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Jammu and Kashmir Enters a New Electoral Phase

By: Aijaz Ashraf Wani

Voters see the Jammu and Kashmir elections as a significant political development towards resolving local governance issues, rather than as an instrument for addressing complex questions like the restoration of limited autonomy.

The Jammu and Kashmir elections, due in September after a [decade-long hiatus](#), are being shaped by local governance issues, not by any big national agenda.

The main parties in the fray are the National Conference (NC), the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), the Indian National Congress, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

For the first time, separatists and their sympathisers, as well as members of the Jamaat-e-Islami, a banned Islamic party, are participating in the polls as independents.

The elections have induced a lot of churning within political parties, with many of their members changing parties or leaving their parent parties to contest as independents. The BJP is no exception. Some disgruntled members of the party have jumped ship to join other parties or are contesting against its official candidates as independents.

The National Conference, which had ruled the state of Jammu and Kashmir for most of the past 75 years has formed a pre-electoral alliance with the Congress party.

What shapes this election

The overall political framework of this election is different from previous elections. The constituencies have been redefined and Jammu and Kashmir is now a Union Territory after bifurcation into Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, with a shrunken geography.

A delimitation commission was set up in 2019 to redefine the boundaries of assembly constituencies of Jammu and Kashmir comprising the Hindu-dominated Jammu region and the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley.

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Earlier the Kashmir Valley, with 46 out of a total of 111 seats, [determined the outcome](#) of the elections. The Jammu region had 37 and Ladakh four seats. Another 24 seats were symbolically reserved for the territory of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir under Pakistan's control, meant to underline India's claim to that territory. Elections, therefore, were practically held for only 87 constituencies.

The delimitation exercise changed the relative political weight of the two regions in the proposed legislature. It increased the strength of the legislative assembly of Jammu and Kashmir from 111 to 114 seats, excluding Ladakh. Six new constituencies were carved out in the Jammu region and only one extra in the Kashmir Valley. This changed the power balance in Jammu and Kashmir, with 47 seats now in Kashmir and 42 in Jammu. This could [determine the polling outcome](#).

The [State Reorganisation \(Amendment\) Act 2023](#) also reserved nine constituencies for [Scheduled Tribes](#) and six for [Scheduled Caste](#) communities. Politics in these areas is anticipated [to exploit the identity and caste dynamics](#).

Additionally, the [State Reorganisation \(Amendment\) Act, 2023](#) empowers the lieutenant governor to nominate two representatives of Kashmiri Pandits and one for refugees from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir to the legislature.

It would be interesting to see how these political reconfigurations impact the formation of the new government, as well as the stability of the new government in case of a close election result.

The combination of these factors makes this election unique.

A chance for change

Irrespective of the changed conditions and regardless of who forms the government, elections are valued because they increase people's access to the legislators and make governance accountable.

The [governance structure has also been changed](#) by the lieutenant governor-led administration for improving security and e-service delivery in the region in the absence of an elected legislature. Unelected individuals and civil servants gaining strength, notwithstanding their contribution towards governance, has led to the bureaucratisation of governance, which is seen as antithetical to democratic governance process.

In terms of the popular anticipation with regards to the elections, chances of a high voter turnout in the upcoming elections are strong like the last three elections (2002, 2008, and 2014) that witnessed an upward trend in voting percentage (43%, 61%, and 65%, respectively).

The voters see these elections as a significant political development towards resolving local governance issues, rather than as an instrument for addressing complex questions like the restoration of a limited autonomy that was guaranteed under Article 370, for example.

The people expect that the elected representatives will be more approachable than the bureaucrats were under the lieutenant governor's administration. This is why the election manifestos of regional parties like the NC and PDP, while mentioning the larger question of restoration of Article 370 and statehood, place greater emphasis on governance issues and social security measures.

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Although the BJP will certainly [boast about the changed security conditions](#) in Jammu and Kashmir and the reading down of Article 370, it will also have to heavily rely on governance, jobs, development and other civic issues. Even in the Jammu region, people have been [voicing concerns](#) regarding bureaucratic governance and the absence of transparency in governance, lack of jobs and [regulating land transfers to 'outsiders'](#).

The banned Jamaat-e-Islami party, which has been boycotting elections since 1990 has been [keen to participate in these elections](#). Several former members of Jamaat have filed nominations as independent candidates in what seems like an attempt to get the ban on the party lifted. Some [independents from unrecognised parties](#), including [separatist sympathisers](#), are also contesting.

All in all, this election will be fought (and people will vote) largely on fundamental public issues rather than the rhetoric of any 'bigger questions'. As a centrally administered territory with no elected government, the last six years (after the ruling BJP-PDP coalition collapsed in 2018) have seen [significant changes in political processes and governance structures](#).

Limited Powers

Even when the elections are completed and a new government is elected, it will have limited powers. As a representative of New Delhi, the lieutenant governor will continue to hold sway over the crucial aspects of regional administration.

Furthermore, the term of the new legislative assembly will be five years instead of six years as it used to be, with a unicameral legislature instead of a bicameral one.

The relationship between Jammu and Kashmir and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP is set to enter a new phase with these elections. The [hope](#) is that democratic values take deep roots and public trust is strengthened after multiple setbacks over the past 70 years.

But for that to happen, efficiency and transparency have to take centre stage and the grievances of the voting population must finally be held sacrosanct at the polling booth.

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