

OPINION

AJK Polls: What next?

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After a long and hectic electioneering in Azad Jammu and Kashmir(POK), Pakistan Peoples Party has emerged as victorious by securing most of the seats in the parliament. In couple of days PPP's nominee will assume office of the prime minister of AJK(POK). The victory boosted the morale of PPP's leaders and workers and gave them huge confidence.

The poll was expected to gauge the popularity of PPP and as a result PPP put its entire state machinery and resources in action to win the election. This win could also discredit the recent opinion polls which had indicated that PPP's support base was shrinking. To make AJK's(POK's) elections a success story for the party the Prime Minister of Pakistan Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani had pledged huge developmental projects in AJK(POK) during the election campaign

ranging from medical college to highways. Additionally, it widely stated that millions of rupees were distributed by the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) to buy voters. ?A full-fledged cell in the President House was formed which spearheaded the election campaign. It was decided that government resources would not be used for election campaign but the premiers of Pakistan and AJK(POK) both blatantly violated the rules. An incompetent Election Commission miserably failed to uphold the elections' code of conduct. On the other hand, most of the political parties have rejected the results and termed it a rig(rigged) election. It underlines the need of an independent election commission in the area which can enforce the code of conduct. ?The people of AJK(POK) had had enough of the rule of Muslim Conference which

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could not deliver anything in its ten years stint in power. Its members were frequently switching their loyalties from one camp to another only to advance their own vested interests. Just in five years AJK(POK) saw four prime ministers which had practically paralysed the entire administration in Muzaffarabad and eventually made the Muslim Conference a non-entity. Nawaz Sharif introduced his party in Azad Kashmir(POK) elections as an anti-establishment party. He flagged up several very important issues such as the Kargil war which had caused the ouster of his own government. He said that the Kargil adventure had derailed the India-Pakistan dialogue otherwise Kashmir issue could have been settled long time ago. He also took on the establishment for playing a king-maker role in AJK(POK) and promised that his party would bring not only prosperity in the area but would also work to empower the people of Azad Kashmir(POK). Raja Farooq Haider, who heads PML (N) AJK's(POK's) chapter and had been championing the devolution of powers from Islamabad to Muzaffarabad won two seats from Muzaffarabad. It shows that urban areas are more conscious of their rights and frustrated with the status quo forces. Several other encouraging trends also surfaced which deserve constant civil society

support. A number of political dynasties have failed to make it to the Assembly. President of AJK(POK) Raja Zulqarnain Khan's close aid Anwar ul Haq, former President Sardar Ibrahim Khan's son Sardar Khalid Ibrahim, former Prime Minister Sardar Sikandar Hayat Khan's son Farooq Sikandar and Sardar Attique Khan's son Usman Attique lost their family seats. Abid Siddique, a noted activist, observes that over fifty percent voters' age was below 30 years who brought this change in the decades old status quo. Additionally, overseas Kashmiris also participated in the elections in a big way this time. Around 15, 000 plus voters returned home from UK and the Middle East to support their candidates. The wealthy diaspora also played vital role to introduced new phases in the region's political outlook. Above all the local vernacular media is fast growing in the entire region. Over a dozen Urdu newspapers not only regularly publish in AJK(POK) but also have increased their circulation. Their impact on local politics and socio-economic issues is higher than the Islamabad-based mainstream newspapers. Their internet editions are widely popular among Kashmiri diaspora. Likewise, half a dozen FM radio channels had been constantly providing news and views of the polls. Social media also was widely

used to promote party agendas in this election particularly by Raja Farooq Haider who used facebook as tool to enhance his image among youth of AJK(POK). The traditional anti-India tirade was also missing in the elections' discourse. However, talk about the resolution of Kashmir was sometimes heard. All major political parties favored peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue. Pakistan Muslim League (N) and Muslim Conference not only publically supported the ongoing Intra-Jammu and Kashmir trade and travel but also urged both India and Pakistan to open all the traditional trade and travel routes between the two parts of Jammu and Kashmir?

It is a matter of fact that no party put forward an elaborate party manifesto containing comprehensive future plan of action to develop AJK(POK) and sort out its uneven relationship with Islamabad. Hardly any party showed its policy on how it would want to restructure Muzaffarabad-Islamabad relations as the present relationship can be best described as client-master which needs to be revisited. Several other contentious issues also need urgent attention of the upcoming PPP government such as the development of mega hydro power generation projects by the Islamabad where it has not made any formal agreement

with the local government. The parallel administration run by Kashmir Council should be drastically curtailed as it undermines the elected government's democratic right to rule. Although PPP has won the election but no one within the party knows who will be the next Premier. Since the local elected representatives have no say in the key decision making process, they will have to only follow whatever the Co-Chairman of PPP, Asif Ali Zardari, decides. A number of aspirants are running for the top slot. However, two major candidates Barrister Sultan Mahmood Chaudhary and Chaudhary Abdul Majeed have emerged as the strongest contenders for the post of the Prime Minister. Sardar Attique is also trying hard to get the office of the president and ministries for his elected assembly members as he is aware that his career would take a plunge otherwise. Pakistan's security establishment has traditionally been calling the shots in the AJK's(POK's) affairs. In this context probably President Zardari would seek their preference before making any major decision. It is heartening that the establishment has learned some lessons from its previous misadventures in AJK(POK). This time no party complained that intelligence agencies have backed anybody anywhere in the entire AJK(POK)

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which is a good omen. One can hope that they would give free hand to the PPP legislators and party to elect whosoever they want and would not try to run AJK(POK) government on their whims.?

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