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An Election of Competing Nationalisms

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A polling official (right) marks the finger of a voter in Char-i-Sharief on Dec 9, 2014, during the third phase of polling for the Jammu and Kashmir State Assembly election. Photo : AP

*The ongoing Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir is marked by a decline in the fortunes of the Indian National Congress. **Kaustav Chakrabarti**, says that though the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) could gain in Jammu, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) is likely to emerge victorious in Kashmir.*

India's counterinsurgency rhetoric is steeped in the grievance school of thought – the argument that civil wars result from widespread feelings of grievances born out of political, economic, or ethnic deprivation. According to this view, marginalised people excluded from democratic institutions feel alienated from the mainstream and hence bear arms to reassert their rights. Whether it is resentment arising out of successive rigged elections in Kashmir, ethnic slight caused by the storming of the Golden Temple in Punjab, or sub-national aspirations in the North-East, New

Delhi's dominant narrative is infused with sympathy and apologies, expressed in hindsight. It follows that the rhetoric is matched with the practice of supplementing the application of violence with restoration of elections and the disbursement of development aid to win the 'hearts and minds' of previously disenfranchised citizens.

The policy is driven by the supposed palliative effects of democratic institutions, specifically their ability to provide a channel for people to address their differences using the power of public office, and in the process wean away the majority of insurgent sympathisers. To be fair, it is possible that people participate in elections to address their economic needs and simultaneously support insurgency to advance their political demands. Counterinsurgency recognises this and considers identity to be malleable. Successive free and fair elections, effective government, and economic development, in time, are believed to blunt the edges of ethno-nationalism. Counterinsurgency, in this view, is Clausewitzian politics by other means. Elections are the benchmark for assessing counterinsurgency performance, and public participation in the process is considered to be a measure of normalisation. The road to stability, it seems, passes through elections.

The theoretical foundation of India's strategy yields a simple prediction – high voter turnout in yet another State assembly election in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) suggests a consistent increase in people's faith in democratic institutions. The first two phases of polling registered more than 71 per cent voting. Constituencies more likely to vote in high numbers are known to be front-loaded in the polling schedule. The actual turnout could be less when the final turnout is announced after the end of polling; nevertheless, overall participation is likely to remain high. This suggests that J&K has turned the corner, and democracy is celebrated as a critical factor. After all, if elections were regarded as dubious, why would the masses participate in high numbers?

Yet, the last five years has been anything but 'normal' in Kashmir. The State administration was beset with one mass protest after the other – the Amarnath land agitation, the Shopian rape case, unprecedented protests in 2010 following the Machil fake encounter and death of 17-year-old Tufail Mattoo and most recently, public dismay over the government's handling of the floods. I travelled to J&K during the last week of October to learn about people's views of India's response to the conflict. Despite having read a fairly diverse literature on the topic, I was stuck with a sense of widespread lack of credibility of 'Indian democracy'.

Widespread cynicism

Be it urban Srinagar or rural Kupwara, the grouse is similar: India controls the democratic process and exercises its veto at various levels. To reproduce some of the sentiments expressed, New Delhi is believed to 'manage' elections by ensuring that no local party can form a government without support from a national party. Rigging has given way to 'sophisticated management' of elections. I was explained how strongholds of parties out of favour in New Delhi witness boycott calls and stone-pelting to deter voting, while bases of support for its rivals are insulated from such intimidation. The State's fiscal autonomy is believed to be deliberately stalled, in contrast to the general trend in other States following the economic reforms of 1991. Cynicism is writ large over conversations about politics; one veteran professor simply described India's actions as 'wretched'.

The most damning indictment of India's 'political' strategy is how leaders who agree to participate in elections or hold peace dialogues with New Delhi end up 'delegitimised' by the local population. The incumbent National Conference, its rival People's Democratic Party (PDP), as well as separatist leaders like Yasin Malik, Shabir Shah, and Sajjad Lone, have ceased to command either the stature or the mass following as a result of holding peace talks with India that have so far precluded the option of greater autonomy – the most popular condition for resolving the conflict short of independence. The reasons that have made this demand so enduring and non-negotiable in

the Valley's political life require greater study; perhaps it is the historicity of the conflict that has sharpened the salience of ethnicity and made Kashmiri exceptionalism so sticky.

The message from Kashmir to its leaders is clear – negotiating with India when it does not consider autonomy as a feasible option is tantamount to being an agent to its pacifying program. Perhaps the best metaphor to encapsulate this is the mausoleum of 'Sheikh Saab' – one of the founders of the National Conference and arguably Kashmir's most important public figure, Sheikh Abdullah.

Abdullah had launched a mass movement for greater civil rights against the Maharaja before independence, implemented the finest land reform program in India and emancipated the peasantry, and served 20 years in prison for refusing to accept India's insistence on forgoing the demand of plebiscite. His pioneering role gave him the sobriquet '*Sher-e-Kashmir*' [Lion of Kashmir]. He relented and finally accepted India's terms during his dying years, and was elected Chief Minister once again in 1977 with a large majority. Yet, for this final act of submission, his grave, located on the banks of the Dal Lake paints a lonely picture. Rather than attract crowds of followers who once equated him with a Pir or [saint], it has to be protected by central security forces to prevent its abuse. This fate, I was told repeatedly, awaits Kashmiri leaders who agree to talk to New Delhi on the latter's terms.

