

Asia & Pacific

# 'A dormant volcano': Kashmir's streets are quiet, but residents seethe with resentment

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By Niha Masih

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SRINAGAR, India — The Kashmiri capital looks as if the city has been emptied of its citizens: Instead of being crowded with civilians, the streets are awash with armed soldiers; instead of traffic jams at intersections, there are spools of concertina wires. People remain locked inside their homes with no phone, Internet or cable TV service.

No one has seen or heard from local political leaders, hundreds of whom are in detention. Of the more than 200 newspapers in the region, only five are publishing physical copies. Their websites are stuck at Aug. 5.

It's time for Friday prayers, and Srinagar's famed 15th-century mosque, Jamia Masjid, is eerily quiet. Nearby shops selling carpets, chicken meat, tableware and wedding supplies are shuttered. The only sound is from a rat scrambling in a chicken pen outside a shop. The only movement is a flock of pigeons in the air.

Five months ago, I interviewed one of the shopkeepers here after a suicide bomber struck Indian security forces. There had been expressions of sympathy with India against the violent attack. Now, the hastily written "Go India, go back" is scrawled across the storefront next door.

I spent four days in Kashmir in the aftermath of [India's dramatic move to strip the region](#) of its partial autonomy and statehood — and saw firsthand that despite the quiet on the streets, Kashmiris are seething with resentment.

Abdur Rehman, 78, a resident of the downtown area who has seen Kashmir through its best and worst times, likened the latest episode to the British colonization of the country. "India is behaving with Kashmir the way Brits behaved with them," he said.

On a side street, men returning from prayers gather. Immediately, a nearby soldier whistles, signaling them to disperse. Nobody moves for a few tense seconds. Finally, the men go indoors.

As daylight fades, security forces retreat from the streets of restive neighborhoods. That's when the civilians emerge. Some throw stones at passing military convoys, others burn tires and some step out just to breathe fresh air after being confined all day.

Many in India point to the absence of large-scale violent protests as proof that Kashmir may not be assailed by violence, as security experts have warned. Some go as far as to paint a picture of normalcy as people line up at ATMs or buy bread.

But the rage is evident, even if it is suppressed.

Several Kashmiris spoke to me about the humiliation they said they felt being policed in their own homeland. At one checkpoint in the city, a soldier shouted at a man on a scooter with two young children for not stopping. Shame and weariness clouded the man's face as he showed his identification card before being allowed to proceed.

Near the airport, in an upscale gated community full of expansive houses with high walls, Zafar Khan, 25, an MBA student, described the dilemma facing young people like him. "Stone pelting is not the answer," he said. "But not doing anything is also not possible."

In Srinagar's Soura neighborhood, which has emerged as the center of protests, life has been reduced to prayers and protests. Beneath the majestic Zabarwan mountain range, under bright blue skies and helicopters hovering ominously, men, women and children gather every day to shout against the "Indian occupation." Some days, the crowd swells to the thousands; on other days, only a few hundred come out.

On Sunday afternoon, the day before the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, young children and teenage girls gathered. For the first time, they said, none had bought new clothes for the holiday. One girl put up a hand to show the henna traditionally applied during festivals. It read, "We want freedom."

It had been a week since any of them had attended school.

"Every kid here is ready to get martyred," said Ishfaq Ahmad, 25, pointing to the younger boys milling around in groups. "This time, it will be worse than the '90s."

01/15/2019 Kashmir's streets are quiet during India's crackdown, but residents seethe with resentment. The Washington Post  
He was referring to the rise of the separatist insurgency, when hundreds of men turned to guns to fight the Indian state. Over the past few years, the government had managed to reduce the [number of active militants](#) to fewer than 300, but locals and security experts say Kashmir's demotion by India is likely to prompt the younger generation to turn to violence, setting the stage for a new cycle of clashes.

“Right now, Kashmir is like a dormant volcano,” said Fizalah Kawoosa, 32, an immunologist. “We are being provoked to react with violence. All it needs is a trigger.”

Again and again, people in Srinagar asked why the government's move was necessary at a time when things seemed to be improving in the disputed region or why there had been no dialogue with the people affected. It was a question for which I had no answer.

Kawoosa placed a big tray of snacks in front of me despite my protestations. “Please eat. This is Eid. No one has visited us,” she said. “You're the first person I'm speaking to in a week apart from my family.”

*Adnan Bhat contributed to this article.*

### **Niha Masih**

Niha Masih is the India correspondent for The Washington Post based in New Delhi. Before joining The Post in 2019, she reported on politics, conflict and religious fundamentalism in India for Hindustan Times and New Delhi Television (NDTV).

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