

## CM Mehbooba Mufti - Has She Finally Arrived?



29 Jun, 2016

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In India, traditionally a by-election to the State Assembly to technically endorse the constitutional legitimacy of an incumbent Chief Minister's office, normally does not evoke a great deal of political interest. Statistically speaking also, there might have been possibly only a couple of instances in the history of Indian democracy where the incumbent Chief Minister would have failed to obtain such an endorsement.

J&K Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti did not fail to win the June 23 by-election from Anantnag constituency in South Kashmir--one that was her father's sad demise in January this year. Anantnag was, so to say, the late Mufti Sahib's political pocket borough, which he had won in the by-election of late 2014, by not as large a margin as Mehbooba did in this by-election. The win was emphatic with a margin of 16000-odd votes, double what her late father had scored. I suspect, indeed firmly believe, that this was not entirely due to a wave of sympathy in favour of Mufti's political heir.

It was also not entirely due to the years of dedicated political nurturing of a newly launched party that Mehbooba had almost single-handedly created. Under her father's guidance, she was quick to realise that a significant political space was opening up in the valley that needed to be filled. The 'Sher - Bakra' political culture was on the wane. The premier political party, National Conference under the astute leadership of Dr / Mirwaiz, was under intense pressure due to the on-going militancy. Congress could in any case play no role beyond being an important political appendage. The BJP, under the banner of APHC could only claim to be 'true representatives' of the people of Kashmir, but could never really muster enough votes as by testing it out at the hustings. They could never come up front and occupy that emerging political space although, those in the know in Kashmir affairs at that time, maintain that even the likes of Syed Sallahuddin and the Mirwaiz did recognise the opportunity, but failed to do so by their controllers, as was widely speculated before the 2008 state elections?

Mufti Sahab and Mehbooba did it and did it in quick time. In just over a decade they built a party from the grass root level upwards and set it onto the centre stage of Kashmiri politics. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Mehbooba's win was the fact that in the 2014 Parliamentary elections she took PDP in an alliance mode with the then 'politically untouchable' BJP, and then decided to go solo in the assembly elections that followed later. And now in the Anantnag by-election she unhesitatingly went in alliance with the BJP in the midst of interminable accusations of 'communal forces'. Interestingly, the 'sell out' campaign was rather muted during the parliamentary elections but in full play when the state assembly elections that necessitated formation of a coalition government in Srinagar. A thumping victory in Anantnag ended all political debate over her political skills. She has indeed arrived; at least politically.

But having got there, it is now important for the first woman Chief Minister of the State to prepare Kashmiri politics and the Kashmiri people for the kind of mandate thrown up in last years elections; address the expectations and aspirations of the people of Kashmir - Kashmir as segments. These expectations and aspirations are significantly different in the three regions which need no redefining. These are also significantly different from those asked of her illustrious predecessors in earlier years. And, unfortunately the right answers acceptable to all will be ever so difficult.

Mehbooba, the astute political organiser, has not been seen and tested much in the role of an effective chief administrator leading a coalition in perhaps the most difficult State to govern. Politically neutral observers, not necessarily aligned to the PDP or the BJP, are of the view, Chief Minister has done surprisingly well over the last few months. This includes a vast number of people from the Valley and the Jammu though, some political observers concede that initially she made an error of judgment in hesitating to take on the mantle of coalition leader during the period of mourning for Mufti Saheb. That was the time for decisive action which she hesitated from, giving an impression of lack of self assurance. The delay, it may be recalled, even led to serious speculations of a section of her party MLAs deserting her in the event of a mid-term poll. In the end she made the politically correct choice.

After having taken the plunge, it is difficult to fault her leadership in any area of governance, starting with the student's agitation in NIT Srinagar. She let the Deputy CM and his team lead the damage control efforts quite successfully. Apart from resolving the complex and emotive issue of NIT Srinagar, she exploited by a clueless opposition, her handling of the situation generated immense confidence between the coalition partners, first time for Mufti's demise.

But soon she was faced with the real challenge last month in the shape of targeted violence in Srinagar town, supposedly by Hizb-UI-Millat that resulted in the death of 4 policemen. It should be noted that barring odd cases of violence in the rural areas, downtown Srinagar remained peaceful for months together. It may also be noted that the Hizb as a group had been perceived, over the years, as quietly subordinated and not aligned with the PDP as an alternate political entity. So, the question arose whether the Hizb, fronting of course for ISI, was sending a message to the new Chief Minister not to get carried away by the smooth transition and her electoral success. 'Stay within the defined parameters; we are capable', seemed to be the message behind these incidents. Repeat messages came in quick succession including the recent Pampore (outskirts of Srinagar) fidayeen attack on CRPF convoy by LeT activists.

