

Direct rule from Delhi imposed in restive Kashmir

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*Despite the optimism generated by record turnout in last month's election, elected representatives in [Jammu and Kashmir](#) have failed to form a government and Governor rule has been imposed. **Mark Mistry** reflects on the current situation and argues the unaccountability of direct rule from Delhi will only further the alienation felt by many Kashmiris.*



Just one month after a record turnout in the state assembly election Kashmir is back under Governor's rule. Direct control from New Delhi was established by Governor NN Vohra after former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah resigned earlier in January, leaving local accountability lacking in a region prone to conflagration.

India and Pakistan have fought at least two wars over the disputed territory of Kashmir, which still smoulders with tension following a fierce insurgency between militants and Indian security forces – present in their hundreds of thousands, according to estimates – that began in 1987.

Following the release of election results on 23 December, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), emerged as the largest, with 28 seats in the 87-member assembly. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came in second, securing 25 seats (all from the Hindu-dominated Jammu region). Ideological differences between the two have so far hampered efforts at reaching a compromise. The BJP, which won a huge mandate in last year's Lok Sabha elections handing the premiership to Narendra Modi, wants to repeal [Article 370](#) of the Indian Constitution, which grants special autonomy to Kashmir. The PDP, on the other hand, promotes self-rule for the state.

A tie up between with the BJP is not the only option. National Conference, led by former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah since 2010, gained 15 seats, which means that an alliance with the PDP would require only several independents to form a government. The two parties are more natural bedfellows, with similar support bases among the Valley's mainly Muslim population.

But the PDP has so far resisted an alliance with National Conference, making fresh elections a possibility if an arranged marriage with the nationalist BJP above should end in divorce, according to some observers. Shashank Joshi, a senior fellow at London's Royal United Services Institute, said: "The PDP and BJP draw their electoral support from entirely different areas and have sharply divergent views on Kashmir's autonomy, the role of the Indian Army, and relations with Pakistan. Given that Kashmir's border with Pakistan is looking increasingly volatile, any coalition between the two would therefore be extremely fragile and would face opposition from within each party. It's possible that we would see fresh elections before too long."

However, the prospect of another poll runs contrary to the wishes of most Kashmiris, according the Editor of Rising Kashmir newspaper, Shujaat Bukhari. He said: "With Governor's rule in place, only worry now is that Delhi is not repeated in Jammu and Kashmir. No one wants a re-election in the state."

Mr Bukhari, a senior journalist, added: "Successful elections, which always are a challenge in Jammu and Kashmir, had rekindled the hope for a stable government, but it worsened those prospects and the commoner in Kashmir is fuming why political parties could not put their inherent acrimony behind and move forward to give them a government they deserved."

Meanwhile, Kashmiri separatists assert that the imposition of Governor's rule changes nothing, arguing that the overwhelming presence of Indian security forces in the state betrays the façade of supposed local rule. Direct rule from New Delhi can only end if the parties form a government or fresh elections are held.

Governor's rule – a chequered history

Kashmir has been ruled directly from New Delhi, via a resident Governor, on numerous occasions in recent decades, both before and after the beginning of the insurgency that started in the late 1980s.

Although a bureaucrat rather than a serving officer, the incumbent NN Vohra, as a former defence secretary, remains in the mould of his predecessors – barring one exception all are former senior members of the Indian Armed Forces or intelligence agencies.

A little over thirty years ago, unconstitutional manoeuvring by then-Governor Jagmohan, which saw the departure of Farooq Abdullah as Chief Minister in 1984, was labelled as “another nail in the coffin of the Kashmiri’s faith in Indian democracy and law” by Mir Qasim, his predecessor.

The series of events that followed descended into the bloody insurgency that led to the deaths of thousands of people, the departure of Kashmiri pandits, and the imposition of ‘[black laws](#)’, such as the 1990 Armed Forces (Jammu & Kashmir) Special Powers Act implemented under Girish Saxena, former chief of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India’s external intelligence agency.

While the insurgency has now abated, those responsible for this – and many [other human rights abuses](#) – have never been brought to justice. Nor have the atrocities been forgotten: on Wednesday (January 21) Kashmiris [protested](#) in Maisuma, a restive area of Srinagar home to Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front chairman Yasin Malik. The protest marked the 25th anniversary of the Gaw Kadal massacre, which took place under Governor’s rule. The incident garnered headlines around the world, prompting foreign correspondents to be temporarily banned from the Valley, and fed militants’ direct confrontation with Indian security forces.

The conditions that sparked the fierce insurrection – such as youth unemployment, broken promises of funding from New Delhi, and political disenfranchisement – all remain today. Furthermore, they are accentuated by the feeling of abandonment by New Delhi in the aftermath of the [devastating floods](#) last September, which killed hundreds, left thousands homeless and the state’s already weak infrastructure in tatters. The current unaccountability of direct rule from the Centre will only further the alienation felt by many.

Cover image: An Indian soldier in Srinagar. Credit: flickr/[Alexandre Marchand](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Mark Mistry is a freelance journalist who has reported from Indian-administered Kashmir, and elsewhere across South Asia, for the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Independent* and the *Frontline Club*. He has previously written about the [Indian media’s treatment of Kashmir](#) for the *India at LSE blog*. He lives in London and tweets [@mark_mistry](#).



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