

APPOINTMENT OF INTERLOCUTOR FOR J&K : ASPIRATIONS OF PEOPLE AND OPTIONS FOR SECURITY FORCES

(By Col Harpreet Singh)

After a period of relative calm in the Kashmir valley from year 2011 to June 2016, the elimination of Burhan Wani by the security forces saw an escalation in violence from July 2016 onwards. Op All Out, which was launched by the security forces in June 2017, has now brought the situation under control. However this seems to be a purely military solution and historically such actions alone have not brought about lasting peace. Nonetheless, the improved law and order situation appears to have paved the way for another dialogue on Kashmir and it is in this backdrop that the government has appointed Dineshwar Sharma as an interlocutor for talks with 'stakeholders' in Kashmir.

Previous Interlocutors

Interlocutors for Kashmir have been appointed three times earlier. KC Pant in 2001, NN Vohra (who is now the Governor in Kashmir) in 2003 and a trio consisting of journalist Dileep Padgaonkar, author Radha Kumar and former CIC MM Ansari in 2010. Out of these only NN Vohra has achieved some headway in the sense that he created an atmosphere for talks at apex level between Delhi and the Hurriyat Conference, which is now known as Joint Resistance Leadership (JRL). This dialogue was followed up by UPA-1 and some CBMs like opening the Srinagar-Muzzafarabad route, review of detention cases in Kashmir and commitment to safeguard human rights were an indirect result of the efforts of the interlocutor. In 2010, the interlocutors in their report stressed upon the need for a sustained and uninterrupted dialogue and also recommended revoking of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the Public Safety Act (PSA). In addition to the three interlocutors, there have been numerous rounds of talks with Kashmiris in the 1990s and a Round Table Conference on the issue was also conducted in 2006.

MM Ansari has been one of the most vocal critics of the appointment of the new interlocutor. He is of the opinion that since Dineshwar Sharma has been the Head of the IB, it means that the government is still thinking of the Kashmir issue in terms of intelligence and national security and not in terms of a political solution. Moreover there has been no action on the recommendations 2010 interlocutor's report.

The Present Interlocutor

Dineshwar Sharma was the IB Chief from 2014 to 2016. He is a 1979 batch IPS officer of the Kerala cadre. He joined IB in 1991 and was sent to Kashmir the very next day after joining. He has also handled the Kashmir desk from the IB Headquarters at Delhi. He was also involved as an interlocutor in talks with the North East insurgents groups. He has been given a rank equal to a cabinet secretary for the talks. He will report to both the centre and state governments.

Role. Though the government is tight lipped about the role of the interlocutor, the major end result which is desired is getting the youth back to the mainstream. The selection of Mr Sharma seems to be a good one as he understands J&K and knows the strengths and weaknesses of their leaders. He also is aware of the modalities of negotiations, based on his previous experience in the North East. He has no political affiliations and is starting with an open mind. The government has stated that all stakeholders will be spoken to and the final decision on whom to talk with is left to Mr Sharma, thereby indicating that the JRL could also form part of the talks.

Initial Reactions of Stakeholders. Mr Sharma has already met the Governor, Chief Minister and the National Conference leaders. However, coinciding with these meetings are some statements, propagating greater autonomy for Kashmir, which are emanating from the National Conference and Congress Party leaders. The National Conference has also sought tabling of the 2010 interlocutors report in the Parliament and the J&K Assembly which further queers the pitch. The JRL predictably has called the nomination of interlocutor 'a new tactic after failure of military repression of Kashmir, and a tactic to buy time and ward off international pressure'. They have said that if any Kashmiri becomes a part of this dialogue, it will undermine their legitimate struggle and sacrifices. They have also said that previous talks by JRL have been held directly with the Prime Minister and not with the interlocutors.

Challenges for the Dialogue Process

The indication by the government that talks will include the JRL is a clear deviation from the earlier stand of the government that there would be no talks with those who do not believe in the Indian Constitution. The polity will need to come clean with the thought process which led to this change of policy, at some stage.

Previous interlocutor reports have not made much headway in reaching a resolution and the current talks will have to come up with new solutions and not put old wine in a new bottle. Each of the previous talks have had the aim of 'bringing the youth to the mainstream' but the same has not been achieved. It will be a huge challenge to convince the stakeholders that the present dialogue will be meaningful and implementable for a lasting solution.

