

'Azad' Kashmir (s) elections

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It was indeed ironic that Islamabad, crying hoarse ever since 1947 for the Kashmiris' right to self determination, denied Kashmir under its control even the right to elect its Legislative Assembly until 1970 and snatched even this symbolic right in 1977.

On June 26, the electorate in Azad Jammu and Kashmir voted to elect 49-member Legislative Assembly. In fact, the voters elect 41 members, another eight slots reserved for women (5), Ulema (1), Overseas Kashmiris (1) and technocrats (1) are elected by the house. There are 12 seats in Pakistan, reserved for the subjects forced to migrate from the state in 1947.

Unlike previous general elections, May 26 was not an electoral duel between traditional rivals, the Muslim Conference and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). The Muslim League Nawaz, that recently launched its Kashmir chapter consisting mainly of Muslim Conference dissidents, converted the electoral fray into a three-pronged fight. However, the Muslim Conference was reduced to almost a naught (bagging only three seats).

However, the likely outcome was not hard to guess. Ever since 1970, when the people of Azad Jammu and Kashmir were granted the right to vote on the basis of adult franchise, the cabinet in Muzaffarabad has been a mirror image of ruling clique in Islamabad (In Indian Held Kashmir, first time elections were held in 1951). Since the first general elections in Azad Kashmir were held before Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto arrived at the helm of Islamabad, hence the GHQ was able to install its traditional puppet, the Muslim Conference, as the 'government'. However, in 1975, Bhutto ensured a PPP government in Muzaffarabad. His nemesis, Gen Zia, dissolved the Azad Kashmir's Legislative Assembly the way he torpedoed Pakistan's elected parliament in 1977.

It was indeed ironic that Islamabad, crying hoarse ever since 1947 for the Kashmiris' right to self determination, denied Kashmir under its control even the right to elect its Legislative Assembly until 1970 and snatched even this symbolic right in 1977. Hence, to avoid an embarrassing situation, 1985 onwards electoral process in Azad Jammu and Kashmir has gone on uninterrupted. Even when Gen. Musharraf, in 1999, liquidated the parliament, he did not tinker with Muzaffarabad.

However, military dictators as well as the elected civilians make sure that Muzaffarabad mirrors Islamabad when it comes to the government. Understandably, in 1985 when the mighty dictator put in place a Muslim League cabinet in Islamabad, a Muslim Conference government was inevitable in Muzaffarabad. Sardar Qayyum, the controversial First Mujahid, was sworn in by the Khakis as the president as remuneration for his long-time services while Sardar Sikander Hayat was rewarded with the slot of prime minister. However, the Muslim Conference ministry was not punished in 1988 by Gen. Zia when he dismissed the Junejo cabinet and the parliament he himself had carefully scrambled together. When the next elections were held in Azad Kashmir in 1990, Benazir Bhutto was ruling the roost. Not unexpectedly, the PPP's Kashmir chapter was able to form the government in Muzaffarabad. Mumtaz Rathore took the oath as the prime minister. But he was not merely unlucky. He proved defiant too. When Benazir Bhutto was dethroned by Khakis in 1990, Rathore proved courageous enough to order a ceremonial guard of honours to receive Benazir Bhutto in

Muzaffarabad. He did not stay long in power. After nine months, Rathore had to dissolve the Legislative Assembly and a fresh election paved the way for the return of Sardar Qayyum-Sardar Sikander duo. After all, the fresh elections were held when Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League was firmly in control of Islamabad.

In 1996, Benazir was managing Islamabad. Hence, the elections in Azad Jammu and Kashmir produced a PPP ministry. Octogenarian Sardar Ibrahim enjoyed the presidency while profligate Barrister Sultan Mehmoud was appointed as the prime minister. In 2001 and 2006, the 12 Div was supposed to cobble together the government in Muzaffarabad. Understandably, the Muslim Conference conveniently emerged victorious in both these general elections. In 2001, Sardar-Qayyum-Sardar Sikander duo enjoyed their traditional privileges. However, in 2006 the old duo was sent on forced retirement. However, to ensure the continuity Sardar Qayyum's son, Sardar Attique, was appointed as the prime minister while the presidency was bequeathed upon Raja Zulqarnain.

Meantime, Zardari replaced Musharraf as events took a dramatic turn in Pakistan. Though President Zardari in spite of all his skills was unable to bring down the Muslim Conference yet in the last three years though three prime ministers faced a vote of no confidence. Muslim Conference's Farooq Haider, in collaboration with PPP, engineered a coup and Sardar Attique was out in 2009. Sardar Yakub was sworn in as the prime minister. Only nine months down the line, Sardar Attique and Farooq Haider joined hands to vote out Sardar Yakub. Finally, Farooq Haider, a protégé of Sardar Sikander Hayat, was in the saddle. But before long, Sardar Attique was able to engineer yet another vote of no confidence and was himself back at the prime minister's secretariat. These petty intrigues generated such bad blood that Sikander's faction split with the Muslim Conference and launched the Kashmir chapter of Nawaz League.

Interestingly, like Indian Held Kashmir, Jamaat-e-Islami has never managed to bag any sizeable number of seats. It hardly gets into the Legislative Assembly, if at all. On May 26, it did not impress any constituency either. As expected, PPP bagging 19 Legislative Assembly seats, has emerged as the majority party (elections were postponed on four constituencies constituencies).

Most likely, a coalition of Muslim Conference and the PPP will form the next government even if the PPP may form a government on its own. The Kashmir chapter of 'Azad' Nawaz League (able to secure only nine seats) will have to wait for now until a favourable change in Islamabad. The electoral show will go on!

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