

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | OMAR ABDULLAH

‘We did not boycott the polls, we stayed away’

The former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister on the National Conference’s political strategy and the issues before the State

PEERZADA ASHIQ

Jammu and Kashmir witnessed a low voter turnout in the recent urban local body (ULB) elections, which the National Conference (NC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) stayed away from. Former J&K Chief Minister and NC vice president Omar Abdullah discusses his party’s decision to stay away from the polls, the BJP’s performance in the State, militancy, and the need to engage Pakistan in talks. Excerpts:

NC president Farooq Abdullah had welcomed the decision to hold ULB polls. So, what prompted the NC to stay away from the polls?

■ It was the lack of clarity on the part of the Government of India as to where they stood in defence of Article 35A and Article 370. As long as there was an elected State government in place in J&K, the responsibility rested with them. They were accountable to the people of J&K. We held them to account to the best extent possible. With the imposition of Governor’s Rule, it became clear that the strings were being pulled completely by New Delhi, which would decide what line would be taken by the State in terms of the defence... When they linked the ULB and panchayat polls to the defence of Article 35A in the Supreme Court, the NC decided not to participate in these elections. It was not an easy decision to make.

Mr. Abdullah raised slogans of “Bharat Mata Ki Jai” while paying tribute to former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in New Delhi. On his return to Srinagar, he chose to warn the Centre of losing J&K. How do you see these opposing stands?

■ This is not the first time that my father has said either of these things. They are not mutually exclusive. I disagree with my father on his perceived need to prove his patriotism. I don’t feel that need. The person who doubts me has the problem, not me. My father sees things differently. It’s his personal

choice. The warning on losing the hearts and minds of the people of J&K is not something he has said for the first time. The situation on the ground bears it out.

Didn’t your party toe the line of the separatists when you decided to boycott the ULB polls? How is the NC’s decision different from that of the separatists?

■ We did not boycott the polls, we stayed away. There is a difference. The separatists stayed away and forced people to stay away. They used all sorts of methods to try and encourage people to stay away. We took the view that we are choosing not to participate, but we were not stopping people from participating or stopping others from filing candidatures or threatening them.

Is your party contesting the panchayat polls in November?

■ No party contests panchayat polls. Those are contested by individuals as panchayats polls are not party-based elections. The NC has taken a view that we will not participate in the ULB and panchayat polls.

Both Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh and Governor Satya Pal Malik expressed satisfaction over the voter turnout in J&K.

■ I see no reason to express satisfaction. Of course, the average turnout may have touched 35.1% but the Centre is ignoring the problems in the Kashmir Valley and other areas. A poll percentage of



NESAR AHMAD

one to three, despite the fact that there was no significant violence, is deeply worrying. In the face of violence, you could have said people were afraid to come out to vote. Barring my two workers being killed in Srinagar, there was no stone pelting on polling day, no attempt to ransack polling booths, no concerted efforts to attack the candidates or the campaign process. In spite of that, you have a poll percentage of one or two or three. This is people choosing to stay away, which the Government of India is choosing to ignore. We need to understand why the percentage was so low. Obviously, the two biggest regional parties were not participating. The Congress was there to fight elections to keep the BJP out, but did nothing. They were barely able to put up candidates. What was shocking was the fact that there were areas where the BJP had candidates in South Kashmir and the Congress didn’t have a candidate. The entire logic

How is seeking dialogue with Pakistan not our domain? It is our domain. No other State is as affected by the relations of India and Pakistan as J&K is.

of fighting elections was turned on its head.

Senior BJP leader and Union Minister Jitendra Singh argues that when Mr. Abdullah can claim victory and become Member of Parliament from Srinagar after a roughly 7% voter turnout in 2017, why can’t the BJP celebrate its victory?

■ I don’t think they should be proud of the fact that Farooq Sahib became an MP on a 7% voter turnout. I think Mr. Singh needs to understand that it is not the candidates’ responsibility to bring a turnout. The government is responsible for creating a conducive atmosphere for voters to come out. Why is it that in Farooq Sahib’s elections in 2008 and 2009, we had a much bigger turnout?

The election that he lost in 2014 had a much healthier turnout; yet in 2017, it was down to 7%. This is a failure of the Modi government, and Mr. Singh is a Minister in the same government.