Pro India parties/stakeholders are already with India on the Kashmir issue and those against do not wish to talk. JRL has said that it will not participate in the interlocution despite the pressure on their funding by NIA and arrests of their relatives and close associates. Maybe the talks could have been delayed for some more time, when the noose was further tightened and the arrests of the top rung of JRL imminent, so that they were more amenable to a settlement on India's terms. In the present situation, given the brazen attitude of JRL will there be any meaningful outcome of the talks?

Whichever way the dialogue heads, it will be rejected by Pakistan, since they are not a part of this process. They are likely to discredit the process and create trouble, both diplomatically and militarily.

The interlocutor has to tread carefully as there is an elected government in Kashmir whose authority must not be undermined by the dialogue process. Also the concerns of the security forces must be looked into before giving any recommendations. Playing to the gallery, as was done by the 2010 interlocutors by recommending removal of AFSPA, may not be in national interest.

Aspirations of people of Kashmir valley are largely to remove AFSPA and PSA, withdrawal of troops, leniency on stone pelters, no dilution of Article 370 and Article 35 A, etc. The demands of Jammu and Ladakh region are exactly the opposite. There does not seem to be any common ground among these stakeholders.

Opportunities and Way Forward

The law and order situation is by and large under control and JRL leaders are under pressure due to arrests of their close relatives, confidants and second rung leaders in terror funding cases. Schools/colleges are functioning normally and stone pelting frequency is minimal with the drying up of funds. Militants are under relentless pressure by the security forces and are not able to achieve a critical mass. A total of 176 militants have been killed in 2017 and a large number of their leaders have been eliminated. Surrenders have started which is a new welcome trend. This may be an ideal time to negotiate a solution to the Kashmir problem with the separatists, regardless of the initial rhetoric and bravado shown.

The talks appear to be part of a well thought out and phased strategy wherein, firstly, the relentless pressure by the security forces brought the situation under control and NIA put a lid on terror funding and some JRL leaders were arrested. Subsequently, the healing process started with the PM announcing during his Independence Day speech that Kashmiris need to be embraced. This was followed up by the visit of the Home Minister to Kashmir in Sep 2017 when he met a staggering 83 delegations. The carrot and stick policy, if managed properly, has the potential to engage meaningfully with Kashmiri stakeholders. It can also sideline the JRL, if it does not toe the line, and also Pakistan to some extent. However we need to be clear whether we want to sideline JRL or give them a face saver since they do have considerable clout in Kashmir.

The rage in the valley after the elimination of Burhan Wani seems to have subsided and the killings of other terrorists like Abu Dujana, Bashir Lashkiri and others has not witnessed the same kind of outrage. There is clear evidence of the fatigue factor setting in which must be encashed at this juncture.

The aspirations of the people of Jammu and Ladakh need to be given an equal voice in the talks. Meaningful and sincere suggestions regarding local and domestic governance issues must also be given.

Media and social media management needs to go hand in hand as there will be efforts from both within the country and by Pakistan to undermine and derail the talks

China holds about 20% of Kashmir and is building CPEC through POK. Though it supports bilateral talks between India and Pakistan on Kashmir, it definitely has a stake, but prefers to be in the background. India must be careful not to get China embroiled directly in the imbroglio without first solving the insurgency issue in the valley.

The interlocutor nomination process appears to be neutral and non-political to start with. It also caters for international audiences to some extent thereby increasing our diplomatic leeway. In addition Pakistan must be slowly isolated on the Kashmir issue in forums where they are very strong, like the OIC. The process appears to have already started with India improving ties with countries like Saudi Arabia and UAE recently.

Options for Security Forces

The government has rightly indicated that there will be no change in the modus operandi of the security forces, at least in the short term. This is a clear message that talks will have no bearing on the conduct of Op All Out. The sustained pressure on militants and their supporters is working, and barring stray incidents they are not able to find operating space which has shrunk drastically. There was an attempt recently by inimical elements to place the blame of braided chopping of women in the valley on the security forces but the same has not worked. The hard line approach will also send a message to terrorists and separatists that there will be no respite militarily and dialogue is the best way forward.

Pakistan is under pressure both internationally and on the LOC. This pressure must be maintained. Pakistan Army calls the shots in their country, increasing costs on them is one solution. This can be done by carrying out more surgical strikes as the threat of more such strikes will force them to increase patrolling on infiltration routes and take other defensive measures thereby sucking resources. Massive and out of proportion retaliation by the Indian Army for infiltration bids may also yield short to medium term results. The effort by the security forces must be to work towards a military driven political solution in Kashmir.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.