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THE DECLINE OF REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES: A CASE STUDY OF AZAD JAMMU & KASHMIR (1947-2021)

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Abstract

Regional political parties are an important feature of democracies that supposedly improve governance by representing marginalized groups and demanding greater autonomy. This paper examines the declining role of regional political parties in Azad Jammu & Kashmir, a semi-autonomous region in South Asia under Pakistan's administrative control. For almost seven decades, regional parties, represented primarily by the All Jammu & Kashmir Muslim Conference (MC), dominated the political landscape and government formation in AJK. In the last three elections, however, local chapters of Pakistan's national political parties have gradually eclipsed the regional parties to near inexistence, prompting this study to investigate the causes of this decline. In light of theoretical models explaining regional parties' performance in South Asia, and historical and empirical evidence (interviews), this study interprets the decline of AJK's regional parties through internal, external (structural), and regional factors.

INTRODUCTION

Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) has a unique political landscape shaped by its disputed status and close ties to Pakistan's political system. Historically, AJK's politics featured indigenous regional parties, most prominently the All Jammu & Kashmir Muslim Conference (MC), that dominated the political arena since the state's inception in 1947. Over time, however, a clear trend has emerged wherein regional parties in AJK have experienced a marked decline in influence, ceding ground to branches of Pakistan's major national parties. Today, AJK's electoral politics are effectively an extension of Pakistan's. Parties like the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) all operate local chapters that dominate government formation, leaving the traditional regional stalwart, the MC, with just a single seat in the 2021 general elections This development underscores the near-complete eclipse of indigenous AJK parties by Pakistan-based national parties and motivates this study to ask: *What are the primary factors contributing to the decline of regional political parties, especially* MC, *in AJK?* Addressing this central question is crucial for understanding the evolving nature of AJK's political identity and the implications for governance and autonomy in the region.

This qualitative case study proceeds by first outlining a theoretical framework for analyzing regional party strength and decline, drawing on

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comparative insights from South Asia and beyond. Next, it provides a historical account of AJK's party system from 1947 to 2021, documenting the rise and fall of regional parties alongside the growing prominence of national parties. In the analysis section, these theoretical and historical perspectives are integrated to explain the decline of AJK's regional parties. This primary evidence was collected via semi-structured interviews with key political stakeholders (including former AJK Prime Minister Sardar Attique Ahmed Khan) as well as local party organizers and voters across the Kotli, Poonch, and Muzaffarabad Divisions (2019–2022), alongside diaspora discussions in the United Kingdom (2015 and 2022). These interviews substantiate the study's core explanations for the decline of regional parties, which include external influences (the structural dominance of Pakistani politics in AJK, electoral rules, and constitutional constraints), internal weaknesses of regional parties (clientelistic elite behavior and organizational frailties), and broader trends in the region (such as the centralization of power and party system nationalization observed in other South Asian contexts). The paper concludes by summarizing the findings and discussing future prospects for political pluralism and regional political identity in AJK.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

AJK's experience of regional party decline can be analyzed through several theoretical lenses. Academic literature on regional political parties and party systems offers insights into how institutional structures, elite incentives, and center–periphery dynamics shape the fate of regional parties (Brancati, 2008; Ziegfeld, 2012, 2016; Chhibber & Kollman 2004). In this section, we discuss key theories and concepts relevant to AJK, including: (1) political decentralization and regional party strength; (2) coalition politics and party system nationalization; (3) elite behavior and clientelism; and (4) federal–state relations in constraining or enabling regional parties.

1. Political Decentralization and Regional Parties:

Decentralization theory suggests that the dispersion of political power to sub-national levels often facilitates the emergence and success of regional parties. Dawn Brancati's influential work argues that political decentralization (the creation of elected regional legislatures with independent decision-making authority) tends to increase the strength of regional parties (Brancati, 2008, pp. 135–59). The logic is that when meaningful authority is devolved to regional governments, political entrepreneurs have an incentive to form parties that appeal to regional interests and identities, and voters are more willing to support such parties in order to influence regional governance. This phenomenon has been observed in many democracies: for instance, the rise of regionalist parties in Spain and India has been linked to the devolution of power to regions or states. Brancati's statistical analysis of 37 democracies (1945–2002) confirms that political decentralization correlates with stronger regional parties, whereas highly centralized political structures correspond with more nationalized party systems. Notably, the study also finds that certain institutional factors can dampen the effect of decentralization –concurrent elections (holding national and regional elections simultaneously) and cross-regional voting laws (electoral rules that allow or encourage voters from one region to influence elections in another) both tend to decrease the strength of regional parties (Brancati, 2008, p. 137). The reasoning is that concurrent elections cause national issues and parties to overshadow regional ones, and cross-regional electoral influences dilute the distinctiveness of regional political preferences.

