

One of those twenty
(One of those 20)

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The list of twenty submitted by the Government of India to the Government of Pakistan is by now well known. Not the names, but the fact that such a list has been given, and that whether or not Vajpayee and his lieutenants Advani and George Fernandes will go to war with Pakistan depends on what answer they get to the request of extradition attached to the list.

It is also, perhaps, known to most people that the list mainly contains names of accused persons in the Mumbai blast case, the Kathmandu hijack case and of course December 13. But there is one in the list who belongs to none of the three categories. His name is – or at least was, when his mother and father named him – Syed Salahuddin. The Government of India wants him because he is founder-president of the Hizbul Mujahideen. It is part of the tangled semantics of the Kashmir issue that nobody can say whether Musharraf's assurance that those among the twenty who are Indian citizens can be handed over to India means that Syed Salahuddin will be handed over, because he is and he is not an Indian citizen, just as he is and he is not a Pakistani citizen: he belongs to India's Kashmir which Pakistan does not recognise as India's, nor does India recognise as Pakistan's.

But it need not have been necessary for India to ask Pakistan to hand him over. He could have been an Honourable MLA in the Legislative Assembly of Jammu & Kashmir, and perhaps also an Honourable Minister. He may have then honourably visited Pakistan as a foreign dignitary in propitious times and not as a gun-seeking militant. It was in the year 1987 that Syed Salahuddin contested on a ticket of the Muslim United Front for the State Assembly from Amira Kadal, a constituency of Srinagar on the banks of the ubiquitous Jhelum, and including the State Capital's fashion centre, Lal Chowk. He won unambiguously at the counting table, but it was his opponent whose name was announced over radio and who was given the certificate of victory.

Salahuddin was not the only one who suffered this fate in those elections. Many successful candidates of the Muslim United Front in the 1987 elections, who won at the counting table were declared defeated, for there was no other way that Farooq Abdullah who had entered into a 'historic' agreement of compulsive power-sharing with the Congress party's youthful President Rajiv Gandhi could win the elections. And what would be the point of such an agreement if the principal party to the bargain failed to win?

Of course, Kashmir saw no elections for the next nine years. The moral being that, if you want rules or institutions to be respected, do not reduce them to a farce. In fact, and paradoxically, the very success of the Muslim United Front was proof of the same principle. From the first election in the State, never had communal Muslim parties got votes worth counting in Jammu &

Kashmir. Indeed, soon after accession of the State to India in 1947, Sheikh Abdullah's communal-minded opponents of the Muslim Conference left the State for Pakistan, reckoning that they had no future in the valley. Though communal politics and the social-educational activity of the Jamaat-e-Islami resurfaced later, it remained a minor aberration in a predominantly liberal-secular atmosphere. It took all the energies expended by the rulers of Delhi in murdering democracy in the valley – from the arrest without any charges of Sheikh Abdullah in 1953 to the imposition of a humiliating agreement on his son Farooq in 1987 – to convince a sufficient number of people in the valley of the value of the fundamentalist's jibes about democracy and secularism. And thus it happened that for the first time since 1947, an explicitly communal grouping, the Muslim United Front, got a lot of votes in the State, but the authorities would not let the legitimate victors grace the Legislature.

They went to Pakistan, Syed Salahuddin among them, and got weapons and training and started militancy in the valley. Salahuddin formed the Hizbul Mujahideen, which is going strong for nearly nine years now. 'Why were they not allowed to rule the State when they had won the elections? By allowing them to rule, they would have become part of the democratic system, and learnt to live by the rules of the system' – so say even the Pandits ruing the past in the suffocating confines of the refugee camps in Jammu.

And India need not now have sent word to Musharraf threatening that if he does not hand over the elected but not elected MLA from Amira Kadal it will wage war against that country.

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