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UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT UPHEAVAL IN POK BY DR PRATEEK JOSHI

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
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The recent region-wide upheaval in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), which resulted in significant casualties, marks an unprecedented, large-scale crackdown by the Pakistani state. While the region has experienced decades of undercurrent friction, contemporary developments offer a deeper perspective into the structural roots of local discontent. On the surface, the public demonstrations revolve around immediate civic issues, basic rights, and legislative refugee seats. However, the actual drivers rest on a deeper constitutional crisis: PoK's ambiguous legal status vis-à-vis the state of Pakistan, combined with overlapping identity cleavages left behind by the historical Dogra Empire.

Historical Evolution of Political Identity (1930s–1970s)

Dr Joshi divides the political history and mobilisation of the region into distinct evolutionary phases:

- The Foundational Era (1930s-1940s): The anti-Maharaja sentiments and the 1931 uprising in Jammu and Kashmir established the original framework for identity politics in the region. This identity was subsequently reshaped by World War II, Partition, and the 1947 Poonch Rebellion, which led to the creation of the Azad Kashmir government with Pakistani support.
- The Direct Resistance Era (1950s): This period was marked by localised rebellions and the setting up of parallel governments that actively opposed direct Pakistani state control.
- The Separatist Phase (1960s-1970s): The emergence of factions like the Plebiscite Front and the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) reflected growing native opposition to Pakistani governance.

Unlike the separatist movements in the Kashmir Valley, which eventually acquired a religious overtone, PoK's political evolution and resistance remained distinct, focusing primarily on governance and civic rights.

The Contemporary Paradigm Shift

In recent years, a critical shift has occurred in PoK's political consciousness, moving entirely away from traditional geopolitical scripts:

- **De-hyphenation from the Valley:** Residents are increasingly seeking to decouple their regional and political identity from the ethnic Kashmiris of the Valley, prioritising native rights.
- **Erosion of Pro-Pakistan Narratives:** The political discourse is moving away from the traditionally pro-Pakistan tribes of PoK toward cross-community demands for equity.
- **Impact of Article 370:** The abrogation of Article 370 in India has structurally influenced PoK politics, prompting a deeper re-examination of state subject laws originally rooted in Maharaja Hari Singh's 1925 constitution.
- **Emergence of the JAAC:** Formed in 2023, the Joint Army Action Committee has shifted the narrative completely. Protests have pivoted from historical anti-India rhetoric to directly challenging Pakistani governance, even questioning historical events like the 1947 invasion.

The transition of the local population toward asserting a distinct PoK identity and demanding administrative accountability has caused visible anxiety within the Pakistani establishment. Rather than addressing the core civic and constitutional grievances, the Pakistani state has responded with heavy-handed measures, utilising anti-terror laws and designating peaceful protest leaders as terrorists. This escalation underscores a permanent shift: the core struggle in PoK is no longer an externalised geopolitical dispute, but an inward-facing demand for fundamental rights and self-governance.