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MONKEY CAGE

India revoked Kashmir's autonomy a year ago. What has happened since then?

The government claimed it needed to clean up the region's separatism and radicalization





An Indian Central Reserve Police Force officer patrols on an empty street in Srinagar during a lockdown on the first anniversary of the revocation of Kashmir's autonomy. (Danish Ismail/Reuters)

Analysis by Sameer Lalwani

August 5, 2020 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

A year ago, India eliminated the semi-autonomy provisions of Jammu and Kashmir, the country's sole Muslim-majority state and a region disputed by Pakistan, a move that analysts anticipated would ripple across the region.

The Indian government scrapped the constitutional provisions of autonomy in Article 370 and 35A, dissolved Kashmir's state assembly and split the region into two union

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territories. The government also surged paramilitary troops, instituted months of communications blackouts and curfews, and detained thousands of political leaders.

India's leaders contend these measures were needed to clean up the "mess" of Kashmir and dismantle a system they claimed fostered separatism, radicalization, militancy, corruption and underdevelopment.

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What's the situation now? On the anniversary of the decision, my research and a new report I co-wrote on this subject for the U.S. Institute of Peace offer a closer empirical look at the period leading up to India's Aug. 5, 2019, move — and the situation in the region today.

A separatist insurgency since 1989

Since 1989, the Indian government sought to quell a separatist insurgency in the Kashmir Valley that was driven by a mix of political and economic grievances, foreign support from Pakistan, and a mostly indiscriminate

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counterinsurgency strategy. In 2012, after a decade of declining violence in Kashmir, the region appeared on the cusp of what the government termed “normalcy.”

A senior Indian intelligence official, however, warned, “The calm appears deceptive.” Underneath the surface, alienation swelled, and reporting, survey research and voter turnout highlighted Kashmiri residents’ growing sense of alienation. Resistance to the Indian government manifested in a gradual rebound in armed insurgency, but also by a form of mass resistance we term in the report “quasi-violence.”



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Quasi-violence in Kashmir is similar to what scholars call “unarmed collective violence,” and involved semi-organized civilians confronting security forces with nonlethal violence. This type of resistance grew around 2013 and spiked with the 2016 unrest after the killing of Burhan Wani, a young militant leader.

This approach was distinctive for its asymmetry, assertiveness and visible symbolism rather than clandestine nature. The most common forms of quasi-violence involved

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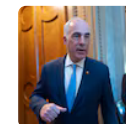
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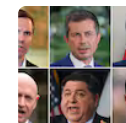
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rock throwing at security forces, attending militant funerals, and mass interdiction of security operations to help militants to escape troop cordons. Though participants generally were unarmed, they employed tactics designed to incite, signal resolve and coerce Indian security forces to erode the Indian government's legitimacy and control, and mobilize sympathy and participation, all while limiting the intensity of retaliation.

The frequency and scale of quasi-violent incidents in the Kashmir Valley (which involved dozens or hundreds of participants per incident) rose significantly from 2013 to 2019, and for several quarters matched or outpaced terrorist incidents, including the period up to the August 2019 lockdown.

[*After terrorist attack in Kashmir, will India seek vengeance or de-escalation?*]

Kashmir's armed insurgency also became more local during this period. As cross-border infiltration from Pakistan became more difficult, locally recruited Kashmiri militants from educated, middle-class backgrounds outnumbered foreign Islamist militants. Though these militants proved less militarily effective, they helped galvanize popular

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support for separatism. One Indian official noted that only the movement's limited weapons supply prevented the resentment in Kashmir from swelling into a mass insurgency.

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Yet New Delhi continued to focus almost exclusively on violently dismantling militant organizations in the region. This attrition strategy appeared to intensify public disaffection, diminish faith in democratic and electoral institutions, and feed militant recruitment. While several motivations likely drove last year's Aug. 5 political shake-up, one of them may have been to arrest the spiraling situation overtaking Kashmir.

[*Here's how India's decision to cut Kashmir's autonomy will affect South Asia — and the world*]

What is the situation one year later?

By August 2020, neither the most pessimistic nor optimistic predictions for Kashmir has been borne out. An all-out “bloodbath” did not materialize, in part because the Indian government possesses tremendous capacity to contain political violence. At the same time, assurances of stability,

development and a resumption of normality have also fallen short.

Contrary to intelligence warnings and international fears, the Indian government may have effectively preempted any violent reprisals. Draconian measures such as curfews, communication bans and the preventive detentions of thousands helped stifle initial public resistance and insurgent mobilization, but potentially exacerbated long-term alienation and separatist aspirations among Kashmiris.

Violence and quasi-violence plummeted in the immediate aftermath of Aug. 5, but both appear to be returning. Local militant recruitment, steadily rising since 2013, grew rapidly this year, posing a concern to India's military commanders. Research, reporting and a committee of former Indian senior political and military officials warns of rising support for separatism and militancy. Government fears that restoring full Internet access will incite the population confirms this instability beneath the surface.

New Delhi has struggled to deliver on

its promises

Though some shortcomings stemmed from the covid-19 crisis, India's promise of investment has not materialized. Unemployment rose, tourism fell and circumscribed communications inhibit economic and educational activity. Frustrations are mounting in Kashmir over corruption and governance deficits — and the Indian government's failure to restore statehood to the territory as promised.

The government has made some progress to broker a new moderate political party, which has espoused a pragmatic, New Delhi-friendly agenda. Nevertheless the Indian government is likely to face stiff resistance if it pursues further political and demographic engineering.

A new domicile law — which allows a wider group of Indians and refugees to claim residency benefits (including employment and the ability to purchase land) — has drawn criticism even from moderates, sparking concerns that “demographic flooding” would render the Kashmiri Muslim majority a minority. Moreover, the delimitation of assembly constituencies (essentially, redistricting) scheduled for 2021 is feared to be a gerrymandering effort to tip political power

to the Hindu-majority Jammu division at the expense of Kashmiri Muslims.

Mass disenfranchisement of Kashmiri Muslims, deteriorating security, economic backsliding and a contentious political agenda do not suggest the situation in Jammu and Kashmir has become any less volatile. Even if the Indian government remains committed to suppressing political resistance through massive security force commitments and tight social controls, the region appears poised for a gradual resurgence of quasi-violent instability and armed insurgency, where any significant spark risks setting off a nuclearized interstate crisis between India and Pakistan.

Sameer Lalwani (@splalwani) is a senior fellow for Asia Strategy, director of the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center, and co-author of the August 2020 USIP Special Report no. 473 “India’s Kashmir Conundrum: Before and After the Abrogation of Article 370.”

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