**[GB: a dream unfulfilled](https://www.dawn.com/news/1659943/gb-a-dream-unfulfilled)**

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The writer, a former IGP Sindh, belongs to Gilgit-Baltistan.

ON Nov 1, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan celebrate their independence day. The latter marks the day on which the Gilgit Scouts led by their local officers ousted the Dogra rulers in 1947. Following the arrest of governor Ghansara Singh, the independence of GB was declared. The scouts were supported by the civilian populace which had been aware of the momentum in colonial India for a separate homeland for the Muslims. Hence even in this remote region, the locals viewed the overthrow of Dogra rule as a historic opportunity to join their compatriots in India and strive for a separate homeland.

With the fall of the Kashmir raj giving rise to a vacuum in governance, the leaders of the uprising established an independent state of GB and unconditionally acceded to Pakistan. These trusting people acceded in good faith, firmly believing that their dark night of oppression had ended, and that they had become free citizens of Pakistan. Similar requests for accession to Pakistan by the autonomous states of Hunza, Ghizer, Punial and Nagar followed. Little did they know that it was the beginning of another dark era. While the valiant warriors and the civil population were locked in combat with Kashmir state’s regular army and the entire region was afire, the Pakistan government treated their accession as a trivial development. The area was not even accorded the status of a regular district. Instead, it was treated as political agency akin to the unruly tribal areas then bordering KP.

The status of the region was further degraded when Sardar Muhammad Alam Khan, a tehsildar of the revenue department of KP, was posted as political agent and tasked with administering an area of 73,000 square kilometres and a million-strong population. Thus, this vast area was entrusted to a junior revenue functionary. Due to his limited administrative experience and vision, he was instrumental in promulgating the black laws of the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) in this region. With one stroke of the pen, the local population was deprived of freedom of speech and political activity. He also persisted with the Dogras’ repressive practices of agriculture taxation and begar (forced free labor) as well as the autocratic rule of small autonomous jagirs.

After two years of this flawed governance, without consulting the locals, the government signed the infamous Karachi Agreement 1949 with the Kashmiri leadership surrendering its control to the federation. This act sidestepped citizenship rights for GB. To exacerbate the situation, the redundant Amritsar Treaty of 1846 between the British Raj and Hari Singh was used to define the region as disputed territory. What followed was a purely bureaucratic dispensation whereby all executive and judicial powers were concentrated in a single civil servant designated as political resident responsible only to the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs. This form of unaccountable governance continued till 1973 when the PPP abolished the FCR and local autonomous principalities.

The inordinate delay in according provisional provincial status to GB is leading to frustration.

Between 1994 to 2018, the government resorted to presidential decrees to implement so-called political reform by issuing eight administrative orders for quelling the residents’ demand for the integration of GB into Pakistan. The linchpin of these rationalisations was the dubious linkage of GB to the Kashmir issue, and the palliatives were cosmetic decrees of self-rule reminiscent of the imperial ‘constitutional reforms’ envisaged for India by the British Raj.

Dismayed by the broken promises of various governments, civil society petitioned the Supreme Court of Pakistan, leading to the 1999 verdict which asserted that the locals were “citizens of Pakistan for all intents and purposes” and could “invoke constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights”. The Supreme Court has re-endorsed this judgement.

Under great political pressure, the PML-N government notified a committee under Mr Sartaj Aziz to examine the GB issue. After two years of deliberation, the committee submitted a comprehensive report in 2017, proposing a provisional provincial status for GB on the basis of its assessment of the implications for Kashmir issue. The Supreme Court also endorsed the recommendations of the committee. However, rather than demonstrating compliance, the federation issued a new decree (which remains in force) in 2018 that violated the court’s decision.

The demand for provisional provincial status is to ensure the participation of the GB government at all forums wherein decisions with a direct bearing on the daily lives of GB residents who are Pakistanis for all intents and purposes (if not yet constitutionally) are made. Time is running out for the region as great changes are taking place and GB now has captured international attention. According to media reports, the government has finalised draft constitutional amendments to confer on GB provisional provincial status along with all the privileges and obligations of a federating unit. Sources have revealed that the Foreign Office, only to show their presence, is objecting to an amendment in Article 1 of the Constitution for defining the status of GB and insisting that the proposed change be incorporated in Article 258. Practically this may serve the purpose, but it does cast into doubt the sincerity of the federation.

In view of the growing demand for constitutional rights by the locals, urgent action by the government of Pakistan is imperative, if not for complying with democratic norms then for safeguarding their own interests due to the following factors:

1. Strategic location of GB in the ‘great game’.
2. Importance of GB as a direct gateway to CPEC with potential for another route. Any political unrest can imperil this fortune-transforming project for Pakistan.
3. Vast mineral resources and hydropower potential that can help the region generate energy for the country.
4. In the last elections to the local assembly, all political parties promised provisional provincial status to GB. They will now be unable to oppose any legislation in this regard.
5. The inordinate delay in according provisional provincial status is leading to frustration amongst the residents, thus providing leverage to hostile elements that want to breed dissent by exploiting GB’s undefined status.

It is time to forge ahead with the integration of GB as a provisional province before these vested interests once more derail this positive development and imperil the outcome for GB and Pakistan.

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