2. Coalition Politics and Party System Nationalization:

Another theoretical perspective comes from the study of coalition politics and the nationalization of party systems. In pluralistic democracies, when no single party can dominate nationally, regional parties often thrive by entering coalitions and leveraging their swing position. Adam Ziegfeld's research on India shows that the prevalence of coalition governments at the national level significantly lowered the barriers for regional parties to succeed (Ziegfeld, 2012, pp. 69–87). During India's coalition era (1990s–2000s), many state-based parties flourished because even a small

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regional party could become a kingmaker in Parliament or join the ruling coalition, thereby gaining access to federal resources and influence. Ziegfeld argues that in periods of single-party majority rule, ambitious politicians have strong incentives to attach themselves to a big national party (since that is the only route to power), whereas in coalition eras, the incentives to form or remain in regional parties increase, as those parties can still partake in power by joining coalitions. In other words, the structure of competition at the center trickles down to the regions: when national politics is fragmented, regional outfits have more bargaining power and appeal; when it is consolidated, the party system becomes more nationalized and smaller parties either merge into big ones or fade away. India's 2019 election illustrates a shift back toward nationalization: the BJP's outright majority under Prime Minister Modi marked the end of the coalition-dominated era, reducing the bargaining power of state-based parties in New Delhi. The nationalization of party competition has curtailed the space for regional parties to remain viable. This also aligns with the broader theory by Chhibber and Kollman (2004) that fiscal and political centralization lead parties to merge or align nationally.

3. Elite Behavior and Clientelism:

The organizational strength or weakness of regional parties often comes down to the behavior of political elites and the patterns of clientelism. Many scholars argue that in patronage-driven political systems, the choices of elites (rather than mass ideological sentiments alone) determine whether regional parties flourish. Ziegfeld's *Why Regional Parties?* emphasizes that in clientelistic democracies, politicians are primarily office-seeking and will choose party platforms that maximize their chances of power and access to resources. Voters in such contexts often expect material benefits, jobs, or local development ("goods, services, and selective access to the state") regardless of whether the party is national or regional (Ziegfeld, 2016, pp. 50-54). As a result, voters may be indifferent to the ideological or geographic scope of a party – they care about which patron can deliver benefits. This gives politicians considerable latitude to reshape or abandon parties: if joining a national party yields better patronage opportunities (funds, projects, influence), an ambitious elite will do so, and voters will often follow that elite for the patronage pipeline, not necessarily out of programmatic loyalty. In other words, elites decide whether to operate as a regional party or as part of a national party based on strategic expediency, especially the availability of patronage. Ziegfeld finds that clientelism raises the costs of building truly national parties (because sustaining nationwide patronage networks is expensive), which can allow regional parties to emerge; but conversely, if a strong national patronage network exists (e.g. through a dominant party), regional politicians may plug into it rather than maintain separate organizations.

Federal–State Dynamics and Constraints on Regional Autonomy:

Beyond party strategies and electoral systems, the broader constitutional and federal arrangements play a decisive role. From a federalism standpoint, AJK is in a paradoxical position: it has its own government, yet it is not a province of Pakistan nor a fully sovereign entity. In contrast to other federal units, AJK's autonomy is limited by legal provisions that explicitly constrain political pluralism (Lashari, Khaliq, & Sardar, 2025; Hayat, 2020; Snedden, 2012). The Interim Constitution Act of 1974 provides AJK with a self-governing structure (comprising a President, Prime Minister, Assembly, and a separate judiciary). However, this constitution imposes an ideological constraint where any party advocating for any status other than joining Pakistan is excluded from the political process (Human Rights Watch, 2006). This has two important implications: (a) True "regional" or nationalist sentiment in AJK cannot translate into electoral politics if it means challenging accession. (b) The "permissible" parties or local groups differ only nominally in outlook. The Interim Constitution and related electoral laws also created the Kashmir Council, a supra-legislative body dominated by Pakistan's federal government representatives, which until reforms in 2018 wielded significant financial and administrative powers in AJK. This structure entrenched

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Islamabad's oversight and limited AJK's self-governance in key domains.

In light of these theoretical considerations, we expect the decline of AJK's regional parties to be driven by a combination of: (a) institutional design that favors national parties (cross-regional voting, constitutional and electoral design), (b) strategic elite decisions in a clientelist environment, and (c) overarching central influence that nationalizes AJK politics. The next section will review the historical trajectory of AJK's parties to ground this analysis in the empirical record.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNT ON AJK POLITICAL PARTIES (1947-PRESENT)

AJK's political history since 1947 provides the context for how regional parties rose and then gradually receded in the face of national party incursion. In this section, we chronicle the key phases in AJK's electoral politics, highlighting the performance of regional vs. national parties, major constitutional developments, and pivotal events that shaped the party system's evolution. This historical account draws on electoral data and prior research, including the user-provided dataset of AJK elections and outcomes.

Early Dominance of the Muslim Conference (1947–1970):

From the establishment of Azad Kashmir's government in 1947 up to 1970, the All Jammu & Kashmir Muslim Conference (MC) effectively monopolized AJK politics. The MC had been founded in the 1930s in the princely state of Jammu & Kashmir and reoriented itself after partition as the main vehicle for pro-Pakistan sentiment in AJK (Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2016). During the 1950s and 1960s, AJK did not have a party-based legislative assembly elected by the populace; governance was conducted under the oversight of Pakistan's Ministry of Kashmir Affairs through a mixture of nominated councils, Rules of Business, and indirect elections (Lashari et al., 2025). In these structures, the MC allied with Karachi (and later Islamabad) and provided the leadership. The first President of AJK, Sardar Ibrahim Khan, and later influential figures like K. H. Khurshid and Sardar Muhammad Abdul Qayyum Khan were all associated with the Muslim Conference (Sharma, Hassan, and Behuria, 2019, p. 38). This era set a pattern where no alternate regional ideology could compete – when one AJK President (K. H. Khurshid) in the 1960s reportedly began advocating a more independent line, he was quickly removed and even jailed by order of Pakistan's government (Mughal, 2018). Thus, even before popular elections, the groundwork was laid for a managed democracy in AJK oriented toward Pakistan's political orbit.

