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## Kashmir on Tenterhooks

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By Gazi Hassan



*Hazratbal Shrine in Srinagar*

The changing political dynamics amidst the coming together of political archrivals in Jammu and Kashmir has given rise to an unprecedented situation in the state. Under the provisions of Section 92 of the Jammu and Kashmir Constitution, the state came under Governor's rule in June 2018 after the BJP decided to withdraw support from the PDP–BJP coalition. The rule ended six months later on December 19, as prescribed by the state's Constitution and the President of India took over the proceedings of the state.

The PDP–BJP coalition was usually referred to as 'an unholy alliance', where two parties with ideologies that are poles apart came together to serve the interests of the two provinces of Jammu and Kashmir. They resolved to make work the Agenda of Alliance reached between the two to govern the state efficiently. Mehbooba Mufti, the daughter of

late Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, led the tumultuous coalition for about two and a half years before the BJP surprised them by withdrawing support. However, this coalition has made things worse than they already were. During those years, rumours were rife on the disintegration of the alliance on sensitive issues like Article 35A and Article 370 among others. The deathblow to the alliance came when the BJP alleged that it had become difficult to continue in view of the worsening security situation in the state.

When Governor's rule was imposed, the state administration came under the administrative capacities of Governor Satya Pal Malik aided by select advisors and bureaucrats. As the Assembly was not dissolved, rumours of PDP MLAs defecting the parent party to join hands with the BJP to form the government did the rounds. But what followed took India by surprise, as three political archrivals, including two regional parties, the PDP and National Conference along with the Indian National Congress, decided to form the government.

The news led to high-end political drama in the state. Some referred to this political development as '*KashmirKichdi*', while others were cynical about such a formation. The reason given for the grand coalition – a *mahagathbandhan* – was that a special response was needed to cater to the special circumstances in the state. The protection of Article 35A, Article 370, the identity and the ethos of the state that were under threat from divisive forces needed to be dealt with a firm response. One of the most important reasons stated was that the unlikely coalition was vital to keep the BJP out of the politics of Jammu and Kashmir, as it was being blamed for the rise in militancy and political chaos there.

Reports of the BJP and the People's Conference led by Sajad Lone joining hands to form government with the help of disgruntled PDP MLAs had been circulating for weeks. Sajad Lone, another towering figure in Kashmir politics, is known to have close links with the BJP top leadership in New Delhi. He was seen as a frontrunner for the post of Chief Minister with BJP support in the state. It was to keep the BJP and the People's Conference out of power that the tripartite group was formed, setting aside critical political differences. Mehbooba Mufti staked claim to form the government with the support of 44 MLAs in the 87-member state Assembly. As soon as the PDP staked claim and sent a letter to the Governor's office, Sajad Lone also sent a letter to the Governor staking claim

to form the government. While this scene was playing out, the Governor's office circulated an order dissolving the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly in the wake of possibility of political chaos, instability and horse-trading in the state.

The point to be noted here is that three political parties coming together to form government without luring MLAs from other parties cannot be a case of horse-trading. On the contrary, Sajad Lone claimed to have the support of 18 MLAs from the PDP and 25 from the BJP. Had the BJP and the People's Conference formed the government, it could have been an instance of horse-trading in politics, since they were well short of the halfway mark of 44 with only 29 seats (BJP: 25, People's Conference: 2 and PDP rebels: 2).

Whatever the case maybe, the partisanship of the Governor cannot be more evident. As soon as Governor's rule was imposed in the state, it was clear that the BJP was resorting to horse-trading and trying to lure PDP members to form a coalition headed by Sajad Lone. The Assembly was not being dissolved only to keep the chances of the formation of this coalition alive. With the formation of the grand coalition led by the PDP, the Governor took no chances whatsoever and dissolved the Assembly. Constitutionally speaking, he should have given the coalition a chance to form the government and then asked to prove majority in the house.

It appears that Governor Malik is mindful of the dangerous trends that have been emerging in the Kashmir valley since July 2016, when Burhan Wani, the poster boy of Kashmir militancy, was killed in an encounter. The situation has deteriorated further as neither the political establishment nor the security agencies has been able to contain militancy in the state. The Governor has let the security agencies to deal with the security problems, while focusing on the political and administrative functioning of the state.

The year 2018 has been the bloodiest in Kashmir in a decade with approximately 159 armed forces and police personnel, 267 militants and 160 civilian casualties. The Centre's response to the escalating tension in the state shows that the prospects for 2019 do not seem promising. In the absence of a political solution in the near future, the militancy is not showing any signs of weakening. The strategy 'Operation All Out' to flush out militancy is far from reaching its goals. The continued counter-insurgency

operations have failed to fend off the locals from joining the militant ranks. Every new day brings news of local militants and unarmed civilians getting killed somewhere in the valley. In order to put an end to this killing spree, the Centre has to act fast, lest the situation goes out of hand and Kashmir is lost forever.

India has to take a pragmatic approach to Kashmir. The dialogue process must be started with all stakeholders – Hurriyat as well as Pakistan – to reach at some sort of consensus over peace and stability in the region. This is required for building the trust deficit and bridging the alienation between mainland India and the valley. A sense of hope and end to bloodshed has to be restored.

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