

Is India Preparing to Impose the “Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act” in Punjab?

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The Chief Minister of Indian Punjab recently requested the deployment of more national military forces to suppress the peaceful Referendum 2020 campaign that aims to hold a forthcoming plebiscite on the region’s independence, which indicates that previous claims by Indian officials alleging that the Khalistan movement has no grassroots support were just a psychological warfare tactic against the local population to deceive them into thinking that their compatriots are disinterested in the Khalistani cause.

The age-old aphorism that “actions speak louder than words” was upheld as accurate after the Chief Minister of Indian Punjab recently requested the deployment of more national military forces to suppress the [Referendum 2020](#) campaign for an independent Khalistan that other Indian officials previously claimed doesn’t enjoy any grassroots support. Former Indian diplomat **Ashok Sajjanhar** [said](#) earlier this week that he doesn’t think that there’s any “mass support” behind the movement, instead repeating the [conspiracy theory](#) that the idea to hold a plebiscite on this issue next year is part of an insidious plot by Pakistan’s ISI intelligence agency. If that was really the case, then **Chief Minister Amarinder Singh** wouldn’t have written to **Union Home Minister Amit Shah** [seeking the deployment of five companies of central security forces](#) in his state. Evidently, the [Khalistani cause](#) actually does enjoy [much more popular support](#) than the Indian government cares to publicly admit, hence why the Chief Minister of Indian Punjab wants a more visible security presence in the region.

The formal basis for this request is that supporters of the Referendum 2020 campaign are “foreign-backed terrorists” even though their Sikhs For Justice (SFJ) organizers vehemently condemn the use of violence on principled grounds and repeatedly committed to [only using peaceful means](#) to achieve their political vision. In spite of the SFJ’s Gandhian approach, Twitter [blocked](#) the account of the group’s legal advisor Gurpatwant Singh Pannun last September in response to a request from the Indian government, showing that it’s enough for New Delhi to allege without any evidence whatsoever that someone is engaged in “terrorism” to get American Big Tech companies to censor targeted individuals. Earlier this year, India [promulgated](#) a new law mandating that social media companies remove accounts that post so-called “unlawful content”, thus representing an attempt to impose extraterritorial jurisdiction, one that the Big Tech giants are likely to abide by out of fear of losing access to what’s poised to become one of the world’s largest markets if they don’t.

Most Indian youths are connected to social media in one way or another, and the Sikhs of Indian Punjab aren’t any different in this respect, so it can be expected that countless pro-Khalistan accounts might soon be censored en masse if they haven’t been so already. New

Delhi thinks that this will stop the spread of grassroots support for Referendum 2020, but that hasn't happened no matter the "wishful thinking" that some officials cling to about this. It's for that reason why the Indian Punjabi Chief Minister wants to intensify the state's suppression against this campaign by requesting the deployment of five companies of central security forces, which ominously hints at something much more sinister speculatively being in the works. Every single time that the Indian state has felt threatened by a grassroots socio-political movement, it's imposed the feared "Armed Services (Special Powers) Act" (AFSPA) that's been abused for over half a century to [carry out crimes](#) against civilians all across the country such as arbitrary arrests and even extrajudicial executions.

It's a very disturbing sign of what might soon come that the Indian Punjabi Chief Minister wants a more muscular military presence in his state, and considering the conspiracy theory about the SJF supposedly being a "foreign-backed terrorist organization", the government might be preparing to make the case that it's necessary to impose the AFSPA in part or all of the region ahead of next year's vote if grassroots support for the plebiscite continues to swell. Any militant overreaction on the Indian state's part to the SJF's campaign is bound to backfire by increasing support for the referendum, exactly as has happened in dozens of other similar cases elsewhere across the world whenever governments made the mistake of thinking that problem problems require military solutions. The frightening irony is that while the SJF are pursuing self-determination through the ballot and not the bullet, India might be readying to do the opposite by using the bullet to stop the ballot.

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