Following the 1960s indirect elections based on Ayub's Basic Democrats model, the first significant opening for electoral politics in AJK came in 1970. Under General Yahya Khan's rule in Pakistan, the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Government Act 1970 was promulgated, establishing an elected AJK Legislative Assembly (and ending the practice of only having a President elected by a limited franchise) (Feyyaz, 2011, pp. 13–14). In the 1970 AJK elections, the Muslim Conference won the presidency (Sardar Qayyum Khan became President) and a majority in the new assembly, capitalizing on its entrenched status and support for accession to Pakistan (Noorani, 2011, pp. 70–99). This period (1970–1974) had a presidential system in AJK, and MC's dominance appeared intact. Voter turnout was enthusiastic as it was the first experience of adult franchise in the region (Schofield, 2003, pp. 90–91; Snedden, 2012, pp. 171–76).

A major shift occurred mid-decade with the intervention of Pakistan's then-Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bhutto introduced the AJK Interim Constitution Act of 1974, converting AJK's system to a parliamentary one (with a Prime Minister as head of government and a President as ceremonial head of state elected by the Assembly). More consequentially, Bhutto sought to extend his Pakistan People's Party (PPP) into AJK politics (Lashari et al., 2025). The 1975 AJK election was a watershed: the PPP's newly formed AJK chapter, often referred to as PPP (Azad Kashmir) or PPPAK, contested vigorously against the Muslim Conference. Bhutto's party assembled a "United Front" alliance that included some breakaway factions like the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation

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League, to challenge MC (Mahmud, 2011, p. 6). Through a combination of genuine popularity (Bhutto was then at the height of his appeal) and heavy-handed tactics, the PPP achieved a dramatic upset. The PPP-Azad Kashmir won 26 out of 40 elected seats in 1975, whereas the Muslim Conference was reduced to only 3 seats (several other small groups and independents took the remainder) (Rehman, 2013, p. 30; Sharma et al., 2019). The PPP's haul included 17 of the 29 seats within AJK and 9 of the 11 refugee seats in Pakistan. MC's leader Sardar Qayyum alleged widespread rigging and boycotted parts of the process, but the outcome stood – for the first time, a Pakistan-based national party had taken control in Muzaffarabad, installing Khan Abdul Hameed Khan as AJK's Prime Minister and Sardar Ibrahim Khan as President (Snedden, 2012, pp. 180–82). Interestingly Sardar Ibrahim was an MC co-founder who had defected to the PPP camp. This episode illustrated how closely tied AJK's political fate was to the center.

Era of Military Rule and its Aftermath (1977–1985):

The late 1970s brought upheaval. General Zia-ul-Haq's coup in Pakistan (July 1977) and the subsequent martial law had direct repercussions in AJK. In August 1977, the recently elected AJK Assembly was dissolved under Zia's orders, halting the democratic experiment after just two years. AJK was placed under an Administrator (Brigadier Hayat Khan) with full powers, later succeeded by another military officer (Maj. Gen. Abdul Rehman) who governed AJK through the early 1980s. During this period (1977–1985), all political parties were banned and no elections took place in AJK, mirroring the suppression of politics in Pakistan (Snedden, 2012, pp. 218-220). When Zia finally lifted martial law and allowed limited return to elections, the 1985 AJK elections were held on a non-party basis but effectively saw Muslim Conference candidates (and allies) win the majority and resume power. Sardar Abdul Qayyum of MC became AJK's President and his ally Sardar Sikandar Hayat Khan became Prime Minister in 1985 (Freedom House, 2018). The exclusion of PPP and the persecution of its activists during Zia's era meant that for nearly a decade, the only viable political force in AJK was the MC, along with a few smaller, Pakistan-aligned religious parties that benefitted during this era across AJK and Pakistan.

Resumption of Competitive Politics and Rise of New Parties (1988–2000):

After General Zia's death in 1988, Pakistan returned to civilian rule, which again influenced AJK in the subsequent election. In 1990 AJK general election, the two main contesting parties, MC and PPPAK, won roughly equal (16 each) seats but PPPAK Mumtaz Rathore defeated MC Sardar Sikandar Hayat with 29 votes to 15 to become Prime Minister (Snedden 2012, p. 201). This arrangement, however, was short-lived. In August 1990, Benazir's government fell in Pakistan, and President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed her. In a mirror move, AJK's Prime Minister Mumtaz Rathore was ousted – literally whisked away by helicopter to Islamabad and forced to resign (Puri, 2012; Snedden, 2012). This dramatic incident underscored AJK's lack of political independence: the fall of PPP at the center directly precipitated the fall of PPP's government in AJK. Subsequent AJK elections (1991) took place under the oversight of Pakistan's new government led by Nawaz Sharif (PML). The Muslim Conference, which was closely allied with Nawaz's Muslim League, won the 1991 AJK polls, restoring MC rule. Sardar Qayyum was elected as Prime Minister and Sardar Sikandar Hayat as President. Later, after the PPP's return to power in Pakistan in 1993, Islamabad reportedly created financial difficulties for the MC government in AJK, which Sardar Qayyum managed to skillfully navigate, allowing him to complete a full five-year term. Reflecting on this period, Sardar Attique Ahmed Khan highlighted the Assembly's productivity, noting that it "worked tremendously and approved 145 bills and passed resolutions on Kashmir and other matters of public importance. Many delegations from different countries, especially the United States, Britain, and other European countries, visited Azad Kashmir" (personal communication, 12 June 2019).

