



Elections may herald a new opening in Kashmir

Can a coalition led by a new political party bring peace?

BY RUPAK CHATTOPADHYAY

In a mountainous region where Indian and Pakistani troops have faced each other across a shifting border since partition in 1947, the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir recently elected its ninth government. The election, with staggered dates in different regions in response to the threat of violence, took place in September and October 2002. This was the state's most closely contested election in more than a decade and resulted in a massive defeat for the ruling Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, which has dominated state politics for nearly fifty years.

The new government of the state is a coalition of the newly formed People's Democratic Party (which won 16 seats), the Indian National Congress Party, (which won 20 seats) and independent members.

At the northernmost tip of India, the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir is about the size of Belgium and is known worldwide as the place where cashmere wool originated and as the home of K2, the second-highest mountain in the world. What happens there could mean peace or war in South Asia. The new state government could generate movement towards the settlement of boundaries in the region, where Pakistan and China occupy areas in the north and east of the pre-partition Jammu and Kashmir and where movements for independence, autonomy and union with Pakistan have often flared into violence.

"A political earthquake"

The election of the new government in the state is a turning point. The Kashmir Times described the ouster of the National Conference as "a political earthquake". The election left no party with a clear majority in the 87-seat state assembly. The National Conference, which had previously held 57 seats in the assembly, was reduced to just 28 seats.

The Indian National Congress increased its position from seven to 20 seats, while the People's Democratic Party, or PDP, formed only three years ago, gained 16 seats.

Politically, the biggest winner is the People's Democratic Party led by veteran politician and one-time Union Home Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed. The PDP not only wrested the traditional constituencies of the National Conference in the Kashmir Valley

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Language and religion

Religion divides this northern state. Of the 10 million inhabitants of Jammu and Kashmir in 2001, the vast majority were Muslim. The Indian Census of 1981 – the last for which figures on religion are available – showed 64 per cent were Muslims, 32 per cent Hindus, 2 per cent Sikhs and 1 per cent Buddhists. Despite the overall Muslim majority, the three regions within the state each have different majorities. Ladakh, in the east, is split between Buddhists and Muslims; the Kashmir Valley in the north is overwhelmingly Muslim; and the plains of Jammu in the South are majority Hindu. And yet, even though Pakistan has long insisted on a plebiscite to determine the fate of the divided province, it is not certain that a majority in Jammu and Kashmir would vote for Pakistan.

Many languages are also spoken in the state, and linguistic preferences are often associated with religion. Kashmiri, Dogri, Urdu, Hindi and Ladakhi are spoken in Jammu and Kashmir. The Kashmiri language also has many dialects. In the Pakistani-held areas, Punjabi is also spoken. Ladakhi speakers are likely to be Buddhists; Urdu speakers are likely to be Muslims; Hindi speakers are likely to be Hindus; and Kashmiri and Dogri speakers could be either Hindus or Muslims.

but also obtained Congress support in leading the new coalition government. The most lasting image from these elections is the loss of the Abdullah family's traditional legislative seat in Ganderbal from where the legendary Sheikh Abdullah and his political machine had successfully contested elections for decades.

The PDP campaigned on a platform to heal the "physical, psychological and emotional wounds" of the Kashmiri people, to consult all segments of opinion – including secessionists – without preconditions, and to relax the pressure on the general public from the security forces. Analysts attributed the increased voter turnout – 46 per cent as opposed to 32 per cent in 1999 – to PDP campaign promises. Most significantly, high voter figures were recorded in a number of Muslim-majority districts along the "Line of Control"; these include Karnah at 71 per cent, Gurez at 77 per cent and Uri at 67 per cent. For many

Kashmiris, these elections represent a watershed. As journalist Shujaat Bukhari observed, "Many do believe that this has been one of the fairest elections in Kashmiri history."

Political prisoners?

The chief minister immediately began to implement his promises by releasing from prison several prominent secessionists whom he characterized as "political prisoners". But a resurgence of terrorist attacks against government targets since early December has forced the new government to tread more carefully. The previous National Conference government of Farooq Abdullah had repeatedly promised to turn the state into "heaven on earth once

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again" by wiping out insurgency and negotiating with Kashmiri secessionists in order to draw them into the national mainstream. The PDP is in an even more difficult position because the electorate expects more from them. Not surprisingly, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed is more circumspect than his predecessor, conceding that the challenge ahead "scares" him.

