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**Elections in AJK**

A fresh round of general elections is set to take place in Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) on July 25, 2021. Historically, elections in AJK have been easy to predict – the political party at the helm of affairs in Islamabad is usually crowned in Muzaffarabad as well. Will the 2021 elections bring any surprise? The jury is out.

Historically, both Muzaffarabad and Islamabad have reduced AJK to the geo-strategic conflict of Jammu & Kashmir. Consequently, I argue that the socio-economic development of AJK has been hostage to a particular brand of politicking in which political and state actors in AJK tend to be more fixated on Occupied Kashmir rather than focusing on their primary task of democratizing and strengthening local institutions to deliver inclusive and sustainable development to the people of AJK. This approach cuts across political parties and ideologies.

I divide the political history of AJK into three phases. I refer to the period from 1947 to 1952 as the first phase in which AJK’s politics was dominated by a single party: ‘Muslim Conference’. The lack of plurality of parties did not help the cause of democratization. During this nascent stage, ‘Muslim Conference’ remained fixated on the discourse of conflict rather than focusing on the painstaking work of institution-building for indigenous socio-economic development.

The second phase is from 1952-1970 in which Islamabad extensively exercised direct oversight over AJK via a non-participatory bureaucratically controlled system. State bureaucracy did not have much incentive to put AJK on the path of economic development. As David Harvey would say, territorial logic remained dominant over developmental logic. Not surprisingly, socio-economic variables remained largely ignored during the first two decades of AJK’s inception.

The third phase started from the 1970s; it marked the beginning of a multi-party system with adult suffrage elections. The electoral process in AJK, despite its inherent limitations, gave people an opportunity to draw the attention of the political elites to their immediate socio-economic and developmental issues such as access to basic infrastructure and public goods. Although public-sector investments on infrastructural development and social sectors have seen relative improvements over the years, the meta-narrative in the political sphere, across party lines, remains heavily tilted towards the conflict of J&K rather than indigenous socio-economic development. The conflict in J&K continues to regulate the politics of AJK.

While general elections are now only a few weeks away, not a single mainstream political party – PML-N, PTI, PPP – has presented any substantive socio-economic programme for the development of AJK that can be publicly debated or discussed.

This brings me to another important point – constituency-level politics in AJK is mediated by biradari and patronage networks, and this primarily serves the interests of the political elite which is wealthy, dynastic and patriarchal.

Therefore, AJK has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the country. If a person is born in a low-income household of AJK – the overwhelming majority of the population – it is almost unavoidable for them to flee AJK to earn a livelihood. Employment opportunities are conspicuous due to their absence. This partly explains why many districts of AJK have substantially higher per capita outflows of migrants vis-a-vis mainland Pakistan.

Remittances, the mainstay of AJK’s local economy, while useful at the macroeconomic front to amass foreign exchange reserves, their microeconomic impact at the village and town level is not necessarily productive. Remittances have primarily fueled the consumption-based economy which has led to the increased reliance of the local population on market forces. Consequently, the lower orders of society tend to be vulnerable to food insecurity due to recurring market shocks and inflationary pressures. Not to mention, remittances come at the expense of the continuous brain drain and the exodus of skilled labour force.

Although historically agriculture was the mainstay of livelihoods, it has not been modernized with time. For example, 92 percent of all cultivable land in AJK is still dependent on rainfall. This partly explains the low productivity. While there are geographical and climatic limitations given the mountainous terrain of AJK, but in more temperate areas of Mirpur and Bhimber around the Jhelum and Poonch rivers, infrastructural investments in the irrigation system could have resulted in major improvements in productivity. But, on the contrary, cultivable farm area in AJK has been steadily on the decline. Around 28 percent decline is estimated in the total cultivable area between 1951 and 2010. In addition to other factors, one major reason is that rich households are converting farmland into commercial real estate in the absence of an effective town and urban planning regime.

What can be done? To promote inclusive and exploitation-free employment opportunities, one potential policy option is to promote ‘workers owned and managed cooperatives’ in agriculture, small-scale manufacturing and services sectors. The government has to provide an enabling environment – provide access to affordable credit, technical training and build physical and knowledge infrastructure, to invigorate processes of indigenous economic development.

One of the comparative advantages of AJK is its natural and scenic landscapes. Often less appreciated is the fact that more than 40 percent of AJK’s area is covered by a diverse range of natural forests. In comparison, only three percent of Pakistan’s total area is covered by forest, not to mention, the latter is shrinking at a rapid rate. In the early 20th century, US president Theodore Roosevelt laid the foundation of the US National Parks system by protecting forests and wildlife, and today national parks are one of the major tourist attractions for both domestic and foreign travelers.

AJK desperately needs a major conservatory and national parks programme to protect diverse wildlife and endangered species. Environment-friendly investments in national parks can potentially make AJK a hub of eco-tourism in the region.

The past seven decades have seen the neglect of day-to-day issues and struggles of the working and middle classes of AJK. Politics and economic development are dialectically interlinked and, therefore, pro-people and environment friendly socio-economic change mandates a transformative shift in the political imagination – politics should be centered on the welfare of the people of AJK.

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