

GILGIT BALTISTAN AND SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

Gilgit Baltistan, originally a part of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and later part of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) is legally an integral part of India. Gilgit Baltistan comprises 86 percent of the total area of Pakistan occupied Kashmir.¹ The Karakoram Highway via Gilgit Baltistan connects China with Pakistan. Till China's presence was reported by the media, Gilgit Baltistan was largely absent from the regional strategic discourse, more specifically Kashmir. Even though the Kargil intrusion and the subsequent war in 1999 were launched by Pakistan from its bases across the LoC in Gilgit Baltistan, it was the reports of Chinese presence which brought this part of PoK into focus.²

Kashmir's problem has remained a major catalyst of militarization, open and protracted wars, extremism, and underdevelopment in South Asia. Gilgit and Baltistan's estimated population of 1.2 million includes four denominations of Islam—Shiite (39 percent), 2 Sunni (27 percent), Ismaili (18 percent), and Noorbakshi (16 percent)—and at least twenty-four ethnic and linguistic groups.³

Keywords

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Diplomatic and Political Perspective

The Region has two different political systems that prevailed in Gilgit-Baltistan. The first was a non-centralized, “egalitarian” political organization in the southern part, roughly in what is today the district of Diamer. All over Gilgit-Baltistan, people are divided into patrilineal groups which are often locally ranked. One political system was governed by *jirgas* or assembly of men, which were mostly limited to the men of the landowning group like Shin and Yeshkun while “menial” and artisan groups like Karmin, Dom, or Gujjur were excluded. Though the nature of the *jirga* was not egalitarian, but it was devoid of any central rule. The second political system belonged to the local monarch, *Raja* or *Mir*, who ruled over the valleys or part of the valleys. Their rule though being hereditary in nature, but was marred by fierce competition between claimants for rule. Before the British intervention, a Raja was largely a *primus inter pares* who needed the support of at least a part of the local population that was not the case during the colonial rule, as they only needed the support of the British to retain their power.¹ During the period of Partition, with the active participation of the Pakistani Army, some disillusioned British officers and local and foreign tribal groups, the entire region was illegally occupied by Pakistan, and has remained a disputed territory since.

The Constitution of Pakistan does not list Gilgit-Baltistan as a Pakistani territory, although the State has exercised sovereignty in the region since Independence. Rather, Gilgit-Baltistan is described as a territory “administered by Pakistan” and is excluded from the Constitution.²

Those, who during 1947 favored Gilgit Baltistan’s illegal occupation by Pakistan, may have been persuaded to believe so. In the course of time, however, the supporters of Pakistan’s ideology in Gilgit Baltistan, especially after the late 1970s came to realize that they had been deluded and that not only were their identities under threat but their lives were also in danger. Pakistan has kept this region in a political and constitutional limbo on the ground that it was linked to the Kashmir problem. On the other hand, it has given a country like China, a free hand to consolidate its foothold in Gilgit Baltistan.

The region, which is around 72,496 sq kilometers, was known as the Northern Areas during British rule and thereafter till 2009, it was renamed as Gilgit-Baltistan through the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order, 2009. It was one of the few cosmetic changes that were done to the occupied territories in the last seven decades. Neither was the region given the status of a province, nor was it provided the long-sought-after autonomy that the indigenous populace demanded from the federal government, showing the ambiguity and colonial mindset that the

Pakistani authorities maintained regarding the region. Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan decided not to introduce democratic structures and the region was governed by the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs from Karachi.³ Even after elections in 2009, the situation is not much different, where majority of the policies of the region are decided by the federal government, rather than by the elected representatives from the region. Many people from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) opined that this Order of the federal government was a ploy to divide the disputed territory into two parts.⁴

Officially, Pakistan has always rejected calls for further integration of G-B on the grounds that it would prejudice its international obligations over the Kashmir dispute. The federal government seems to take immature steps while making attempts to bring symmetry in the governing structure.

