



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Valley of the Brawls

Tensions Rise in Kashmir

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Today's Kashmir Valley looks worryingly similar to the Kashmir of the 1980s, just before the region erupted into a bloody insurgency that threatened the stability of the Indo-Pakistani border. Yet in recent years, international security analysts have overlooked the region. In part, that is because there has been some good news: violence in Jammu and Kashmir declined steadily between 2001 and 2012, thanks to increased security measures, international pressure, and serious political engagement with separatists and the Pakistani government. Since then, however, India's continued military control of the valley has stoked political grievances without providing meaningful economic dividends.

Members of the Jammu & Kashmir police, army officials, a former chief of India's foreign intelligence agency, and a former Indian national security adviser have expressed fears that the region could once

again see major conflict, pointing to its rising religious radicalism, communal tensions, and what they have called a significant increase in militant violence.

In fact, following a steady decline in violence—there were fewer than 100 fatalities in 2012 for the first year since the beginning of the insurgency—the numbers have again begun to rise. Recent data from the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs reveal that casualties in Kashmir have almost doubled since 2012, to 185. Over the same time frame, independent estimates show a steady rise of major incidents (from ten to 24) and suicide attacks (from zero to six). The controversial February 2013 hanging of Afzal Guru, the Kashmiri terrorist who was sentenced to death for his role in the December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament, triggered a new wave of public anger and violence. This uptick resembles the buildup of instability in the 1980s, with palpable unrest and periodic terrorist attacks that eventually bubbled over.

The revival of militant organizations, particularly in southern Kashmir, poses another alarming trend. Several Kashmir-based observers, journalists, and analysts suggest that the once defunct militant group Hizbul Mujahideen has been resurrected because of a swell in recruits. Even more concerning, most of the new recruits are young, educated, middle-class, and tech-savvy, suggesting that India has lost the battle for the minds of upwardly mobile youth. Better-quality recruits also boost militant capabilities.

Where violence has not spiked, such as in urban centers like Srinagar, there is persistent evidence of instability and repression. Based on available news accounts, Kashmir faced an average of one curfew per month in 2015, including one enforced prior to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in

November. Kashmir also had an average of one militant funeral per month in 2015. The largest funeral turnouts may have been a pair for commanders from Lashkar-e-Taiba, the group responsible for the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, in October 2015, which drew a reported 30,000 people.

Some observers have not been attuned to the alarming trends and adhere to a dated view that Kashmir is returning to normal. This view has been repeated in official and political circles and expressed by army, paramilitary, and even state government officials. As proof, they point to an increase in democratic participation—66 percent turnout in the most recent state elections, the highest in 25 years—and a rise in tourism: until recently, the region averaged 1.3 million tourists a year. Yet even if increases in tourists and voter turnout were meaningful indicators of stability—a claim some researchers have thoroughly debunked—it is unclear what these numbers actually mean.

Although tourism to Kashmir has increased since collapsing in the early 1990s, it has not fully recovered. In the 1980s, foreign tourism to Kashmir was growing twice as fast as it was in India as a whole, accounting for four percent of all foreign tourists to the country. Further, there has been almost no growth since 2011, and Kashmir attracts less than one percent of India's foreign tourists.

Comparative data on elections are equally revealing. Voter turnout in Kashmir has been high in local elections and modest in state elections, but it has considerably lagged behind in national elections. One common explanation for higher voter turnout in local and state elections is that people are sometimes coerced into voting out of a fear of being denied crucial basic services and infrastructure, particularly in isolated, vulnerable rural areas.

At the district level, turnout for the 2014 state election was almost 20 points lower in the Kashmir Valley than in Jammu and 25 points behind 1987 levels, before the war. That a near defeat of the insurgency and more than a decade's decline in violence have not restored these numbers speaks to high levels of political disillusionment and disenfranchisement. In an era where Indian democracy is deepening and maturing, the fact that Kashmiri turnout in national elections continues to lag more than 20 points behind the national average is a telltale sign of despair.

A more direct way of measuring normalization is through public opinion. Despite the Indian military touting the success of its “winning hearts and minds” program, it has not been able to offer any data that it has swayed public opinion toward India. The two most recent surveys, from 2010, found that the vast majority of Kashmiri residents did not want to join Pakistan but still favored independence from New Delhi.

New Delhi has responded to these worrisome trends by exerting more control on political life through routine curfews. Meanwhile, Indian outreach programs such as education initiatives for Kashmiri youth have been met with public apathy. And prolonged delays and shortfalls in the region's economic rehabilitation, including after the devastating September 2014 floods in Srinagar, remind Kashmiris of their disempowerment. The massive protests of 2008 to 2010 were a reminder of this continued resentment, as are the large militant funeral turnouts.

Leaders in New Delhi continue to elevate near-term political interests above long-term strategic ones. As some journalists have pointed out, India's central government has eroded the political institutions and governance capacity in Jammu and Kashmir. The state government—at times hamstrung by New

Delhi, at times threatened by what one former chief minister termed “straightforward blackmail”—has been unable to deliver on many of its promises.

Institutional decay contributed to the onset of the bloody Kashmir insurgency in 1989; rigged elections and constraints on political expression eroded the government’s thin legitimacy and opened the door to armed violence. Today, the persistence of centralized (and excessively militarized) control, corrupt patronage politics, government surveillance, and the narrative that Kashmir is merely an economic problem will only intensify alienation and undo modest gains.

In October, one police officer in Kashmir candidly told me that there was little preventing a renewed insurgency in the region. If New Delhi does not take this threat seriously and begin to substantively address Kashmiris’ political grievances, it can brace itself for more violence, conflict, terrorism, and potentially something worse.

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