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Divided Verdict in Jammu & Kashmir

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More than two weeks after the results of the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Assembly elections in India were declared, a government is still not in place in the state. The reason is the nature of the verdict where no party has come close to a majority in the 87-member Assembly.

The Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) has won the most seats with 28 followed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with 25. But both parties are well short of the 44-seat mark to form government. The other two players are the National Conference (NC) with 15 seats and the Congress with 12. By virtue of being the single largest party, the PDP has the first shot at forming government. Given the electoral verdict, the PDP's options are somewhat limited. While the Congress is the PDP's most natural ally, the combined tally of the two parties does not add up to a clear majority in the assembly. Similarly, a BJP-NC combination could possibly muster the numbers, if a few independents threw their lot with the two parties, but the alliance would be an unstable one. Indeed, the BJP would prefer this alliance since it would be the senior

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partner. A PDP-NC alliance would just about have enough seats to form government, but it is almost inconceivable that the two regional rivals would form a coalition.

A PDP-BJP Partnership?

The most viable option in J&K seems to be a PDP-BJP government. While the numbers of both parties comfortably add up to well over a majority, the attempt to form a partnership though has been a tortuous one. One of the hurdles is the ideological differences between the two parties, especially on the issue of Article 370 of the Constitution of India which gives special status to Jammu and Kashmir. The scrapping, or at least revision, of Article 370 has always been high on the BJP's agenda. In this election it strategically chose to keep the issue on the backburner, preferring instead to focus on development. This makes it somewhat easier for the BJP and the PDP to get together.

Another obstacle is the issue of chief ministership. While the PDP believes that it should have the chief minister's chair since it is the single largest party, the BJP has been pushing for a rotation system with the chief ministership being shared between the two parties. This is not an unusual arrangement and there is a precedent in J&K itself when Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, the chief patron of the PDP, shared chief ministership with the Congress' Ghulam Nabi Azad. Under the agreement, Sayeed was CM from 2002-2005 and Azad from 2005-2008.

A rotation agreement makes good sense due to the arithmetic of the electoral verdict. The PDP and the BJP have won almost an identical vote share with the BJP at 23% and the PDP at 22.7%. Besides, the two parties enjoy a geographical majority in the two distinct regions of Jammu and Kashmir respectively, with the BJP having won 25 of the 37 seats in Jammu and the PDP 25 of the 46 seats in Kashmir.

The BJP's Performance

Though the BJP failed in its much-publicised goal of 'Mission 44' — achieving a majority on its own in J&K — it performed far better than in the 2008 elections where it won 11 seats. The

continuing hold of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the electorate was a factor in the BJP's impressive showing. However, a significant aspect of the BJP's performance was that it won 22 of its 25 seats and 48% of the vote from the Hindu-dominated seats of the Jammu region. Incidentally, this region also had the highest voter turnout which possibly helped the BJP.

In contrast, the BJP could not open its account in the Kashmir Valley winning only 2.2% of the vote there. This despite the BJP giving 40% of its tickets to Muslims in the state. High profile Muslim BJP candidates like Hina Bhat, who contested from the Amira Kadal constituency in Srinagar, performed poorly. However, for the first time a Muslim candidate, Abdul Gani Kohli, won on a BJP ticket. Kohli won from the Kalakote constituency in the Muslim-majority Rajouri district in Jammu.

In Ladakh, too, the BJP performed poorly being unable to win any of the four seats in the region. In fact, the BJP's overall vote share in J&K fell by over nine percentage points from 32.4% in the 2014 national elections going to show that state elections do not always mirror the national polls.

While the BJP was able to consolidate the Hindu vote in Jammu, the Muslim vote was divided in Kashmir. The PDP, the NC and the Congress all vied for the Muslim vote preventing the PDP from fully capitalising on the anti-incumbency sentiments against the outgoing Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and his NC party. Despite anti-incumbency and the effect of the floods that ravaged the state not long before the elections, the NC did not do as badly as expected winning nearly 21% of the vote. Though this translated into only 15 seats, in effect the NC managed to keep the PDP's tally down. Given the circumstances, the Congress too did reasonably well winning 12 seats, five fewer than what it had won in 2008.

Conclusion

Though the PDP and the BJP have been in talks over the last fortnight, an agreement has proved elusive. The BJP is keeping all options open, including Governor's Rule. One section within the BJP believes that the party will benefit from being in government while another feels that the ideological differences with the PDP cannot be bridged. The PDP, too, is split with many of its

members and constituents uneasy about an alliance with a party which they perceive as “anti-Muslim”. But a substantial section within the PDP is keen to form government and believes that a tie-up with the BJP will ensure benefits, including a smooth flow of funds from the Centre for the state’s development.

According to latest reports, the J&K Governor N N Vohra has written to the Indian President about the continuing political impasse in the state. He has suggested several options, including Governor’s Rule. The picture will only become clear by January 19, the deadline for formation of government in J&K.

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