

New Kashmiri administration fails to deliver “healing touch”

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The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) came to power, in coalition with the Congress Party, in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir in November last year. It substantially increased its vote in the poll at the expense the long dominant National Conference Party by promising “a healing touch” to resolve the protracted armed conflict in Kashmir.

To date, however, the new administration has been effectively stymied by the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led coalition government in New Delhi. The PDP promised to initiate unconditional talks with various Kashmiri separatist groups but it is New Delhi that holds the key to any negotiations.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is under some pressure from the US and other major powers to ease tensions with Pakistan, including over the key issue of Kashmir. At the same time, however, the BJP faces a series of state elections and is desperate to shore up its own flagging political support by reasserting its Hindu chauvinist agenda, including a hard-line stance on Kashmir.

PDP chief minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed has issued a series of appeals to New Delhi over the last three months for talks with Kashmiri separatist groups. But apart from vague promises, the Vajpayee government has given little indication that it actually intends to engage in talks. The latest moves appear likely to go the same way.

Last Friday, India’s junior home minister I.D. Swami announced that the national government “fully supported” the moves towards talks by the Mufti administration. He declared that “the centre has been pursuing a definite strategy, including holding negotiations with different outfits, to make Kashmir a militant-free state.” The Indian press speculated that the government may be about to appoint “an interlocutor”

to engage in talks.

Even if discussions go ahead, the conditions set by New Delhi effectively block any serious negotiations with all parties. During a visit to the state in late December, Indian deputy prime minister and home minister L.K. Advani seemed to suggest, in line with Mufti’s appeals, that the government would consider talks, even with groups that had boycotted the state election.

Within days, however, Advani ruled out discussions with any group that “reflects Pakistan’s voice”. “We do not want to talk to Pakistan or their proxies. If we have to talk to Pakistan, we will not require any intermediary,” he said. New Delhi has repeatedly declared that it will hold no further talks with Islamabad, until it halts “cross-border terrorism” by Kashmiri separatist groups based in Pakistan.

Advani’s precondition effectively blocks any negotiations not only with various armed militia groups but also with the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC)—a loose coalition of parties opposed to Indian rule. The legally recognised grouping includes factions that call for an independent Kashmir and those which insist that Kashmir should be part of Pakistan. Advani is clearly trying to divide the alliance in advance of any talks.

The APHC has indicated its willingness to engage in dialogue but reacted angrily to Advani’s comments. APHC leader Umar Farooq declared: “We are neither the proxy of India, nor the proxy of Pakistan... we are representatives of the aspirations of the people of Kashmir.” In early January, the Indian government suspended Farooq’s passport, declaring his travel abroad was not “in the interests of the nation”.

Among armed separatist groups, the Mufti government was regarded with hostility from the

outset. In late December, a prominent PDP member, Abdul Aziz Mir, was shot dead in his home village of Konibal. A previously unknown outfit calling itself the Save Kashmir Movement claimed responsibility for the murder, warning that anyone strengthening Indian rule in Kashmir would meet a similar fate.

New Delhi's hard-line stance has left the Mufti government in Jammu and Kashmir increasingly isolated. Unable to carry out its election platform, the PDP faces the prospect of rapidly losing its support. Its other election promises have run into the same obstacles as the talks.

Mufti has failed to release significant numbers of political prisoners. According to human rights organisations, an estimated 1,400 Kashmiris accused of aiding armed separatist groups are being held without trial in Jammu and Kashmir and elsewhere in India under the country's draconian security legislation.

The new administration released eight prisoners last November but immediately ran into criticisms from New Delhi that the move would "demoralise" the army. The opposition intensified after an attack on the Raghunath Hindu temple in Jammu on November 24 that killed 12 people and injured 52 others. BJP leaders blamed the Mufti government's "soft-pedaling on terrorism" for the spurt in violence in the state.

Mufti accommodated to New Delhi by announcing the formation of a screening committee for the release of political prisoners. He also indicated that his administration would not interfere with the police practice of repetitive arrest, at least in the most serious cases. The Indian security forces are notorious for subverting bail decisions by re-arresting political detainees as they leave the courts and holding them on fresh trumped-up charges.

Since the announcement a handful of political prisoners have been released. New Delhi has slowed the process to a snail's pace by the simple expediency of not sending a representative to the screening committee. Only a few prominent APHC leaders—including Bashir Ahmed Bhat, general secretary of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), and Yasin Malik, also from the JKLF—have been freed.

The PDP also pledged to abolish the police Special Operations Group (SOG), which is infamous for its abuse of democratic rights in Jammu and Kashmir. In

early January, however, Mufti indicated that his government would "reorient" not dismantle the SOG. In mid-January, he announced the formation of a new police group—the Jammu and Kashmir Voluntary Force (JKVF)—which would include SOG officers as well as members of village defence committees. Small JKVF units will receive special military training and work alongside Indian security forces.

The Indian military is strengthening its role in the state. Last April, prior to the elections, the army's northern command prepared a confidential paper entitled "J&K Strategy for Resolution of Internal Conflict", which recommended that overall control of all military operations be handed to a new Action Group in the Ministry of Home Affairs. As well as control over military matters, the paper suggested that the army direct development work and administration in special border areas of Jammu and Kashmir.

While making gestures towards talks over Kashmir, the Vajpayee government is also preparing to step up the war. India has recently signed a \$US30 million agreement with Israel for it to train 3,000 Indian special forces troops and to equip them with advanced light weapons systems. The focus of the training will be on counterinsurgency for operations in Kashmir in particular.

In the event that fighting does flare up, the first political casualty is likely to be the Mufti government.



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