

ISAS Brief

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Kashmir Redux

The renewal of political violence in Kashmir does not signal a reigniting of the insurgency. Instead, it is a reflection of accumulated grievances on the part of a youthful population as a consequence of living with decades of curfews, roadblocks and everyday harassment at the hands of security forces. The problem that the Indian state confronts is not one of mere order but the restoration of normal, civic life.

Sumit Ganguly¹

The Kashmir Valley is afire yet again. Periodic mass gatherings, stone pelting of police and armed forces and random acts of violence have become common. The explanations for this recent outburst of street protest and violence are both commonplace and wrong. One of the usual answers suggests that it stems from the grievances of large number of unemployed youth who are venting their anger. If youth unemployment were an adequate explanation then surely vast segments of India should be routinely aflame. After all, unemployment has long been endemic to the country. Another standard account holds that the troubles can be attributed to Pakistani machinations. This proposition, though not bereft of some truth, is nevertheless incomplete. Pakistan has long sought to fish in troubled waters but with varying levels of success. Why has it met with success in recent years once again? A third claim asserts that the

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upheavals reflect the growing influence of radical Islam in the valley. Once again, this may well be the case. However, it still begs a question. Why has this generation of Kashmiris been attracted to this ideology and what explains their disaffection with the Indian state?

A more complex explanation needs to be proffered. These demonstrations have a distinct resemblance to those that transpired shortly after the deeply flawed elections of 1987. That set of events, as is well known, culminated in the uprising that erupted in December 1989. Though it emerged as a quintessentially indigenous movement, Pakistan's involvement in it turned it into a well-orchestrated, religiously motivated, extortion racket.

After the transformation of the movement into an externally abetted terrorist enterprise it took New Delhi the better part of a decade to develop, evolve and apply a suitable counterinsurgency strategy to quell the insurgency and restore a modicum of political order. Since then, it held a series of mostly free and fair elections which seemed to bring a modicum of normalcy to the region.

That said, beneath this apparent calm, sources of discontent and frustration remained. For example, in May 2008, after the local government chose to allocate some land to create shelters for Hindu pilgrims traveling to the famous Amarnath shrine, widespread agitation ensued in significant parts of the valley. Faced with such protest, the government was forced to annul its decision. This, in turn, led to counter protests in Jammu. After waves of protests, a compromise of sorts was worked out.

Yet, this episode underscored the existence of discontent that could easily be aroused and mobilised whenever an emotive issue was at hand. Since then, there have been periodic protests and outbursts of violence that have characterised the valley. However, the most recent incident that has triggered a new upsurge of violence was the targeted assassination of a young insurgent, Burhan Wani, of one of the principal Kashmiri insurgent groups, the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. Wani, who enjoyed a substantial following amongst Kashmir youth on social media was killed in July 2016. Indian security forces, who were responsible for his death, had clearly failed to anticipate the depth of support that he had commanded amongst significant segments of Kashmiri Muslim youth. Shortly, after his killing, rioting broke out in significant parts of the valley and required stern measures on the part of security forces to contain it.

Why did Wani's killing produce such a resonant chord amongst Kashmiri youth? After all, he had belonged to a terrorist organisation and was killed in a firefight with the military. The answer has at least two important components. First, Wani, like many others, had joined the insurgency after his brother had been beaten in a casual encounter with Indian security forces. Second, Wani's decision to join the militancy is also emblematic of a larger problem that has dogged the valley long after the Pakistan-sponsored insurgency had mostly waned. Namely, that significant numbers of young men have grown up with curfews, have faced routine harassment at the hands of security forces and have, on occasion, even been manhandled. Not surprisingly, there is a substantial body of resentment and frustration that seethes amongst this population. A single incident, such as the killing of Wani, can easily precipitate an outburst of protest.

Unfortunately, no regime in New Delhi has proven willing to come to terms with the underlying sources of discord. Consequently, the measures that they have undertaken, both ameliorative and repressive, have failed to address the primary grievances. What have various regimes done to try and tackle the problems facing the region? The United Progressive Alliance regime, in the wake of some disturbances, had appointed a three-person committee to look into possible ways of tackling extant grievances. The report, delivered in 2012, had made a series of practical and sensible suggestions, including a repeal of the highly controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act. However, none of these recommendations were ever implemented.

Other strategies have also been found wanting. For example, in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered an enormous economic development package for the state. This was entirely in keeping with the attempts of prior governments to respond to a fundamentally political problem with economic means. More to the point, many of these massive infusions of funds, rarely, if ever, actually reached their targeted audiences.

The current approach of the Modi regime is also quite flawed. It seems to be based on the belief that a strong set of repressive measures will cow the aggrieved population into submission. Instead, much of the evidence suggests the contrary: in an age which has seen the widespread use of social media, photographs of those who are maimed are quickly emblazoned across web pages. These images only provoke further anger and bring out more young men and increasingly women on to the streets and alleys of Kashmir's cities. In turn, this leads to another round of repression thereby contributing to a spiral of violence.

Unfortunately, none of these strategies is likely to contain the discontent that permeates the region. Any long-term solution must have three components. First, India, which has a right to secure borders, should bolster its capabilities to interdict any attempts of infiltration from Pakistan. To a large extent, the Indian armed forces have already accomplished this, some recent tragic exceptions notwithstanding. Second, and more importantly, the Indian government must find ways to end the routine aggravation of Kashmiri youth on the part of the security forces. Third, even if it finds it most unpalatable, the government should open a dialogue with the separatist All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC). It is entirely possible that the APHC lacks popular legitimacy because it has never sought to demonstrate its electoral prowess. It nevertheless has considerable capacity for rabble-rousing. A dialogue with the APHC, without any preconditions, may well inhibit its capacity for launching street protests. Such an outcome may then help the Modi government forge more long-term measures that could produce a lasting peace in the valley.

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