**AJK: what next?**

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Against all odds, the three-phase local government elections have been conducted successfully in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. All political and religious parties participated in the elections enthusiastically, running intensive door-to-door campaigns across the region.

The PTI, PPP and PML-N have equally effective party networks and cadres in AJK. Therefore, all these parties bagged a reasonable number of votes and secured seats in local councils. Likewise, the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Party, Muslim Conference, and Jamaat-e-Islami also won seats. Interestingly, a large number of independent candidates have also made their way to the local councils. However, nationalist groups in Kashmir did not participate in the elections, due to the precondition of allegiance to accession to Pakistan.

The local government elections remained largely peaceful. Due to the PTI-led long march, the federal government refused to provide security personnel to be deployed by the local police at polling stations in the first phase of the election held on September 27. Despite this, AJK’s security forces managed to hold the elections peacefully. The AJK Election Commission and administration earned much kudos for holding elections without any external support in Muzaffarabad. However, later, the federal government sent police and FC officers to AJK to support the local administration in the two subsequent phases of the elections.

Overall, the elections were transparent as no party made allegations of rigging. Unlike how it did in the past, the federal government or any state institution did not interfere in the election process or extend support to any candidate or party.

The pro-status quo forces were not in favour of devolving administrative and financial powers to the lower tier of democracy. A few top leaders tried hard to run away from the elections. However, the overwhelming groundswell in favour of the LG polls forced these parties to ride the wave.

Over 10,000 candidates contested the elections. A large number of potential candidates jumped onto the PTI bandwagon ahead of the elections. Being the ruling party, the PTI turned out to be a lucrative choice for fence sitters.

Despite their flip-flop approach towards the local government elections, both the PPP and PML-N have surprised political observers by securing substantial electoral triumphs. The PML-N swept the elections in Muzaffarabad where it was badly defeated by the PTI in the general elections held last year. Likewise, the PPP made a significant comeback in Muzaffarabad and Poonch. However, it barely won a seat in Mirpur district, which used to be its strongest political bastion. The PML-N and the PPP have been closely collaborating to form local governments in several cities and towns by keeping the PTI at bay.

The PTI, led by Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas Khan, ran a hectic election campaign across AJK. The PM tried to broaden his political appeal by using social media platforms and recruiting political heavyweights in his party’s fold. Nearly 2,100 candidates were awarded tickets for the district and ward council elections. Consequently, it took the lion’s share in the local government polls.

The results of the elections have set the stage to initiate a conversation regarding the effective role of the over 2,300 elected representatives in providing better governance and service delivery to the people. The current local government Act needs drastic changes as it was enacted in the 1980s and does not ensure the transfer of the required powers and financial resources to local governments. Elected representatives act as an extended wing of the bureaucracy such as that of deputy commissioners in the current LG Act.

Additionally, the interim constitution of Azad Jammu and Kashmir does not make it a constitutional requirement to hold regular and uninterrupted elections. It vaguely talks about the local government system and assigns the responsibility of conducting these elections to the AJK’s Election Commission in consultation with the government but does not make it mandatory legal obligation.

The constitution of Azad Jammu and Kashmir has to be amended in order to establish a constitutional basis for holding local government elections regularly and assigning administrative and financial responsibility and authority to elected representatives.

It is the responsibility of the government to initiate dialogue with all political parties and civil society, aimed to create a consensus among all stakeholders before granting powers to local governments.

At present, all administrative and financial powers revolve around the PM office. The allocation of funds and development schemes has always remained at the whims of either the prime minister or powerful ministers. The uneven distribution of funds and infrastructure development schemes left many vital projects unattended.

Also, a major chunk of funds travels through the hands of the members of the legislative assembly towards the union council level. There is no system to ensure that the funds are consumed transparently. Now, since an LG system has taken shape, a substantial reduction should be made in the MLA’s developmental budget, and these funds should be utilized by representatives from the grassroots level.

Furthermore, to guarantee the fiscal autonomy of local governments, the AJK government has to commit a reasonable percentage of its revenue collected by the local tax department to the local government bodies, along with increasing it on a regular basis. A district finance board should also be established so that all districts get their share according to their area, population and underdevelopment.

No physical infrastructure for local government exists. The restoration of sitting spaces for the LG heads of cities, districts, tehsils and town committees is imperative to enable elected representatives to smoothly fulfil their responsibilities.

The people of AJK believe that the upcoming local government system will enhance service delivery, and help the region turn itself into an engine of economic growth and socio-economic uplifting for ordinary people.

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