In 1996, Pakistan saw another power shift when Benazir Bhutto returned to power (1993–96). The 1996 AJK elections reflected this shift: a new

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regional player, the Jammu & Kashmir Peoples Party (JKPP), emerged as a major contender. The JKPP was founded in 1990 by Sardar Ibrahim (AJK's first President in 1947) and positioned itself as a Kashmiri-centric party, though still pro-Pakistan in orientation. By mid-90s, JKPP had aligned with the PPP. As a result, Sardar Khalid Ibrahim (son of Sardar Ibrahim) and Sultan Mehmood Chaudhry of JKPP forged a strong alliance with PPP. In the 1996 elections, the JKPP/PPP combination won power in AJK, and Sultan Mehmood Chaudhry became Prime Minister (1996–2001) (Feyyaz, 2011, p. 10). This could be seen as a brief revival of a regional party's fortune (since JKPP was an AJK-grown entity) but crucially it succeeded because it partnered with a Pakistani party (PPP) that was ruling in Islamabad. The Muslim Conference was defeated in 1996, a blow that demonstrated again the advantage of having friends in Islamabad. It was during this late 90s period that MC's long monopoly truly broke – now AJK had a two-front contest: MC on one side and the JKPP (often in tandem with PPP) on the other. The JKPP-led government remained until 2001.

National Parties Consolidation (2001–2021):

The turn of the century brought further consolidation of national party influence. After General Pervez Musharraf's coup in Pakistan (1999), the 2001 AJK election was once again maneuvered in favor of allies of the Pakistani regime. The Muslim Conference aligned itself with Musharraf and was back in power after 2001; Sardar Sikander Hayat Khan as Prime Minister and Maj. General Sardar Mohammad Anwar Khan elected by joint sitting as President. The 2006 AJK elections were held when Musharraf was still in charge; the MC secured a plurality. Sardar Qayyum's son, Sardar Attique Ahmed Khan, took on leading roles and eventually became AJK Prime Minister in 2006. That election also saw the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a Pakistan-based ethnic party, contest in AJK for the first time. MQM managed to win 2 seats in the 2006 AJK Assembly, indicating the broadening presence of Pakistani parties even beyond the traditional PPP/PML sphere. However, MQM's venture into AJK was short-lived – it lost those seats in the subsequent 2011 election and retreated, perhaps due to lacking a natural constituency in AJK's demographic (Snedden, 2012, pp. 205–09).

After 2008, Pakistan's return to civilian rule ushered in alternating rule of PPP and PML-N, which was mirrored in AJK. In the 2011 AJK elections, the PPP (Pakistan Peoples Party) AJK chapter won handily (largely because the PPP was in power federally from 2008–2013). Chaudhry Abdul Majeed of PPP-AJK became Prime Minister (Tirmizi, 2011). The Muslim Conference by this point had been relegated to a minor role; it won only a handful of seats in 2011. The JKPP also persisted as a minor player, but notably its main leader Sultan Mehmood had by then actually joined the Pakistan PPP (he was even briefly considered for AJK President). This exemplified how regional party figures merged into national parties.

In the 2016 AJK elections, the script followed the Pakistani political cycle: now it was Nawaz Sharif's PML-N in power in Islamabad (2013 onwards), and unsurprisingly PML-N's AJK branch swept the polls, winning 31 of 41 elected seats. Raja Farooq Haider (PML-N) became Prime Minister (2016–2021). The PPP-AJK was routed down to 3–4 seats. The Muslim Conference managed only 3 seats, continuing its decline. A new entrant, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which had not contested AJK before, picked up 2 seats in 2016 (Azad Jammu & Kashmir Election Commission, 2016). PTI's entry is significant – founded by Imran Khan in 1996 as a national party in Pakistan, it eventually extended to AJK as well. By 2016 PTI was emerging as a national opposition force, and it attracted some former JKPP and MC figures (including Sultan Mehmood). Still, in 2016 PML-N was dominant.

Finally, the most recent 2021 AJK elections were held with Imran Khan's PTI now at the helm federally (since 2018). Consistent with the pattern, PTI-AJK won a strong majority, taking 26 of 45 elected seats (and 32 of 53 including reserved seats). The PPP-AJK came second with 11 seats, PML-N third with 7 seats, while the once-mighty Muslim Conference won just 1 seat and the JKPP 1 seat. The MC's sole seat in 2021 (held by its veteran leader Attique Ahmed Khan) was a symbolic footnote in an Assembly otherwise filled with Pakistani party affiliates. PTI's victory brought its

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nominee Sardar Abdul Qayyum Niazi (later replaced by Sardar Tanveer Ilyas) to the premiership (Naqash, 2023a, 2023b, 2025). The 2021 result underscores the near-total takeover of AJK's politics by Pakistan's main parties: the legislative assembly now essentially mirrors the partisan lineup in Pakistan's National Assembly (minus regional incumbents).

