‘Azad’ Kashmir’s Unheard Rebellion: Voices from the People’s Struggle

Posted on October 7, 2025 by Haris Qadeer

[**Over the past month, Pakistan-Administered Jammu and Kashmir (PAJK) have experienced one of the most significant waves of mass mobilisation in recent years. Triggered by rising electricity tariffs, increased taxation, and widespread economic hardship, the protests, which are led by the Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC), have evolved into a broader movement advocating for social and economic justice through a 38-point Charter of Demands. The demonstrations have attracted participation from workers, students, traders, and ordinary citizens across the region, highlighting a pervasive discontent with systemic neglect and inequality.**

In this interview, *Alternative Viewpoint* speaks to grassroots activist

Haris Qadeer, involved in the ongoing struggle. The discussion explores the political content of the demands, the state's response, the composition of the movement, and the evolving role of the left in shaping its direction. The conversation also reflects on the resonance of regional and global protest waves—from South Asia to the Middle East and beyond—that have challenged neoliberal austerity and state repression.

The movement in PAJK serves as a powerful reminder that, even in the most militarised and marginalised regions, popular resistance can emerge with striking clarity and determination. – ed.]

Alternative Viewpoint : How is the current struggle related to earlier protest movements in Pakistan-administered Jammu Kashmir?

Haris Qadeer : Pakistan-Administered Jammu Kashmir (PAJK) is divided into two primary regions, each governed by distinct administrative structures, yet ultimately under the authority of Pakistan's federal government. One of these regions is Gilgit-Baltistan, which has been designated as a semi-provincial entity through a presidential order. Historically, this area was administered under colonial-era laws, including the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR). The other region comprises the districts of Jammu Kashmir, historically shaped by the former princely state of Poonch and the Kashmir Valley. With its president, prime minister, supreme court, and various state institutions, this region functions as an independent state. Senior officials from Pakistan, along with the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan, effectively oversee both regions.

In the areas under the state government of PAJK, a tradition of struggle and protest dates back to 1932. Initially, the region witnessed the movement for the autonomy of the former Poonch state. Later, in the 1940s, when the sub-state of Poonch was brought directly under the control of the Maharaja of Jammu Kashmir and discriminatory taxes were imposed, a popular movement arose against the Maharaja's autocratic rule and oppressive taxation. Even before the Indian subcontinent's partition in 1947, this movement took a violent turn and transformed into an armed rebellion.

After Partition, the armed uprising in Poonch succeeded in gaining control over much of the region. Simultaneously, the newly established Pakistani state dispatched tribal militias from Muzaffarabad towards the state capital, Srinagar, with the aim of capturing the city. These militias advanced through Muzaffarabad, reaching Baramulla and the outskirts of Srinagar. Meanwhile, Maharaja Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir, along with the newly independent Indian leadership, began to move towards formal accession to India. The tribal invasion, alongside the indigenous revolt in Poonch, provided a pretext for the deployment of Indian troops and the signing of the Instrument of Accession.

The rebels of Poonch established a provisional government that was a democratic, representative, secular, and independent entity for the people of Jammu and Kashmir. The founding declaration also stated that a plebiscite would determine the political future of Jammu and Kashmir after its complete liberation.

With the arrival of Indian troops in Kashmir, Pakistan's regular army subsequently entered the conflict to support the tribal forces. This escalation led to the Indo-Pakistani War, which, following a ceasefire, resulted in the

permanent division of Jammu and Kashmir into two distinct parts.

This historical background shows that movements in this region are not new. The struggles have not only been directed against the autocratic rule of the Maharaja of Jammu Kashmir but also later against Pakistan's control over the region. Once the government's autonomy was undermined, and decision-making shifted to the central government in Pakistan, often exercised through migrant Kashmiri leadership settled in Pakistan, another rebellion broke out in Poonch in May-June 1950. A parallel government was established; afterwards Pakistani troops were sent to suppress it but failed spectacularly, and local rebels disarmed and captured the soldiers. The three-year-long uprising ended only after the government promised to form an election commission and hold representative elections, a promise that was never fulfilled.

In 1955, another rebellion broke out in Palandri (Poonch). This time, the Punjab Constabulary was deployed to crush it. An agreement known as the Baral Accord restored peace after two years of intense conflict and heavy sacrifices.

Subsequently, the local ruling elite crafted an official narrative portraying the region as the "base camp" for the liberation of Indian-administered Jammu Kashmir (IAJK). This pretext replaced the struggle for control over local resources, political autonomy, and fiscal rights with the rhetoric of liberating IAJK. However, the idea of establishing a united, independent Jammu Kashmir, an unfinished mission since 1947, remained deeply rooted within the popular consciousness.

