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**Sham elections**

Notwithstanding the fact that as per UN resolutions the question of accession of Kashmir to either Pakistan or India is required to be resolved through a UN sponsored plebiscite, the Modi government took a unilateral and illegal action of ending the special status of Jammu and Kashmir under its occupation, bifurcated it into two territories and made them part of the Indian union.

The action was not only a brazen violation of the orders of the Indian Supreme Court which in April 2018 had ruled that this article had achieved permanence and could not be scrapped as the constituent assembly of the state had ceased to exist but was also an affront to the UN and the world community. It is pertinent to mention that the UNSC in its three informal meetings in the backdrop of the action taken by India has held that the Kashmir dispute was required to be resolved in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter and the relevant UN resolutions.

The move by the BJP government was not a sudden development. It was part of the election manifesto of Narendra Modi. Just two days after scrapping Article 370, Narendra Modi is on record to have said: “The nation took a historic decision by scrapping Article 370 which will ensure equal rights and duties for the citizens of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. The decision has amounted to the realization of dreams of many of the distinguished leaders of the past”. On his Independence Day speech last year, he said that his government had done in seven months which could not be accomplished in the last seventy years.

India tried to sell the narrative that the action taken with regard to Occupied Kashmir was its internal matter but the attempt failed to achieve its objective as the world refused to go along with the Indian version and the international media continuously tried to unmask the killing spree in the valley while it was under complete siege and cut-off from the outside world. The UN and growing number of countries expressed their concern on the human rights situation in the valley.

Now after two years since annexing Occupied Kashmir and using ruthless force to suppress the freedom movement and the resistance to the Indian action, the BJP government is conducting local elections in 20 districts of the state to elect 280 members for the District Development Councils. These members will be elected in eight phases.

Analysts rightly believe that this is an attempt by India to show normalcy in the state and a symbolic exercise in an area that carries deep distrust for India, ostensibly to erase the impression of it being a disturbed region. Reportedly 1000 candidates from various political parties, including the BJP, are participating in the elections. India has deployed thousands of troops in addition to the more than half million forces already stationed in Kashmir, to ensure smooth conduct of elections, as rebels continue to carry out attacks.

What is significant about these elections is that two bitter political rivals – the National Conference (NC) and the People’s Democratic Party – have formed an alliance for the first time to contest the local elections. The alliance, known as the PAGD, is contesting these elections with a declared aim of restoration of Kashmir’s special status and statehood. Both these parties have in the past maintained a pro-India posture.

The National Conference, which has ruled the state the most during the last seven decades, has had three chief ministers. Former chief minister Mehboob Mufti belongs to the PDP; her late father Mufti Muhammad Saeed also served as the chief minister of the region, the last time in an alliance with the BJP. The coming together of both these parties leaves no doubt about the fact that Indian action in Occupied Kashmir is widely resented and resisted.

Mehbooba Mufti reportedly told Al Jazeera that Kashmir’s parties have formed the alliance not to leave the space open for the BJP, reiterating “If we stay away from it then those elements will occupy this space which will be detrimental to the interests of Jammu and Kashmir. It’s a political fight now for us. It’s not that [the] BJP will last forever in rule and we will not resist. We have to struggle and resist, we can’t stop resisting”. This indicates that the BJP does not have significant political support in the state and the alliance probably would win most of the seats, provided the elections are fair and transparent.

However, there is no guarantee that as a result of these elections the freedom movement in the valley will subside. The presence of the Indian security forces is being fiercely resisted as is evident from frequent clashes between the freedom fighters and the Indian security forces. India has also lost the support of the major political parties in Occupied Kashmir, which surely will scuttle its ability to keep the state under its control for an indefinite period. The freedom struggle can neither be suppressed through the barrels of the gun nor by gimmicks like holding local elections under the control of the security forces.

The All Parties Hurriyat Conference and its entire leadership has vowed to keep the fight going for freedom of the state from Indian occupation. Pakistan, being a party to the dispute, will never allow India to get away with usurpation of the state in contravention of the UNSC resolutions.

The Indian leadership is better advised to recognize the ground realities and to remove the cause of conflict in the region, the continuation of which will also ultimately hurt India itself. The sham local elections in Occupied Kashmir are not going to change those realities and the international community cannot be hoodwinked forever.

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