

LOCKDOWN LONGER THAN CORONAVIRUS

Abdul Waheed Parry



To cite this article: Parry, Abdul Waheed. "Lockdown Longer than Coronavirus", INSAMER, 30.07.2020.

 Analysis

At a time when the whole world went into lockdown, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) was coming out of the longest lockdown it witnessed so far. In January 2020, the Indian government started to slowly lift the restrictions in Kashmir imposed in August 2019. In mid-2019 India unilaterally stripped Kashmir's special status under article 370 and 35(A) of Indian constitution. Being stripped off its special status means complete restrictions on movement and communications were imposed in J&K. A direct rule from Delhi was implemented and the whole state was and has been controlled by the Indian army and paramilitary forces. People were confined to their homes, medical facilities were unavailable, and complete shutdown on communications was done through the absence of phone and Internet connections.

In late January, after nearly six months of being cut off from the world, the Kashmir Valley

regained access to a list of few government-approved sites of low-speed Internet. In March, some local politicians were released from jail. But soon after the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Kashmir later in March, the region was plunged into lockdown once again. There were new rules and regulations imposed on movement and social gatherings. Mosques were closed for prayers. The shattered businesses which had recently opened were closed again. A new lockdown was imposed on an already locked down territory.

5 July 2020 marked the 11th month of Lockdown in J&K. The longest ever lockdown with restrictions on movement and communications has affected the Kashmiri people in multiple dimensions. Among all the most affected areas are communications, media, health, education, and livelihood.

Communications:

When the lockdown was imposed globally to fight COVID-19, people around the world moved their lives online. Unfortunately, the people in J&K cannot do so because 4G Internet remains shut off in the whole state. The so-called largest democracy in the world has imposed its worst communications blockade. J&K has witnessed Internet access restrictions, with 55 Internet blackouts in 2019 alone, including the longest in recorded history - 213 days - when Delhi put the valley on lockdown in August. *The New York Times* has termed this as the year of crackdown, “This past year will be remembered for the crackdown. In August, the Indian government suddenly stripped away statehood from Jammu and Kashmir, which had been India’s one Muslim-majority state. Security forces flooded the area, cut off roads, shut down landlines, cellphone lines and the internet, and arrested thousands of Kashmiris, from students to top elected officials. Some have been released, but many remain in jail.”ⁱⁱ

While writing about the situation due to communications blockade, the report further says, “Though some phone and internet service have been restored, they remain nothing close to pre-crackdown levels. Many Kashmiris, who used social media to socialize because it was dangerous to hang out in the streets, now feel completely isolated. Children have remained out of school for months. Because of the military crackdown and then the coronavirus lockdown, students have been in school only a few weeks.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Health System:

J&K health workers say that the Internet lockdown has a negative impact on public health. Doctors working in Kashmir are unable to access the latest medical advice. These doctors and other health workers complain that they face many hardships while performing their professional duties. According to the *TIME* report, “Because of COVID-19, everything is about new research,” says one doctor in a district hospital, who spoke on condition of anonymity because doctors have been threatened with jail

time for speaking to journalists. “Every day, there is something about the virus that we must know in order to keep pace with our research but we are not able to access it properly because of the 2G speed.” Doctors and medical professionals are not able to join live online sessions held during the pandemic times, which ideally serves as a helpful tool for research professors in labs to share the latest information on the virus with doctors working on the front lines. The report further reads, “You cannot join them because of the low Internet speed,” says Dr. Suhail Naik, President of the Doctors Association of Kashmir. “Right now our hospitals are functioning normally, but if the crisis deepens, we don’t know if we can handle it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite the fact that the health sector is facing problems due to low-speed Internet, the administration in Kashmir is least bothered about its negative impact on human life. The adversity of the situation can be learned by the answer given to the Supreme Court of India by the Kashmiri administration on whether 4G Internet access should be reinstated. On April 30 the Kashmiri government, which most of the times takes dictate from central government, argued against the idea of Internet restoration to the court, saying the “right to access the Internet is not a fundamental right,” and arguing “various Pakistan-based terror outfits” would exploit 4G Internet to plan attacks if high-speed Internet were restored. India’s judicial system is alleged of being used by the right-wing BJP government to fulfill its dream agenda of making India a Hindu State. The Supreme Court of India gave a ruling in January this year that Indians had “fundamental rights” to freedom of speech and expression that extended to their use of the Internet — although they stopped short of declaring the Internet access itself a constitutionally-protected right. This clearly shows how different institutions are undermining people’s rights in India.

