

Jammu and Kashmir Goes to the Polls: First Assembly Election in 10 Years

Ronojoy Sen



Summary

Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) will see a three-phase election beginning 18 September 2024 with the counting of votes on 4 October 2024, along with those of Haryana, which will go to the polls on 1 October 2024. This will be the first Assembly polls in J&K since the abrogation in 2019 of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution and the bifurcation of the state into two Union territories.

On 16 August 2024, India's Election Commission announced the dates for Assembly polls in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The three-phase election will begin on 18 September 2024 with the counting of votes on 4 October 2024, along with those of Haryana, which will vote on 1 October 2024. What came as a surprise though was that the dates for Maharashtra, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies suffered losses in the 2024 general elections, were not announced. The Election Commission justified it on the grounds of security, weather conditions and upcoming religious festivals.

This will be the first Assembly polls in J&K since the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution in 2019, which gave J&K special status, and the bifurcation of the state into two Union territories, including Ladakh. The J&K Assembly has 90 seats and after the 2023 delimitation process, there are 47 seats in the Kashmir division and 43 in Jammu. While the abrogation of Article 370 was rushed through parliament by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, the delimitation process too was controversial with the Hindu-majority Jammu getting six additional seats whereas Muslim-dominated Kashmir received only one seat. In addition, nine seats were reserved for the Scheduled Tribes for the first time in J&K.

Both the national parties – the BJP and the Congress – as well as the major regional parties, including the National Conference (NC) and Peoples Development Party (PDP), will contest the upcoming election. The last time the J&K Assembly election were held in 2014, the BJP won 25 seats, the Congress 12, the PDP 28 and the NC 15. In the 2024 general elections, the BJP won the two seats in Jammu while the NC won two of the three seats in Kashmir, with Sheikh Abdul Rashid, popularly known as Engineer Rashid, winning from other from Baramulla. Rashid, who is currently in jail on terror charges, defeated NC leader, Omar Abdullah, in Baramulla, and he is now heading a new party, Awami Ittehad Party, which is contesting the Assembly election. Other smaller outfits in the fray are former Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad's Democratic Progressive Azad Party, the Jammu and Kashmir Apni Party, led by Altaf Bukhari, a former leader of the PDP, and the Jammu and Kashmir People's Conference, headed by Sajjad Lone. All three parties contested and performed poorly in the general elections in 2024.

Among other things, the J&K election will be a test of the impact and popularity of the Modi government's decision to abrogate Article 370. The BJP will be looking to build on its 2014 election performance, following which it formed the government for the first time in J&K in alliance with the PDP. However, the coalition collapsed in 2018, after the death of PDP leader, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, and the reluctance of his daughter Mehbooba Mufti to continue the alliance. In 2014, the BJP won all its seats from the Jammu region and scored a blank in Muslim-majority Kashmir. This time, it is hopeful of opening its account in the Kashmir region, especially in the constituencies with sizeable number of Gujjars and Paharis.

The coming election in J&K also marks the return to national politics of Ram Madhav, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leader, who has been appointed BJP's election in-charge of J&K. In 2014, Madhav, who was then the general secretary of the BJP, was a key player in J&K. He was also the architect of the alliance between the BJP and the PDP. However, in 2020, Madhav lost his position within the BJP and went back to the RSS as a member of its national executive. The upcoming election will be a test of Madhav's political and strategic skills.

The BJP's initial list of candidates was marked by some confusion. On 26 August 2024, the BJP announced a list of 44 candidates after a meeting of the party's central election committee which includes Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. However, within hours, a fresh list was released with only 15 names apparently due to resentment among party workers. Subsequently, the party announced the names of 45 candidates.

Of the two main regional parties in J&K, the NC has tied up with the Congress. The alliance was announced on 22 August 2024. Both parties also contested the 2024 general elections together and have worked out a seat sharing arrangement where the NC will contest 51 seats, the Congress 32 and with a "friendly" contest in five seats. One of the main planks of the alliance is the restoration of the statehood for J&K. A weakened PDP, which is part of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance at the national level and has made restoration of Article 370 one of its main campaign issues, is not yet part of any coalition. Both regional parties will be keen to show their electoral relevance in the post-Article 370 era.

Finally, the voter turnout in J&K will be closely watched. Historically, voter turnout has been low in the Kashmir Valley. However, in the 2024 general elections, the overall turnout in J&K was 58 per cent, the highest in 35 years, with the three constituencies in the Valley recording an average turnout of 51 per cent. Similar levels of turnout would be seen as evidence of the J&K voters' faith in the democratic and electoral process.

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Dr Ronojoy Sen is a Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics, Society and Governance) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.