

India: Why the PDP should not ally with the BJP in Jammu and Kashmir

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It has been called Jammu and Kashmir's "Black Swan" moment, a "historic" opportunity to heal divisions in the deeply polarised state, and a test of sagacity and even statesmanship for Narendra Modi and the People's Democratic Party's (PDP) Mufti Muhammad Sayeed.

The idea that the PDP should reach out to the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress to form some kind of "grand alliance" government is being vigorously promoted and avidly debated in J&K. Its supporters claim it would be the best way of reconciling the state's three different regions—the Kashmir Valley, Jammu and Ladakh—which voted radically differently in the just-concluded elections to the 87-member Legislative Assembly.

Jammu, where the BJP-RSS ran a rabidly communal campaign, overwhelmingly backed the BJP, giving it 25 (or two-thirds) of the region's 37 seats. The Valley (46 seats) rejected the BJP altogether, and strongly favoured the PDP with 25 seats, to the National Conference's 11 and Congress's four. The Congress won three of Ladakh's four seats.

Although there are variants of the "alliance" theme, including one which includes the now-discredited NC, and another that lays emphasis on roping in some of the seven MLAs who are independent or come from small parties, the core-idea is that the two extreme opposites, the PDP (28 seats) and the BJP (25), should come together. If they win the support of a few more MLAs, they can form a potentially stable majority government; this in turn can send a strong message of "unity" to Pakistan, domestically generate a momentum for peace and reconciliation, and eventually facilitate a solution to the long-festered "Kashmir problem".

My discussions with a number of MLAs from the PDP and other parties suggest that Mufti is inclined, with some reservations, to pursue this strategy and is discussing it in one-on-one meetings with individual MLAs, but some of them oppose it—not least because, as one of them put it, "we presented ourselves during the election campaign as a bulwark against the BJP-RSS in the Valley, which would protect its people against virulently anti-minority Hindutva fanatics... Even Governor's Rule or a BJP-NC alliance would be better than a PDP-BJP coalition."

As the PDP vacillates, the local BJP unit is pushing for a Hindu from Jammu to be made the Chief Minister of India's only Muslim-majority state, to signify the community's total hegemony over the nation. There are also sharp differences between the two parties on Article 370 of the Constitution (guaranteeing special status to J&K), the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, porous borders and dialogue with Pakistan, release of political prisoners, etc.

The PDP's fairly strong stand on these issues, which the BJP condemns as "soft-separatist", marks its distinct identity vis-a-vis the NC and Congress. It has powered the PDP's steady rise in the Valley over 15 years, and is considered by many as key to the party's future success. If, despite this, the PDP still countenances some dilution of this identity, that's because it has no base whatever in Jammu. And the combination of Jammu-chauvinist separatism, now at its peak, and Hindutva, can be a deadly obstacle to peace and stability in J&K. This has given the BJP unprecedented leverage over

the PDP. RSS-BJP ideologues and strategists also offer the PDP the lure of special Central funds and favourable treatment for the flood-affected Valley. The more devious sing the virtues of a “grand embrace” between the “two regions”.

This is a deeply communal proposition, which reduces people to their religious affiliations alone and negates the tremendous diversity that exists within each of J&K’s regions and sub-regions. This diversity, with generous federalism, can accommodate Jammu’s legitimate regional concerns—without bestowing on the BJP the status of Jammu’s sole representative. The central issue in J&K is not so much inter-regional integration as the alienation of Kashmir Valley’s people from the Indian state.

No party has a full mandate to rule J&K. It would be delusional for the PDP to act as if it did—and utterly suicidal to ally with the BJP in a “grand embrace” even if it shrewdly concedes all of the PDP’s demands, including Art 370 and AFSPA.

“An overwhelming majority of Kashmiris”, says CPM MLA Yusuf Tarigami, “will reject such a shameful compromise with a party they see as implacably hostile to them, and which regards Kashmiris with suspicion. Such capitulation will be infinitely worse than Sheikh Abdullah’s surrender to Indira Gandhi in 1974, which sanctified severely curtailed autonomy for J&K.”

By allying with the BJP, Mufti risks becoming Kashmir’s version of the Palestinian Authority’s Mahmoud Abbas, powerless against Israel’s occupation, yet legitimising it and dependent on it. The PDP will almost certainly suffer a rout soon. But it will have helped Modi to strut about the world for having fully coopted J&K’s Muslims in an “inclusive” arrangement, and whitewashed his own terrible record in Gujarat and beyond. What a coup that would be for the RSS-BJP!

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P.S.

*<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2015/01/04/Why-the-PDP-should-not-ally-with-the-BJP-in-Jammu-and-Kashmir>