Mufti's accession during the global "war against terrorism" is probably fortuitous. Farooq's government had to contend with the Karhmiri insurgency's most savage phase. Mufti, on the other hand, assumes the chief ministership at a time when Pakistan is under intense diplomatic pressure to reduce the infiltration into Jammu and Kashmir of armed fighters (or *jihadis*). Consequently, the insurgency is weaker today than even a year ago and its immediate prospects appear uncertain. The Indian government's mobilization after the terrorist attack on parliament of December 2001 has also made operations difficult for *jihadis* in Jammu and Kashmir. This combination of military and political changes may at last have opened the political space for a settlement.

Mufti has proved more dynamic than his predecessor in boldly attempting to reposition the PDP as *the* political vehicle for pro-independence, or *azadi*, Kashmiri opinion. Kashmiri academic Amitabh Dubey suggests that this historic step carries potential costs and benefits for India. The main benefit that might accrue is that the PDP might displace the separatist Hurriyat Conference as the repository of Kashmiri nationalism and help integrate it into the national mainstream. This would be likely if the ruling coalition is able to deliver on its promises of improved welfare and increased economic development. Public pressure might encourage the Hizbul Mujahideen, the only significant indigenous insurgent group, to experiment with a second ceasefire offer, especially since Pakistan would find it harder to sabotage a peace effort this time.

The Special Operations Group

On the other hand, a quasi-secessionist strategy could backfire in at least two ways. The first danger is that it could produce paralysis within the ruling coalition because the Congress Party, the larger coalition partner, is unlikely to tolerate separatist opinion. Unlike the previous government, the PDP's paltry 16 seats (in an assembly of 87) make it dependent on the Congress Party with 20 seats and on other allies for support. An incoherent political strategy would, in turn, invalidate the psychological gains produced by the most recent election and make it harder to woo Valley voters. The president of the National Conference, Omar Abdullah, has already indicated that his party will attempt to capture the pro-*azadi* vote by renewing its campaign for "autonomy", and stands ready to take advantage of any discord within the ruling coalition.

The second danger lies in the possible consequences of the government's policy toward a controversial police unit called the Special Operations Group. On January 7, 2003, Amnesty International condemned the Jammu and Kashmir government for not implementing a promise in its Common Minimum Program to investigate all earlier deaths of those in police custody and punish those found responsible for killings. If the government abolishes the controversial unit, or interferes too extensively in its operations, it could reduce the flow of intelligence to security forces. If the government does nothing, it risks condemnation for human rights abuses.

Political violence

Stories in India's press show the scale of the problem:

"More than 1,900 people have died in Jammu and Kashmir's terrorist violence this year, including 136 people in the first half of August

"Since the launch of counter-insurgency operations in Jammu and Kashmir in 1990, security forces have seized 24,426 AK rifles, 27,782 bombs and explosive devices, 6,642 kilograms of RDX explosives, 46,224 hand and rifle grenades, 5,691 mines and 4,135 rockets. More than 36,500 people have died in Jammu and Kashmir since the eruption of terrorist violence in 1989, and official sources say 30,600 of the victims were civilians and Muslim terrorists. Officials have also recorded a total of 7,213 incidents of firing across the Jammu and Kashmir border with Pakistan, 130 of them in the first half of August."

The Hindustan Times, 28 August, 2002

The Delhi-based Institute of Social Sciences reported that political violence and terror in Jammu and Kashmir did have an effect on the elections:

"The report by the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 'Fair Elections Under the Shadow of Fear', said while the election was fair it was "not necessarily free", with violence and terror being real factors affecting the election outcome. George Mathew of ISS said the election endorsed the importance of the democratic process, but cautioned against "taking this election as a plebiscite."

The Hindu, November 10, 2002

The PDP has begun to back away from its promise to close the police unit entirely. Indeed, the Common Minimum Program of the coalition makes no mention of the unit's future. Nonetheless, the fact that the PDP campaigned on an anti-Special Operations Group platform suggests that voters in the Kashmir Valley will carefully scrutinize the government's actions.

Regional support

Another significant challenge for the PDP government is the apparent over-concentration of its support in the Kashmir Valley. This part of Jammu and Kashmir is suffering the most from the insurgency but comprises only a third of the state's geographic area. The PDP has no political standing in largely Hindu Jammu and largely Buddhist Ladakh. Even though the

Indian National Congress, the PDP coalition partner, has representation in both Jammu and Ladakh the government must nevertheless take care to ensure that its Kashmir-centric policies do not alienate people in these areas.

It is entirely possible that the victory of the PDP-Congress coalition represents a real revival of the political process. The election campaign of 2002 witnessed greater participation from Valley Kashmiris than did the tepid campaign of 1996. The greatest challenge for Mufti is to walk the fine balance between having his platform hijacked by separatist elements while at the same time breaking the current political status quo. If Mufti is indeed successful in breaking the current impasse and in sustaining the revival of the political process he will likely have to brace for an upsurge in *jihadi* violence before it finally subsides. (c)

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