

ISAS Brief

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Chief Minister Sayeed's Death could upset Jammu and Kashmir's Stability

The death of Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed has thrown into doubt the stability of the government in this strategically located Indian State. Sayeed's death has brought into sharp focus not only the calculations of local leaders, including Sayeed's daughter Mehbooba Mufti, but also the political stakes of the Centre.

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The death of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed on 7 January 2016 not only signals the end of an era in Kashmiri politics, but also introduces a strong element of uncertainty into the State's politics. All indications are that Sayeed's daughter, Mehbooba Mufti, will succeed her father as Chief Minister. At present, however, the State is under Central or Governor's Rule, since both Sayeed's Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who were running a coalition government in J&K, have not yet formally stated their positions on government formation following the chief minister's death. The official reason given by the PDP for the delay was that the new chief minister would be sworn in only after end of the seven-day official mourning

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for Sayeed. However, at the time of writing, even though the mourning period ended on 14 January, the PDP is yet to take a decision suggesting that the party is willing to make the BJP wait.

Sayeed had been appointed Chief Minister in early 2015 following the Assembly elections held in end-2014. PDP had won the most seats, with 28, in the 87-member J&K Assembly, followed by the BJP, with 25. A partnership between the BJP and PDP, two parties that are not natural allies, was largely possible due to the pragmatism – detractors would say opportunism – of Sayeed. The two parties have ideological differences, especially on the issue of Article 370, which gives special status to J&K, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which gives special powers to the Indian Army in “disturbed” areas, and is hated in the Kashmir Valley.

One of the significant markers of Sayeed’s long political career, both in his State and at the Centre, was his flexibility. Though he began his political journey in 1957 with the Democratic National Conference, a splinter group of the State’s National Conference party, and was elected to the State Assembly, he joined the Indian National Congress in 1967. He rose to become the State Congress president in the early 1970s, and later in 1986 was appointed the Union Tourism Minister under the Rajiv Gandhi government. He, however, left the Congress in 1987 and joined V P Singh’s Jan Morcha going on to become the country’s first Muslim Union Home Minister in 1989 in the V P Singh government. A decade later he formed the PDP along with daughter Mehbooba.

The PDP quickly became an alternative in J&K to both the National Conference, founded and dominated by Sheikh Abdullah’s family, and the Congress. In 2002, Sayeed became Chief Minister of J&K for the first time in alliance with the Congress, running the State from 2002 to 2005 under a power-sharing arrangement. In 2015, he was appointed Chief Minister for the second time, but this time in an unlikely alliance with the BJP. One of the reasons that Sayeed gave for joining hands with the BJP was uniting the Kashmir Valley, which voted heavily for the PDP, and Jammu, from where the BJP won all its seats. However, the relationship between the two allies have been prickly. Among the flash points have been the release of the jailed separatist Masarat Alam Bhat, and a court ruling reviving an archaic beef ban.

These contradictions might come back to haunt Mehbooba. Although a member of the PDP since its inception and currently the party’s president, she faces several challenges. Unlike her

father, Mehbooba has a reputation of having sympathy for Kashmiri separatists. She has also been known to visit the families of terrorists killed by security forces, prompting charges of promoting “soft separatism”. This is likely to make the PDP’s relationship with the BJP an uncomfortable one. Indeed, Mehbooba kept out of the public eye for a while in the aftermath of the PDP-BJP tie-up due to her apparent discomfort with the alliance.

Within the PDP, too, there is a divide on the alliance with the BJP. While a large number of PDP leaders, including Sayeed, felt that the tie-up with the BJP was necessary to garner funds for the state and to create an inclusive brand of politics, there were many, particularly those in the rank and file, who were unhappy with the alliance. Some like Engineer Rashid, a PDP MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly), has publicly stated that that his party should reconsider its ties with the BJP. In the BJP, too, there are rumblings about the advisability of continuing the alliance with the PDP in the absence of Sayeed, as well as demands for a rotation in the chief ministership between the two parties.

The issue of India’s relations with Pakistan will of course hang heavy on Mehbooba. Sayeed, like most Kashmiri mainstream leaders, had had to do a balancing act on Pakistan. Shortly before his death he had welcomed the resumption of dialogue with Pakistan, saying that the people of J&K would be direct beneficiaries of good relations between the two neighbours. At the same time he has pitched for dialogue with the Kashmiri separatists. In fact in 2015, at a press conference held after the new government was sworn in, Sayeed expressed his gratitude to the separatist group Hurriyat, as well as Pakistan and militant outfits for “the conduct of assembly elections in the state”. This drew a strong response from Delhi, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi had to clarify in Parliament that his government did not support such a position.

Following Sayeed’s death, a team from the Congress, including party president Sonia Gandhi, has met Mehbooba. Though officially the Congress leaders said they came to offer condolences, the visits have set off speculation about a possible PDP-Congress alliance. This tie-up is technically possible since the PDP could form the government taking on board the Congress’s 12 MLAs, the smaller parties and independents. However, this would be an unstable coalition with a wafer-thin majority in the Assembly. The other major player is the National Conference, with 15 MLAs, but as a regional rival to the PDP there is no question of the two parties tying up.

The BJP for its part is playing a waiting game. Though senior leaders such as Nitin Gadkari and Ram Madhav have met Mehbooba, the BJP is waiting for the PDP to commit to continuing the existing alliance. A day before the PDP was to have a legislators' meeting on 15 January, the Union Finance Secretary, Ratan Watal, met Mehbooba. While Watal, a native of J&K, said he had only gone to offer condolences, reports suggest that release of funds for a special financial package for the State was discussed. It remains to be seen if the BJP's overtures will satisfy Mehbooba and those in the PDP opposed to its alliance with the BJP.

There is of course another option available to the PDP where it pulls out of the alliance with the BJP and ensures fresh elections in J&K. This might prove beneficial to the PDP since it could hope to ride on a sympathy vote for Sayeed. But for the BJP this would be an unsatisfactory solution since it is part of the government for the first time in J&K. Given Kashmir's strategic importance and the spike in militancy from across the Pakistan border, the Narendra Modi government would also want a stable government in Kashmir and one where it has a say in policy and security issues.

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