

GLOBAL

The Dueling Narratives of India's Kashmir Crackdown

New Delhi's actions have been welcomed domestically, but Narendra Modi's government will have a hard time selling its message abroad.

SADANAND DHUME SEP 5, 2019



Indian paramilitary soldiers stand guard in Srinagar, in Indian-controlled Kashmir. (DAR YASIN / AP)

A month ago, the Indian government abruptly voided the constitutional autonomy afforded to Kashmir. The announcement was made in Parliament with no warning, resulting in the splitting of what was a single state, formally known as Jammu and Kashmir, into two federally-run units whose rulers will be picked by New Delhi.

The move once again catapulted the decades-long dispute over Kashmir—parts of which are variously administered by India, Pakistan, and China—into the global spotlight. In the United States, India's actions have attracted almost universally negative coverage: A spate of news stories and op-eds have highlighted the quashing of Kashmiri human rights, the risk of war between nuclear-armed India

and Pakistan, the threat to Indian federalism and democracy, and the rise of a muscular brand of Hindu nationalism hostile to Islam. (Before its dissolution, Jammu and Kashmir was India's only Muslim-majority state.)

In India, by contrast, the government's decision was widely welcomed. In Parliament, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party easily reconfigured a seven-decade-old political compact with the state over just two days. Several opposition parties supported the government, and even among those that did not, such as the left-of-center Congress Party, prominent leaders broke ranks to back the decision. Much of the Indian media, especially television-news channels, greeted it with undisguised glee. On YouTube and TikTok, scores of videos have sprouted to celebrate Modi's "bold move." The BJP will almost certainly showcase its decision in state elections later this year in northern and western India.

Why is an action so widely castigated internationally so wildly popular in India?

Turn first to Modi's own justification for the decision: In a 40-minute televised address to the nation in Hindi, he argued it would boost economic development, fight corruption, and end gender, caste, and religious discrimination in the erstwhile state. As the prime minister put it, the voided constitutional provisions had "given nothing but secessionism, terrorism, nepotism and widespread corruption on a large scale" to Kashmir.

In Modi's telling, Kashmir had languished too long as a backwater scarred by violence and ruled by corrupt dynastic politicians who siphoned off federal funds meant for the people. Tighter integration with the rest of India, he argued, will create new jobs as both state-owned firms and private Indian enterprises rush to invest. Students can look forward to more government scholarships. Film crews will return to the iconic Kashmir Valley, once a Bollywood favorite. A new generation of Kashmiri leaders will rise to take their people toward a bright future in the benevolent embrace of Mother India.

Considering Modi's popularity—225 million voters chose the BJP in national elections this year, giving it India's largest political mandate in 35 years—it should surprise nobody that many of his compatriots find him persuasive. Moreover, his

claims contain a kernel of truth. State laws preventing outsiders from owning property may have dampened investment in tourism, and refugees from Pakistan could not vote in state elections despite having lived in Kashmir for decades. In the end, Modi is selling a sunny promise of the future. Reject it as Pollyannaish and you risk looking like you *want* it to fail.

And while critics see the government's decision, taken without consulting Kashmiris, as deeply undemocratic, many Indians view it differently. Since the 1950s, the BJP—then called the Bharatiya Jana Sangh—has campaigned to abrogate constitutional provisions that, at least in theory, limited New Delhi's control over Jammu and Kashmir to defense, foreign affairs, and communications. The party manifesto this year repeated the pledge. By this logic, Modi won an election and kept his promise to voters. That's what democratically elected politicians do.

What about the more than 500,000 Indian soldiers and paramilitary forces in Kashmir, 35,000 of whom were rushed into the state shortly before the government's announcement? Kashmiris may resent their overbearing presence, but elsewhere in India they are seen as the good guys, serving selflessly amidst a hostile population. In February, a suicide bombing in Kashmir killed 40 Indian paramilitary troops traveling in a convoy, and provoked tit-for-tat air strikes between India and Pakistan.