On 29 August 2009, the Government of Pakistan announced the “Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order 2009.” The Order, officially published on 9 September 2009, built upon the previous reforms of 1970, 1975 and 1994, introduced administrative, political, financial and judicial reforms. The 2009 Order establishes the following system of government for Gilgit-Baltistan:

- a. A Gilgit-Baltistan Council;
- b. A Legislative Assembly;
- c. The Government, consisting of the Chief Minister (elected by the Legislative Assembly from among its members by majority vote) and the Ministers; and
- d. A Governor, appointed by the President of Pakistan on the advice of the Prime Minister.

However, to date, due to the lack of a constitutional base, all judicial matters, which are dealt with in military tribunals in G-B, are dealt with on the basis of political motives. The military tribunals, having two years tenure, were established through an executive order. The use of executive orders to extend and entrench the occupation in G-B has a long history. In the past, Islamabad used them to establish the draconian Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), General Zia’s martial law, Sharia courts as well as anti-terrorism courts in Gilgit Baltistan. Executive orders are issued routinely to appropriate local resources without due process or compensation. They are also used for stationing military garrisons in the region in direct violation of the UN Resolutions on Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. Elections were held in G-B for the first time in 2009, with the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) candidate Syed Mehdi Shah winning it. Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) won eleven out of the 23 seats, Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) won one, PML (N) won

two, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) won one, the PML (Q) won one and four seats were won by independent candidates.⁵

Assembly has 33 seats in total out of which 24 are directly contested. The present elections were scheduled to take place on June 8th 2015, but All Pakistan Muslim League (APML) Chief Coordinator, Ahmed Raza Khan Kasuri as well as Muhammad Ali Akhtar, former PPP minister, challenged the G-B Legislative Assembly elections by filing a petition in the Pakistani Supreme Court, declaring the notification to the elections to be unlawful.⁶

However, the elections were held on the due date and the results showed the consistency that political analysts were expecting. As per unofficial sources, PML-N secured 12 of the 24 constituencies, followed by two seats each for Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Majlis-e-Wahdat-e-Muslimeen and the independent candidates. One seat each was grabbed by Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam and Islami Tehreek.⁷

Though there were allegations of rigging and many questioned the neutrality of the electoral process, the coming in of PML(N) was not unexpected. Some analysts mentioned about the corruption and the violence that took place during the last government under PPP leader, Syed Mehdi Shah, which pushed the people away from PPP, but it can also be easily surmised that when the federal government is being run by Sharif's PML(N), and G-B is run by the offices in Islamabad and Karachi, how will PPP be able to muster support to form a government? It was the same picture in 2009, when PPP was in power. The Chairman of the United Kashmir Peoples' National Party (based in Canada), Mumtaz Khan stated before the elections that "If you look at the history of the past elections in G-B or Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), it always follows the party that is in Islamabad. The same party normally wins and forms the government there. However, military input is always sought, especially with respect to the nomination of CM there."⁸

Strategic Perspective of the Region

The Karakoram highway has remained important for G-B. After the highway was completed in 1985, the former Northern Areas (present G-B) were divided into five districts, viz. *Gilgit*, *Ghizer*, *Diamar*, *Skardu* and *Ghangche*. The role of China in G-B has remained significant not only because of the construction of the Karakoram highway, but for multiple other factors. The issue of the Uighur refugees, also known as Kashgar, who have settled in G-B after fleeing from the Xinjiang province in China for the fear of being persecuted;⁹ the closeness with the Siachen Glacier; and G-B turning into a new haven for the Afghan Taliban in the region are reasons that make the region strategically important for Chinese policymakers.

Three famous mountain ranges, the Himalayas, Karakoram and Hindukush converge in this region. The Chinese are building three mega dams near this area of convergence. The rivers, which run through G-B, have the potential to generate over 30,000 MW of electricity. The largest of these is the Indus, which is also a primary source of water for Pakistan. Dams under construction and consideration will, however, inundate vast sections of the densely populated valleys.¹⁰