To summarize the trajectory in Figure 1 (below): The Muslim Conference enjoyed a monopoly until the mid-1970s; the PPP's entry in 1975 signaled the first major decline of MC. The 1980s saw MC temporarily back (with PPP repressed). The 1990s introduced multiparty competition in AJK – MC versus PPP/JKPP – with outcomes closely tied to Islamabad's political swings. By the 2010s, the Muslim Conference and other purely regional outfits were consistently losing to the Pakistani party chapters, and their vote banks dwindled to single digits. The data clearly demonstrate a trend of party system "nationalization" in AJK: whereas in 1985 nearly 100% of the Assembly seats were held by AJK-based parties, by 2021 over ninety percent of seats were held by Pakistan-affiliated parties (PTI, PPP, PML-N), with only two seats left for local parties. This historical record sets the stage for analysis. In the following section, we interpret the decline of AJK's regional parties in light of both the theoretical framework and the evidence from these past elections and political events

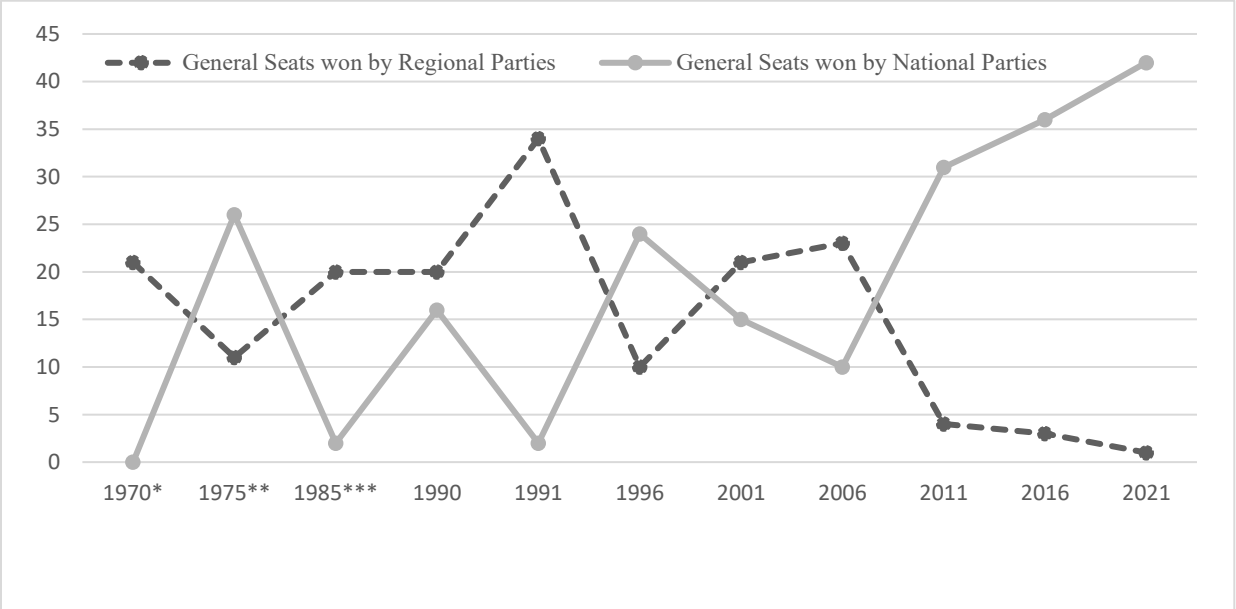


Figure 1: AJK Legislative Assembly — Seat Share by Party Type (1970-2021)

Note: "General Seats" refers to the elected seats available at the time, excluding seats won by independent candidates and reserved seats. "Regional-Party Seats" refers to seats won by AJK-originated parties (principally the Muslim Conference and its splinters, and the JKPP); "National Party Seats" refers to local chapters of Pakistan-based parties. See Table 1 for Major AJK Regional and National Parties

** First adult-franchise elections in AJK.*

*** First entry of a Pakistani national party (PPP) via a United Front alliance between PPP and allied factions.*

**** Non-party-based elections in which Muslim-Conference-aligned candidates prevailed.*

Table 1: Regional and National Parties Winning Seats in the AJK Assembly (1970-2021)

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Party	Status
All Jammu & Kashmir Muslim Conference	Regional
Azad Muslim Conference (Sardar Ibrahim, 1970s)	Regional
Liberation League (K. H. Khurshid)	Regional
Tehreek-i-Amal Party (Brig. Hayat Khan)	Regional
Jammu & Kashmir Peoples Party (Sardar Ibrahim / Sultan Mehmood, 1990s)	Regional (allied with PPP for some time)
Pakistan Peoples Party, Azad Kashmir	National
Pakistan Muslim League (N), Azad Kashmir	National
Jamaat-e-Islami, AJ&K	National
Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), Azad Kashmir	National
Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Azad Kashmir	National

Source: Election Commission of AJK – data on political parties and election results (various reports).

ANALYSIS: EXPLAINING THE DECLINE OF REGIONAL PARTIES IN AJK

Bringing together the theory, history and empirical data, we can identify multiple interlocking reasons for the decline of regional political parties in AJK. These factors can be grouped into external influences that emanate from AJK's relationship with Pakistan and the structural context, internal weaknesses within the regional parties themselves, and broader political trends in South Asia that provide a comparative backdrop.