Pakistan, through its 'strategic assets' has attempted to deliver these messages, strangely at a time when they are trying desperately to start the stalled FS level CBD, knowing full well that India will not succumb to such blackmail tactics. It can also not now convince any onlooker or parliamentarian of the non-involvement of its own 'agencies'. So what does it want to achieve, defies logic! One tends to agree with the Hon'ble Defence Minister Shri Parrikar that Pakistan was getting desperate and, I add, it has lost its sense of balance, if it had any.

What is more interesting is the way Ms. Mehbooba Mufti responded to Pakistani misadventures; delivering bold, firm and stern messages that she would not tolerate violence from any quarters and would deal with it as firmly as required. This single incident marked her as a leader. But she did not stop there. In the Sainik colony and return of the Pundits debates as well, she preferred to take her detractors head on. When time in the house, she delivered a clear message to the separatists and others, not to go beyond the limits. Continuing in the same vein, too, she lambasted the militants not to kill people in the name of religion and to respect the sanctity of the Holy month of Ramazan.

These statements have not gone unnoticed in Kashmir and beyond. It was a different Mehbooba in public view. One suspects that her detractors, within and outside; push her more aggressive would be her response. A no nonsense approach should not surprise Kashmiris.

Yet, in the overall assessment, it's not going to be easy nor smooth sailing for her. Her persuasive appeals and firm warnings notwithstanding, that such grave provocations originating from across the borders with an agenda totally delinked to the concern of the Kashmiri people will not only continue but will even be escalated further. The ISI or the Lashkar do not really care about how many Kashmiris get killed irrespective. They do not recognise the basic principle that, as one Kashmiri leader put it more than a decade back, 'Right to Life Precedes Right to Religion'.

Apart from the serious challenges posed by trans-border, externally sponsored terror, the new leader would be expected to settle down to address pressing challenges on multiple fronts such as speedy, sustainable and visible developmental activities in urban and rural areas; sustainably curb rampant corruption in administration; provide clean, efficient, accountable and responsive administration; deal firmly with militant challenges; re-build morale of the police force; restore trust of the people in the administrative machinery; bridge the trust deficit in Srinagar and many more. The list is long, almost unending and almost humanly impossible to deliver on in a short time frame. But attention must be given. One does recall a similar situation having arisen in the aftermath of the 1996 Assembly Elections in the state. Enormous expectations were not matched by ill equipped, unwilling and unprepared administrative machinery. The Mehbooba government needs to draw a lesson from the cyclic political changes in the state after each election. For many years, no government has been re-elected to a second successive term on account of non-deliverance on promises made.

If that jinx has to be broken, an entirely fresh approach in governance will have to be ingeniously configured. The state government and evolve an engaged and cooperative approach that aims beyond traditional political compulsions and temptations/pressures of vote-bank called ethno-religious diversity in the state should be sought to be converted into its strength than otherwise. The 'Us versus Them' approach in any society, much less in one torn apart by decades of militancy partly fed on social and religious differences running counter to the 'Kashmiriyat'.

Without hesitation, one could say that the balance of responsibility in addressing the challenges facing the state, weighs heavily on the f New Delhi has to first and foremost ensure that that the IB and LoC are firmly secured against induction of militants as has been happened also take full responsibility for effective and extensive deployment of CPMFs to ensure peace in all parts of the state. Developmental governance programmes can only then follow, beginning with infrastructure development, establishment of centers of educational excellence special well protected industrial zones, provision of reliable power supply etc.

All these must begin on priority but not under the mistaken notion that merely focusing on economic and developmental issues would 'real normalcy'. Let Delhi not once again, as in the past, fall into the trap of measuring 'normalcy' in statistical terms such as number reported, number of militants killed, the kill-ratio, infiltration and ex-filtration etc. The real barometer of restoration of normalcy should 'pain and hurt' in the minds of the people, integrating them into the mainstream and reducing the depth of their 'alienation'. While the keep looking for a political package from New Delhi, unfortunately every time Delhi ends up doling out economic hand outs. To start with under the guidance of its master strategist and NSA Mr Ajit Doval, should devise ways of 'engaging' with all shades of Kashmiri leadership state government fully on board. A great deal of this can happen under Track II as in the past. It does not need any reiteration that Rawalpindi and Islamabad more than the separatists getting engaged with New Delhi. This should be exploited to the hilt, sooner than expectations that the people of Kashmir had from the Modi govt. and later the formation of PDP-BJP coalition in the state have started to is the time to act and act it must before it is too late. In this process, Mahbooba should be the key ally of Delhi. She seems to have sufficient charisma, the reach to and resonance with the Kashmiri masses. It's Delhi's turn to strengthen her hands and encourage her to make an endeavour the entire country will back both the players.

Published Date: 29<sup>th</sup> June 2016, Image Source: <http://www.firstpost.com>

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