New Kashmiri government to push for talks to end armed conflict

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After two weeks of deadlock, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the Congress Party last week finally sealed a coalition deal to form a new government in Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The National Conference (NC), which held power in the state for most of the past 50 years, lost its parliamentary majority in elections concluded last month.

The PDP, which was only formed three years ago, and Congress had agreed on the basic elements of their Common Minimum Program but continued to wrangle over who should hold the key post of Chief Minister. In the end, Congress conceded the position to PDP leader Mufti Mohammed Sayeed in return for the posts of deputy chief minister and chairman of the coalition coordination committee. The new government was sworn in last weekend.

As well as the PDP and Congress, with 15 and 21 MPs respectively, the coalition includes two MPs from the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), four from the Panthers Party and some 14 independents. The National Conference, which previously held 57 seats in the 87-seat state assembly, has just 28 seats.

The PDP and Congress dramatically increased their vote in the elections by appealing to growing popular sentiment against the protracted conflict in the state between Indian security forces and armed Islamic groups opposed to continued Indian rule of the majority-Muslim state. The fighting, which began in the late 1980s, has resulted in an estimated 50,000 deaths.

The coalition program calls for the national government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to initiate "unconditional" and "wide-ranging" talks with state assembly and other groups "to evolve a broad-based consensus on the restoration of peace with honour in the state". The appeal is vague as to the basis for any settlement to the bitter conflict but does leave the door open to talks with the armed militant groups.

The two parties were under considerable pressure to reach an agreement and clear the way for negotiations. Sections of the Indian ruling elite view the political climate created by the US "war against terrorism" as an ideal opportunity to press for a settlement in Kashmir at the expense of rival Pakistan and the armed Kashmiri separatist groups.

Reflecting these views, the Indian media expressed concerns at the delay in forming a new state government that would foster peace talks. Expressing a certain relief at the outcome, the *Times of India* declared: "All's well that ends well. Hackneyed as the saying may be, there is no better way to describe what is without doubt the best news to come out of Jammu and Kashmir in the past fortnight."

The US, which has been involved in extensive behind-the-scenes discussions with parties in Kashmir, also welcomed the formation of the coalition. Richard Haass, US State Department Director of the Policy Planning, who has been visiting the Indian subcontinent, hailed the government saying, "it opens up new opportunities of good governance and helps to make life normal" in Jammu and Kashmir.

Washington has been seeking to lower tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, which has sparked two of the three wars between the two countries. Following an attack by Kashmiri separatists on the Indian parliament building in New Delhi last December, India and Pakistan mobilised a million heavily armed troops along the border and threatened to drag the region into another war. Such a conflict would cut across the Bush administration's own intervention in Afghanistan and Central Asia and its preparations for war against Iraq, as well as US growing economic interests, particularly in India.

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Following the election, the US has stepped up its political intervention in Kashmir with a new round of talks with local parties and organisations. Asked at a press conference on October 31 about its discussions, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said: "Well, I can't confirm it in detail, but yes, our embassy is very interested in the situation in Kashmir. We had people up there for the elections... It's an ongoing subject of great interest to us, and we do try to keep in touch with all the various groups."

The new chief minister Mufti Sayeed declared that his administration would bring "relief to the people of the state who have been suffering endless miseries for the last 13 years". But having won office by appealing to anti-war sentiment among the Kashmiri people, the new coalition has pledged to support the ongoing presence of hundreds of thousands of Indian troops in the state.

In their coalition program, the parties pledged the state government's full cooperation "with the government of India in combating cross-border militancy originating from Pakistan". In other words, while calling for negotiations with various separatist groups, the administration will collaborate with the Indian security forces in cracking down on any that do not respond to calls for talks.

In reaching agreement with Congress, the PDP watered down its election demand for the release of hundreds of Kashmiri political prisoners. The new government will limit itself to reviewing "the cases of detainees being held without trial for long periods" and releasing "all detainees held on non-specific charges, those not charged with serious crimes and those who have been held on charges that are such that the period they have spent in jail exceeds their possible sentence".

The PDP-Congress administration has promised not to implement New Delhi's draconian new Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), which provides harsh penalties for belonging to or in any way assisting any grouping designated as "terrorist". The parties were, however, at pains to point out that they did not oppose the anti-democratic nature of the POTA legislation but considered that "there are enough laws in existence to deal with militancy".

The PDP had pledged to disband the Special Operation Group, a state police force that is notorious for torture and extra-judicial killings. Under the coalition agreement, the group will cease to work as a separate unit but its members will be "assimilated or relocated within the regular police establishment," allowing them to continue their brutal work.

The All Party Hurriyat Conference, a loose alliance of 23 legal Kashmiri separatist parties that boycotted the election, cautiously welcomed the state government's proposal for peace talks. On October 27 Hurriyat leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq said: "As far as Hurriyat is concerned our stand on the solution of the Kashmir issue is very clear. However, we do not want to deprive others of making efforts for the solution of the Kashmir issue. If the new coalition is keen to make the atmosphere conducive for talks and facilitate a dialogue we do not have any objection."

Vajpayee's Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) lost heavily in the state elections. Some BJP leaders have attacked Congress for "betraying the masses of Jammu" by entering a coalition with the PDP and criticised the decision not to implement the POTA legislation. But the official response from New Delhi, articulated by Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani was to pledge "full cooperation" with the new government to "control terrorism and for the development of the state".

The relatively muted response from the Vajpayee government reflects an understanding that the most powerful sections of India's ruling elite are looking to the opportunity created by the new government to fashion a settlement in Kashmir favourable to New Delhi's strategic and economic interests.

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