**[GB: a lost opportunity](https://www.dawn.com/news/1691071/gb-a-lost-opportunity)**

[Afzal Ali Shigri](https://www.dawn.com/authors/4611/afzal-ali-shigri)

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

SUBSEQUENT to their liberation from Dogra rule, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan unconditionally joined Pakistan. However, based on a controversial agreement with the Kashmiri leadership, the government of Pakistan linked the accession of GB with the Kashmir dispute and governed the area through a bureaucratic arrangement that excluded the locals. The unilateral declaration of GB as disputed territory not only violated the residents’ fundamental rights but also disregarded the UN resolution mandating control of the disputed territories via self-rule for routine governance.

**Read**: [*GB Assembly demands provincial status for region*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1611658)

Under the impetus of popular demand for constitutional rights, the participation in government through executive orders was granted until a Supreme Court verdict led to the [creation of a representative assembly](https://www.dawn.com/news/1425749) invested with limited powers.

Due to growing demands for integration of Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan, and two earlier unanimous local assembly resolutions for absorbing GB as a federating unit in Pakistan, leading political parties, including the two major parties in the present coalition, scrambled to promise provincial status to the area ahead of fresh elections to the GB Assembly.

In response to an earlier petition, the honourable Supreme Court had already passed a landmark judgement in January 2019, ordering the conferral of constitutional status and rights on GB’s residents on a par with other citizens of Pakistan. To indicate its compliance, the PTI government even agreed on a draft law, submitting it to court for immediate implementation. But then the PTI government chose to execute a U-turn and file a petition for revising the judgement. This ruinous petition effectively stonewalled the matter. However, facing political pressure, the PTI government then initiated action to grant GB provisional provincial status as recommended by the Sartaj Aziz Report commissioned by the earlier PML-N government. This also aligned with the aspirations of GB residents as reflected clearly in the resolutions of the local elected assembly.

Despite all promises, little progress has been made on a provincial status for Gilgit-Baltistan.

The expectation was that PTI would immediately move a bill for constitutional amendment, thus enabling the provisional integration of GB as a province until the resolution of the Kashmir issue. However, the PTI again chose to procrastinate, and in lieu of legislation sent the proposed draft constitutional amendment to the GB government for endorsement despite pre-existing GB Assembly resolutions endorsing the desire for provisional provincial status. This uncalled-for process wasted valuable time and deferred the introduction of the constitutional amendment bill.

**Read**: [*GB as a province?*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1581166)

GB’s chief minister appreciated the significance of the proposed integration of the region in the federation with representation in parliament and in all statutory forums as a federating unit. This was however undermined by the party’s own local chapter. Unfortunately, the chief minister could not resist their pressure and formed a transitional committee to review the amendment. He failed to anticipate the response of his party members, blinded by their petty and selfish political interests. From the start, the members of the assembly nominated to this committee have wanted to thwart the acceptance of the proposed constitutional package, unless their egoistical interests were safeguarded.

It was beyond their vision to be part of “a landmark achievement and the highest watermark for the people of GB since their accession to Pakistan”. They could not comprehend that its implementation would “go a long way in appropriately realising the objectives of the entire exercise for the benefit of the people of GB in particular, and Pakistan in general”.

Instead of looking at the big picture and understanding the implications of GB acquiring the status of a province with all its attendant privileges, rights and responsibilities, they advanced caveats on minor issues falling within the normal legal structure of the country. Their major demands are summarised here:

— Insertion of special provision for tax exemption in the Constitution for the region refusing to accept the applicability of tax laws for such concessions.

— Protection of tenure of the present assembly created under an executive order by the president after integration of the region as a province. (Strangely, the members wanted automatic protection of their tenure, also desiring this assembly to elect the constitutionally created Senate members. Unfortunately, they failed to understand the legal impossibility of providing a legitimate arrangement of this nature.)

— Constitutional protection to subsidies granted through administrative orders and normal laws, and service issues and other financial matters, ignoring the fact that provincial status would inevitably confer enhanced legislative powers on GB, thus enabling the provincial government to address most of these matters. Representation in parliament was key to taking up any matter provided within the ambit of the federal laws.

A constitutional amendment for provincial status is not a governance order. Rather, it is a binding legal structure ensuring fundamental rights equal to those granted to other citizens of Pakistan, including representation in the highest legislative institution, participation in all statutory bodies where important decisions are taken for the region and protection of an independent legal structure under the Supreme Court of Pakistan. All governance matters such as taxation, service matters and subsidies can be addressed by the elected regional representatives to parliament, and, for most, under the 18th Amendment. The federating unit is the final authority on most important matters.

**Read**: [*‘Almost’ Pakistan: Gilgit-Baltistan in a constitutional limbo*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1198967)

The status of a province with representation in parliament not only creates a legal linkage between GB and the federation but also excises all impediments for local and international investments, thus lending new impetus to CPEC in the region. CPEC will catalyse economic development, alleviate poverty and generate employment opportunities in the region. The harnessing of its natural resources, particularly hydropower, has the potential to transform GB into a powerhouse for the entire country, thus ensuring affordable and clean energy and resultant prosperity for Pakistan.

The coalition government should take up this legislation on a priority basis and not hunker down for the inevitable but avoidable protests in this sensitive region which are likely to ensue if a game of wait-and-see is played. People are losing their patience with several unfulfilled pledges. Decisive action is good not only for GB but also for Pakistan.

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