The construction of the Diamer-Bhasha Dam on the River Indus commenced on October 18, 2011. On completion, this will be the highest Roller Compacted Concrete (RCC) dam in the world and is slated to produce 4,500 MW of electricity, store 8,500,000 acre-feet (10.5 km) of water for Pakistan that would be used for irrigation and drinking. The estimated cost of the project is in excess of USD 11 billion with an estimated completion time of 12 years. Its location in a highly seismic zone is a source of great concern to the local population, who will face all the adverse consequences of construction, while all the benefits will flow to the people living in Punjab and Sindh. Skardu town, which has a population of over 100,000 people, is overlooked by the Satpara Dam. This project, which commenced in April 2003, is slated to produce 17.6 MW of power. This dam is opposed by local journalists and activists due to its faulty design and material use, which could lead to a burst affecting the inhabitants of Skardu Valley.¹¹

To date, dozens of locals in G-B face sedition charges, arrest and torture for resisting Chinese mining projects for gems, uranium, gold, copper and heavy metals. There are complaints against Chinese firms for denying jobs and financial compensation and damaging farmlands and infrastructure. Many accuse the China Roads and Bridges Corporation, a Chinese firm currently blacklisted in Turkey and Malaysia, of using devastating environmental practices in its expansion of the Karakoram highway in Gilgit-Baltistan.¹² Local newspaper, *Daily Baadeshimal* stated that the Chinese firms violate local laws and have failed to contribute to regional development.¹³ However, Huang Xilian, Deputy Director-General of the Asian Affairs of the Foreign Ministry of China, stated that these “projects are not political projects. They are all for the livelihood of people. There is no commercial action by China in that part of the region,” which seems to overlook the plight of the common people of G-B.¹⁴

International analyst, Selig Harrison stated that Pakistan has de facto handed over G-B to China. “Many of the PLA soldiers entering Gilgit-Baltistan are expected to work on the railroad. Some are extending the Karakoram highway, built to link China’s Sinkiang Province with Pakistan. Others are working on dams, expressways and other projects.” He further said that “mystery surrounds the construction of 22

tunnels in secret locations where Pakistanis are barred. Tunnels would be necessary for a projected gas pipeline from Iran to China that would cross the Himalayas through Gilgit. But they could also be used as missile storage sites... Until recently, the PLA construction crews lived in temporary encampments and went home after completing their assignments. Now they are building big residential enclaves, clearly designed for a long-term presence.”¹⁵

The presence of the People’s Liberation Army during the making of the highway had created serious reservations not only in the Pakistani neighborhood, but even the people of G-B had doubts of getting annexed by the Chinese. The purpose of the highway was clear to most foreign analysts as in 2010 only, it was stated that “China deployed an infantry battalion of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) at the 15,397-foot Khunjerab Pass on the Karakoram highway... for the security of its workers engaged in building a railroad. This railroad will eventually connect Xinjiang to the port of Gwadar in Balochistan, Pakistan,”¹⁶ which remains the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of today.

Strangely, both China and Pakistan have shown concern over the violence and uprisings in Balochistan that might hinder the CPEC project, and the nine battalion protective forces that have been designated by the Pakistani Army, are mostly for Balochistan only. No such apprehension about the rising sectarian violence or anti-Chinese sentiments in the local populace has been shown regarding G-B, as the PLA, in cohort with the military tribunal, expects to suppress such voices of revolt and rebellion easily.

Gilgit Baltistan: Conflictual Perspective

The diverse communities of G-B have lived together in relative harmony.¹⁷ Ethnic and tribal identities and social ties developed over centuries were valued more than sectarian affiliations.¹⁸ G-B has a Shia majority in its estimated 1.3 million populace. The rest of Pakistan, having Sunni majority, instigated sectarian violence in the region from the times of Zia-ul Haq, when he introduced the ‘Sunni Deobandi’ Islam in the region. Sipah-e-Sahaba, a Sunni Deobandi militant group along with other Sunni groups, in cohort with the State, started making active incursions in the region, ‘destroying crops and houses, lynching and burning hundreds of people to death.’¹⁹ Some analysts have even suggested that such sectarian violence was used as a political weapon by the State, which was facilitated only after the construction of the Karakoram highway that connected the previously isolated region with China and mainland Pakistan.²⁰ They further stated, “While unlocking Gilgit-Baltistan from its physical isolation and ushering in economic opportunity, the highway has also increased Gilgit-Baltistan’s vulnerability to new threats, such as the influx of illegal

weapons, drugs and intolerant attitude from the south, which has changed the demography of Gilgit and other towns.”²¹