Everything that the BJP could have done wrong, they have. Relations with Pakistan are at a historical low though I concede that it’s not only India’s fault; Pakistan has a role to play in that. The internal dialogue process is non-existent. We have an interlocutor, poor Dineshwar Sharma. I have no idea what his agenda is and what goals he has been given by the government. The PDP-BJP alliance was a disaster from the start.

The BJP has managed to win many municipalities in the Valley for the first time. How do you see the party’s journey in Kashmir from now onwards?

■ The BJP won’t have a journey. You send me to the Olympics and put me on a 100m track and make sure that all the other seven lanes are empty. I run and win the gold medal. Does that count

for anything? In the next Olympics, when there is full participation, I won’t even make it to the qualifying round. Winning because there is no opponent is not winning. It’s taking advantage of a vacuum, which is politics. I am not grudging them. But to suggest that they have opened their account and there will be tremendous acceptability... is not going to happen.

People’s Conference leader Sajad Lone is emerging as a new contender for the Chief Minister’s post. Are you wary of a third regional party emerging in Kashmir?

■ I am not wary of anybody emerging. Mr. Lone’s is not a new outfit. He is a *khandani* politician like me. The People’s Conference was started by his father and he inherited a part of it and another part is with the Hurriyat. Everybody has a right to stake their claim to the Chief Minister’s or even the Prime Minister’s post. Nobody has ever said a family or any two parties have a right to govern J&K. However, the decision rests with the people of J&K. The office of the Chief Minister should be assumed with dignity and chosen by the people of J&K. It should not be assumed by making or breaking a party. Coming through the backdoor by buying MLAs is not a dignified way.

Governor Malik has accused the regional parties and separatists in Kashmir of selling dreams and has ruled out *azaadi* or autonomy as a solution. He even drew a red line for mainstream parties on seeking Pakistan’s involvement. Do you see Pakistan as a party to the Kashmir problem?

■ We have not sold the dream of *azaadi*. We would not have lost thousands of our workers since 1987. I vehemently disagree with

the Governor on autonomy. The demand rests within the four walls of the Constitution of India. We have commitments from Prime Ministers of this country that it is a matter that can be discussed. The Governor needs to educate himself about the history of J&K, about the circumstances under which it became a part of the Union of India, and how autonomy is enshrined in the Constitution.

How is seeking dialogue with Pakistan not our domain? It is our domain. No other State is as affected by the relations of India and Pakistan as J&K is. For us, India-Pakistan is as much a domestic issue as it is an international issue. When violence takes place, our people suffer. When trade and normalisation happen, our people are affected. You have every right to turn down our demand but you can’t muzzle our voices. We are not asking for anything extra-constitutional. We are asking for improvement in relations between two countries.

In an interview, the Governor suggested that the NC was a part of the problem in J&K, like the separatists.

■ If NC is a part of the problem, please find somebody who is a part of the solution. Don’t keep asking us to fight elections. Why did you ask us to meet the Home Minister on his recent trip? Why is your Divisional Commissioner asking us to talk to the Home Minister? This doublepeak doesn’t work. On the one hand, you call us a part of the problem; on the other, you want us to be a part of the solution.

Militancy in J&K is showing no let-up despite operation ‘All Out’. Instead, highly educated youth like Mannan Wani and Sabzar Bhat are joining the militancy. Why

have the security forces failed to arrest the trend?

■ Killing them doesn’t kill militancy. In fact, killing them is adding to the numbers. I am not saying that when someone comes with a gun, you wave a white flag. We have to begin the process of arresting this trend. We need to figure out ways of engaging these youngsters in schools and colleges, talking to village heads and family elders. You are trying to wean away youth from militancy by saying that there is a better economic future. But even J&K Bank jobs are not given on the basis of merit but on the basis of political considerations. What future are you promising the youth?

U.P. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said, “Hindus and Sikhs were safe in Kashmir when it had a Hindu Maharaja.” What do you infer from this?

