'Kashmiris will erupt': fear grips region as Indian crackdown bites

August 9, 2019

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/09/kashmiris-will-erupt-fear-grips-region-as-indian-crackdown-bites>

Eid is just days away, and the central market in Srinagar, Lal Chowk, should be bustling with people. Every year crowds flock to its stalls to buy clothes, jewellery and sweets. Sheep and goats – traditionally offered as a sacrifice – are brought to the market by nomads from the [Kashmir](https://www.theguardian.com/world/kashmir) mountains.

But this week Lal Chowk was deserted. On Wednesday, only two men – armed Indian police – stood opposite the market’s shuttered shops and ice-cream parlours.

Srinagar, the main city in Kashmir, is in complete lockdown following a dramatic announcement by the Indian government on Monday, [which stripped the territory](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/05/india-revoke-disputed-kashmir-special-status) of its autonomy and divided it in two.

“Our lives will be different. This is injustice,” says Nusrat Amin who was out on the empty streets of Srinagar trying to buy medicine. “We are compelled to come out on roads and fight against the oppression.”

Under the changes, Kashmir’s constitution and flag will disappear. Rules that have prevented people from outside Kashmir buying land in the territory, India’s only Muslim-majority state, are also scrapped. Many Kashmiris fear the demography of the state, and their way of life, could be altered.

Pakistan responded angrily, with the prime minister, [Imran Khan, suggesting India](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/07/pakistan-cuts-india-trade-amid-kashmir-ethnic-cleansing-fear) could carry out ethnic cleansing, while China called the decision “unacceptable”.

The voices of Kashmiris – whose future will be dramatically affected by the government’s actions – have been almost completely silenced. Hours before the announcement, millions of people in the territory were placed under strict curfew and a wide-ranging communications blackout.

In residential areas, where a few people venture outside to sit in side lanes, there is a deep sense of anger and betrayal.

“[On the one hand] they say Kashmir is ours, but at the same time they kill us,” says Mohammad Rafiq, who describes himself as a citizen of Kashmir. “Whatever they are doing here is by power and force,” he says. Many accuse India of wanting Kashmir’s land, but not Kashmiris.

In Srinagar, people are used to curfews and living under a heavy security presence, but the current clampdown is far more intense. Officers from the Central Reserve Police Force, India’s armed police – who wear helmets and carry rifles – vastly outnumber Jammu and Kashmir police, who carry batons. Officers, some of whom have never been to Kashmir before, cover every corner.

“When a child looks out from a window, he sees Indian forces with heavy weapons. What sort of impression would he get on his mind?” says Rafiq. “Will you win the people of Kashmir by love or with the gun or power?”

## Communications blackout

The clampdown on communications is equally harsh, and it is likely that people from outside the city have still not heard about the Indian government’s announcement. Landlines, mobile, internet coverage and, for many, cable TV have all been blocked.

People cannot call relatives, or call ambulances if there is an emergency. Public transport is not running, which means those with health problems can only get to a hospital if they have a car – and even then they struggle to get far.

Across the city, many roads are permanently blocked by loops of barbed wire. At checkpoints, people – including families with children – can be seen pleading with officers to let them pass. Most people, nervous that tensions were building last week, had stocked up on food and essentials, but it’s not known how long the curfew will last.

On some streets, broken bricks lie in the roads, left over from groups pelting the government forces with stones. At dusk, the sound of teargas canisters can be heard. The security presence is huge, but there are protests taking place at a neighbourhood-level.

On Friday, the police announced that the curfew would be temporarily eased so that people could attend local mosques for Friday prayers. Protests often occur after Friday prayers, prompting fears that violence could break out.

At the Shri Maharaja Hari Singh hospital, doctors have been treating at least 50 people with wounds from pellet guns and rubber bullets, according to reports by the Associated Press.

Hundreds of politicians and activists have reportedly been arrested and taken to temporary detention centres, apparently to prevent violence.

Some of Kashmir’s most prominent political leaders, people who have formed alliances with parties such as India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, remain in detention. The entire political spectrum in Kashmir is opposed to the revocation of the territory’s special status.

## ‘We have no hope’

In Srinagar, Kashmir’s biggest city, some are disillusioned with mainstream political leaders. Mir Shahid, a local shopkeeper who was sitting outside his closed shop says he has little faith.

“These pro-Indian [Kashmiri] leaders are nothing and we have no hope from them,” he says, pointing out that the voter turnout is extremely low. “How can we expect them to represent the people of Kashmir. They are not our leaders.”

As soon as restrictions are lifted, it is likely there will be a backlash from the people of Kashmir, says Adnan Ashraf, spokesperson Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Conference. “I’m certain that Kashmiris will erupt,” he says, adding that in the long term, India has given the Kashmiris “enough reason to welcome people who they think will fight on their behalf,” pointing to America’s imminent withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Neighbouring Pakistan, which also claims Kashmir, has responded to the crisis by announcing plans to expel India’s top diplomat and to suspend trade. The countries have fought two of their three wars over [control of Kashmir](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/05/kashmir-fog-of-war-how-conflicting-accounts-benefit-india-pakistan).

In a speech to the nation on Thursday, India’s prime minister, Narendra Modi, promised he would bring development and prosperity to Kashmir, and that his actions would help rid the state of terrorism. But many in Kashmir, who can’t watch TV, won’t have heard his words.

The economic consequences of the shutdown are grave. Hafeez Ahmed, a tour operator, says the decision to evacuate tourists and thousands of Hindu pilgrims last week was unprecedented. The industry was just starting to recover, following a [suicide car bombing](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/14/indian-paramilitaries-killed-in-suicide-car-bombing-in-kashmir) in February that killed dozens of Indian paramilitaries.

“Tourists who used to come are more than our guests,” he says.

“Our Kashmir is so caring that we used to give food to Yatris (Hindu pilgrims) even in the worst times. And they have evacuated all the tourists and Yatris. Shame on them,” he says.

Everyone’s businesses are suffering. The timing of the clampdown, right before Eid, a huge boost to the economy, couldn’t have been worse.

“People like me no longer have any faith or any expectation in the parliament of India,” says Ashraf, adding that he party he represents believed in a shared and common future within the union of India.

“It’s a majoritarian India trampling down on the rights and freedoms of Kashmiris,” he says. “It’s a monumental and historic disaster.”