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Poll Rhetoric in J&K Focuses on Threats to Special Status



[DAVID DEVADAS](#)



A voter reacts to a security personnel as he arrives at a polling station to cast his vote for the first phase of Lok Sabha elections, in Uri, north Kashmir, on April 11, 2019. Photo: PTI / S. Irfan

Elections to the six Lok Sabha seats in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) are taking place against the backdrop of the fall of the Mehbooba Mufti-led government after its ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), withdrew support to it in June 2018. In the Valley, there is still great anger and resentment, not only against the poor governance provided by that dispensation, but also against the fact that the PDP allied itself with the Hindutva-based BJP. With the BJP's manifesto promising to remove Article 35 A from the Constitution if it is returned to power — a declaration that has become the object of criticism across the political spectrum — people in the Kashmir Valley who had virtually boycotted last year's local body elections, are taking an unusually high degree of interest in the Lok Sabha polls, that they see as a rehearsal for the Assembly elections.

David Devadas journalist and author of several well-regarded books on the politics of J&K, who travelled extensively through the Kashmir Valley recently shares his ringside view of the ever changing politics of the State, and unravels the complexities of electoral battles, constituency by constituency.

It is often said that the weather and the mood in Kashmir can change within seconds. Even knowing that, one is startled by the huge shift in the mood in the Valley from the local bodies' elections in late 2018 to the current Lok Sabha elections. The turnout was abysmal then. Now, except for the districts of Pulwama and Shopian in the southwest of the Valley—possibly in adjacent Kulgam, too—there is likely to be a fair turnout.

Not just that, at least in north Kashmir, there is a level of interest that is uncommon for a Lok Sabha poll. Several voters seem to see it as a stand-in for the Assembly elections that are awaited, the previous Assembly having been dissolved late last year. While discussing the elections in street-side conversations in several places, citizens sometimes referred to figures who were likely to be candidates for the Assembly elections.



Former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister and PDP President Mehbooba Mufti during an election rally in Baramulla, north Kashmir, on March, 26, 2019. Photo: Nissar Ahmad / The Hindu.

These elections take place in the backdrop of the withdrawal of support by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to the State government led by Mehbooba Mufti of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in June 2018. In the Valley, there is great anger and resentment, not only against the poor performance of that government, which was often at loggerheads within, but also against the fact that the PDP allied itself with the Hindutva-based BJP.

To enlarge the focus, and project itself as a trenchant opponent of the BJP, the PDP has put the spotlight on the BJP's desire to do away with the State's special

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constitutional provisions. The National Conference (NC), too, has taken a strong stand on this issue. So, much of the rhetoric in these elections has been about Jammu and Kashmir's relationship with India, indeed, far more than has been seen in elections since 1996.

When NC leaders such as Mirza Afzal Beg, and Janata Party (JP) stalwarts like Mirwaiz Mohammed Farooq raised such issues in 1977, they did so with allusions and some ambiguity. When such themes were raised again in 1987, it was

done far more openly but by only one side of the new line-up, the Muslim United Front (MUF).

That grouping (which some of its top leaders claimed would have won between 15 and 20 of the Assembly's 76 seats in free and fair elections) was defeated through ham-handed rigging. After two of its main constituents, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the People's Conference (PC), put up rival candidates, and rigging defeated a few more candidates, it won only four seats.

It is an ironic twist of the times that the PC's positions seem less radical than those of the NC and the PDP this time around. The PC has nevertheless drawn vast crowds to its campaign meetings. The crowds are remarkable, since participation in the local bodies' elections just six months ago was abysmal.

