



ENSURING RIGHTS FOR ALL: KAMALA HARRIS AND HOPE FOR KASHMIR

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Many Indians cherished the heritage of Kamala Harris after her election victory.¹ Being born to an Indian mother and Jamaican father,² Kamala is the first person of Asian descent to climb this far in US echelons of political power. People across the globe are closely monitoring the new developments in the Oval office. In this milieu, analyzing the new US administration's policies on Indian Occupied Kashmir becomes pertinent with particular reference to Kamala Harris and her career as a defender of human rights.

While the Trump administration had a blatant disregard for the human rights violations in Kashmir, President Biden has been critical of India's activities. Joe Biden's Agenda for Muslim American communities clearly states that "in Kashmir, the Indian government should take all necessary steps to restore rights for all the people of Kashmir."³ It further highlights Joe Biden's disappointment over the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passage

¹ "Indians Celebrate Kamala Harris's US Election Win," *Al Jazeera*, November 8, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2020/11/8/in-pictures-firecrackers-and-prayers-as-indians-celebrate-harris>.

² Nayanima Basu, "Kamala Harris is Vocal on Kashmir, 'unbreakable Bond' with India & Loves Her Idli-sambhar," *The Print*, August 12, 2020, <https://theprint.in/world/kamala-harris-is-vocal-on-kashmir-unbreakable-bond-with-india-loves-her-idli-sambhar/480424/>.

³ "Joe Biden's Agenda for Muslim-American Communities," *Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website*, July 29, 2020, <https://joebiden.com/muslimamerica/>

into law. It states that "these measures are inconsistent with the country's (India's) long tradition of secularism and with sustaining a multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy."⁴

This puts Kamala Harris, the Vice President of the United States of America, in the spotlight too. Her ethnicity and ancestry linking her to India make her position on the issue even more crucial.

During her campaign, Kamala has been a strong supporter of human rights for all. She has been especially outspoken about the issue of Kashmir. While answering a question in September 2019 about curfews, crackdown on information, human rights abuses, enforced disappearances, and violence against women and children in Kashmir, she said that "we have to remind Kashmiris that they are not alone in the world. We are keeping track on the situation."⁵

She further stated that the current US administration had decimated the state department. She believed that without having a representative to Pakistan, the US could not play any meaningful role in the valley. She stressed upon having a representative on the ground in Kashmir. She further said that "part of the values of who we are as a nation is that we speak out about human rights abuses and where appropriate; we intervene."⁶

She involved herself in the US-India scuffle over Kashmir again in December 2019. In late 2019, Pramila Jayapal, a US congresswoman, submitted a bill in the US House of Representatives.⁷ In this bill, she urged India to lift the communication clampdown and preserve "religious freedom for all residents" in Jammu and Kashmir. It also insisted upon ending internet restriction and addressing the issue of mass imprisonment in Indian Occupied Kashmir.⁸ For this reason, Indian External Minister Jaishankar refused to attend a diplomatic meeting⁹ in the US with Jayapal in it. At that time, Kamala Harris stood with Jayapal by stating that no foreign government can tell what members are allowed in Capitol Hill meetings.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Presidential Candidate Kamala Harris on Kashmir," *YouTube*, September 13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmnxfgFeY_k.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Text - H.Res.745 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Urging the Republic of India to End the Restrictions on Communications and Mass Detentions in Jammu and Kashmir As Swiftly As Possible and Preserve Religious Freedom for All Residents," *Library of Congress*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/745/text>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ John Hudson, "Top Indian official abruptly cancels meeting with congressional leaders over Kashmir criticisms," *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/top-indian-official-abruptly-cancels-meeting-with-congressional-leaders-over-kashmir-criticisms/2019/12/19/29b023ea-2291-11ea-9c2b-060477c13959_story.html.



Image Source: *Twitter, December 20, 2019*

It indicates her willingness to go out of the way to criticize the Indian government when it concerns issues of grave human rights violations and crimes perpetrated against innocent individuals in Kashmir.

Throughout her career, Harris has remained a strong advocate of human rights. During her victory speech in Washington, DC, she said, "the first time I walked into a courtroom, I spoke five words. 'Kamala Harris, For the People.'"¹⁰ She further said that these words encapsulate the American justice system's spirit, where harm against one person is the harm against everyone. Highlighting her resolve to protect the vulnerable communities, she said "that no one should ever be made to fight alone. And for the people, when I stood there, and when I stand here today, means all the people."¹¹ It was heartening to see that she shared the same conviction when addressing human rights abuses in IIOJK in September 2019 that Kashmiris are not alone. It depicts her priorities and consistency in her stance about ensuring rights for all.

Kamala has often referred to India as the oldest democracy.¹² However, her critique on CAA and NRC¹³ depicts that she cherishes India as a secular democracy and not as the current authoritarian

¹⁰ "Read the transcript of Kamala Harris's victory speech in Wilmington, Del," *The Washington Post*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/11/07/kamala-harris-victory-speech-transcript/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Basu, "Kamala Loves Her Idli-sambhar."

regime. It is also pertinent to note that she was among the leaders who boycotted the Howdy Moody event in Texas in 2019.¹⁴

A peek into her professional career demonstrates that she has been a staunch supporter of human rights throughout her life. After becoming the District Attorney of the City and County of San Francisco, she initiated a program for first-time drug offenders to mend their ways, get a high school diploma, and enter the job market respectably. As the District Attorney of San Francisco, she worked for the rights of those who are the most vulnerable. Her critical achievements as California's Attorney General include:

- Winning the US \$ 25 billion settlement for California homeowners hit by foreclosure crises
- Defending California's climate change law
- Protection of Affordable Care Act
- Helping Marriage Equality for all Californians
- Prosecuting transnational gangs involved in human, drugs, and gun trafficking.¹⁵

Even in the United States Senate, fighting for the rights of all communities remained her forte. Reforming the criminal justice system, addressing substance abuse, supporting veterans and military families, and expanding access to childcare for working parents¹⁶ are to name a few achievements to her credit. It indicates that she has remained true to her words of being committed to the people so far.

Therefore, from the above analysis, it is safe to deduce that under the new US government, the ease of human rights violations within India and Indian Occupied Kashmir is likely to disappear. Kamala's track record on human rights issues indicates that her administration will not be willfully negligent of India's gross misconduct in the Valley. This only imparts the message of hope for Kashmiris and those supporting the cause.

¹³ Anik Joshi, "A Biden-Harris Administration Would Mean a Harder Eye on Kashmir," *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/biden-harris-kashmir-policy-india-modi/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "US Senator Kamala Harris of California," *US Senate Official Website*, Accessed on January 7, 2021, <https://www.harris.senate.gov/about>.

¹⁶ Ibid.