

A decisive turn in the secessionist movement in Kashmir

Mr. Sajjad Lone has taken high risk by contesting the Lok Sabha election. It is a bold decision taken by martyred Abdul Gani Lone's son. Mirwaiz Omar Farooq and his cohorts in the Hurriyat "will have to carefully consider shrinking options they are left with".

By G L Jalali

Sajjad Gani Lone, the son of slain Abdul Gani Lone, is an important secessionist leader who heads Political Conference founded by his father in late seventies. He has been active in the secessionist politics since the outbreak of Muslim insurgency in the Valley. Long back he parted his company with the Hurriyat Conference because of certain differences with the Hurriyat top-brass. Recently he declared in a press conference that he would contest the Lok Sabha elections. His decision to contest the Lok Sabha election marks a decisive turn in the secessionist movement in the Valley which has been witnessing unprecedented violence. Mr. Sajad Lone's father Abdul Gani Lone was slain in a very tragic manner. He was in favour of dialogue between India and the separatist leaders to resolve the Kashmir issue. Pakistan's ISI was particular that the Islamabad be also associated with the talks. In mid-April 2002 Mr. Lone travelled to Sharjah for discussions with PoK leader Abdul Qayoom Khan and the ISI Chief Lieutenant General Ehsan-ul-Haq. Mr. Lone was reported to have apprised that the Hurriyat wanted to "open the way for direct dialogue with New Delhi to resolve the crisis." If the Indian Government is not ready to allow self-determination, the alternative is that it should be ready to settle the dispute through a meaningful dialogue involving all parties concerned, suggested the Hurriyat leader Abdul Gani Lone " (Praveen Swami in the Hindu, April 17,2009).

After some days Mr. Lone was brutally assassinated by LeT operative hit squad while he was addressing a mammoth gathering at Idgah in the down town of Srinagar. The very killing of the prominent Hurriyat leader was "a blunt message to all those contemplating a deal with New Delhi that did not accommodate Pakistan's interests. In 2004 Mirwaiz Omar Farooq had talks with the then Home Minister L.K. Advani, but their talks were purely formal in nature and as such no concrete results were discerned. With change of government in Delhi and the UPA Government coming to power, the thread of dialogue between the Hurriyat and New Delhi was once again picked up. Dr. Manmohan Singh held a fresh round of negotiations with the Hurriyat leaders in 2005 but the Hurriyat did not come forth with concrete proposals that could accommodate New Delhi's interests. There were some reasons for the Hurriyat to show cold shoulder to New Delhi on the assumption of talks with New Delhi. Hurriyat leaders backed off after threats from the Hizbul-Mujahideen. New Delhi turned attention to Pakistan for the resolution of the ongoing crises in J & K state. The doors of back channel diplomacy were opened. Secret meetings between Dr. Manmohan Singh's envoy S.K.Lamba and his counter- part from Pakistan Tariq Aziz began in 2005.

The first thing they hit upon is that there would be no re-drawing of the Line of Control. Second, the two envoys "accepted that both parts of Kashmir would be given greater Political autonomy. Mr. Lamba agreed that India would reduce troops deployed in J&K State provided Pakistan stops sending infiltrators from across the border to indulge in violence. It was under consideration that the LoC would be opened for travel and trade. In an interview in 2007 to the newsmen Omer Farooq, the chairman of the Hurriyat, said that both India and Pakistan were looking at all the aspects of Kashmir issue and the results would be fruitful. The Hurriyat leaders hoped that the deal between New Delhi and Islamabad "would hand over power to them" .

When the deal was about to be made public, political situation in Pakistan took a nose-dive. President Musharraf asked India to defer the dialogue on Jammu and Kashmir. He tried to consolidate his position in his country where political storm was brewing up over the dismissal of Chief Justice Iftiqar Chowdhary. Lawyers had launched agitation, demanding the resignation of Musharraf. President Zardari who succeeded Musharraf was not willing to take risk by allowing his envoy Tariq Aziz to resume secret dialogue with his Indian counterpart Lamba. Hurriyat leaders were disappointed and lost any hope of resolving the vexed Kashmir issue through dialogue between India and Pakistan. In the meanwhile the announcement of holding Lok Sabha elections was made by the Election Commission. Mirwaiz Omar Farooq signalled that the Hurriyat had no idea of opposing the elections. Professor Abdul Gani Bhat, prominent Hurriyat leader, "called on the National Conference and the PDP to work with the secessionist formation to mutually work out a joint settlement and present it to India and Pakistan. For his part Mr. Sajjad Lone called for secessionist aspirations to be focussed on the achievable. Mr. Lone said that the leadership has to consider something as well " (Praveen Swami, The Hindu, April 17, 2009).

