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**Challenges in AJK**

The PTI emerged as the victorious party in the eleventh elections of the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Assembly. Around 58 percent voter turnout is an indication of society’s trust in the political system, though this time allegations of rigging and violence were plenty.

Intense and active political campaigning from all major parties infused energy in the election process as Bilawal Bhutto, Maryam Nawaz, Prime Minister Imran Khan and a number of federal ministers spoke to large gatherings. However, the rhetoric did not address the economic question – how to broaden the economic base in AJK – nor was it about addressing the rise in unemployment in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic which forced thousands of expatriates, most of them from the Gulf States, to return home risking their financial security.

The electoral campaign also hardly touched the sentiment of active young people seeking political space in the form of elected local government or challenging development deficit. The issue of Jammu and Kashmir and the role of the AJK government could not gather due attention either. Nor was attention given to 3G or 4G internet access to bridge the digital divide. Instead, the campaign was intimidating, in which the prime victim was civility and language.

The polarization and commercialization of politics gained new dimensions with larger implications for the political system, social cohesion, and democratic values in AJK. Though in the past too federal parties have campaigned for AJK’s elections, this time it got more prominence, resistance and support. Maryam Nawaz’s informed speech on saying no to becoming a province was informed, since there is across-the-board resistance in AJK on granting it provincial status without addressing the larger question of Jammu and Kashmir. This effectively was countered by the prime minister during his speech in Tarakhal Poonch, by standing firm on the right to self-determination of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

People in AJK are protective of their political status and relate it with the issue of Occupied Jammu and Kashmir. Anything short of the right to self-determination would be a hard nut to crack given the history of the political struggle of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. The tug of war between the PML-N and state institutions in Pakistan did not draw the attention of AJK’s people. The PPP substantially gained seats owing to its connectivity to its voter base and the presence of a vibrant and dedicated president of its AJK Chapter.

The challenges to the new government are enormous. In the past, infrastructure development and employment opportunities were the forte of the PPP, while the PML-N cherished the introduction of the 13th Amendment which is important for better governance in AJK.

AJK requires massive intervention to create an economic base, as unemployment has further exacerbated after the Covid-19 pandemic. Largely dependent on the markets of Rawalpindi and Islamabad for basic livelihood needs, the new government in AJK should dedicate resources to build intervention in agriculture and livestock so as to create employment and self-sufficiency.

At the moment, the state is the biggest employer in AJK, spending most of its resources on the non-development budget which exceeds Rs113 billion out of the RS141 billion total budget. This also highlights the challenge of governance reforms on the lines of New Public Management. Internet penetration in AJK is alarmingly low and students face a lot of issues when trying online education.

AJK also created and replicated the bureaucratic system of other provinces in Pakistan. It requires restructuring to improve performance and efficiency; in the absence of local elected governments, one can easily find a missing link in the implementation of public policies. Modernizing the bureaucracy includes introducing some performance measures of the private sector, creating public-private joint ventures, introducing e-governance, delegating power and enhancing policy capacity and improving efficiency to ensure good governance. This won’t be an easy task for the government in the presence of a powerful and experienced bureaucracy which is deeply entrenched in governance structures. Such reforms could also help the government better exploit the tourism sector, arguably the largest potential source of employment in AJK.

Last but most important is the restoration of the elected local bodies system which has been stalled from the early nineties. Many key leaders in AJK’s politics got a chance to rise at the national level due to training and recognition they received from the local bodies system. Sadly, despite efforts, most parties never championed its restoration, no doubt fearing delegation of power and resources. The absence of local bodies has created a huge political gap as it served as a breeding ground for young leadership, inclusive and rapid development, and community participation. One of the failures of the PML-N government was its reluctance to restore the local bodies system which could have helped successful execution of development projects and effective use of the allocated budget.

The PTI in its 2021 election manifesto promised to hold local bodies’ elections within three months of government formation; but one can never rule out other factors to delay these much-needed elections. It would also be a great source of youth and women empowerment if parties dedicate around 25 quotas for both young men and women to contest elections.

The entire political process in AJK is important, not only for the local development but also for the issue of Occupied Jammu and Kashmir. A better governed and inclusive AJK can serve as a great base to strengthen the voice of the people of Occupied Kashmir.

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