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## **BJP PULLS OUT OF RULING ALLIANCE IN KASHMIR**

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ended an uneasy alliance with a regional partner in the state of Jammu and Kashmir as law and order in the area continue to deteriorate.

The BJP was in an alliance with the People's Democratic Party (PDP), a Kashmir party, following the 2014 state assembly elections.

The PDP had won 28 seats in the 87-member assembly in Muslim-majority Kashmir, while the BJP won 25 seats in Hindu-majority Jammu.

Many had predicted the alliance of opposites between the Hindu nationalist BJP and PDP, which represents Kashmiri Muslims, would not last the year.

But the coalition lasted three years . However, it ended yesterday when BJP national general secretary Ram Madhav said at a press conference that it was "untenable for the BJP to continue in the alliance government in Jammu and Kashmir".

Mr Madhav maintained that the decision was taken to "bring the deteriorating situation in the state under control", in what many viewed as an admission of the failure of the coalition government.

The withdrawal of support forced Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Mehbooba Mufti, leader of the PDP, to resign yesterday.

The state is likely headed for governor's rule as other political parties have refused to form alliances and fresh elections are not likely to be announced immediately.

Kashmir, which is at the heart of a conflict between India and Pakistan, has seen a deterioration of law and order in recent years. A round of violent protests has erupted, with many young Kashmiris taking to pelting stones at security forces and police.

In response, security forces have retaliated, including using controversial pellet guns.

BJP's pullout also comes days after well-respected Kashmiri journalist Shujaat Bukhari was gunned down as he was leaving his office in the capital city of Srinagar.

The BJP and PDP had different approaches to tackling the problem facing Kashmir, with the BJP favouring a tough stance against violence and the problem of separatism, while Ms Mufti often

spoke of the healing touch and a softer approach to the separatism issue.

Ms Mufti, who has faced severe criticism from many of her own supporters over the coalition, said: "There can't be muscular politics in Jammu and Kashmir. The PDP works on a healing-touch policy. I am not shocked by the BJP's move."

Still, anger lingers against both parties in Kashmir.

"This was not a stable government. It was a matter of convenience for both parties just to have power. It should have collapsed much earlier," said author and journalist Ghulam Nabi Khayal.

"Both parties have ruined Kashmir. We have a record number of (cases of) violence and killing of innocent people."

People are heaving a sigh of relief over the break-up, Mr Khayal added.

A recent United Nations report, while seeking an international inquiry into the accusations of rights violations, had said 145 civilians were killed by security forces and 20 by militants between July 2016 and April this year.

The BJP's decision to quit the alliance is also seen to be linked to next year's general election, when Mr Modi seeks re-election.

Analysts said its move was designed to appeal to its core constituency of Hindu nationalists, who were against the tie-up.

"It was becoming difficult to justify the alliance. The BJP is hoping that by pulling out of the government, it is sending a message to the electorate on its strong stand on Kashmir, patriotism and nationalism," said Dr Sandeep Shastri, a political analyst and pro-vice-chancellor of Jain University.

"It is not just about Jammu and Kashmir. There is a larger message."

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