At the local level, struggles for basic rights and autonomy persisted. While the

movement for total national liberation remained prominent, the abrogation of Article 370 by India on 5 August 2019 prompted both progressive and nationalist leaders to shift their focus towards securing self-rule within PAJK as a means of furthering the broader freedom struggle. The ineffectiveness of depending on imperialist powers and institutions, such as the UN and the US, became increasingly apparent, especially following the meetings between Modi, Trump, and Imran Khan in 2019, which coincided with India's decision to revoke Kashmir's special status.

A segment of the Left has long sought to organise the national liberation struggle along class lines, despite facing criticism from nationalist circles. Nationalists frequently dismissed efforts to address fundamental issues such as the rising prices of basic goods, power load-shedding, and unjust taxes as mere distractions. However, a significant shift began to occur after 2019. Class-based struggles gained momentum, leading to the formation of Action Committees and United Fronts.

After the pandemic, this trajectory gradually converged into a more organised framework under the "Awami Huqooq Tehreek" (People's Rights Movement), which was centred around a charter of demands. Launched in August 2022, the movement entered a new phase on May 9, 2023. Through long sit-ins, demonstrations, shutter-downs, and wheel-jam strikes, it eventually grew into a statewide movement by September 2023. A 30-member Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) was formed as the central leadership, followed by the establishment of local-level action committees across the district level or even at the ward level.

The movement's central demands were to gain control over locally generated

hydroelectric resources, ensure access to hydropower at production cost, and abolish unjust taxation. Additional significant demands included the restoration of wheat subsidies and the removal of privileges held by the ruling elite. The Charter of Demands sought to progressively move towards sovereignty and resource ownership, aiming to rebuild the national liberation movement along class lines.

The forces of the left began to intervene in these movements, while reactionary right-wing forces and state interference intensified. The ad hoc central leadership of the movement largely consisted of second-tier nationalists and representatives of local small-scale trader associations, who found it challenging to grasp the full depth and radical potential of the movement. The right-wing leadership worked in collaboration with the state, aiming to dilute its anti-colonial character. Consequently, the leadership sought to uphold the movement's "apolitical" stance, implementing standard operating procedures to restrict ideological debate and even discouraging all forms of criticism, including that aimed at colonial structures.

As a result, the movement has now divided into two distinct trajectories; essentially, we can identify a sub-movement within the larger movement. In summary, the current struggle not only continues the legacy of prior movements but also surpasses the articulated charter and limited demands set by its leadership, indicating a more profound and radical evolution of political consciousness in the region.

What are the main demands in the 38-point Charter of Demands?

On September 29, 2025, the movement entered its second or third phase,

marked by lockdowns, mass protests, and long marches aimed at addressing the 38-point Charter of Demands.

In May 2024, following a lengthy march, the government agreed to set the electricity price between Rs. 3 and Rs. 6 per unit and to reduce the price of flour by Rs. 1,000 per 40 kg bag. However, other agreed-upon demands were not implemented. A subsequent agreement in December 2024 also went unfulfilled. After the deadline for this agreement expired, a significant public meeting held in Muzaffarabad in May 2025 led to the expansion of the Charter to include new demands such as:

1. Abolition of the 12 legislative seats reserved for Kashmiri refugees settled in Pakistan.
2. Abolition of the 19% job quota reserved for these refugees.
3. Free education and healthcare for all citizens.
4. Ending privileges and perks for the ruling elite.
5. New agreements on hydropower projects with the Muzaffarabad government.
6. Transparency in governance and eradication of corruption.
7. Restoration of student unions.
8. Empowerment of local governments.
9. Construction of tunnels, bridges, and roads to improve transport and connectivity.

While the public narrative highlighted that the movement sought to dismantle the colonial order and reclaim the region's rights to self-governance, the Charter of Demands did not specifically articulate a direct appeal for decolonisation or sovereignty.

Could you elaborate on the nature of the current struggle? What is the current situation? Have there been any incidents involving arrests, violence, or intimidation?

I believe that in recent days, some truly extraordinary events have unfolded in this region—events that, in terms of popular participation and political maturity, may even surpass the recent significant upheavals in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. For instance, in all ten districts of Jammu Kashmir under Pakistani administration, hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets. For five consecutive days, daily life was effectively brought to a standstill; individuals refrained from driving vehicles, businesses across all towns and cities remained closed, and massive demonstrations were held in numerous locations.

