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India

# Mufti seriously risks losing the plot in Kashmir

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**The Bharatiya Janata Party's national leadership has officially confirmed that it's in talks with the People's Democratic Party to form a coalition government in Jammu and Kashmir. This proposal is endorsed by a surprisingly large number of self-avowed well-wishers of the Kashmiri people, as well as cynical "realists" who believe that such a coalition of extremes, between India's unitarian-nationalists and the Kashmir Valley's "soft-separatists", is J&K's best chance of having a stable government which paves the way for its greater integration into India. The parties' respective core-bases, Jammu and the Valley, they argue, "complement" each other. Arithmetically too, the two "with respectively 25 and 28 seats" would command a solid majority in the 87-seat Assembly.**

The negotiations may turn out to be prolonged, not merely because there are sharp differences between the two on thorny issues, including Article 370, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, and dialogue and porous borders with Pakistan "but also because the BJP is reportedly reluctant to seal a J&K alliance before the Delhi elections, probable in February.

Whatever course the talks take, it's plain that the PDP's options are far narrower than the BJP's, and that it will face greater opposition from within the Valley over any compromise it makes than will the BJP from within Jammu. That's partly because the PDP won a majority of the Valley's 46 seats by presenting itself as a strongly secular anti-BJP-RSS force, which would protect the region's people against Hindutva fanatics. The BJP swept Jammu's Hindu-majority areas on a somewhat weaker obverse of this "but still stoking anti-Muslim and anti-Valley chauvinist sentiments.

There's something to be said for reconciliation between the two regions, but the BJP isn't remotely the kind of force that will promote this on equitable terms. The central issue in J&K is not so much inter-regional integration as the alienation of the Valley's people from the Indian State. The BJP has long been in irrational denial of this and wants to force their integration into India.

Neither party would enhance its credibility by allying with the other. But the BJP has infinitely less to lose than the PDP. Its national strength isn't dependent on holding power in J&K or creating/having a base in the Valley (or for that matter, even Jammu). But the PDP's very survival depends on support from within the Valley. And that will be grievously undermined if it allies with the BJP, which an overwhelming majority of Kashmiris see as incurably Hindu-communal, anti-autonomy, and implacably hostile to them.

That's why it would be suicidal for the PDP to ally with the BJP even if the latter shrewdly concedes all its demands, including those on Article 370 and AFSPA, makes Mufti a full-term Chief Minister, and offers J&K a generous central financial package, including special rehabilitation assistance for the flood-affected Valley.

My recent telephone conversations suggest that a wide spectrum of Kashmiri leaders, from the CPM's Yousuf Tarigami to the hardline-separatist Syed Ali Shah Geelani, would consider such "capitulation" much worse than Governor's Rule, indeed more condemnable than Sheikh Abdullah's 1974 "surrender" to Indira Gandhi. The Valley will erupt again, and the Indian State will unleash unprecedented repression.

By embracing the BJP, Mufti risks becoming a weaker version of Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas, powerless against Israel's occupation, yet helplessly dependent on it. The PDP will soon be routed. But it will have helped Modi strut about the world stage for having co-opted J&K's Muslims in an "inclusive", "secular" arrangement,

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and whitewashed his own record in Gujarat and beyond. What a coup that would be for the RSS-BJP!

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