■ He is playing the communal card. He is unfortunately highly uneducated in the history of this country. I am not surprised given the history of the organisation he belongs to. Mahatma Gandhi’s words may not resonate with him but for most other Indians, who consider him as the Father of the Nation, it was he who looked at Kashmir and said, “In this darkness I see a ray of light and hope”. It was for this reason that Kashmiris cutting across religious lines were safe in the aftermath of Partition. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians have all lived in harmony right up to 1987. It was in the early 1990s that people were driven out. However, it was not just Hindus; Muslims too had to leave in large numbers because of a differing ideology. At some point, when Mr. Adityanath is free from playing politics, perhaps he should read a bit more about Kashmir and its history of tolerance.

SINGLE FILE

Define ‘strategic partners’

The Indian and U.S. conceptions are different. This needs to be addressed

MICHAEL KUGELMAN



It is no surprise that U.S. President Donald Trump has turned down an invitation from India to attend next year’s Republic Day parade as the chief guest. We shouldn’t have expected Mr. Trump to rearrange his schedule at home to attend an event abroad that entails sitting for hours in polluted air and observing another country’s military parade, even if that country is a purported U.S. strategic partner. That’s how Mr. Trump rolls.

To be sure, former U.S. President Barack Obama shifted the date of his State of the Union address so that he could come to India in January 2015. But the U.S.’s relationship with India, and the broader world, is drastically different now, amid the revolution in its foreign policy since Mr. Trump’s arrival in the White House. For more than a decade, a bipartisan consensus in Washington had supported India’s entry into an exclusive club of the U.S.’s strategic partners. Only the likes of Israel, the U.K., Australia, Japan, South Korea and Saudi Arabia – all of which attract the “strategic” or “special” relationship designation – enjoy membership. Today, U.S. officials pay lip service to notions of a strategic partnership with India; the Trump administration, led by its businessman-in-chief, is transactional to the core.

There’s nothing wrong with transactional relationships, and the t-word need not be a dirty one in international diplomacy. Indeed, Mr. Trump’s emphasis on deal-making has helped move the needle forward on U.S.-India security cooperation, as evidenced by the recent inking of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement. Additionally, the emphasis on the transactional hasn’t harmed bilateral ties. On the contrary, the fact that U.S.-India relations have remained relatively robust despite a flurry of new tension points – from U.S. tariffs and sanction policies to controversial statements by Mr. Trump about India – attests to the partnership’s overall strength.

Still, what’s missing from the relationship in the Trump era is a commitment from the U.S. side to go deeper than deal-making. For example, Washington and New Delhi need to resolve critical definitional issues to make the relationship truly strategic. What does “strategic partnership” mean for each side? Indian conceptions emphasise technology transfers and intelligence-sharing, while U.S. conceptions envision deep levels of operational cooperation to which New Delhi hasn’t assented. To fully take advantage of the relationship’s repositories of trust and goodwill, and of its enduring shared interests – from China’s rise to terrorism – these fundamental questions must be addressed. But for Mr. Trump, doing deep dives on the definitional disconnects in U.S.-India relations is simply not a priority. And neither was that Republic Day invitation, despite the pomp and prestige that the trip would have generated for the U.S. President.

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DATA POINT

Fewer fires

A look at preliminary satellite data shows that there has been a reduction in the burning of paddy stubble by farmers in Punjab and Haryana this year. However, as the peak burning season varies every year, a clearer picture will only emerge at the end of November.

Vignesh Radhakrishnan analyses the data

A dip in October | The heat map plots the number of crop fires detected in Punjab and Haryana. The darker the colour, the higher the number of fires detected. The data for 2018 are updated till Oct.28

