**GB s quest**

B Y A F Z A L A L I S H I G R I 2020-12-06

GILGIT-BALTISTAN is a feast for the soul with its lofty mountains, shimmering lakes and green vales. It also boasts a rich and diverse culture. Some two million residents, following all major sects of Islam, live in this region. Six languages are spoken here. Despite this diversity, they are closely bonded with a history of shared privations and a collective desire to integrate into Pakistan as a federating unit. These two factors enabled them to wrest control of the region in 1947 from Dogra rule and hand it over to Pakistan.  
  
But such diversity can also breed tussles in politics as evident in the political activities in GB for elections to the local Legislative Assembly and the formation of a regional government. At every election, this social diversity challenges the federal government which is keen to win the elections to reaffirm its credibility.  
  
Historically, the party in power at the centre has won comfortably. The PPP in 2009 and PML-N in 2015 were elected with a clear majority that enabled them to form the government without coalition alliances.  
  
Although this empowered them to function unimpeded, they failed to address some key issues. In the recent poll, PTI got only 10 seats out of 24, with six independent members; it was able to form the government only by inducting independents four of whom were discarded PTI workers and had won on their own strength and are dif ficult to please.  
  
PTI also opted for electable candidates instead of party workers, which negates the principles of a sound democracy.  
  
After intense negotiations, PTI has formed the government with Barrister Khalid Khursheed, an educated young politician, as GB`s chief minister and 15 ministers and two advisers. The government has preferred political expediency over merit and included the entire treasury bench in the cabinet. Ignoring fundamental democratic values particularly given conflicting interests in the local social structure was not advisable. When key decisions are needed, a government built on bargaining and political engineering is bound to falter as it has very limited room for manoeuvre.  
  
The new government faces daunting challenges which if addressed wisely may also present opportunities for changes that can transform local lives and catalyse economic revival in Pakistan.  
  
The most important issues requiring decisive action are given here.  
  
Granting provincial status to GB to empower the neglected region as it will now have a say in national policy formulation through the presence of GB representatives in all institutional governance forums. This formal legal linkage is vital for developmentof CPEC and other mega projects in the region that must be operationalised through international funding. The latter cannot be arranged in an area with an undefined constitutional status. All major parties including PTI have voiced their support for such an arrangement. Even the establishment has gained a better awareness of the long-term impact of this issue and is on board. Delays are likely to cause unrest as thereis already a trust deficit as seen in the deviation from the historical voting pattern where PTI, with its propensity for U-turns, is concerned.  
  
Several unresolved matters related to the Bhasha-Diamer dam need to be addressed urgently. This concerns resettlement of people removed from the dam area, the settlement of tenants who had no property rights but had been cultivating the land for centuries and the development of a new township for the displaced urban population.  
  
Lack of employment of local candidates in project development, despite availabilityof qualified local manpower. Hiring is based on domicile quota at the national level, practically denying employment to the locals.  
  
Ownership rights of locals to the land including the common land as well as grazing area that should not beacquired without compensation through immediate legislation by the new assembly.  
  
Resettlement of the people dislocated due to border conflicts between India and Pakistan and opening of the road with Kargil for reuniting divided families and promoting business and tourism for the area in line with the policy for the international border in other parts of the country and AJK.  
  
Fair share in CPEC and representation of GB as a province on the joint committee with China formed for the selection and implementation of projects.  
  
Construction of an alternate CPEC route from Maztagh pass following the now abandoned road from Yarakand through Shigar valley for ensuring a sustainable land route.  
  
GB residents have high expectations from the new government which, as the changed pattern of elections shows, has been put on notice as people await long-desired constitutional change because the current system has hampered progress.  The writer; a former IGP Sindh, belongs to Gilgit-Baltistan.