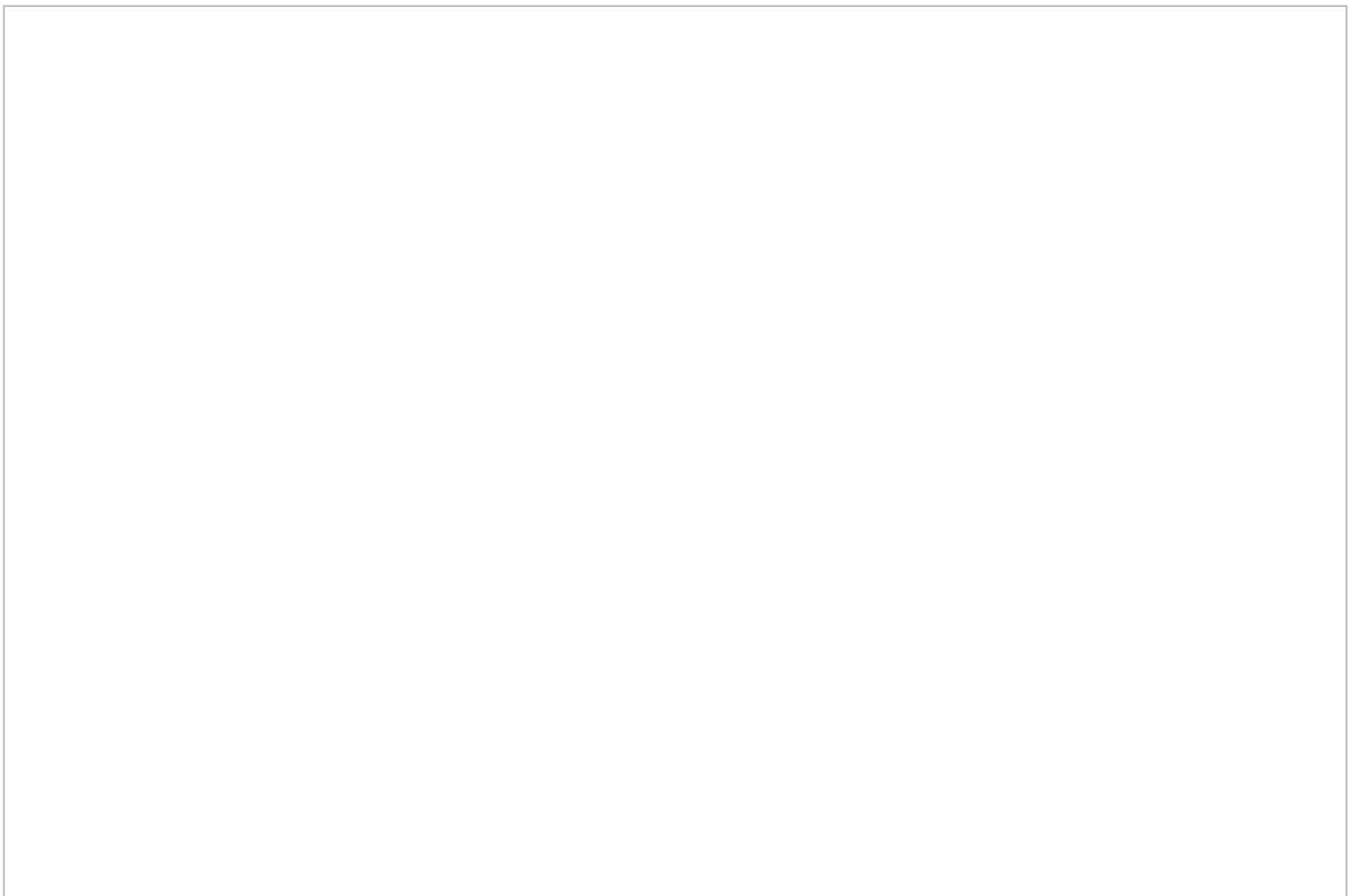
Human-rights groups criticize Indian troops for blinding protesters with buckshot, but viewed from the other side, the use of pellet guns—rather than live rounds sometimes deployed in other Indian states—suggests concern for life, not unwarranted brutality. Indeed, the government says its shutdown of normal activities in the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley (including a month without internet or mobile-phone services) stems from a desire to save lives. Three years ago, more than 50 people died in protests after security forces killed Burhan Wani, a leader of the Islamist terrorist group Hizbul Mujahideen.

Over the years, mainstream public opinion in the rest of India toward Kashmir has hardened. In 1990, shortly after Kashmiri Muslims rose in revolt against Indian rule following rigged state elections three years prior, militants spurred the exodus of 250,000 to 400,000 Kashmiri pandits, Hindus whose presence in the valley

pre-dates the coming of Islam to the region in the 14th century. Many BJP supporters weigh the suffering of Kashmiris today against the plight of the pandits, most of whom have not returned to their ancestral homes. They also resent what they see as the media's excessive focus on the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley. Many people in Hindu-majority Jammu, and the sparsely populated Buddhist-majority Ladakh region, which is one of the new union territories, have welcomed the government's decision.

Since Modi's election in 2014, a crop of chest-thumping television-news channels broadly aligned with the BJP have used Kashmir as a convenient tool to whip up nationalist sentiment. Their Kashmir-related Twitter hashtags leave little to the imagination: #ServeIndiaNotPak, #NationLovesIndianArmy, #KashmirForAll, #IndiaAgainstAntiNationals. If anything, Hindi-language media are even more strident.

The popularity of Modi's action means he faces no meaningful domestic pressure to take a gentler tack. Notwithstanding a flurry of outraged op-eds in English-language newspapers, domestic public opinion remains firmly with the BJP.



Outside India, it's a different story. For the most part, with the exception of China, major powers have been loath to criticize India. The U.S. has reverted to its traditional position of treating Kashmir as a bilateral matter between India and Pakistan. At the G7 summit in Biarritz, President Donald Trump said, "The prime minister really feels he has it under control." Many in Washington see India as a potential bulwark against Chinese hegemony in Asia. And Pakistan's backing of terrorist groups in the valley has leached the Kashmir issue of international support. Even Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, drawn to India by business opportunities, have refused to take Pakistan's side in the dispute.

Still, New Delhi will have a hard time selling its message outside its borders unless it changes its behavior. Bluntly put, India's branding as the world's largest democracy does not square with preemptively arresting up to 2,000 Kashmiris, including three former chief ministers of the state; suspending mobile-telephone networks and the internet for weeks; and locking up doctors for bringing attention to medicine shortages in the valley. Five members of the U.S. Congress, including Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Ilhan Omar, have publicly called on India to lift its communications blockade. More will likely follow.

To an impartial observer, India's actions smack of collective punishment. Unlike Hindu chauvinists, reasonable people distinguish between a small number of Islamic militants and ordinary Kashmiris who just happen to be Muslim. Blinding civilian protesters with pellet guns suggests cruelty, not compassion, and at least one protester has died as a result of the Indian security forces' actions. The jingoistic TV channels and permanently enraged social-media trolls used so effectively by the BJP to mold public opinion at home have little influence elsewhere. Modi's Kashmir gambit may be popular with Indians, but it's unlikely to win over the world.

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