

Mission Kashmir

The government's new interlocutor will arrive in Srinagar on Monday, the storm winds of history pushing back against his face. Armed with the knowledge accumulated during an illustrious career in the covert services, and with status accorded by the government's decision to give him the rank of a cabinet minister, former Intelligence Bureau director Dineshwar Sharma has the authority to spark off a genuine dialogue on Jammu and Kashmir's political future. But he knows, better than most, that the odds are stacked against him. The All Parties Hurriyat Conference, as well as the hardline Tehreek-i-Hurriyat, have refused to participate in the proposed dialogue, citing, among other things, New Delhi's unwillingness to concede that Kashmir is a disputed territory. The two major parties in the Kashmir valley, the People's Democratic Party and the National Conference, have said they will restate their long-standing demands — "self-rule" for the former, which encompasses freedom of movement and joint institutions across the Line of Control, and wide-ranging federal autonomy, for the latter. In Jammu and Ladakh, Sharma will hear calls for greater autonomy from Kashmir — demands New Delhi has historically seen as divisive, and dangerous to the state's future.

New Delhi knew that secessionist parties would stay away: As Intelligence Bureau director, Sharma closely monitored cases against the Hurriyat leadership which have now crystallised into criminal proceedings, while the government snapped a programme of secret financial remuneration to some key leaders. This is of a piece with the Hurriyat's long-standing behaviour: Fearful of terrorist attacks, the conglomerate even walked away from Prime Minister [Manmohan Singh](#)'s round-table dialogue process in 2006, after promising to participate. But on its part, New Delhi must have a clear idea of precisely what it is bringing to the table. In recent months, the government has adopted an ambiguous position on Kashmir's special constitutional status, and repeatedly ruled out greater autonomy. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that while New Delhi wishes to appear to talk, it may have nothing to say.

This would be tragic. Despite substantial gains against terrorism and street violence in Kashmir, the larger problems of the alienation of the state's youth cohort, and the seduction of some by political Islam, remains unchecked. Political creativity, not a security-centric approach, is needed to address these problems. It would be a pity were Sharma's mission to go the same way as that of Prime Minister [Atal Bihari Vajpayee](#)'s interlocutor, K.C. Pant, and his many successors. Piles of interlocutors' reports and expert group findings never moved off the table, because political forces in Srinagar and New Delhi alike never had the will, or vision, to make them concrete. The cost of this has been paid by the people of Kashmir.

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