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*The Hizbul Mujahideen leader Syed Salahuddin's comments on panchayat institutions in Kashmir have caused disquiet in that region. He told Riyaz Wani of Tehelka: "Panchayat institutions are meant to take care of local affairs. But this is not their role in Kashmir, where they are exploited to serve pro-India political parties and build vote banks. What is of real concern for us is that panchayats are projected as a referendum on Kashmir. New Delhi advertises the participation in panchayat polls as yet another instance of Kashmiris reposing their faith in India." India hopes "to declare things normal in Kashmir by holding panchayat polls in the state". These remarks fall into three parts. First comes a fair recognition of the role of panchayat members to take care of local problems. Kashmiris sorely need attention to their mounting problems near their very homes. Secondly, Syed Salahuddin fears their exploitation by New Delhi "as a referendum on Kashmir. This is far from the truth. For decades New Delhi did cite rigged elections to the Kashmir assembly as proof of popular ratification of accession to India. But beginning with the PDP (Peoples Democratic Party) government's assumption of power in 2002, that myth has been buried.*

*The PDP's Mufti Mohammed Sayeed made it plain that the polls were no substitute for a political settlement of the Kashmir dispute with the consent of India, Pakistan and the people of Kashmir. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah of the National Conference has said the same thing repeatedly. If assembly polls cannot be cited as a ratification, surely still less can polls to local bodies; whether municipalities or panchayats. During the campaigns for elections to the assembly in 1996, 2002 and 2008, correspondents from New Delhi noted with some dismay that voters in the queues were shouting "azadi". In the voters' eyes there was no contradiction between that cry and their vote. The cry represented their abiding commitment; the vote gave them a right to demand the local MLA's response to their grievances.*

*Lastly and unfortunately, Syed Salahuddin also said: "Panches (village council members) and sarpanches (village council heads) are exploited by India to project Kashmir as pro-India, and as such, they will continue to be targeted. No matter how much the government tries to secure them, they will still be attacked." Only a few days earlier Syed Ali Shah Geelani, whom Syed Salahuddin respects, denounced on Sept 15 the killings of panchayat members. "It is our longstanding policy that we have always condemned innocent killings," he said, adding, "No person should be killed for his political ideology".*

*Syed Salahuddin's remarks reflect both impatience and distrust. These sentiments are widely shared by separatists in Kashmir. They fear that the lapse of time would induce 'normalcy' which would end the Kashmir dispute. This reflects a profound distrust of the people. It is widely accepted that even if militancy were to end altogether popular alienation from New Delhi would survive; so deep is their alienation.*

*I was present at a convention of elected sarpanches at Yusmarg in the Badgan district of Kashmir on June 23 and 24 this year. They clamoured for real power from an insensitive Kashmir government. Engineer Abdul Rashid was lustily cheered when he demanded azadi. This independent MLA has made a mark in the assembly with his brave speeches. Can you imagine the impact of a score of such MLAs backed by the Hurriyat leaders? The separatist leaders do not realise that their tactics of hartals impose a heavy toll on the people's patience and economic costs which they find increasingly hard to bear. But such is the mindlessly negative approach of some of the leaders that they begin to tremble whenever there is some movement in other fields.*

*We are constantly treated to inane cries such as 'LoC trade is no solution', 'cultural exchanges give a false impression of normalcy', etc. Can the 65-year-old Kashmir dispute be resolved*

*immediately under pressure from such negative assertions? These leaders and, for that matter, the academia also, do not take even a brief holiday from the shouting of old sterile slogans and instead devote themselves to devising creatively new approaches which will chip away at the deadlock by gradual degrees. Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who staunchly opposed British rule, won an election to the Bombay Municipal Corporation on March 10, 1904. The stalwarts of old first excelled in municipal bodies. Both the two major political parties, the Congress and the Muslim League, participated in the general elections of 1937 and 1946 under the British dispensation and ran ministries in different provinces.*

*Would independence have been won if the League and the Congress had boycotted the polls and demanded a solution first? More to the point. Would the Quaid-i-Azam have achieved his goal, Pakistan, if he had not shown a spirit of compromise by accepting the Cabinet Mission's Plan of May 16, 1946? The Congress wrecked it. No power can deprive Kashmiris of their rights, provided only that they close their ranks and adopt realistic politics. History has been unkind to them. Their future is to be decided by an agreement between India and Pakistan – subject of course to the Kashmiris' approval. They must raise their voice to force these states to stop wasting time and finalise the elements of the five-year-old consensus. The best must not be made enemy of the good. The writer is an author and a lawyer Courtesy: Dawn*