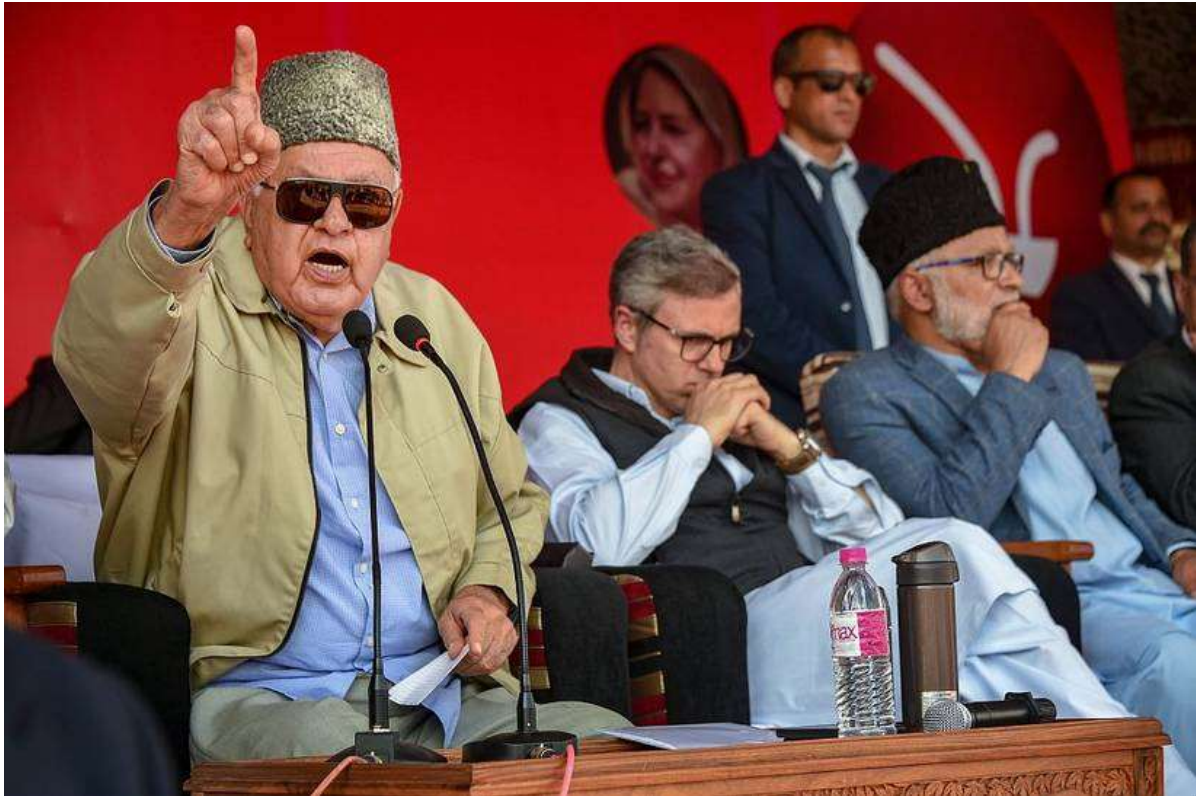
Another reason this is surprising is that militants are still present in large numbers, despite the string of encounters in which a large number of militants have been killed since mid-June 2018. Operations re-started at that time after the ceasefire during Ramzan, and Governor's rule was imposed on the State.

Militants are still present in large numbers, despite the 'encounter killings' of a large number of militants since mid-June 2018.

Fear of militant reprisals combined with disinterest in local bodies, which successive State governments have not empowered, ensured that there was barely any turnout for the local bodies' elections. The decision by the Valley's leading parties, the NC and the PDP, not to participate in those elections further dampened the mood.

The NC president, Farooq Abdullah, claimed his party had boycotted the local bodies' polls because the Centre had "suddenly" brought up the issue of Article 35-A¹. That is an unconvincing claim, since that is precisely the issue with which both his party and the PDP have jumped into the fray this time.

Owing partly to the boycott, the government apparatus was hard put to even get candidates to stand for the panchayat and municipality elections. Well-placed sources in government said that, notwithstanding the official figures, up to 80 per cent of the local bodies' seats were either uncontested, or were won by a single candidate elected unopposed. There are entire municipalities for which not a single candidate stood.



Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC) President Farooq Abdullah gestures as he speaks during an election rally, ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, at Beerwah, in Budgam district, on April 03, 2019. Photo: PTI / S. Irfan

Speaking exclusively to this writer, Abdullah held that persons who had been living in Jammu for several years had been elected unopposed as panchayat members, and so were unavailable to their constituents. In this context, he asked: "How are the people going to go to them to get any work done?"

Referring to the Assembly elections, Abdullah asserted that people "want to see a government of their own" but "the present dispensation in Delhi, and their men in Jammu seem to be playing some strange games" to put off Assembly polls. He pointed to BJP leader Ram Madhav (who had played a key role in putting together the PDP-BJP alliance) "and his cronies" in this context.

Desire for elections

This desire for "a government of their own" partly explains the relatively high interest in these elections. Many voters spoke of their Assembly candidates while discussing their voting choices, as if they were preparing for an Assembly vote rather than a Lok Sabha poll.

