

“Shoot them down”—India’s government incites violence against opponents of its anti-Muslim citizenship law

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India’s Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is instigating violent police and vigilante attacks on opponents of its anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

In the run-up to last Saturday’s Delhi assembly election, BJP leaders railed against those protesting against the CAA, accusing them of being in league with Pakistan, and repeatedly led their supporters in chants of “shoot them down.” As a direct result of this incitement, at least three gunmen targeted anti-CAA protesters in New Delhi within the space of four days, starting from January 30.

Delhi’s police force, which is under the direct control of Modi’s chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, continues to run amok. In the latest outrage, a peaceful anti-CAA protest by Jamia Millia Islamia University students came under brutal police attack Monday.

The BJP government has been shaken by the mass opposition to the CAA, which it rushed through parliament and into law last December.

The CAA makes religion a criterion in determining citizenship for the first time in the history of independent India. It provides a virtually automatic path to citizenship to all who migrated to India from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan prior to 2015—except Muslims.

The CAA is part of a flurry of government actions, including last August’s constitutional coup against Jammu and Kashmir, India’s only Muslim-majority state, aimed at transforming India into a Hindu *rashtra* or Hindu state, in which Muslims reside on sufferance.

Faced with an economic crisis and mounting popular opposition to its austerity measures and other “pro-investor” policies, the BJP is whipping up anti-Muslim communalism so as to mobilize its Hindu-supremacist supporters as shock troops against the

working class, and to divert social anger behind reaction and militarism.

While Muslim students and youth in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal initiated the anti-CAA agitation, it quickly engulfed all parts of the country, cutting across the religious, ethnic and caste divides that India’s ruling elite has systematically cultivated so as to divide the working class.

Rattled by the sudden emergence of mass opposition, the BJP responded with massive state repression, suspending internet use and imposing blanket bans on all protests across wide areas, and ordering a lethal police crackdown. At least 25 people were killed in December, including 20 in Uttar Pradesh, where Modi and Shah have installed as chief minister a Hindu *mahant* (high priest), Yogi Adityanath, already under criminal indictment for inciting attacks on Muslims.

In recent weeks the BJP, its ideological mentors in the fascistic RSS, and their Hindu supremacist allies have become even more venomous and threatening in their denunciations of the anti-CAA protests.

Last Sunday, Raj Thackeray the head of the far right Maharashtra Navnirman Sena concluded a mass pro-CAA rally in Mumbai with threats of mass violence. “Stones will be answered with stones and swords will be answered with swords,” he thundered, adding that parts of Maharashtra have become “the hub of illegal immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh, which need to be cleaned.”

One of the main targets of the BJP’s vitriol is the peaceful sit-in that hundreds of Muslim women have mounted day and night at a major intersection in the poor, predominantly Muslim south Delhi neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh since the CAA was adopted by parliament last December 11.

The protest at Shaheen Bagh has become a symbol of the opposition to the CAA nationwide, incensing the government. The BJP leadership is particularly concerned about Shaheen Bagh protesters raising social issues, such as mass joblessness, rising prices and the safety of women, and more generally the intersection between opposition to its anti-democratic communalist agenda and growing working-class unrest across India over economic privation.

In the run-up to the February 8 Delhi assembly election, BJP leaders railed against the Shaheen Bagh protesters, likening them to pro-Pakistan traitors and terrorists. Speaking at a February 3 election rally, Modi claimed the Shaheen Bagh sit-in was a “political conspiracy to destroy the country’s harmony.” Two days earlier, at another election rally, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath had tried to tie the BJP’s main electoral opponents in Delhi to the sit-in, while insinuating the Shaheen Bagh protesters were terrorists. He denounced Delhi’s Aam Aadmi Party government, claiming it “supplies biryani” to the Shaheen Bagh protesters, while Modi and the BJP have “been identifying every terrorist and feeding them goli (bullets) instead of biryani.”

On January 28, Anurag Thakur, the junior finance minister in the BJP central government, was caught on video leading an election rally in chants of “shoot them down”—a Hindu right war-cry that gained currency after the head of the West Bengal BJP, Dilip Ghosh, chastised the state’s chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, “for not opening fire and ordering a *lathi* (police-baton) charge” on those protesting against the CAA. “Our governments in Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Karnataka,” he went on to boast, “shot these people like dogs.”

On the video, the BJP minister Thakur, speaking in Hindi, declares, *desh ke gaddaron ko* (“Traitors who betray the country,”), to which the crowd enthusiastically replies “*goli maaro saalo ko*” (“Shoot them down”).

Encouraged by these incitements to violence against those opposing the CAA, a young man shot at anti-CAA protesters at Jamia Millia Islamia University (JMI) on January 30, injuring one student. In a video, shared by the ANI news agency, the gunman can be seen walking and waving a pistol while dozens of policemen in riot gear stand by. Only after he opened fire, did police intervene. While being taken away, the gunman shouted *Delhi Police Zindabad* (“Long live Delhi Police”).

Less than 48 hours later, on February 1, a second gunman fired two rounds in the air at the Shaheen Bagh sit-in and shouted, “No other community will have a say

in this country. Only Hindus will.” The third shooting in four days was reported on February 2, when an unidentified assailant fired outside the JMI campus.

Last December police illegally stormed the JMI campus and assaulted students with tear gas, rubber bullets and truncheons. More than fifty students were hospitalized, many with broken bones and other severe injuries. Since then police have repeatedly harassed and attacked anti-CAA protests led by JMI students.

On Monday, when JMI students sought to march on parliament they were met with a mass cordon of heavily-armed police. When the students sought to assert their right to protest, they were brutally attacked by the Delhi police. As a result some students were forced to seek medical attention.

Speaking to India Today TV, doctors said that “more than 10 woman students have been hit (by police) on their private parts. We have found blunt injuries on some of the protesters.” One female JMI student told India Today: “One of the women cops took off my burqa and hit me on my private parts with a *lathi*.”

Despite the repression and BJP threats, opposition to the CAA—and to the BJP’s plans to use the 2020 National Population Register (NPR) and ultimately an all-India National Citizens Register (NCR) to mount an anti-immigrant witch hunt, in which poor Muslims will be the principal victims—continues to grow. On January 29, Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha, witnessed what the media termed one of the largest demonstrations in its history, as a large cross-section of the population took to the streets to oppose the CAA, NPR, and NCR.

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