Kashmir on the Threshold of Change by Mikeandy

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Fresh winds are blowing across the Kashmir Valley. The winter chill is slowly disappearing and a change is setting in.

The State Government headed by Omar Abdullah has finished half its term and is keen to effect a real change in the state in the remaining period that it is in power. The Central Government, headed by the Congress, also wants to find a â€˜solutionâ€™ to fix the situation in Jammu and Kashmir.

Both Srinagar and Delhi have tried in vain to find a â€˜political solutionâ€™ to the problems facing the state Just when â€˜back channelâ€™ negotiations were seemingly bearing fruit, there was a change of government in Pakistan in 2009. President Musharraf had to hand over power and it seems he will not be able to return.

The â€˜dialogueâ€™ that was started with the new rulers in Pakistan, headed by President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Geelani, is static and now questions are being asked about their own effectiveness and ability to withstand the pressure from Chief of Army Staff General Asfaq Pervez Kayani. The strategy that would be adopted by the Indian and Jammu and Kashmir governments is to take steps within their power that are largely accepted by the people of the state.

The interlocutors met over 700 delegations, held three Round Table Conferences, and interacted with groups in each of the 22 districts of the state. In spite of their best efforts the interlocutors could not meet the separatists.

The report has also suggested the appointment of developmental councils in all three regions and the devolution of powers to the sub-regions. They have recommended a massive economic and employment package to tackle the unemployment situation in the state and promote infrastructure development to improve connectivity and boost tourism.

The interlocutors have recommended that there should be more people-to-people contact between the two parts of divided Kashmir by opening more cross LoC routes in Kashmir, Ladakh and Jammu. They have also suggested increase in the frequency of cross LoC weekly bus service and the number of days of cross LoC trade on Uri -Muzaffarabad and Poonch- Rawalkote routes.

Importantly, the interlocutors have recommended â€˜meaningful autonomyâ€™ for the state, while preserving its distinct regional and ethnic diversities. Meanwhile, the Delhi-based Institute of Research on India and International Studies (IRIIS) has conducted a survey to elicit public opinion in the state, in particular what ails the Kashmiri youth in the age group of 15-35 years. The findings indicated that they were far more concerned over governance issues than separatist politics.

Those interviewed included 1300 youth from six districts of Baramulla, Bandipora, Srinagar, Budgam, Anantnag and Kulgam. Just one percent of the youth said that a merger with Pakistan could be a final solution to Kashmirâ€™s problems. Hardline separatist leader Sayeed Ali Shah Geelani also suggested this. Only one percent voted for â€˜mergerâ€™ with India, which is the slogan of the BJP. Fifty-four percent voted for â€˜Azadiâ€™ with varying meanings 20% â€˜Azadiâ€™ meant â€˜political right

Interestingly, the survey indicated that local newspapers and local private television (cable) channels had more influence on the Kashmiri youth than the national newspapers and national private television channels. It disclosed that 37 percent of the Kashmiri youth were looking for Kashmir related news in local English papers, 56 percent in local Urdu papers and only 10 per cent

in national dailies. As far as credibility is concerned they relied more on local newspapers than on national dailies.

The survey also indicated that most of the youth have rejected the prevailing gun culture, and favoured good governance and a corruption free state. The survey is scheduled to be discussed in Srinagar soon. A massive employment scheme has been undertaken with private sector firms undertaking to train and employ youth from the state. The process is gathering momentum. More recruitment is also taking place to recruit youth from the state to the Jammu and Kashmir Police and into other security forces.

Meanwhile, much of the public debate will be devoted to the lifting of the Armed Forces Special Powersâ€™ Act from some parts of the state and as to whether â€˜governanceâ€™ was better under the Peoplesâ€™ Democratic Party, headed by Mufti Mohammed Sayeed than the one under Omar Abdullah. At least for the next three years, it has been agreed that the Congress will not make an attempt to have a â€˜rotationalâ€™ chief minister.

One hopes the winter snows will melt and the political climate will be conducive to implement the political changes.

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