So high is the interest that some Kashmiris even discussed election trends in the Jammu region. Interest particularly focused on the role of Lal Singh, the former BJP Minister who had defended the alleged rapists and murderers of an eight-year-old girl in Kathua in early 2017. He is standing as an independent candidate for the Udhampur seat and — along with anti-incumbent dissatisfaction — could damage the BJP's Jitendra Singh, who is currently Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office. They face Vikramaditya Singh of the erstwhile Dogra royal family, who is contesting for the Congress.

This desire for elections has also not been dampened by the possibility of militant

Even the BJP candidate for north Kashmir stated that Article 35 A could not be removed.

reprisals in north Kashmir. Kashmiris also feel very strongly about Article 35-A, which different parties have highlighted. Even the BJP candidate for north Kashmir stated that it could not be removed—saying so after his party's central manifesto had promised to remove it.

Finally, both the NC and the PDP have fielded their party presidents, and so the party machinery has been revved up. For the PC too, it is a crucial opportunity to make a mark.

Uneven responses

Of course, the turnout will vary across different parts of the Valley. Most people expect almost no voting in Shopian and Pulwama districts. There are many militants in these districts, even though a large number have been killed since June 2018. If many residents fear that they might be killed for voting, there is also huge anger over the boys who have been killed by state forces.

Parts of the adjacent Kulgam district could also see little to no voting. Anantnag, the southernmost of the four south Kashmir districts, is likely to see a fair turnout, except perhaps in the cities of Anantnag and Bijbehara. (Since at least 1996, the turnout in urban centres has generally been substantially lower than in rural areas, and inner city turnouts have been even lower.) There are almost no militants in this district, and it has a long tradition of learning and cosmopolitan values. Even in the rest of

the Valley, the turnout will vary from place to place. But overall, there is likely to be a fair turnout in north and central Kashmir.

Foregone conclusion

Of the three seats to which the Valley elects members, the Srinagar seat appears to be the most predictable. Most observers expect NC President and sitting member Farooq Abdullah to have an easy run there. The party expects the support of two niche communities, of whom there are large numbers in the Budgam and Ganderbal districts, which are a part of the Srinagar constituency.

Mian Altaf, who has been a Minister in NC governments since 1996, is a leader of the Gujjar community, which is concentrated in the Kangan tehsil of Ganderbal district, and has traditionally voted in large numbers. The NC also has the support of the Agha family of Budgam, one of the two leading Shia families of the Valley. Agha Rohullah of this family, too, has been an NC Minister.

The PC, led by Sajad Lone, has fielded Irfan Ansari, a scion of a leading Shia family, for this seat. And the PDP has fielded Agha Mohsin, who has been described as a weak candidate. The PDP won the seat in 2014, when Tariq Karra was its candidate. Karra has since joined the Congress, but the Congress has not fielded a candidate against Dr Abdullah.

Sheikh Khalid Jehangir of the BJP has added new zest to the campaign for the Srinagar seat with strongly-asserted contrarian positions on issues like the recent controversial ban on civilian movement on highways on two days a week — indeed, he was perhaps the only politician in the fray to defend the ban.

The Congress has not put up a candidate against Abdullah. However, Abdullah made it clear that his party's loose seat adjustments were tightly focused on defeating "the fascist forces," and did not mean the NC

was backing the Congress per se at the national level. He named the Samajwadi Party's Akhilesh Yadav, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)'s Mayawati, and "the

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Vibrant campaign in north Kashmir

Baramulla (north Kashmir), which voted on April 11, has had the most vibrant campaign of the three. The air was already tingling early in the run-up to this contest, when former IAS officer (the 1999 topper) Shah Faesal resigned from the service and seemed about to contest this seat. The grapevine had him slotted as the NC's candidate for this seat.

That did not work out when Faesal decided not to join any existing party, indeed, not to contest the Lok Sabha elections at all. He launched his own party, the Jammu and Kashmir People's Movement (JKPM), in preparation for Assembly elections. Faesal publicly claimed at the launch of his party that he had changed his mind after receiving a barrage of social media messages urging him not to join any of the existing parties.

Shehla Rashid, former vice-president of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union, and a couple of businessmen joined Faesal on the rostrum at the party launch. A couple of established politicians, such as former PDP Minister Javed Mir, have also joined the new formation.

Farooq Abdullah observed that elections could test emergent parties and formations

People want to see a government of their own, says Farooq Abdullah.

only as long as the election process was honest, the machines were not tampered with, and forces were not misused.