External Influences and Structural Factors

a. Dominance of National Parties & Coalition Politics on AJK: The most visible driver of regional party decline in AJK is the expanding dominance of Pakistan's national parties and national politics in the region. Over the decades, the PPP, PML-N, and now PTI have each established strong local branches that effectively function as extensions of their operations in Pakistan. These branches are not mere nominal presences; they are instrumental in AJK elections, candidate selection, and government formation. This dominance matters because it crowds out the political space that independent regional groups could occupy. What is more, the spillover effect of Pakistan's national politics on AJK is profound. Observers note that "the politics in AJK are decisively under the reign of the government of Pakistan," meaning that when Pakistan's ruling party changes, AJK's power dynamics shift accordingly (Awan et al., 2021, pp. 49–61). During periods when one party strongly controls Pakistan's center, AJK politicians have tended to flock to that party's local branch for patronage and support, leaving independent regional parties sidelined. Indeed, a striking pattern since 2000 is that whichever party is in power in Islamabad almost invariably wins the subsequent AJK election. For example, the AJK elections of 2011, 2016, and 2021 coincided with the same party ruling Pakistan (PPP, PML-N, and PTI respectively), and in each case the AJK electorate handed victory to the local chapter of that national ruling party. This suggests that AJK voters and politicians anticipate benefits from aligning politically with the Pakistani government of the day, effectively nationalizing AJK's party system. Under these circumstances, standalone regional parties that lack patronage linkages to the center find themselves at a severe disadvantage.

Ziegfeld's insight, therefore, is borne out: when national-level power is consolidated (in Islamabad's hands), the incentive is for AJK elites to join that power structure rather than resist it (Ziegfeld, 2012). Conversely, there has been no real opportunity for AJK's regional parties to leverage a coalition scenario to their advantage, since AJK has no representation in Pakistan's coalitions and internally the trend has been single-party dominance by extensions of Pakistani parties. In essence, national parties bring to AJK a combination of greater financial resources, media

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visibility (via Pakistani media), and the promise of integration with Pakistan's power structure. This phenomenon aligns with Chhibber and Kollman's (2004) findings that party system nationalization often correlates with central resource control: regions depending on the center tend to see national parties extending their reach.

b. Centralization, Decentralization, and Constitutional-Legal Frameworks:

Dawn Brancati's decentralization theory suggests that political decentralization tends to increase the strength of regional parties (Brancati, 2008). Applying this to AJK, we face an apparent paradox. AJK does have a form of political decentralization: it possesses its own elected Legislative Assembly and government, separate from Pakistan's provinces. In theory, this autonomous structure could provide a platform for robust regional parties. Indeed, in the first few elections under the 1970 AJK Government Act and later the 1974 Interim Constitution, local AJK-based parties like the Muslim Conference were prominent. However, the *nature* of AJK's autonomy is highly constrained. While the legal framework of AJK's politics (Interim Constitution 1974) ensures a homogenization of political discourse, it has also structurally undermined independent regional politics. In a typical federation or state, regional parties often distinguish themselves by championing regional autonomy, cultural identity, or local issues that national parties might neglect. In AJK, however, campaigns cannot revolve around demands for more autonomy (beyond what Islamabad permits) or any notion of Kashmiri self-determination, because that would be "prejudicial to the ideology of Pakistan" and invite immediate disqualification (Human Rights Watch, 2006). The absence of a distinct regional and/or ideological platform takes away a potential advantage of regional parties. Instead, elections focus on personalities, patronage, or general governance issues (roads, utilities, jobs) where national parties can compete on nearly equal footing with local ones. The result is a filtered political arena where the difference between a "regional" AJK party and a local chapter of a Pakistani party is blurred.

Moreover, AJK's electoral system contains features analogous to Brancati's dampening factors (Brancati, 2008, p. 137). Elections in AJK are not concurrent with Pakistan's national elections but critically, Pakistan-based parties directly contest the AJK elections through local branches, injecting national politics into the regional arena year-round. Furthermore, cross-regional voting has been institutionalized in the form of 12 Assembly constituencies reserved for Kashmiri refugees who reside in Pakistan. The impact is twofold: (1) Even if a regional party like MC remains popular inside AJK's own districts, it must also win a share of refugee seats to secure overall victory – something that's extremely difficult without Pakistan-wide campaign machinery or favorable support from Islamabad. (2) Refugee seat voters consume Pakistani national media and politics; they may vote along national party lines (e.g. choosing PPP or PTI as extensions of their support for those parties in Pakistan) rather than consider AJK-local issues. Moreover, refugee-seats have been, allegedly, an instrument used by Islamabad to shape AJK's Assembly composition, a pattern that has persisted since the 1975 election. As Brancati noted, cross-regional voting arrangements tend to diminish regional party strength, and AJK is a real-world confirmation of that finding. Thus, AJK's case suggests that formal decentralization alone is not sufficient for regional party success. The degree of *independent decision-making power* and the absence or presence of central meddling and cross-regional electoral influence are crucial. Brancati's framework would predict weaker regional parties if decentralization is undermined by central controls or if electoral rules nationalize the contest, which is precisely what we observe in AJK.

Additionally, the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system in AJK's Assembly elections tends to amplify the seat bonus for larger parties. When regional parties were the larger parties (pre-1990s), FPTP helped them; but now that national parties are the largest vote-getters, FPTP disproportionately converts votes to seats for them, wiping out smaller parties. For example, in 2021 the MC and JKPP together got about 14% of the vote but only 2 seats (~3.7% of seats), whereas the PTI with 31% vote got nearly 60% of seats. In short, constitutional centralization, ideological gatekeeping, and electoral designs have undercut the potential distinctiveness

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and efficacy of regional parties in AJK's political system.

Internal Weaknesses of Regional Parties

While external pressures have been formidable, AJK's regional parties have also been undermined by their own internal weaknesses. These include issues of leadership, organization, and innovation.

