* **A collective vision for Gilgit-Baltistan**
* August 22, 2019

[Amir Hussain](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/amir-hussain)

Gilgit-Baltistan has recently seen peace, tranquility and social harmony after being plagued by sectarian violence for nearly three decades.

Many people think that this peace and tranquility is schematic and short-lived rather than being systemic and long term in nature. Schematic because the peace and harmony has been attained without much political efforts at reconstructing the institutional structures and economic basis of sectarianism. Critics also believe that this peace and interfaith harmony is founded on a cosmetic political arrangement because of the mounting pressure to provide a safe and secure political environment at the gateway of CPEC.

Whatever may be the causes of the peace, it is a positive development and now is the time to initiate the institutional reforms to reconstruct an inclusive political system. One thing is certain from the political developments of the recent past: peaceful coexistence can be ensured with more endeavors by setting forth the long-term strategic objectives of inclusive economic and political integration of marginalized areas.

The conventional paradigm of administrative control should be replaced with political integration and participation. Conflict management is the fundamental art of constructive politics of engagement and mainstreaming of dissenting voices rather than persecuting them and then deepening the political crisis. Constructive politics strives to minimize the gap between state and society through engagement of divergent interests in the larger goal of national building. The most important and time-tested political instrument of streamlining the divergent subnational interests is the propagation of the idea of citizenship.

The idea of citizenship cuts across all other diverging political objectives and provides an even keel for everyone to engage in the agenda of nation building. Politically oppressive and economically weak states become hollow from inside without the support of their own people. The real strength of a state, therefore, is its people as responsible citizens who can contribute in attaining the political and strategic interests of the state. An oppressive state treats its people as objects of control not as partners and citizens which, in turn, gives birth to a deeper crisis of the political legitimacy of the state.

In postcolonial states like Pakistan, the idea of citizenship could not take roots and therefore there has always been trust deficit between the state and its people which at times leads to insurgencies, arm conflicts and civil wars. The state has not been able to build a consensual national narrative on its political, economic and strategic policies.

There has been very little space for critical perspectives and the expression of citizens’ concerns over key national policy initiatives; this has further aggravated the mistrust between the state and its citizens. The state’s ability to demonstrate the will to align it with the popular aspiration of nationhood has been shaken by the politics of regionalism in Pakistan.

Politics of regionalism has, at times, been triggered inadvertently by the state policy of controlling the peripheries rather than mainstreaming their political aspirations. The constitutional limbo of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) stands out as a political case study of administrative control rather than engagement.

Had there been the propagation of the idea of citizenship as a core political principle of engagement, the state could easily have attained its strategic objective in GB without allowing sectarian violence to erupt. Even the dissenting nationalist groups in GB can easily be mainstreamed without recourse to incarceration and persecution – simply by engaging them as citizens rather than relegating them to ‘enemies of the state’. Failure of the state in dealing with sectarian violence is the political caution to rethink the strategy to tackle the emerging nationalist groups in GB.

The sectarian politics which sharply divided the social fabric along parochial religious ideologies produced a whole generation which believed that violence was legitimate to protect the faith. Sectarian politics was formalized as a political relationship among diverse faith groups when extremists from the tribal areas of the then NWFP province invaded Gilgit town in 1988 during the dictatorial regime of General Zia. Armed with weapons and enjoying logistical and financial assistance, they attacked villages upon villages and committed unspeakable atrocities. This was indeed one of those unknown tragedies among many other national tragedies inflicted upon the people of Pakistan under the dictatorship of General Zia.

While the wounds of this tragedy were not fully healed yet, Gilgit-Baltistan saw another spell of sectarian violence in the 1990s and the following two decades with the implicit acquiescence of state institutions. Religious clerics instigated sectarian violence through hate speeches and Gilgit town was soaked in blood where armed sectarian groups wreaked havoc in society. Passengers on buses travelling on the Karakorum Highway between Rawalpindi and Gilgit-Baltistan were brutally murdered by fully trained and armed killers.

The impact of this long-term sectarian violence has become visible today as a political normal as all government and non-government institutions in GB are now divided on sectarian lines. Though armed conflict has gone down in the face of CPEC, social relations and political perception of domination are still shaped by a sectarian mindset.

Decades of sectarian violence has created a huge political and social gap between diverse communities living side by side in GB. Cultural and religious diversity has become a political weakness because it has further sharpened the differences cultivated through institutionalization of sectarianism. Failure to piece together the political ideals of diverse faith groups is also a failure of crafting a collective political vision for GB in terms of its status in the larger Kashmir dispute.

While the Kashmir dispute is entering a new political phase with the revoking of Article 370 of Indian constitution by the Modi government, the place and significance of GB in the larger scheme of things looks murky. While Indian-held Kashmir is being annexed with India against the wishes of the people, the political case of GB needs to be redefined in this new emerging reality. The people of GB by and large consider their region a separate entity from Kashmir for they won their freedom from the Dogra Raj of Kashmir on November 1, 1947 and voluntarily ceded their status as a free state to join Pakistan.

When the Dogra Raj was defeated by the people of GB without any external support, the then political leadership of the newly created state wrote a series of letters addressed to Mr Jinnah that they wanted to join Pakistan. As the content of the letters written to Jinnah show, the political leadership of the new state of Gilgit considered their territory as an independent state. The letters were written by the rulers of this new state with the desire to join Pakistan not as part of the Kashmir dispute but as an independent territory. In response to those letters an administrator was assigned by the government of Pakistan to oversee the administration of the area on behalf of Pakistan

The state must pay heed to this narrative which is fairly rooted in history; more importantly, nationalist groups also have consensus on this narrative. Engaging the dissenting nationalist groups would be the first step towards finding an amicable political solution to what seems to be an emerging political crisis in GB.

The writer is a social development and policy adviser, and a freelance columnist based in Islamabad.

Email: ahnihal@yahoo.com

Twitter: @AmirHussain76