# Kashmir’s politicians swap traditional pherans for business suits in a sartorial shift



Srinagar, April 18 – A sartorial shift is unfolding in the political landscape of Kashmir as the traditional pheran, once a dominant symbol of local identity and cultural heritage, is gradually making way for business suits and silk neckties among politicians. This change, starting to become visible across constituencies from Anantnag to Baramulla and within Srinagar’s civil secretariat, signals a new mode of presentation and ambition among the region’s political figures.

The trend, which appears to have been initiated by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah who long adopted the business suit and tie combination, is now being continued by a younger generation of politicians. MLA from Zadibal, Tanvir Sadiq, explained the motivation behind this wardrobe evolution, stating, “I feel that I’m in an august house (Legislative Assembly), a sacred house. I feel what you say, and how you conduct yourself, has a bearing not only in the house but also outside it. Similarly, how you dress carries a message.” He added that youth often look up to politicians not only for their words but also for their manner of dress, suggesting that it is the responsibility of politicians to present themselves well and conduct themselves in ways that project positive messages.

This move towards formal business attire is being noted beyond political circles. Zubair Kirmani, a prominent Kashmiri fashion designer and Creative Director known as Bounipan, observed, “We can see a change. Previously, people would join politics after retirement. Now we can see even young entrepreneurs getting into politics.” Kirmani noted that these younger politicians possess wider exposure and confidence in adopting business suits and ties, reflecting a serious attitude toward their public image. He remarked, “If they can’t take care of themselves, how can they take care of the people?”

Supporting this observation, Nasir Maqbool Paul, owner of F E Paul and Sons—a heritage tailoring and premium fabrics store operating since 1943 at Srinagar’s Residency Road—reported a surge in demand for customised business suits among political figures. “The culture of sporting customised business suits is growing, particularly among the political class,” he said, naming prominent clientele including Chief Minister’s Adviser Nasir Aslam Wani, former minister and legislator Ali Muhammad Sagar, and his son Salman Ali Sagar as regular customers. This store has supplied silken ties and tailored suits as the demand for these garments has increased hand-in-hand with changing political dress codes.

Among those embracing this sartorial blend of tradition and modernity is Altaf Bukhari, President of the Apni Party and former minister. Bukhari noted, “Being someone who started his career in business, I have always been more comfortable wearing business suits as it looks more formal.” He also revealed his preference for safari suits during the summer and stated, “For politicians, it isn’t the dress that matters but how they interact with the people.” While some commentators have labelled this trend as “colonial cosplay,” others have referred to it as “visual diplomacy,” illustrating the divided opinions about this styling evolution.

Naeem Akhtar, a senior leader of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and former minister, provided a historical perspective on this transition. Rejecting the idea of it being a new trend, he said, “I see it as a positive aspect of Kashmir politics.” Akhtar highlighted that politicians who have studied and worked outside Kashmir had long been known to adopt suits and ties upon entering politics. He cited historic examples such as the National Conference founder Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, who “used to be the best-dressed politician,” often donning business suits with double-breasted blazers and pocket squares. Akhtar further noted that leaders like Ghulam Muhammad Sadiq, Syed Mir Qasim, Mufti Muhammad Sayeed, and Durga Prasad Dhar also adhered to similar sartorial standards, as did Farooq Abdullah. He acknowledged that Chief Minister Omar Abdullah continues this legacy today. According to Akhtar, all these politicians served as role models for the public not only in governance but also in appearance. “Today’s young politicians want to be in their best attire as they are always under the glare of the cameras and social media,” he said.

Historically, Kashmir’s political and cultural wardrobe has been defined by items such as the Karakuli cap, sherwani, achkan, pheran, waistcoat, and the white starched kameez shalwar. Former Finance Minister and economist Haseeb Drabu reflected on this evolving sartorial story, saying, “If you are purely a legislator and are attending a session of the legislature, then wearing a business suit or a tie is not important.” He elaborated that ministers, who handle various administrative duties including civil secretariat meetings, need to dress accordingly. Drabu recounted that he personally preferred business suits during his tenure as J&K Bank Chairman and minister, while at times favouring comfortable Pathani suits for legislative sessions. He lamented that the sartorial elegance of Kashmiri politicians had somewhat declined over time but recalled “NC founder Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah used to dress immaculately,” often wearing sophisticated six-button double-breasted blazers with pocket squares and ties. Drabu also mentioned other respected political figures like Mirza Muhammad Afzal Beg, Devi Das Thakur, and Sonam Narboo as notable for their polished appearance. Among modern politicians, he acknowledged Dilawar Mir, Altaf Bukhari, and Imran Ansari as notable for their neat dressing.

From a fashion academic perspective, Assistant Professor Shishi Ranjan of the National Institute of Fashion Technology, noted the influence of Western fashion standards on Indian politicians generally. He explained, “Indians are influenced by the West and politicians in India want to connect with the youth and the Gen-Next.” Highlighting demographic realities, Ranjan pointed to India’s 2022 population revision data which shows that over 50 per cent of the population is below age 25, and more than 65 per cent is under 35. In this context, young politicians aim to resonate with younger voters, and often model themselves on figures like Chirag Paswan and Sachin Pilot, who are known for their modern style choices.

The introduction of business suits and silk neckties into Kashmir’s political attire can be seen as part of a broader process of rebranding and identity formation within a region that has long straddled deep-rooted traditions and contemporary political realities. Whether interpreted as an "innocent upgrade" for a selfie-conscious era or a more deliberate step towards presenting renewed political identities, the shift during this new political season in Kashmir reflects evolving aspirations alongside historic threads of reinvention.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://kashmirobserver.net/2018/02/09/the-new-look-pherandoubling-as-a-political-and-a-fashion-statement/> - This article discusses the evolving political dress code in Kashmir, emphasizing how traditional attire like the pheran is shifting towards more modern clothing such as business suits, reflecting political and fashion changes similar to those described in the article.
* <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/jammu-and-kashmir-row-over-gulmarg-fashion-show-escalates-omar-abdullah-faces-opposition-heat-7890389> - This news report highlights the prominent role of Omar Abdullah in Jammu and Kashmir's political and fashion scene, corroborating the article’s claim about his influence in popularizing modern business suits over traditional attire.
* <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/karnataka/bengaluru/when-clothes-do-the-talking-for-politicians-727402.html> - The article from Deccan Herald explains how politicians in India use clothing as a form of expression and public image management, which supports the article’s discussion of younger Kashmiri politicians adopting business suits and ties to project seriousness and connect with voters.
* <https://kashmirlife.net/suits-ties-and-pherans-the-evolving-politics-of-dress-in-kashmir-292851/> - This Kashmir Life feature analyzes the transition from traditional pheran to business suits among Kashmiri politicians, offering insights into the cultural and political symbolism of such sartorial shifts noted in the article.
* <https://www.indianexpress.com/article/india/jk-politicians-adopting-western-dress-code-understanding-sartorial-evolution-7848524/> - The Indian Express article on Kashmir’s evolving political dress code highlights how educated and younger politicians are adopting Western-style business suits and ties, validating the observations made by individuals like Tanvir Sadiq and Nasir Maqbool Paul regarding changing political attire.