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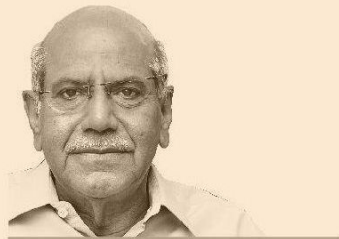


# Risky moves in Jammu and Kashmir

Things may not go according to the script, and risks should be evaluated and minimised

That the Union government was planning some dramatic move concerning Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) had become an open secret in the week preceding the announcements in Parliament on August 5. The deployment of a large number of additional security forces in the Valley, the shutting down of internet services, the house arrest of leaders of mainstream political parties, the suspension of the Amarnath Yatra and the compulsory evacuation, en masse, of non-Kashmiri tourists, students and visitors, were unprecedented moves, presaging that major developments were imminent. The announcements made by the Home Minister in Parliament represented a seismic change in government policy towards J&K. A presidential order scrapped its special status as derived from Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, thereby removing its claim to autonomy which was part of the political compact between the popular political leadership of Kashmir and the central leadership of the Indian Union after the princely state became part of India in 1947. Accession is different from autonomy. The Instrument of Accession signed by Maharaja Hari Singh makes the state an integral part of the Indian Union. Autonomy in certain specified respects, going beyond what was available to most other states, was derived from Article 370. As a result of the presidential order, the additional elements of autonomy are no longer valid. The change is more symbolic than real since over the years the Union government has systematically hollowed out the state's autonomy. It may even be argued that the hand of the Centre hangs more heavily on J&K than other states of India. But the

original political compact, tied up with the unique identity of the state, has been unilaterally altered by the Union government.



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Parliament has also legislated changes to the status of J&K, eroding its autonomy even further. The state will be bifurcated into two — Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, respectively. The truncated state will be downgraded from a full-fledged state into a Union Territory directly ruled from the Centre through a lieutenant governor. This is the first instance in independent India's history of a state becoming a Union Territory and has been justified on security imperatives. It will be seen by the Valley population as demeaning and humiliating even if it is a temporary arrangement. It constitutes an ominous precedent for other states of the Indian Union.

It is not clear how the new arrangements intend to deal with Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), comprising so-called Azad Kashmir, Gilgit and Baltistan. For example, should Gilgit and Baltistan be declared as Union Territories like Ladakh has been? Do the latest moves imply that we will no longer agree to include J&K on the agenda of a resumed dialogue process with Pakistan? Or shall we argue that J&K can remain on the agenda since we wish to discuss the return of PoK to India?

The extraordinary security measures taken in advance of the announcement and which continue to be in place, testify to the clear awareness within the government that this would be deeply unpopular and may even trigger violent opposition. The contention that the announcements have been welcomed by the ordi-

nary Kashmiris, who have already been deeply alienated by policies pursued by successive governments, is not credible. What is visible is the enthusiastic reception the announcements have received at least through most of northern India. There is a pervasive sentiment that the Kashmiris are pampered, that they are anti-national and unpatriotic and need to be dealt with a strong and firm hand, like a wayward and rebellious child. The latest decisions are popular and consolidate the ruling party's political dominance of the Indian heartland. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's approval ratings will soar further. This will also deflect attention from increasingly depressing economic news, though this may not have been the original intention.

The Union government is confident that it can maintain order in the Valley with strong-arm measures even if this results in a sullen and resentful peace. There is an argument that it is Article 370 which by keeping alive the hope of enhanced autonomy prevented the Kashmiri people from becoming part of the Indian mainstream. With its demise, the state will become fully integrated. A more realistic outcome may be the reverse and trigger increased militancy and violence.

Pakistan will exploit the situation. There will likely be an increase in cross-border terrorism and an escalation in cross-Line of Control firing. Pakistan will seek to turn the international spotlight on Kashmir. It is encouraging that so far none of the major powers have made any statements on the announcements beyond issuing advisories against travel to Kashmir. But this may change if the Valley remains disturbed and there is increase in violence.

An increase in India-Pakistan tensions will inevitably draw in major powers such as the US and even China. The US is focused on removing its remaining troops from Afghanistan and continues to regard Pakistan as the key to an Afghan peace settlement. Pakistan has already declared that it may not be able to play that role if India is allowed to get away with the political changes in the status of J&K. Influential sections in the US administration buy the oft-repeated argument that the road to Afghan peace lies through Kashmir. We need to be alert to signs of revived US and Western activism on the issue. Pakistan will seek to mobilise opinion against India among Islamic countries. Expect an Organisation of Islamic Cooperation resolution. India should be able to weather the storm, given its enhanced standing among the major powers. However, India's international clout is partly from its rapidly growing emerging economy and a large and expanding commercial market. If the Indian economy continues to slow and protectionist barriers advance, then our international clout will also diminish. The international fallout from bringing the Valley to heel may be more difficult to handle.

The deed is done and the gauntlet has been thrown in a high-stakes game. Things may not go according to the government script. It would be prudent to assess the risks involved and carefully work on minimising them.

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