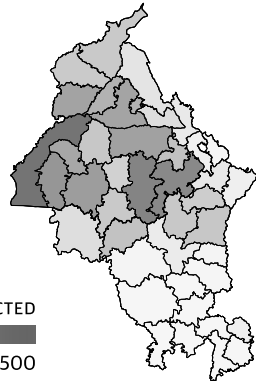
| Months | Jan. | Feb. | Mar. | Apr. | May. | Jun. | Jul. | Aug. | Sep. | Oct. | Nov. | Dec. |
|--------|------|------|------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|------|
| 2012 | 350 | 602 | 615 | 20557 | 665 | 1030 | 128 | 46 | 468 | 31993 | 46039 | 640 |
| 2013 | 496 | 472 | 871 | 21565 | 1097 | 230 | 43 | 59 | 577 | 31932 | 38506 | 818 |
| 2014 | 373 | 507 | 387 | 23075 | 599 | 962 | 86 | 33 | 1027 | 29642 | 50709 | 522 |
| 2015 | 335 | 518 | 404 | 18711 | 751 | 419 | 28 | 23 | 314 | 24763 | 46278 | 690 |
| 2016 | 354 | 878 | 422 | 14126 | 5917 | 411 | 28 | 18 | 544 | 41545 | 58136 | 890 |
| 2017 | 322 | 820 | 503 | 17039 | 1896 | 458 | 91 | 41 | 342 | 34557 | 33271 | 950 |
| 2018 | 562 | 588 | 624 | 20166 | 1679 | 612 | 70 | 29 | 151 | 16983 | - | - |

The second peak is in Oct.-Nov., when Kharif crops are harvested and Rabi crops are sowed

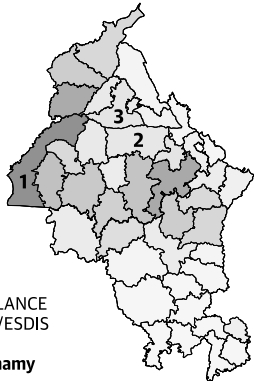
There was a dip in the number of fires this October compared to previous years. Fires may still peak in November

Mapping the hotspots | Most districts showed signs of reduction in crop fires in 2018. But some fared better than others

Map 1 shows the average number of crop fires in the districts* of Punjab and Haryana in October from 2012 to 2017



Map 2 shows the actual number of crop fires in October 2018



NO. OF FIRES DETECTED
0 3500

Data sourced from LANCE FIRMS, NASA/GSFC/ESDIS and processed by Raj Bhagat Palanichamy

1 Firozpur and Fazilka registered the highest number of crop fires among districts in Punjab in previous years. They still top the list in 2018, but there has been a reduction of 36% in fires detected

2 Ludhiana registered a reduction of 82%

3 Jalandhar registered a reduction of 78.5%

FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 31 1918.

Salt Supplies.

(From an Editorial)

The experience of last year and the early part of this year has taught us valuable lessons in regard to our salt supplies which, it must be stated, have been fairly well utilised by the Government. The policy hitherto pursued in regard to salt licensing was of haphazard growth. It does not seem to us to be a severe indictment of it to say that it was the result of devices adopted to secure the Government revenue not only against loss but also against all obstacles on the way of its utmost possible expansion. The result is a confused combination of three main systems: the excise licensee system under which the licensees, on payment of Government duty, are allowed to make salt as they please and sell on their own account on the most advantageous terms to themselves, the monopoly system under which the licensees are compelled to show diligence in manufacture and to sell, not directly to the public, but to Government, and a system which is a combination of the two foregoing systems.

The Defence Act Appeal.

Mr. C.R. Dass’s address to the Chief Court [in Rangoon] on behalf of four men sentenced under the Defence of India Act rules was based on the argument that the rules were ultra vires. He contended that the British legislature had given the Viceroy’s Council no power to legislate and that thereby the rule made by the Council under the Defence of India Act created offences and punishments. The Indian legislature was subordinate to the British Parliament and covered only legislation within the limits of its powers. For the contention he replied upon the Government of India Consolidation Act of 1915, which defined the status of the Indian legislature. He also contended that the action of the coolies in demanding Rs. 2 per day was not an offence and criticised the District Magistrate, who, he said had poisoned his mind and had imbibed suspicions as was shown by this designating the Social Service League as a body which existed to hamper the Government.

CONCEPTUAL Programmatic advertising

BUSINESS

This refers to a form of digital advertising where advertisements are bought and sold by automated computer programs in an advertisement exchange. It is believed that this kind of advertising helps in better targeting of advertisements as technologies like artificial intelligence are used to assess the behaviour of consumers and offer advertisements accordingly. Programmatic advertising, which is considered by many to be the future of advertising, is in contrast to old styles of advertising where the placement and billing of advertisements were determined through human negotiations, which are prone to various human errors and other biases.

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The Statue of Unity: all you need to know

http://bit.ly/PateUnity