For a political entrepreneur in Kashmir, electoral politics presents a dilemma: access to public office provides an opportunity of attaining the high stature of becoming peacemaker to one of the oldest disputes in the UN; yet, the very attachment to formal politics carries the risk of rendering the politician 'irrelevant' to the masses.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) ascent to power in New Delhi and its possible success in the State elections are likely to exacerbate the dilemma mentioned above. Two reasons account for this – changes in its policy towards Pakistan, and increased polarisation of J&K's electorate between a fractured Muslim Kashmir and an increasingly consolidated non-Muslim Jammu and Ladakh region.

First, the government's decision to cancel talks with Pakistan over its High Commissioner's meeting with the Hurriyat Conference suggests a restitution of India's previous position of treating the Kashmir conflict as a bilateral dispute between two sovereign states. Though the view of Kashmiri leaders of various denominations may be ascertained, it seems, they are no longer considered party to the negotiations. On this negotiating table, foreign policy analyst C. Raja Mohan, writes, there is simply no room for a third chair. Increasing asymmetry between India and Pakistan in terms of economic capacity, military strength, and diplomatic clout appears to be the determinant of India's decision to shrink its bargaining space and dictate the terms of talks with Pakistan. Driven by Thucydidian logic, New Delhi's worldview obviates innovative solutions like soft borders, joint management of the region, and greater autonomy.

Second, Kashmir's ability to influence policy changes in New Delhi is hampered by shifting bases of support of local and national parties. The Amarnath land agitation of 2008 in Kashmir led to a counter protest in the Jammu region which demanded an end to the perceived 'appeasement' of Kashmir within the State at the expense of the Jammu and Ladakh regions. Why is the State Chief Minister always a Kashmiri Muslim, Jammu asked. The movement generated increased support for the BJP in the Jammu region, traditionally a Congress stronghold. This occurred alongside the party's increased nation-wide popularity consequent to strong anti-incumbency sentiment against the UPA-2 government. During the General Elections in May, the BJP led in 30 of the 37 Assembly segments in Jammu and 3 of the 4 in Ladakh, and is expected to replicate the performance in the ongoing State elections. In fact, its strategy to win the J&K elections, presented as 'Mission 44', is premised on garnering support among the Hindu Kashmiri Pandit migrant community spread in and around Delhi region, and collaboration with

individual leaders in the Valley. Sajjad Ghani Lone's recent meeting with Narendra Modi fuelled speculation about such a strategy at work.

Competing nationalisms

The BJP's popularity in the Jammu region has risen along with the Congress's spectacular decline: its last Chief Minister, Ghulam Nabi Azad, failed to retain his constituency during the national elections. The Jammu electorate has consolidated itself around the BJP 'wave'. In stark contrast, the Valley's votes are still divided between the National Conference (NC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Despite a dismal performance since 2008, the NC enjoys support among older voters who still retain loyalty to 'Sheikh Saab' and in rural areas where its cadre managed to survive insurgent violence during the 90s. In addition, some parts of the Valley where the Hurriyat organisation is strong will most likely refrain from voting, further fracturing the electorate.

Poll analysts in J&K seem certain that the BJP will sweep Jammu and the PDP will emerge as the largest party in Kashmir. But this remains to be seen. Without a clear majority, their collaboration will be interesting to watch; both represent competing nationalisms, the PDP based on securing Kashmiri autonomy, while the BJP intent on subsuming it within Indian nationalism.

Will the BJP allow popular programmes suggested by the PDP that are typecast as 'pro-separatist' among security circles, such as rehabilitation of former insurgents especially those based in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, greater leniency towards stone-pelters, transfer of water resources, demilitarisation, and 'self-rule', the party's articulation of autonomy? The BJP has threatened to veto any measure to dilute the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) as suggested recently by former Home Minister P. Chidambaram. What does this mean for the PDP's rising popularity in the Valley; for how long will people repose *their* faith on their party as its promised policies are vetoed by a possible national coalition partner?

From the vantage point of Lal Chowk, this presents a contradiction in India's policy towards Kashmir and the limit of the praxis of political realism. True to the traits of a rising power, India's external goal is driven by maximising power in relation to Pakistan and negotiating disputes on terms favourable to it. Soft borders, joint management, and consultation with the separatist leadership are ruled out. Precisely because of its intransigence, India's domestic goal of creating liberal democratic institutions is compromised. From New Delhi, forgoing autonomy reflects power and statecraft; from Srinagar, it reeks of submission, an unfair settlement and in the words of a Kashmir University professor, an 'ugly peace'.

Resources: Jammu and Kashmir Assembly Election 2014 **(Source: Election Commission of India)**

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