

Azad faces an arithmetical puzzle to save his government

As Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad braces to prove his majority in the 87-member state legislative assembly here Monday, political circles are agog with possibilities for and against the Congress-led state government, with dissidents from the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) holding the key to its survival.

The Congress has 21 legislators, plus the support of 15 independent members. That leaves it eight short of the 44 votes it needs to win the trust vote. The two Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M) legislators may vote for the government, since the Left have not yet decided to withdraw support from the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government at the centre.

Even if the two CPI-M legislators vote for him, Azad will be six short of 44. Ranged against the government are the National Conference with 24 legislators, the PDP with 17, the Panthers Party with four, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Jammu Mukhti Morcha with one each, and one independent legislator, Shahjahan Dar, who is likely to vote with the PDP.

Manjeet Singh, the lone BSP member, has already declared his support to the PDP while Jugal Kishore of the BJP and the four Panthers Party legislators have demanded imposition of governor's rule in the state.

The crisis in the government was precipitated when the PDP walked out of the ruling coalition last week. Now it is the PDP dissidents who hold the key to the government's survival.

National Conference president Omar Abdullah and PDP president Mehbooba Mufti have made it clear their parties would issue a whip to their legislators to remain present in the assembly and vote against the Congress government Monday when Azad must prove his majority as per the directive of Governor N.N. Vohra.

Two PDP dissident legislators, Ghulam Hassan Mir and Sarfraz Khan, may vote for the government. Plus, the Congress hopes to have more PDP dissident members voting in its favour and thus save the government.

Asked whether Mir and Khan - who have been suspended from the PDP - can vote against the whip, constitutional expert and noted lawyer Zafar Shah told IANS: 'Yes, they can vote against the party whip and their votes will have to be counted as such.

'It is a different matter their party can later ask the assembly speaker to expel them from the house for having violated the party whip and the state's anti-defection law. The expulsion process involves a procedure that might take months to complete.'

If Mir and Khan vote for him and Azad can get four more PDP dissident legislators to do the same, he will be able to save his government. The PDP has already written to the governor, complaining that Azad is 'poaching' from its flock of legislators.

Analysts here are wondering if this betrays a sense of frustration and breach of ranks in the PDP or if it is the insurance the party is taking out against any poaching by the Congress.

The chief minister appears to be confident. According to sources, he has asked various government departments to prepare a note highlighting the achievements of his government during the 43 months he has been in power. He intends to read it out when he seeks the majority vote in the assembly.

He will need all 44 votes, Shah pointed out. 'Proving your majority as per the state constitution is different from defeating a vote of no confidence.

'In a vote of no confidence, abstaining members who choose to remain out of the house on the voting day are not counted and the simple majority is worked out on the basis of the members present and voting.

'But, when Azad has to prove his majority as he has been asked to by the governor, abstentions would not help.

'He must have 44 members present and voting for him so that he proves a simple majority in the house.'

The answer to the arithmetical riddle would only be known Monday when the blocks of this jigsaw puzzle fall into place, or fail to do so.

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