Mr. Sajjad Lone's decision to contest the Lok Sabha election must be studied in this context. While addressing a press conference in Srinagar Mr. Lone made it clear that he wants to take the Kashmir issue beyond the state and discuss it on the floor of the House. He denied that he has given up his previous agenda. "I want to make the people of India aware of the various dimensions of Kashmir issue on a bigger platform ", said the Chairman of Political Conference Mr. Lone. It may be recalled that of all the Hurriyat leaders, barring Mirwaiz Omer Farooq, have no well organised political constituency ". Lone exercises a lot of political influence over a large part of north Kashmir. His late father Abdul Gani Lone, whose legacy Sajjad carries forward, was a grassroot politician. Sajjad has nourished his constituency all these years. Hurriyat leaders are no match to him. Sayed Ali Shah Geelani, the hard-liner, does not wield influence beyond Sopore and Baramulla towns.

Of all the moderate Hurriyat leaders, Maulvi Abas, a Shia cleric, has limited following in his Shia sect which constitutes one fifth of Valley's Muslim population. The influence of JKLF supremo Yassin Malik is limited to the Maisuma locality. According to media reports differences have surfaced within the Hurriyat Conference led by Mirwaiz Omer Farooq on the very issue of boycotting forthcoming Parliamentary elections. Soon after returning from Delhi Mirwaiz took the decision to boycott the elections. He changed his earlier stand. Perhaps this decision was taken under threat from the militants. Sayed Sallahudin, the head of the Jihad Council, had asked voters in the Valley to boycott the elections. He is said to have acted on the dictation of the ISI which is opposed to the participation of people in the elections. Maulvi Abas Ansari criticised the United Jihad Council, the umbrella organisation of militants for asking voters to boycott the forthcoming elections.

Maulvi Abas Ansari was of the opinion that the very issue of boycotting the election should be left to the people. He was supported by Abdul Gani Bhat and Bilal Lone, the elder brother of Sajjad Lone. However, many others like Mukhtar Waza, Fazal-ul-Haq Quereshi, Nayeem Khan and Yusuf Naqqas sided with the young Mirwaiz and pressed for harder stand. These developments have exposed the Hurriyat which dances to the tune of ISI and militant outfits.

People in the Valley, by and large, are fed up with the "Hurriyat politics". In the previous Assembly election they actively participated in the election and voted for their choicest candidates despite the boycott call given by the Hurriyat leaders. Sajjad Lone's participation in the election is a rebuff to the Hurriyat. Despite his earlier stand, Sajjad has now declared, "I will represent Kashmir in New Delhi". His sister Shabnam Lone contested from Kupwara, but lost the election by a narrow margin. Ghulam Qadir Mir, a People's Conference backed independent, lost his seat to National Conference's Mir Saifullah by only 132 votes in 2002. Peoples Conference backed candidate Ghulam Mohiuddin Sofi won from Handwara. He was inducted into the state cabinet as state's Forest Minister. Abdul Rashid Sheikh, a long-time confidant of Abdul Gani Lone, defeated prominent National Conference leader Sharif-ud-Din Shariq and the People's Democratic Party's candidate Mohammad Sultan Pandit in Langate Constituency. These developments and electoral victories boosted the morale of Sajjad Lone who was determined to carry on the mission of his martyred father. In the first week of April, "the working group of the People's Conference leaders met to discuss as to how the party would proceed to meet the challenge posed by new political developments in Pakistan after the exit of President Musharraf.

Mr. Sajjad Lone received full support from the party to contest the Lok Sabha election says Praveen Swami, "Despite appearances, Mr. Lone's decision to contest the Lok Sabha election is not

surprising, its foundations were carefully built by secessionist leaders in and outside Hurriyat over the last ten years " (The Hindu, April 17, 2009).

In 1997 Ghulam Mohammad Bhat, former head of Jamaat-e-Islami which is the parent organisation of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, criticised the "gun culture" that militancy has brought in its wake. Mr. Bhat called for a political dialogue both with New Delhi and Islamabad. At present there is general awareness that gun cannot solve the vexed Kashmir issue, it is the political dialogue that can lead to the effective resolution of the issue. On this account, Sajjad Lone's decision to contest is a step in right direction and as such it should be hailed by all those elements who are interested in forging good neighbourly relations between India and Pakistan.

It has dealt a severe blow to the Hurriyat Conference which is playing in the hands of ISI. Moreover, Sajjad's decision has come as a bolt from the blue to the militants who are out to uproot Kashmiriat and impose gun culture on peace-loving Kashmiris." Mr. Lone's decision to contest the Lok Sabha election marks that first step towards the realisation of this so-far undefined something". Few observers believe that People's Conference has an even chance of winning the Baramullah Lok Sabha seat, but the campaign will help rebuild the party apparatus and cadre. In time the People's Conference could seek tactical alliances with formations like the PDP" (The Hindu, April 17, 2009).

In conclusion it may be stated that Mr. Sajjad Lone has taken high risk by contesting the Lok Sabha election. It is a bold decision taken by martyred Abdul Gani Lone's son. Mirwaiz Omar Farooq and his cohorts in the Hurriyat "will have to carefully consider shrinking options they are left with " .