The way the contest has played out in Baramulla, Faesal would have won hands-down on an NC ticket. There is an undercurrent of support for the NC in many parts of north Kashmir, even though the NC candidate, former Assembly speaker Akbar Lone, does not spark much interest beyond the Hajin-Sonawari belt. He has repeatedly been elected to the Assembly from this seat, and people there generally say he got a great deal of development work done in the area.

The PDP, too, has a relatively weak candidate in Baramulla. Abdul Qayoom, former president of a robust teachers' association, has no direct electoral experience but was fielded for the Lok Sabha as soon as he joined the party. Some observers saw the party's choice as being targeted at Shah Faesal. When Faesal was the State's director

of education (under the PDP, ironically!), he had a public spat with Qayoom over moves to discipline teachers.

Early calculations

Akbar Lone's main opponents are Raja Aijaz Ahmed of the PC and Rashid Ahmed, who uses the title 'engineer.' When the campaign began, many observers thought Raja Aijaz was the clear front-runner, and that 'engineer' Rashid would play spoiler.

That assessment was based on the presumption, in light of the very low turnout during the local bodies' elections, that there would be a relatively low turnout in not only Sopore, but also in the Bandipora, Hajin-Sonawari, and Baramulla areas that are dominated by the Kashmiri ethnic-linguistic community. The PC was likely to draw votes from certain other belts and niche communities.

Since Raja Aijaz is a Pahadi, it was presumed that members of this community, who are concentrated in the Uri and Karnah areas of north Kashmir, would turn out in large numbers to vote for him. In addition, Lone's People's Conference would bring him the votes of its longtime support base in the Handwara and Kupwara tehsils of Kupwara district, and surrounding areas such as Langat, too.

The third niche factor on which the PC was counting was the support which the Ansari family enjoys in the Pattan and other Shia-dominated areas of north Kashmir. Imran Ansari, the elder brother of the PC's candidate for the Srinagar seat, joined the PC soon after Governor's Rule was imposed.

Although the PC is indeed drawing huge crowds at its public meetings, even in Rashid's home borough Langat, a road trip through north Kashmir villages at the beginning of April indicated that

various factors could potentially undermine that early assessment of advantage to the PC. For one thing,

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there was far greater interest in the elections than the local bodies' elections had led one to expect.

People in north Kashmir did not seem to fear militants, even in the Hajin area, where there are large numbers of foreign militants. Even Riyaz Naikoo, one of the only two

prominent militants left in the field, especially addressed voters in north Kashmir, appealing to people not to vote. He, too, had realised that there was likely to be a much higher turnout of voters in the Baramulla constituency than was expected.

The second factor that has complicated the campaign in north Kashmir is that Shia voters do not appear to be rooting for the Ansari-backed candidate en masse to the extent that had been expected. Some voters from this minority community may be hiding their real views but, at least if one goes by what they say, a number of them will vote for Akbar Lone of the NC.

Standing in front of the village mosque with a group of young men, Liaquat of the Shia-dominated Gadakhud village at the southern edge of Hajin Assembly constituency said that Akbar Lone got a water pipeline, a high school and a road built for the village even while the PDP was in power. So, he held, people would vote for him. Hafizullah, one of the others in the group, added that they would vote on the basis of the needs of the constituency rather than in support of their sect.

Dark horse

A third factor has added spice to the campaign for the Baramulla (north Kashmir) seat. This is the fiery campaign of 'Engineer' Rashid, who has represented the Langat constituency in the past two Assemblies. Rashid began as an independent, launched the Awami Ittehad Party (AIP), lost most of his prominent members, but remains a redoubtable one-man army, along with his associate, Inam-un-Nabi, who frequently features in television debates.

Rashid is an indefatigable agitator, and has kept this going on his campaign trail, too. Voters at Ghantamaula on the Baramulla-Uri road were eagerly waiting for him to come there to campaign in the first week of April. He had promised them that he would sit in a dharna on the road until the district magistrate came to address their electricity-related issues, and only address a campaign rally after that matter was sorted out.

Rashid, who takes a strident stand on the Kashmir issue, has said during his campaign that he will ask for a plebiscite from the floor of the Lok Sabha. His campaign has sparked a response, and he seems set to take some votes from beyond his Langat Assembly constituency.

Shah Faesal's public statement that he would vote for Rashid has given him another fillip. By the second week of April, people in various parts of the Valley were animatedly discussing Rashid's prospects. Some observers even see him as a dark horse for victory.