Dynastic Leadership and Elite Ambitions:

The major regional parties like the Muslim Conference and JKPP often revolved around prominent families or personalities. MC, for instance, was led by Sardar Qayyum for decades, then by his son Attique; at times it split when other ambitious figures (e.g. former PM Sikandar Hayat, Raja Farooq Haider, and others) felt sidelined. Such elite rifts diminished the party's coherence and grassroots effectiveness. Consequently, internal democracy in the party suffered, and younger leaders had fewer opportunities to rise, which sometimes prompted them to leave and join national parties that promised tickets or positions. The elite behavior and clientelism discussed earlier also plays in here (Ziegfeld, 2016).

In AJK, politics has long been patronage-oriented and dominated by influential families and biradaris (clans). The elite-driven nature of party affiliation is evident. Many of AJK's prominent politicians have treated party labels as fluid – switching allegiances or establishing new parties when convenient. Such moves illustrate that elite career ambitions often outweigh loyalty to regional party organization. The clientelist logic also holds: an AJK politician's influence (and ability to reward supporters) often depends on connections to Islamabad. Aligning with a Pakistani ruling party can mean more development funds for one's constituency, more government jobs to distribute, and greater personal clout. By contrast, sticking with a purely regional party (like MC or others) when it is out of favor with Islamabad could mean political marginalization. The clientelist character of AJK politics, and the responsiveness of voters and politicians to patronage rather than party loyalty, was a recurring theme in interviews with former MC voters and local party organizers in parts of Kotli, Poonch, and Muzaffarabad Divisions (personal communication, 2019-2022). This dynamic has progressively hollowed out AJK's regional parties, as many of their talented or opportunistic figures have been co-opted by the larger national parties. In essence, AJK's case demonstrates Ziegfeld's thesis that under clientelism, elites prefer to establish or join parties that maximize their access to power. In AJK, the choice increasingly has been to join national parties, because those offer a surer path to office and resources, whereas standing by independent regional parties became a losing proposition as their resource base withered.

b. Organizational Decay and Lack of Innovation:

Regional parties in AJK have struggled to build strong party organizations and mass mobilization beyond their traditional strongholds. The MC, for example, had its core base among certain clans and in certain districts (such as parts of Muzaffarabad, Poonch, and Kotli), but it did not invest adequately in party branches, youth wings, or policy development (personal communication, 2019-2022). During years out of power, its activity waned until the next election season, whereas Pakistani parties could rely on their national organizational structures to keep momentum. For a regional party to survive, it also must champion unique local causes or styles of governance that national parties might neglect. Here AJK's regional parties perhaps did not innovate enough. For instance, issues like the rights of AJK's large diaspora community, or the environmental concerns (given AJK's ecology), or even autonomy in managing local affairs – these could have been rallying points for a visionary regional leadership. However, MC and others mostly campaigned on standard promises (jobs, roads, welfare) similar to Pakistani parties, and often ended up being perceived as no different in practice. By the 2010s, young voters in AJK (many active on social media) seemed more attracted to the narrative of Pakistan's national parties – e.g. Imran Khan's anti-corruption and reformist rhetoric – than to the MC, which was seen as part of the old status quo. In 2021, analysts noted that educated young voters were keen on performance and governance and less bound by old party loyalties. Thus, the MC's failure to reinvent itself or

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present a compelling policy vision contributed to its decline. It gradually lost the battle for the narrative (Awan et al., 2021, pp. 49–61).

In summary, AJK's regional parties did not fall *only* because of external pressure; they also imploded in certain respects. Their elites often chose personal benefit (switching to national parties when opportune) over loyalty to party or region, their internal divisions weakened them, and they lost touch with the changing aspirations of the electorate. This created a vacuum that national parties were happy to fill.

Broader Political Trends in South Asia

AJK's story, while unique in many particulars, also resonates with broader trends observed in South Asia concerning regional parties and centralization. One trend is the resurgence of strong central governments and the corresponding weakening of regional forces. In India, as noted, the dominance of the BJP under Modi since 2014 has curtailed the influence of regional parties at the Union government level (Aiyar & Sircar, 2020, pp. 209–22). The rhetoric of one-nation, one-development agenda can sway voters away from parochial considerations. Similarly, in Pakistan, one could argue that there has been a reduction in the influence of traditional regional or smaller local parties in recent years – for instance, the decline of the MQM in urban Sindh, and the difficulties faced by parties like the Awami National Party (ANP) or Balochistan's nationalist parties. While Pakistan's context is different (it's still largely a two-party plus provincial parties system), the general trend is toward centralization of narratives, often under a populist leader who appeals above regional divides. Imran Khan's PTI, for example, tried to fashion itself as a Pakistan-wide party breaking the hold of both PML-N (Punjab-based) and PPP (Sindh-based). In doing so, PTI also reached into places like Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK, establishing units there.

Another relevant trend is the impact of globalization and media. With the advent of satellite TV and internet, even remote regions like AJK are exposed to national (and international) discourse constantly. Voters in AJK watch Pakistani news channels, follow Pakistani political talk shows, and engage with national-level political debates on social media. This inevitably shapes their political perceptions leading them to view the prime minister in Islamabad as more consequential to their lives. This mediated environment tends to benefit the big national parties who dominate airwaves, and it can diminish the local particularism that sustains regional parties.

Furthermore, the South Asian pattern of patronage-based politics means that wherever the locus of resources is, politicians will gravitate. We see in both India and Pakistan that when the central government became more powerful or richer (e.g., economic liberalization in India made the central government financially stronger vis-à-vis states), central leaders gained more leverage over regional satraps. In AJK, the financial dependency on Islamabad means the real patron is always the central government. This is a broader post-colonial state phenomenon: fiscal centralization undermines regional political entrepreneurship – precisely what Chhibber and Kollman theorized (2004).

