



ANALYSIS

KASHMIR IN FOCUS, A YEAR OF LOCKDOWN AND STRIPPED OF AUTONOMY

5 August 2020 marked a year of the revocation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir with a pledge to bring region peace and prosperity by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The autonomy granting ruling on matters other than foreign policy and security was the main condition of Kashmir's, as a princely state, joining India in the heat of 1947, later stipulated in Articles 370 and 35-A of the Indian constitution. The initial temporary nature of the article was then deemed to be a permanent feature of the constitution, thus, calling void unilaterally amend or abrogate the Article.

Once elected, BJP's bolder language on critical issues during the 2019 general election campaign has paved the way for controversial reforms at the cost of scrapping freedoms. The world's largest democracy has now become grabbing headlines for the human rights situation in Kashmir. India's new Kashmir policy, coupled with extensive forms of restrictions such as communication blockade, detention without charges, stifling dissent, has threatened the civil liberties of Kashmiri people. Under these conditions, any sign of development cannot be the case. If at the beginning of this year there was a window of little hope to back to normalcy, the advent of pandemic leaves the line between coronavirus and the so-called security lockdown blurred. Considering that, a two-day curfew imposed the day before the first anniversary of Kashmir's lost autonomy for citing public safety purposes, perhaps, may not be found odd.

Furthermore, as the only Muslim-majority state, the situation assessment of Kashmir becomes much more worrisome, considering the overall manifestation of the Hindu nationalist agenda. Intercommunal relations hit the low, concerning behavior toward Muslims under the rising Hindu nationalism flamed by party rhetoric. Unfortunately, in February, India witnessed the worst violent communal riots in decades, which were allegedly triggered by a provocative speech by a party official. In that sense, contrasting with the previous shield for privileges against outsiders under Article 35 A, new domicile rules, which provides permanent residency status to non-Kashmiris under some categories such as living at least 15 years, studying for seven years there, and taking certain exams, can be seen as fitting the pattern of steps towards changing the demography of the region in favor of Hindus.

On the other hand, the move of repealing constitutional status in an attempt to integrate Kashmir into India added further strain to already deteriorating relations with Pakistan earlier last year, throwing the seven-decades-old dispute into grave trouble. Since then, the two nuclear powers have once again become an international spotlight owing to the possibility of turning nuclear conflict. While India does not accept any intrusion, calling it an internal decision, Pakistan, in the quest for international meditation and assistance, advocates the self-determination right.

As the day, 5th of August marked as 'Kashmir Siege Day' (Youm-e-Istehsal) in Pakistan demonstrating solidarity with Kashmiri people, in addressing Parliament Session, President Arif Alvi, not surprisingly, praised Azerbaijan, alongside other countries, for its standing beside Pakistan (Dunya News, August 6). Indeed, in featuring their multi-faceted relationship, most significantly, supporting each other's stance on respective conflicts is worth mentioning as a cornerstone. With bearing a role in the OIC Kashmir Contact group, Azerbaijan takes every single opportunity to promote Pakistan's stand on Kashmir at international forums as well. Similarly, Pakistan's strong commitment to Azerbaijan's just cause on Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict reveals itself with its denial of recognizing Armenia as an independent state and going to pursuing this until it frees up the occupied territory of Azerbaijan.

On a side note, Azerbaijan is maintaining good relations backed by close historical and cultural ties with India and keen to develop them further. Remarkably, the two countries enjoy economic cooperation expanding year on year in multiple domains ranging from trade, investment, energy sector to tourism, and reaching a new level with their participation in the North-South Corridor. As a matter of fact, Azerbaijan has welcomed as a reliable economic partner since projecting itself as the heart of crossroads hints the potential for building on these relations. Tourism relations also follow a similar suit of growth reflected in developing people-to-people contact. Apart from that, regarding the situation in Kashmir, Azerbaijan, as a responsible member of the international community, fully acknowledging and embracing the UN principles, deeply concerned with the recent developments. To that respect, it voices firm commitment to the relevant UNSC resolution on the matter.

Overall, beyond the content of security concerns in order to justify crippling fundamental freedoms, the dire humanitarian situation in Kashmir remain the subject of serious concern for the international community. Dozens of reports released on a year of lockdown are striking. In a joint press release on 4th August, 17 UN Independent Human Rights experts briefly sum up the situation in a statement that "the human rights situation in Jammu and Kashmir has been in free fall" (UN News, August 5). In the same vein, Human Rights Watch and the Amnesty reports underscore the indefinite clampdown of the very means of freedom of expression and media, as well as arbitrary detention of journalists, politicians, and activists and doubling the adverse impact of communication blockade especially during the COVID pandemic. Significantly, each report, on its part, urging India to abandon such courses of action, in the meantime, signaling the international community step up.

Besides, on the alarming, the dispute has moved from being bilateral, left aside internal matter, to the potential hotspot amidst the disastrous humanitarian situation. Eliminating constitutive elements of democracy, in particular, leaving no space for the local representation, which is unlikely to remove the motivation for an insurgency, thrusts the youth to join militant groups at last resort, herewith putting under suspicion the original security motive of the decision. Thus, it gives important clues about what the region looks like in the future as a consequence of current developments. To reverse this trajectory, the international community should exert the utmost efforts by stepping up efforts to resolve or at least to ease the situation around Kashmir.

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