Initially, sectarian tension was limited to Gilgit town, with religious clerics shouting insults at each other from their respective sect’s mosques, and adrenaline-induced fights among the Shia and Sunni youth, especially during the Muharram processions, which were quickly brought under control by local elders. The first case of sectarian violence resulting in the loss of human life occurred in 1975, when the Shia Muharram procession in Gilgit town was fired at from the Sunni mosque. The subsequent arrest of the Sunni Qazi (religious leader) caused riots in the Sunni areas of the Indus valley, south of Gilgit, and in the valleys of God, Darel, and Tangir. Sunnis from these regions threatened to attack Gilgit.²²

The next major clash took place in 1983, triggered by a dispute over the sighting of the moon—the time to end the month-long fasting of Ramadan and start Eid festivities. Based on the declaration of moon sighting by their religious leaders, the Shia community ended fasting and started celebrations, while the Sunni community was still fasting. The disagreement was significant because Muslims are forbidden to fast on the day of Eid. Tensions rose quickly and resulted in violent clashes in Gilgit town, killing two people and injuring several others.²³

Since then, many internal and external factors have contributed to providing a fertile breeding ground for the rise of sectarian conflicts in G-B. Some of the internal factors include erosion of traditional culture, especially music and dance; the growing social and economic disparities; and unemployment among the youth. Internal rural to urban migration has also changed the demographic composition of Gilgit and other towns. The disputed status of G-B and prolonged direct rule from Islamabad has not only resulted in limited space for political participation and blunted institutional development, but also prevented the development of local resources, such as hydropower and minerals. A bulging population and lack of employment opportunities also appear to be contributing to sectarian violence and crime. Among the external factors are increased exposure to intolerant attitudes from mainland Pakistan, as well as spillover effects of extremism and sectarian violence.²⁴

The Chief Minister elected in 2009, Syed Mehdi Shah, though himself belonged to the Shia community, failed miserably to quell the rampant sectarian violence that kept on erupting in the region. Though he was elected by the people of the region, he had neither any power in choosing his Chief of Police, nor could he ‘guide’ the Frontier Corps, G-B Scouts and other paramilitary forces in checking the rising violence, as they followed orders from Rawalpindi. He rather chose to protect his

own future after his Chief Ministership, keeping himself financially secure and allowing himself to enjoy all the perks associated with Chief Ministership.

The Washington-based Gilgit-Baltistan National Congress (GBNC) points out that sectarian division has been the chosen instrument of political and administrative management in G-B and in Shia-dominated restive regions, like the valley of Parachinar (in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). This policy dates back to the days of military dictator, Gen Zia-ul-Haq, whose successors, according to the GNBC, have fine-tuned the policy to achieve demographic change by forcing the Shia majority to quit these strategic areas.²⁵

Way Ahead

Gilgit and Baltistan have turned into a strategic hotspot not only for India and Pakistan but as well as China and some major world powers. With the rising sectarian conflict and violence, there does not seem any peaceful solution to the problems that the region faces. With the apathy that has been displayed by the Pakistani federal government, and the complications that have increased with the inclusion of China in the strategic fora, the issue of Gilgit and Baltistan and the plight of the people in the region will continue. As long as Pakistan is unstable, any call for autonomy and better governance is bound to be overshadowed by the gravity of the overall situation of Pakistan. The reverse, however, is also true: as long as the situation in Pakistan is unstable, the international focus will remain on this part of the globe. The development potential of Gilgit-Baltistan is huge in terms of its water resources for irrigation and hydropower, mineral wealth, tourism, high-value horticulture, and opportunities for trade and transit. If developed, this potential could usher in prosperity for everyone along the ancient Silk Route. It would require a concerted effort, almost a revolution to bring about a change in the region today- and this change is required at various levels. It is high time that Gilgit Baltistan and its people get a say in their future.

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