

ELECTORAL DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE: THE UNABATED ONSLAUGHT ON KASHMIRI IDENTITY

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The ongoing onslaught on Kashmiri identity and the desire to disempower Muslim population of Indian Illegally occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K) has led Modi government to decide to allow non Kashmiri Indians to participate in upcoming local legislative polls expected to be held later this year by registering them as voters thereby changing the electoral composition of the Muslim majority state.

The announcement was made by the Chief Electoral Officer Hirdesh Kumar who said that Jammu and Kashmir would get additional 2.5 million voters that would include outsiders (security forces stationed in Kashmir and people from other parts of India working in Kashmir) after the special summary revision of electoral rolls are being held for the first time following the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019.¹

It goes without saying that the announcement caused much uproar and drew strong condemnation. The entire Kashmiri leadership, irrespective of their ideology, unanimously denounced any such move by the Indian government. Former Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah while condemning the move expressed his apprehensions saying "fallout of voting rights to non-J&K residents will be that

¹ "Around 25 lakh new voters likely to be enrolled in J&K; parties hit out at Centre, " Hindu, August 18, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/around-25-lakh-new-voters-likely-to-be-enrolled-in-jk-parties-hit-out-at-centre/article65780947.ece>

tomorrow's assembly will be in the hands of outsiders...Tomorrow the number may go up to 50 lakh or 1 crore. J&K's identity is facing a direct assault.²"

In his response, National Conference leader and former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah tweeted "Is the BJP so insecure about support from genuine voters of J&K that it needs to import temporary voters to win seats? None of these things will help the BJP when the people of J&K are given a chance to exercise their franchise,"³

Mehbooba Mufti, President, Peoples Democratic Party criticised the move and said "This is the last nail in the coffin of electoral democracy. A Muslim majority state chose India, they wanted to be part of secular India. But people have lost confidence in voting,"⁴

Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Conference Chairman Sajjad Lone said that "the statement of ECI officials has heightened the fears of demographic intervention and demographic change. We know the set of laws that prevail across the country but what matters here is not the application of the law but the intentions of those implementing the law".⁵ In his message from Tihar jail, All Parties Hurriyat Conference Vice Chairman Shabbir Ahmad Shah saw this latest development as another attempt for political disempowerment and marginalisation of indigenous Muslim majority of Kashmir.⁶

Interestingly, this new announcement by the Modi government was also criticized by mainstream political parties and civil society. Former interlocutor for IIOJK Dr. Radha Kumar believes that the "fear of the political parties in Jammu and Kashmir is justified given the way the Modi administration has acted since 2019." She further argued that military personnel should vote only in their native states as is the case in the rest of the country.⁷ Similarly, taking to his social media account, Dr. Ashok Swain, Professor of Peace and Conflict Research said "To win the election in Kashmir, they are

2 "Kashmiris fear 'demographic change' after India grants voting rights to non-locals," Arab News, August 22, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2148086/world>

3 "Allowing non-locals to vote in J&K will be disastrous: Kashmiri leaders," Hindustan Times, August 18, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/allowing-non-locals-to-vote-in-j-k-will-be-disastrous-kashmiri-leaders-101660772991203.html>

4 "'Last nail in coffin of electoral democracy': MehboobaMufti slams voting rights to non-Kashmiri residents," ABP Live, August 18, 2022,

5 "Centre needs to be transparent on non-locals voting in J-K: Sajad Lone, Business Standard, August 19, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/centre-needs-to-be-transparent-on-non-locals-voting-in-j-k-sajad-lone-122081900360_1.html

6 "Kashmiris reject 'sinister' Indian design of registering outsiders' votes in IIOJK," Tribune, August 20, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2372202/kashmiris-reject-sinister-indian-design-of-registering-outsiders-votes-in-iiojk>

7 "Kashmiris fear 'demographic change' after India grants voting rights to non-locals," Arab News, op.cit

bringing in 2.5 million non-local voters to vote for them. When you fail to buy them, or when you fail to win hearts and minds, the new formula is you import the voters".⁸

Modi's continuous efforts - starting from making promises of abrogating article 370 during 2014 election manifesto and campaign to actually stripping the Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir of its special status and dividing the state into two union territories on August 5, 2019, the Modi government has made every possible effort to ensure that the Muslim majority of Kashmir is converted into a minority. In complete violation of Article 49 of Geneva Convention 4, India changed domicile law and issued domiciles to around 3.4 million to non- Kashmiri Indians.⁹ Electoral maps were also redrawn thereby increasing six seats for the Hindu majority Jammu region and only one seat for Muslim majority Kashmir valley. All this is being done with the intention of erasing Muslim character of IIOJK and convert the Muslim majority into a minority so that the demand for a plebiscite and "Azadi" (freedom) dies its own death. Besides, by encouraging non Kashmiris, particularly Hindus to permanently settle in IIOJK, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) also wishes to strengthen its grip on this region.

Though, when IIOJK was stripped of its special status in August 2019, the world community and international media did raise this issue on a regular basis but that momentum too has lately been lost. The world community, particularly the UN, seems completely oblivion to the fact that it is UN's responsibility to make sure that the resolutions it has passed promising the Kashmiri people their right to self-determination are implemented in letter and spirit.

Pakistan on its part has once again rejected the Indian move of registering non Kashmiri voters. In its statement, the Foreign Office raised a strong protest and stated "Pakistan categorically rejects the deliberate Indian attempts of pre-poll rigging and overt manipulation in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir." The statement further added that allowing temporary residents to register as voters was a clear manifestation of "treacherous Indian design" to influence the outcome of so-called elections in the territory.¹⁰ However, for Pakistan, the ongoing demographic change in IIOJK is a race against time. Pakistan needs to take more concrete steps to shake the conscience of the world powers so that they may play their due role in ensuring the basic human rights of the people

8 "Pakistan denounces bids to reduce Muslims into minority in IIOJK," News, August 20, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/983729-pakistan-denounces-bids-to-reduce-muslims-into-minority-in-iioj-k>

9 "Over 3.4m fake domicile certificates issued in IIOJK," Express Tribune, February 4, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2341928/over-34m-fake-domicile-certificates-issued-in-iiojk-report>

10 "Pakistan categorically rejects India's deliberate attempts of pre-poll rigging and manipulation in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK)," ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, August 19, 2022, <https://mofa.gov.pk/pakistan-categorically-rejects-indias-deliberate-attempts-of-pre-poll-rigging-and-manipulation-in-indian-illegally-occupied-jammu-kashmir-iiojk/>

of IIOJK that includes their right to self-determination. In fact, there is a pressing need for an early resolution of the Kashmir disputes according to the wishes of the Kashmiri people and the UN Security Council resolutions.