Pakistan deployed a significant number of police and paramilitary forces to suppress the protests. To halt the long march, security forces resorted to repression and violence. Nevertheless, the protesters managed to overcome the security forces, compelling them to lay down their weapons. Following their surrender, the protesters ensured the safe return of the subdued forces. Under the direction of the state, thugs affiliated with the ruling party, operating under police supervision, launched an armed attack on demonstrators in Muzaffarabad, disguised as a "peace march". The gunfire from these armed individuals led to the death of one young man and injuries

to dozens of others. Despite this violence, the protesters maintained their focus on the demonstrations and refrained from engaging in vandalism or rioting.

Only one significant incident throughout these five days could be characterised as violent: in Dhirkot, a suburb of the Bagh district that connects Poonch and Muzaffarabad, police opened fire and shelled the protesters who were trying to advance. This confrontation resulted in five fatalities and over 150 serious injuries, primarily among police personnel. Additionally, police vehicles were set ablaze at the scene.

Overall, during those five days, there were ten fatalities and over 300 injuries. Despite this, the protests did not escalate into a violent movement. Thousands of demonstrators gathered at the entrance to Muzaffarabad, the capital, and held a sit-in that persisted until October 4, when the leadership of the Joint Action Committee (JACC) declared that their demands had been met.

At its core, this movement is anti-colonial and anti-neoliberal, deeply rooted in the grassroots of society. However, the leadership appears to lack full awareness of this character. Similar to traditional trade-union leadership, they often settle for partial concessions after each round of struggle, merely preparing for the next phase, without fully recognising the broader transformative potential of the movement.

Which social groups, such as workers, students, women, peasants, and unemployed youth, are most actively participating in the protests? Additionally, how has the government responded to the ongoing struggle?

To comprehend the situation, it is essential to examine the demographic and economic makeup of the region. Generally, this movement has engaged various segments of society. The area functions predominantly as a consumer society, heavily reliant on remittances sent by migrant workers residing in Europe, America, Africa, and the Middle East. Of the total population, which stands at 4.5 million, approximately 1.5 to 1.8 million are migrant workers abroad. The government employs approximately 100,000 individuals. The peasantry is notably sparse, and the lack of factories and industries means there's no organised working class in the region. The private sector employs about 300,000 people across small businesses, banks, private schools, and hospitals, frequently paying wages that fall significantly below the legal minimum. Furthermore, both public and private sector employees are prohibited from forming trade unions.

Because of these conditions and the dependence on remittances, a petty-bourgeois or middle-class psychology dominates the society. Consequently, the movement's nature is popular rather than class-based. Participation from rural areas has been particularly strong. Many participants are unemployed youth, who, because of remittances from family members abroad, can afford to engage full-time in political activities. Thus, a large number of students and young people have taken part in this movement.

Due to the persistence of patriarchal and tribal attitudes, women's participation in the movement has been limited. Despite their high education levels, women primarily organised separate demonstrations during the early stages. However, on social media, they have played an active and vocal role in shaping the movement's discourse. In physical protests, their participation has remained minimal; nonetheless, we witnessed unprecedented

involvement from women in providing food and other supplies along the route of the long march, along with their crucial solidarity.

The government has taken extensive measures to suppress the movement, with over 500 legal cases filed against activists. The substantial involvement of Pakistan's intelligence agencies has shaped much of the state's response. Additionally, a systematic campaign of propaganda and psychological manipulation is currently in progress. It appears that the leadership has been pressured to isolate left-wing and nationalist forces from active participation in the struggle, a tactic aimed at undermining the movement's anti-colonial character.

Could you provide a brief description of the Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) and its activities?

The Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) serves as the central coordinating body of the movement. Comprising 30 members, it includes three representatives from each of the ten districts. The committee's primary activities focus on organising small-scale grassroots conferences at both the village and local levels. More than 200 conferences have taken place over the past two years, drawing thousands of participants. In addition to numerous smaller demonstrations, shutdowns, and wheel-jam strikes throughout the region, the JAAC has initiated three major mass protests to date.

Why are there protests regarding the reserved seats for refugees?

The Legislative Assembly of Pakistan-administered Jammu Kashmir comprises

53 seats, of which 12 are allocated for refugees from Jammu Kashmir who migrated to Pakistan during the 1947 conflict and are now settled across various provinces. The Government of Pakistan oversees the elections for these seats, which represent approximately 450,000 registered voters. Additionally, the government allocates 19% of its job positions for these refugees.

The protests arise for several reasons:

1. Pakistan uses these reserved seats to reinforce its colonial control over the Muzaffarabad government. Through these assembly members, the Government of Pakistan can easily engineer internal changes, forming or toppling governments at will, a practice that has occurred repeatedly in the past.
2. The Karachi Agreement of 28 April 1949, signed between the Government of Pakistan and the Government of PAJK (Muzaffarabad), delineated the limits of the latter's powers. Under this agreement, Pakistan retained authority over the administration of refugee rehabilitation and Gilgit Baltistan.
3. The refugees were subsequently granted Pakistani citizenship and allocated lands within the country. They also pay taxes in various Pakistani provinces and benefit from representation in Pakistan's own political institutions.

