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**GB: elections and leadership**

For the sake of Pakistan, the people of Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir have made tremendous sacrifices and have kept alive, with their blood, the freedom movement for their emancipation from India’s occupation and state terrorism.

Similarly, the love of the people of Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) for Pakistan is second to none. Unfortunately, we have failed to give them their due constitutional rights and financial resources at par with the other provinces in the country.

Although Azad Jammu and Kashmir has its own president and prime minister, they are practically just nominal heads of state and government and do not have the power of even a federal secretary. Likewise, the government of Gilgit-Baltistan too is toothless.

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan have been demanding a separate province, but we have been reminded for seventy years that a separate provincial status for GB will undermine our case for and position on Occupied Jammu and Kashmir. However, rationally, the best option was that we should have made GB part of Pakistan in every aspect from day one. We should have empowered them financially, politically, and administratively – which would have also provided an incentive to the people of Occupied Kashmir. But now, after seventy years of myopic policies and criminal negligence, and when Modi annexed Occupied Jammu and Kashmir, we have come up with the idea of giving provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan.

In 2009, the then government of the PPP passed the Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order under which the people of GB were granted some constitutional rights. But the then establishment did not allow GB to become a province. In 2018, during the PML-N government, the constitutional committee under Sartaj Aziz recommended a provisional provincial status for GB – but it was again turned down on the pretext of the possible implication for the Kashmir cause. Now the situation is that the highest administrative posts in GB, like chief secretary and inspector general of police, are filled by outside officers – primarily from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The economic and strategic importance of GB has increased tremendously in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – the game-changer project. Unfortunately, though, the then PML-N government in the centre and the military leadership did not give GB its due share in CPEC and ignored it much like Balochistan.

It was expected that the PTI government would address the grievances of the people of GB, but they have also ignored GB completely in their two-year tenure and have failed to address GB's genuine issues. But now, when the time came for elections in GB, PM Imran Khan also finally remembered GB. For the sake of political gains and victory, Imran Khan announced a provincial status for GB without consultation and mutual consensus. This irresponsible move by the prime minister for short-term political gains was inevitably opposed by the Kashmiri and national leadership.

The PM also gave Ali Amin Khan Gandapur and others the task of conquering GB for the elections. The tactics used in the 2018 elections began to be used by the government. I pleaded time and again that, due to the sensitive nature of Gilgit-Baltistan, the usual election manipulation tactics should be avoided. However, first the PTI was artificially created in GB, then electables were picked from other political parties and finally the election process made the electables win. GB’s Election Commission was effectively rendered useless. The 2018 election tactics were also used in different ways during the vote count in the GB election.

Generally, every political government in Pakistan is powerless so why would the GB government be any different. In fact, the political government of Gilgit-Baltistan has always been very weak and considered to be a tool of the federal government. No one can gain absolute power there merely through a political government. No matter who is in power, practically GB is controlled by the federal government sitting in Islamabad.

This time, though, the elections in Gilgit-Baltistan had assumed more importance for Pakistan's security and the Kashmir cause of liberation. It was due to this fact that we were repeatedly pleading to those who run the country to let the GB election remain an election instead of turning it into a selection. Our humble plea was based on multiple reasons.

First, the enemies of Pakistan and China have dangerous designs on GB due to its strategic location and status as an entry point for CPEC. Some people in GB were already complaining about our political behavior and indifferent attitude towards the region. Further annoying anyone in GB is not in Pakistan's national interests. The dissenting voices and the grievances of the people of GB can only be addressed by real representatives. But if we impose and install an artificial leadership in GB, then a PTM type of movement could easily emerge there.

Second, GB has sectarian fault-lines and sectarian riots and clashes have happened in the past due to conspiracies by those against the country. These fault-lines could be exploited by our enemies; India is always ready to ignite a flash of sectarian violence and bring instability in the region. Former CM Hafeez-ur-Rehman maintained a peaceful environment in the area and very skilfully handled and controlled the sectarian issue in GB. The PPP also played a very important role during its tenure in overcoming the issue. Now the million-dollar question is: will the nominees of Ali Amin Gandapur and Zulfi Bukhari and the new artificial representatives be able to overcome this serious problem?

Third, the issue of Gilgit-Baltistan is linked with the issue of Occupied Jammu and Kashmir. There is no doubt that the majority of the people of GB have been demanding provincial status. In the past, I had also advocated their cause of a province. But when Modi annexed Occupied Jammu and Kashmir, I gave up the idea for the time being. The reason is that the Kashmiri Hurriyat leadership does not support the idea; they think that such a move at this stage is undermining their stance and the cause of Kashmir's liberation.

People on both sides, Occupied and Azad Kashmir, are hopeless and highly frustrated at this stage. The unilateral decision by the government of Pakistan regarding Gilgit-Baltistan – without taking them in confidence and without taking all the national political leadership in confidence – will further hurt their sentiments.

If a genuine and real leadership had come into power in GB through a fair and transparent election, then making GB a provisional province through mutual consultation would have been an easy task. But now the controversial election in GB has made the task very difficult. At this stage, when there is already a controversial government in Islamabad, another controversial government in GB would not be able to handle the issue properly. Besides the people of Kashmir, Pakistan's mainstream political parties will also not cooperate.

The PTI won 10 seats in the GB election and the PPP and the PML-N have rejected the election results. But in reality, the PPP and the PML-N won the GB politics; the PPP especially dominated the show. The way Bilawal Bhutto took camp in GB and the way Maryam Nawaz came and addressed large gatherings created a sense of belongingness in the hearts of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. Moreover, their issues were highlighted by Pakistan's media.

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