It is also useful to briefly compare the Aceh case in Indonesia (Ikramatoun et al., 2023, pp. 41–59). Aceh, like AJK, was a region with a strong separatist movement that, after a peace treaty in 2005, was allowed to form local political parties. Initially, Aceh's local parties (composed of ex-rebels) won big in regional elections, but within a decade they began to decline. Voters started returning to Indonesian national parties or new local alternatives as the ex-rebel parties failed to govern effectively and were beset by internal problems. Once peace stabilized, the extraordinary appeal of a special regional party waned and people cared more about day-to-day issues, where national parties could compete. Aceh's local parties, much like AJK's MC, also suffered from leadership splits and corruption issues, alienating supporters. The lesson from Aceh (and AJK) is that even when local parties are given a chance, they must perform and adapt to survive; otherwise, national parties will encroach as normal politics resumes.

Lastly, a broad trend concerns the interplay between identity politics and development politics. Regional parties often thrive on identity (linguistic, ethnic, or based on regional pride). In AJK, while a component of Kashmiri identity exists, the population is culturally closer to Pakistani Punjabis

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and Paharis than to the Valley of Kashmir. Furthermore, despite being religiously homogeneous (nearly all Muslim), AJK society remains fragmented along ethnic, baradari, and regional lines. An instructive illustration of these cross-cutting divisions is the 2015 campaign by Kashmiri organizations in the UK, concentrated among Mirpuri and Kotli-origin communities, to have "Kashmiri" recognized as a distinct census ethnicity option in the UK national census, separate from the broader "Pakistani" category. This campaign met with resistance from some self-identified “ethnic” Kashmiris, who contested the Mirpuri and Pahari-speaking community's claim to a shared Kashmiri identity (personal communication, 2015). Such regional, dialectal, and biradari-based divisions are documented by Snedden (2012), while Hayat (2020) explores their implications for internal AJK governance and the broader Kashmir dispute. The politics in AJK, therefore, is less about ethnic assertion and more about the Kashmir cause, which, due to legal strictures, could not be openly contested. The playing field accordingly shifted to who can deliver development. Pakistani parties could argue “we can deliver more”. The identity aspect that MC could use early on lost resonance over time, especially with newer generations born long after 1947 who may not revere the MC’s historical role. By contrast, regional parties in some Indian states still champion linguistic or state identity: the DMK's decades-long Tamil-pride politics in Tamil Nadu, where the party has repeatedly formed governments since the 1960s on an explicitly Dravidian and Tamil-linguistic platform, is the paradigmatic example. AJK’s regional parties lacked a comparable differentiator. Thus, general development politics took over, favoring those with access to greater resources.

CONCLUSION

The decline of regional political parties in AJK is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in the region’s unique political context and broader patterns of centralization and elite behavior. This study has found that a confluence of external and internal factors has led to the near eclipse of AJK-based parties in favor of branches of Pakistan’s national parties. Externally, AJK’s political sphere is structurally constrained by Islamabad’s overarching influence. Internally, the traditional regional parties like the Muslim Conference failed to renew themselves, suffering from leadership nepotism, factional splits, and a disconnect from grassroots aspirations, which led many of their supporters and politicians to migrate to the more dynamic national parties.

Given these findings, what are the implications and future directions for AJK’s political pluralism and regional identity? One implication is that AJK’s political future will likely continue to mirror Pakistan’s political fortunes. If Pakistan’s politics remain dominated by a few large parties, AJK’s spectrum will remain the same set of actors. For political pluralism to increase in AJK, institutional reforms aiming at devolution of power to regions would be needed. This could include revisiting the Interim Constitution Act 1974 to allow a broader range of political expression and greater autonomy within the Pakistani federation. Such reform, however, is politically sensitive and unlikely in the short term given Pakistan’s stance on Kashmir. Another reform could be adjusting the electoral system (perhaps introducing some form of proportional representation for part of the Assembly) to give smaller parties a better chance of representation even if they don’t win many constituencies – this could encourage niche regional platforms. Additionally, reducing the role of the refugee seats or ensuring they are fairly contested (perhaps by involving international observers) might prevent undue manipulation. Strengthening AJK’s fiscal autonomy could also empower local leaders (of any party) to formulate independent policies, which in turn could allow regional political cleavages to emerge beyond just patronage pipelines.

From the regional parties' own perspective, if they are to reconfigure and remain relevant, they may need to reinvent their political identity in ways that complement rather than confront the Pakistani parties. One plausible niche is to champion governance issues specific to AJK: environmental management and tourism, disaster preparedness, a dedicated security and economic support package for the population living along the Line of Control (who have faced recurring cross-border shelling),

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and targeted wlfare policies for AJK's diaspora in Pakistan and abroad. By building expertise and grassroots support around such issues, a regional party could rebuild credibility as the true voice of AJK's people's day-to-day interests.

In conclusion, the decline of regional parties in AJK is the outcome of a complex interplay between structure and agency. It underscores the powerful role of structural context in shaping party systems, and the agency of local elites who largely acquiesced to or embraced that structure for short-term gains. Even though AJK is not a province, the nationalization of its party politics resembles what happens in highly centralized nations where local political actors become appendages of the center. Unless there is a significant political decentralization in practice, a principle Brancati (2008) champions as a means to empower regional voices) we are likely to see the continuation of this trend.

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