

Kashmir election results in defeat for ruling party

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Recent elections in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir have resulted in a decisive defeat for the National Conference (NC), which has held power for most of the past five decades. Party leader Omar Abdullah, whose grandfather Sheikh Abdullah founded the NC and was considered likely to take over from his father Farooq Abdullah as the state's chief minister, lost his seat in the state's summer capital of Srinagar.

The election, which was marked by widespread violence and allegations of vote rigging, left no party with a clear majority. The NC, which previously held 57 seats in the 87-seat state assembly, was reduced to just 28 seats. The Congress party increased its position from seven to 21 seats, and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which was formed only three years ago, gained 15 seats.

The Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), which is the leading party in the coalition government in New Delhi, retained only one of its eight seats. Its electoral ally, the Jammu State Morcha (JSM), which ran for the first time, managed to win only one seat out of the 11 contested. The remaining seats are held by a collection of small parties and independents.

The election was held in four phases from September 16 and concluded on October 8. As yet, however, no agreement has been reached on the formation of a government. Talks between Congress and the PDP have bogged down on the issue of who will hold the key post of state chief minister. The current chief minister Farooq Abdullah has refused to continue to act in a caretaker role, opening the way for the BJP-led Indian government to impose direct rule on the state just 10 days after the end of voting.

Indian political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan described the election outcome as "a political earthquake," commenting that "this is the best chance for some measure of normalcy." An estimated 50,000 people have died in fighting over the past decade between Indian

security forces and Islamic fundamentalist militia opposed to Indian rule over the majority Muslim state.

Within the distorted framework of electoral politics, the result does appear to reflect a growing sentiment of opposition to those responsible for the fighting on both sides. In all areas of the state, voters have rejected those who were directly responsible for intensifying the war—the BJP and the NC—and voted for those who they believed would bring peace to the state.

The most striking feature of the outcome is the emergence of the PDP in Muslim-dominated areas of the state. The party was founded by Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, a former member of Congress and home minister. His daughter Mehbooba Mufti, the party's vice president, led the PDP election campaign. She was elected to the state assembly.

Mehbooba Mufti criticised the long record of human rights abuses by the security forces in Kashmir but has been careful to cultivate her image as a peacemaker. She has called for talks between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and promised "an unconditional dialogue" with armed separatists, saying that they needed to be given a way to put down their arms with "honor and dignity".

Congress made most of its electoral gains in Hindu-dominated Jammu at the expense of the BJP and its Hindu extremist ally, the JSM. Congress leader Sonia Gandhi called for talks with all sections of Kashmiris—Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists—including "those who have doubts," a guarded reference to various separatist organisations.

At the same time, an increased turnout indicates that support among Muslim voters for the election boycott called by the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), a loose coalition of legal separatist organisations, is waning. Those who did vote had to defy threats of violence by armed Islamic extremist groups.

While still low at just 46 percent of registered voters,

the turnout was significantly higher than the 32 percent for national elections in 1999. As well as in Jammu, high voter figures were recorded in a number of Muslim-majority districts near the Line of Control dividing the Indian and Pakistani held regions of Kashmir, including Karnah (71 percent), Gurez (77 percent) and Uri (67 percent).

The continuing low overall turnout is not simply a reflection of the intimidation of armed militia but the disgust of voters with the NC administration and their distrust of an electoral process that has been repeatedly manipulated and corrupted in the past—similar sentiments to those expressed by people who did vote.

The NC's electoral debacle reveals a broad hostility to its administration. The party gained a two-thirds majority at the 1996 assembly elections by promising to fight for “greater autonomy” for the state. Six years later, it has been thoroughly discredited for its repressive rule, corruption, and its opportunist alliance with the Hindu-chauvinist BJP. Omar Abdullah has served as junior foreign minister in the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

The NC backed Vajpayee's increasingly aggressive stance towards Pakistan and the huge military buildup following an attack by separatist guerrillas on the Indian parliament building in New Delhi last December. A million heavily-armed Pakistani and Indian troops are stationed along the border in Kashmir. Artillery and mortar exchanges have caused a significant number of civilian deaths and forced thousands to flee to refugee camps.

As a number of commentators have noted, the vote reflected an anti-NC mood more than a positive endorsement of other parties. One analyst Malini Parthasarathy made the point in the *Hindu*: “Complicating its [Congress's] task is the political reality that these election results are more a reflection of the unpopularity of the NC rather than the appeal of any other party.”

Hurriyat responded to the outcome by declaring it to be “a vote against the central [BJP] government.” Chairman Abdul Ghani Bhat left the door open to cooperation with Congress and the PDP by referring positively to those who “to some extent have been speaking about the aspirations of the people of Kashmir, advocated talks between India and Pakistan and the release of separatists.”

The US intervened behind the scenes to try to pressure Hurriyat to participate in the poll as a step toward resolving the longstanding conflict over Kashmir, which,

at present, threatens to undermine Washington's broader ambitions in the region and beyond, in Central Asia and the Middle East.

On October 10, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher, commended Prime Minister Vajpayee for holding elections, saying: “We call on both India and Pakistan to make a strenuous effort towards an early resumption of diplomatic dialogue on all outstanding issues, including Kashmir.” He also welcomed “the Indian government's commitment to begin a dialogue with the people of Jammu and Kashmir”.

US officials have continued their discussions with various parties under the auspices of the Kashmir Committee, a non-governmental committee working with the approval of the Vajpayee government. On October 7, one day before the close of the poll, US Ambassador Robert Blackwill had a luncheon meeting with the Kashmir Committee, led by the former law minister Ram Jethamalani, to discuss what needed to be done next.

None of the parties, including Congress and PDP, have any progressive solution to the conflict over Kashmir. Congress, which dominated Indian politics after independence in 1947, bears a heavy political responsibility for the division of Kashmir and the encouragement of the communalism that led to fighting in the 1990s. All of the proposed “solutions”—including greater autonomy, the formation of regional councils, or the division of the state—are based on a continuation of the same communal politics that led to the conflict in the first place and will pave the way for further tensions.



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