**Criminalizing dissent in Kashmir**

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Since the revocation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution three years ago on August 5, 2019, Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir has become a land where the silence of graveyards, not of peace, reigns supreme.

Indian authorities are content that daily demonstrations and political activities have come to an end. But the efforts to ensure peace in the region involved many heinous acts of violence and terrorism. Almost all major pro-Azadi political leaders were either jailed or put under house arrest. Fifty-six-year-old freedom leader Yasin Malik was sentenced to life imprisonment a few weeks ago. He went on a fast-unto-death in Tihar Jail for ten days, demanding a fair trial.

The last three years mark the most horrible phase in the contemporary history of Kashmir, even worse than Maharaja Hari Singh’s time when political and economic empowerment was at its lowest ebb. Ali Gilani’s dead body was snatched from his family and unceremoniously buried in the dark, even against his will. Another resistance leader, Ashraf Sehrai, passed away mysteriously. His family believes that he was poisoned in prison. Instead of conducting investigations to prove his family wrong, his sons and relatives were detained.

Shabbir Ahmad Shah, Asiya Andrabi, Naeem Khan and several other popular leaders have been persecuted in politically motivated and largely fabricated cases. The list is endless. These people are not criminals by any standard and deserve fair and humane treatment.

Representatives of India’s civil society and human rights watchdogs used to criticize the Indian state’s repression and heavy-handedness. Most of them are now facing extraordinary restrictions. Recently, India’s National Security Adviser Ajit Doval publically declared Indian civil society actors ‘the enemies of the country’. He said that civil society could hurt national interests.

This resulted in a heavy crackdown on human rights defenders and independent media persons. Dissent has been made a crime by state authorities in the Kashmir Valley. Internationally acclaimed human rights defender Khurram Parvez became a prime victim in November 2021 and still remains detained at the Tihar Jail. Indian authorities alleged that he had links with militant outfits.

Interestingly, Khurram Parvez has been added by ‘Time’, an American news magazine, in its list of ‘100 Most Influential People of 2022’. The magazine says, “He (Khurram Parvez) had to be silenced, for his was a voice that resounded around the globe for his fierce fight against human-rights violations and injustices in the Kashmir region.”

Kashmiri media outlets were told to either fall in line or face the occupying state’s wrath. Most of them opted to toe the official line and committed themselves to observe exceptional self-censorship. The Srinagar press club was locked and handed over to state loyalists. Promising journalist Fahad Shah was implicated in a fabricated case and sent to jail. Independent journalists’ homes and offices were frequently raided. Their gadgets such as laptops and mobile phones were confiscated. Some of them were summoned to police stations as well.

Kashmiri journalists are also being stopped from traveling outside India. Recently, Aakash Hassan, who writes on human rights and digital technologies, was prevented by the immigration authorities at the Delhi airport from leaving for Sri Lanka for work. Previously, Sanna Irshad Mattoo was denied permission to travel abroad without any reason. She was travelling to Paris as one of the 10 award winners of the Serendipity Arles Grant 2020 to attend a photography exhibition.

Save a few exceptions, the vernacular Kashmiri media has successfully been tamed. Former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Mehbooba Mufti has aptly described the state of the media in Kashmir, “freedom of expression virtually guillotined.” The Press Council of India’s fact-finding team recently revealed (March 2022) that the Indian government is releasing advertisements to newspapers selectively; this selection is based on the ‘line’ and nature of the coverage.

Pro-Azadi digital activism has also been proscribed. Social media platforms are being strictly scrutinized. Several Kashmir sympathizers claim that their Facebook and Twitter accounts have been suspended at the behest of Indian authorities. Despite this, young people find ways to raise their voices and circumvent oversight to some extent. To avoid de-platforming, they create innovative IDs and put across information about events taking place in the Kashmir Valley.

Social-political suffocation and growing frustration among the people have reached their climax. No space for political or social activities has generated a wide void. Consequently, the violence by the occupying forces has taken an ugly turn. Despite massive witch-hunt operations and killings of hundreds of militants, reaction by Kashmiris has not significantly receded.

Indian authorities have acknowledged that, due to the LoC ceasefire, barbed-wires and multilayered defence mechanism on the ground, cross-border movement is gone. Nevertheless, indigenous armed pro-freedom groups have gained significant strength; they are now operating anonymously. The highly militarized capital city of Indian-held Kashmir, Srinagar, bore the major brunt of violence last year despite having an unprecedented intelligence network.

Three years have passed, but relations between Pakistan and India are still on a rocky path; no hope for the resumption of full diplomatic relations is in sight, let alone the resumption of a bilateral dialogue. Upping the ante, Doval told ‘ANI’ last month. “We can’t have peace and war at the choice of our adversary (Pakistan). If we have to protect our interests, then we will decide when, with whom and on what terms we will have peace.”

Following this playbook, India’s Defence Minister Rajnath reassured the people of India that his country would never forget to gain control of Pakistani areas – Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan.

The above two statements show that India is adamant to continue its disengagement approach towards Pakistan and Kashmiri pro-freedom parties, and also wants to develop its capacity to gain control over Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan.

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