Media:

The media in Kashmir is not free. Recently a new media policy was devised by the Kashmiri

administration. On June 2, 2020, the Kashmiri administration unveiled a policy to examine the content of print, electronic, and other forms of media for “fake news, plagiarism and unethical or anti-national content”. The new media policy will remain valid for the next five years. According a report by *The Wire* newspaper, “the policy authorizes government officers to decide on what is “fake news” and take action against journalists and media organizations. It also emphasizes on verifying the antecedents of newspaper publishers, editors and key staff members before empanelling newspapers and online portals for advertisements.”^{iv}

The police in Kashmir are filing FIRs against journalists for highlighting human rights violations. A freelance photojournalist Masrat Zahra was booked under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in April this year. Masrat won the 2020 Anja Niedringhaus Courage in photojournalism award from the International Women’s Media Foundation only two months after she was booked under the UAPA. According to *The Wire*, “The policy also came in the backdrop of three J&K-based photojournalists, working with news agency Associated Press, winning the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of Kashmir’s lockdown after the reading down of Article 370 last year.”^v

It is obvious that the suppressive measures on media by centrally dictated administration of Kashmir have not changed. Their priorities remain unchanged even in the times of pandemic. Instead, the pandemic is being used as an excuse to extend lockdown. Journalists are being silenced by the tactic of cutting advertisement quota from different government agencies to the local media houses. The fear of losing

government advertisements was the main reason that only a few journalists could protest against the new media policy almost one month after its publication. Masrat Zahra was charged under an anti-terrorism law for “uploading anti-national posts with criminal intention” on social media, and “uploading photographs which can provoke the public to disturb law and order.” Zahra explained to the *TIME*, “The Indian government is cracking down on local journalists to curb freedom of expression in the valley. I personally feel they charged me to send a stern message to the whole journalist fraternity in Kashmir. The message was pretty black and white – if they could book a female journalist, imagine what they could do to male journalists. There are only a few female journalists here. They intimidate and harass us. The effect is that people are scared to talk to journalists now, making Kashmir even less visible to the rest of the world.”^{vi}

Tail Piece:

Almost every aspect of life has stopped in Kashmir, and humanity seems to be invisible in Kashmir since August last year. The world’s longest lockdown by the so-called largest democracy could not care less about the global pandemic. A population of almost 10 million have been deprived of access to the Internet, education, health, and livelihood. When the whole world has switched to online entertainment due to lockdown, Kashmir has been deprived of this very facility by the so-called Indian democracy. The time is high that world powers intervene in this matter and play a role to end the difficulties faced by the Kashmiri people since August 2019. World powers must pressure India to give up on its senseless inhumane policies in Jammu and Kashmir. Let us hope sense will prevail.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Samir Yasir. 'Kashmir, Under Siege and Lockdown, Faces a Mental Health Crisis'. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/world/asia/kashmir-india-mental-health-coronavirus.html>
- ⁱⁱ Samir Yasir. 'Kashmir, Under Siege and Lockdown, Faces a Mental Health Crisis'. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/world/asia/kashmir-india-mental-health-coronavirus.html>
- ⁱⁱⁱ What's Happening in Kashmir During Coronavirus Lockdown <https://time.com/5832256/kashmir-lockdown-coronavirus/>
- ^{iv} Malik, Irfan. 'Why journalists are worried about the new media policy in Jammu and Kashmir'. <https://thewire.in/media/kashmir-new-media-policy-press-freedom>
- ^v Malik, Irfan. 'Why journalists are worried about the new media policy in Jammu and Kashmir'. <https://thewire.in/media/kashmir-new-media-policy-press-freedom>
- ^{vi} What's Happening in Kashmir During Coronavirus Lockdown <https://time.com/5832256/kashmir-lockdown-coronavirus>