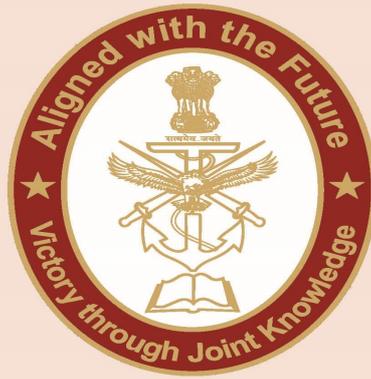


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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KASHMIR AND THE ELECTION YEAR

BY

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2018 ended on a positive note in Kashmir with security forces eliminating 248 militants, the largest in recent times, making most militant groups leaderless. Simultaneously, have been reports of an increase in locals joining militant groups and continuing clashes in parts of the valley during and post encounters, leading to deaths of locals. Interestingly, all those killed or injured in the firing are claimed to be innocent bystanders or uninvolved in violence, which makes it even more absurd.

Locals who join militancy are neither trained nor equipped, hence end up being eliminated early. However, their joining itself indicates anger against the state and needs to be assessed. Those joining militancy and those interrupting security force operations by stone throwing are both cases of radicalization, an aspect gaining ground and a source of worry to security forces. Unless curbed, a section of the youth will always be alienated.

The success of security forces operations is due to increased flow of intelligence, both electronic and human. The human angle is important as it indicates an anger within Kashmiri society against militancy. Information has begun to flow against both Pak infiltrated and local militants. This overrides attempts by militants to create fear within the community by targeting locals, claimed to be informers, and off duty police personnel. It is the reverse of radicalization and needs to be encouraged.

2019 will be a challenging year for the government and security agencies in Kashmir. This the election year for both the centre and the state. The Home Minister and the Governor have already announced that the

government is ready to hold both assembly and Lok Sabha elections simultaneously in the state, if the election commission is willing. Valley based political parties have already moved into the election mode enhancing their interactions with different spectrums of society and addressing rallies.

Mehbooba Mufti visited families of militants, post which she commented that the police should stop harassing them. She has even suggested that the government initiate talks with militant leaders. Farooq and Omar Abdullah have already begun making poll promises and advising the governor to stay away from the political process. The governor, seeking to improve the situation and create an atmosphere conducive to elections has directed security forces to be more sensitive to locals and avoid civilian casualties. He has even offered talks to the Hurriyat, with no response.

The Hurriyat still claims to represent the will of the Kashmiri people and are unwilling for talks, unless their masters in Pakistan are involved. They simultaneously cry that there has been no offer from the government, while they themselves shut the door with absurd pre-conditions.

Pakistan, on the other hand, continues to harp on supporting the Kashmiri struggle and claiming it Indian highhandedness on Muslim majority Kashmir, while in the same breath, refuses to term Chinese actions against the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang as wrong or anti-Islamic.

While on one hand it offers talks, on the other Pak continues to attempt to push in terrorists as part of proxy war. However, with winters closing the passes, they would now be seeking to use the IB for their nefarious activities. In the valley, militant group leaders are no longer Pak launched militants, but locals, therefore reducing the impact of Pak sponsored terrorists. Hence, talks with Pak or the Hurriyat are not within realms of reality.

It is in this scenario that security forces are working in close harmony to create peace. There is a perception within security forces that the situation can be brought to near normal creating a conducive environment for conducting elections. The recently held local body elections brought forth a difference in voting patterns across the state, with low percentages in Srinagar and parts of South Kashmir.

The difference in voting patterns is an indicator of the small region in the valley, in which public sentiment is controlled and swayed by the financial and muscle power of the Hurriyat. There have been remarks by locals in places that they fear the muscle power of the Hurriyat, questioning whom enhances risk to life. Press reports and sting operations have

revealed that stone throwing is a small-scale industry in the valley, financed by the Hurriyat.

While there has been much stated and discussed that engaging with the youth, to wean them away from violence and militancy is essential, nothing would be effective unless the financial and muscle power of the Hurriyat is curtailed. Development can only take place once violence levels reduce, which again is directly linked to the power of the Hurriyat. The one incident when ISIS supporters sought to grab the pulpit in the Jamia Masjid in Srinagar panicked the Hurriyat into issuing a joint statement against the incident.

As security forces contemplate their strategy for the coming months, there are some factors which they need to consider. Firstly, pulling back from its cordon and search operations due to stone throwing is not an option as it would convey a wrong message of weakness and surrender to stone throwers.

Secondly, they need to consider structuring of forces during anti-militancy operations seeking to reduce collateral casualties and reducing alienation. Every time there are casualties to stone throwers social media goes on an overdrive accusing security forces and moving those on the fence towards radicalization and joining militancy.

Thirdly, reassess their social media organization structures to counter radicalization and anti-India sentiments. It may mean employing social media offensively and engaging with elders to reach out to the youth. Fourthly, is the need to engage with the youth of the region, convincing them of the futility of challenging the might of the state. However, before engaging with an angry youth, it should seek to reduce the money and muscle power of the Hurriyat.

This year is a possible test bed for all involved with the valley. Successful conduct of elections would send a strong message to the international community and shut the rhetoric flowing from Pak. It can be a gamechanger. However, the reverse could also happen. Hence, the importance of coordinated and planned actions.

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