When he threw his hat into the ring, he had been expected to be no more than a spoiler for Raja Aijaz. Rashid's Langat constituency abuts Sajad Lone's Handwara and, having started life as an activist of the People's Conference, Rashid's candidature was expected to prevent his Langat voters from voting for the PC candidate—and conversely, to keep his vote base intact for when Assembly elections are held. However, as his rhetoric sparked the imagination of many voters, he seemed to some observers to be a serious contender in what they now see as a triangular contest.

Lacklustre campaign in south Kashmir

The campaign for the (south Kashmir) Anantnag seat has been relatively lacklustre. That was expected, since the area has been the scene of bloody battles between militants and state forces over this decade, with neighbours joining in to pelt stones on the forces since the beginning of 2015.

What gives the campaign zest nevertheless is the candidacy of two of the State's most high-profile candidates, Mehbooba Mufti and Ghulam Ahmed Mir, the presidents respectively of the PDP and the State unit of the Congress. The NC has put up a relatively lightweight candidate, retired justice Hasnain Masoodi, and the PC has fielded a Gujjar candidate, Chaudhary Zafar Ali Khatana.

Khatana was vice-chairman of the Gujjar Development Board while he was in the PDP. He left that party to join the PC in early March, and was immediately named the party's candidate for south Kashmir. Khatana could have had a good chance of winning if polling had been minimal, as was expected in south Kashmir. For, the Gujjar community that lives on the slopes of the mountains at the southern edge of the Valley have traditionally participated in polling.

Mehbooba Mufti's announcement that she would be her party's candidate brought some life to the contest. She had won the seat in 2014, but resigned in 2016 after she succeeded her father as the Chief Minister. The seat has remained vacant since then.

A by-election, which was slated for 12 April 2017, was cancelled after widespread violence during the by-election for the Srinagar seat three days before.

Perhaps in light of the fears that there would have been much more intense violence if the Anantnag by-election had been held, the Election Commission has taken the extraordinary step of holding polls in portions of that constituency on three separate days.

Mehbooba Mufti's leap into the electoral fray is bold, for she faces huge unpopularity on at least three inter-related counts: the non-performance of the PDP-led government since 2015, its coalition tie-up with the Hindutva-based BJP, and her harsh public statements in September 2016 regarding militancy and stone-pelting in south Kashmir.

Her bid for election hinges on white-washing that image and projecting herself as a flag-bearer of Kashmir's rights. While the NC is demanding a return of the sort of maximal autonomy the State had under the 1952 New Delhi Agreement, Mehbooba has gone further. She has stated that the State's accession to India will stand negated if Articles 370 and 35-A are removed from the Constitution of India. The BJP's national manifesto has promised that these provisions will go if the party returns to power.

Some analysts had thought that the administration's decision in late March to ban the Jamaat-e-Islami might work in Mehbooba's favour on the ground. A large

Will Mehbooba succeed in convincing JeM's leaders and cadres that they need her in Parliament to protect them from the current suppression?

number of Jamaat leaders and cadres have been arrested, their schools were briefly closed, and some of their homes and establishments sealed. Mehbooba has had a good equation with the Jamaat in south Kashmir's Shopian, Pulwama and Kulgam districts for the past couple of decades. The question is: will she succeed in convincing them that they need her in Parliament to protect them from the current suppression?

Conversations with some Jamaat-related figures in south Kashmir in early April indicated that the answer may not be in the affirmative. Like other Kashmiris at this point, they do not seem to trust her. In places like Shopian, activists who have been

associated with her party say they do not dare to campaign. "They will beat us if we talk about elections," said one school principal. Even PDP activists from Anantnag say they have little hope of getting voters to the booths in Shopian and Pulwama districts. Much will depend on whether some voters emerge in Kulgam, they add.

There is likely to be a good turnout in many parts of Anantnag district, but that is precisely where Congress State president G.A. Mir has a firm footing. His emergence on the battlefield at the last moment has spoilt the scenario for Mehbooba Mufti as much as her emergence had marred the prospects of Khatana of the PC.

[**David Devadas**, Author and Journalist, has written extensively on Kashmir, including *The Generation of Rage in Kashmir* (OUP, 2018) and *The Story of Kashmir* (2019). He has reported on Kashmir for more than three decades. He can be contacted at daviddevadas@gmail.com.]

Reference:

[This URL was last accessed on April 12, 2019]

1. **Article 35A** of the [Indian Constitution](#) is an article that empowers the Jammu and Kashmir State's legislature to define "permanent resident" of the State and provide special rights and privileges to those permanent residents which are excluded for non-permanent residents.

[https://www.india.gov.in/sites/upload_files/npi/files/coi_part_full.pdf].