The protesters contend that assembly members, who do not contribute taxes to the Muzaffarabad government and operate outside its constitutional jurisdiction, lack the authority to legislate for the region. Consequently, the

laws they enact do not apply to them.

Additionally, the 19% job quota allocated for these refugees is perceived as a direct infringement on local rights because it favours individuals who are neither residents nor taxpayers of the region. Protesters argue that this arrangement exemplifies the ongoing colonial subjugation disguised as a democratic process.

Could you tell us about the role of the Left in the current struggle?

The Left was the original initiator of this movement, but it currently exhibits fragmentation and fragility. A significant faction, the Stalinist nationalist Left, continues to extol the monarchical rule of the Maharaja. Additionally, there exists a small, opportunistic segment of the Left that entirely dismisses the national question. The Jammu Kashmir National Students Federation (JKNSF), the region's first left-wing student organisation, along with a group of leftist activists who emerged from it, played a pivotal role in establishing the movement's foundations. Despite this, the central leadership features only one member from the Left within JAAC, although numerous militant left-wing activists have garnered considerable popularity at the local level across various districts and areas.

Due to state pressure, the central government has been hesitant to adopt a left-wing programme. Nevertheless, leftist ideas continue to resonate strongly with the masses, particularly the demands for the establishment of a Constituent Assembly, the recognition of collective ownership of natural resources, the withdrawal of Pakistan's lent officers, and the dismantling of the colonial structure reinforced by the 1974 Act and the Interim Constitution.

Do you observe any influence from the regional and global protests in this struggle?

Absolutely, regional and global protest movements have profoundly influenced this uprising. Among the most prominent slogans are calls for revolution and freedom. The events in Sri Lanka and the ongoing movements in the peripheries of Pakistan have shaped the current situation. Most recently, the wave of protests in Nepal significantly impacted events occurring between September 29 and October 4. Inspired by Nepal's movement, people participated on a much larger scale than before, standing resolutely in the face of state repression and a barrage of gunfire.

What potential outcomes do you foresee arising from this movement? What long-term political impact might it have on PAJK?

This movement has fundamentally raised significant questions regarding the colonial structure of governance. It now appears increasingly unlikely that Pakistan's state institutions will be able to sustain the region's existing constitutional, political, and financial framework. The movement has profoundly shaken the status quo, leading to a loss of credibility for traditional political parties, particularly the local branches of Pakistani parties. Current and former members of the legislative assembly have become symbols of public disdain and contempt.

Even if this movement does not progress further, stabilising the existing political structure will prove extremely challenging. However, it is inevitable that the movement will persist, as genuine advancement cannot occur without dismantling the colonial framework.

How do you perceive the role of solidarity from Pakistan, India, and international groups? What are your expectations of them?

This region of Jammu Kashmir is situated on the periphery of Pakistan and remains a crucial part of the broader, unresolved question surrounding Kashmir's political future. Despite the movement's vibrancy, its ultimate success or a transition towards the abolition of the capitalist system relies heavily on the mobilisation of the working class and oppressed nationalities, particularly within Pakistan and the wider South Asian context. Consequently, solidarity from left-wing forces and the vanguard elements of the working class in both Pakistan and India, as well as the surrounding region, is of paramount importance.

Globally, solidarity from leftist movements, the international working class, and anti-colonial struggles is essential. To end colonial domination and neoliberal imperialist policies, it is crucial to defeat the capitalist system itself. The liberation of Jammu Kashmir remains unattainable as long as the capitalist states of Pakistan and India exist in their current forms; similarly, the liberation of other oppressed nationalities across the subcontinent cannot be realised within these confines. The dismantling of this artificial partition of the subcontinent, alongside the creation of a voluntary socialist federation of independent nations, represents the only viable path to ending national oppression and colonial exploitation, thereby enabling the construction of a truly humane society.

This struggle cannot succeed in isolation or through fragmented efforts. We must not only hope for solidarity; we must actively work towards building alternative revolutionary forces. A significant weakness evident in the current

movements across the region is a lack of organised revolutionary leadership grounded in scientific socialist principles. Consequently, it is the historic responsibility of revolutionaries in this region to accelerate the establishment of such leadership, connect the ongoing struggles, dismantle every chain of capitalist oppression, and pave the way for a brighter future for humanity.

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