has also picked up. Several incidents of targeted shootings and grenade attacks have been reported from Kashmir. In retaliation, Indian forces have undertaken large scale search and cordon operations where local communities are subjected to torture and homes raided. Meanwhile, facing stiff resistance from communities across South Kashmir, the Indian government has announced the deployment of a newly raised special operations division in Kashmir for anti-insurgency operations. The new division will combine special operations forces from the Army, Airforce and Navy.

Investigative reporting by independent journalists reveals that several hundred young men and women are admitted to wards in hospitals across Kashmir for injuries incurred by pellet guns. The financial and psychological impact of this damage goes beyond the economical capabilities of the conflict zone, wiping out aspirations of entire families for a better standard of life. Those lucky enough to survive the direct blow succumb to fear of self/families' safety and drop out of schools or quit work.

Challenging disability and depression requires aid from international agencies and organizations capable of delivering it efficiently. But when a systematic lockdown on the lives of Kashmiris is imposed, all of the help is essentially rendered useless since humanitarian organizations are barred from operating or reporting on Kashmir.

On such example is the targeted attacks on Amnesty International. "Over the past year, a pattern of harassment has emerged every time Amnesty International India stands up and speaks out against human rights violations in India," said the Indian arm of the international human rights group in a statement after their offices in Bengaluru and New Delhi were raided by the Central Bureau of

Investigation (CBI) on November 15th. India's Home Ministry registered a case against Amnesty International on the basis of a complaint, to probe into alleged violations of foreign funding rules but what is evident is that the raids were meant to deter independent assessment of the human rights abuses being committed in one of the world's most militarised regions.

Ostracizing Muslims

What was described by Indian opposition leader Derek O'Brien as having an "eerie similarity" to the Nazi Laws of 1930's Germany, the recently passed Citizenship (Amendment) Bill excludes Muslims from immigrants seeking Indian citizenship. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims living in Assam and Bangladesh are likely to be targeted through the CAB in combination with the planned National Register of Citizens. Given the recent changes made to the status of Kashmir and subsequent Registration Act, CAB is likely to play an important role in changing the demographic status of Indian occupied Kashmir by giving up to a million non-Muslims the right to become citizens and residents in the occupied territory.

Line Out of Control

With protests against the abrogation of Article 370 and the rising unrest within India on the Citizenship Amendment Bill, the Line of Control too is expected to witness a sharp rise in escalation. Since February this year, India has reportedly violated the ceasefire on the LOC more than 3000 times, targeting civilians and military posts. Several instances of civilian casualties and injuries have been reported over the past five months across the entire LOC. The use of heavy weapons such as Anti-Tank Guided Munitions, 155mm howitzers and heavy mortars are not a regular occurrence. Not since the early 2000's has such wide scale escalation been witnessed along the LOC. Pakistan too has responded effectively against Indian violations on the LOC. In a recent press statement, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi has said that India has moved heavy weapons along frontlines deploying the Brahmos cruise missile and the recently acquired Israeli Spike ATGMs along the LOC. He has also reported the removal of fencing by Indian forces in five sectors along the LOC in preparation for escalation. Pakistan has repeatedly cautioned the international community that India may undertake military action to divert attention from recent developments in Kashmir and within India. With rising unrest on the streets of several large cities in north India, the fear of diversionary action along the LOC is growing.

In his most recent address, Prime Minister Imran Khan has cautioned India that the armed forces are ready to counter any Indian aggression in AJK & GB. As the year closed to a draw the growing hostilities and rising death toll along the LOC poses a serious challenge to the escalation matrix in South Asia. In the coming weeks developments along the Line of Control will determine in large part the future trajectory of bilateral relations.