**Gilgit-Baltistan and the question of status**

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Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) is a diverse region and a distinct political entity, formerly known by different political adages, such as the Northern Areas of Pakistan and Gilgit Agency. This geo-strategic area shares borders with regional heavyweights China and India. Abundant in natural resources, GB’s trade potential through the Karakoram Highway replicates the ancient Silk Road. Then there are the unique ethno-linguistic formations.

The aforementioned has led to considerable attention from social science researchers and policy experts. Yet few have tackled the constitutional and political limbo that still lingers seven decades after Partition. On the one hand, the people of GB have expressed concern about protection of indigenous property and resources. On the other, they seek resolution to this prolonged ‘identity crisis’. It seems, therefore, that this subaltern population continues to live on a “political island” — to quote indigenous historian Amanullah Khan — under ambivalent arrangements.

It is against this backdrop that the people of GB have long pursued provincial status for the area; thereby bringing it into the fold of legislation and governance and ensuring full constitutional rights. Pakistan’s latest commitment to integration came from the Sartaj Aziz committee in 2018, which envisaged provisional status. More recently, in March of this year, the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly voted towards this end, unanimously passing a resolution demanding the status of interim province. Chief Minister Khalid Khurshid acknowledged in a tweet the historical moment that fulfilled the aspirations of the people.

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Since the 1970s, the Pakistani state has implemented several governance reform packages in GB. Yet these proved rather slow for the local population’s liking. Nevertheless, evolving policies have been applied top-down through small grants and executive orders. By contrast, the interim status of province is deliberately framed as a bottom-up policy, since the decision was made at the local legislative assembly level. This narrative aims to counter Indian claims to Gilgit-Baltistan within the broader context of the Kashmir dispute. Until now, the Government of Pakistan had administered GB through its Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan. The extent of such institutional neglect of local autonomy may be measured by the fact GB was, until 1975, subject to the draconian British-era Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR). In fact, the area had to wait until the Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-governance) Order, 2009 was signed before enjoying any sort of legislative autonomy.

One must therefore ask: why now? That is, what are the underlying conditions giving impetus to the GB integration drive? Different factors are at play, CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) being the most obvious. Beijing has invested heavily in Pakistan. Thus, both countries’ economies will benefit from the security that ‘mainstreaming’ Gilgit-Baltistan will bring.

However, it remains paramount that Pakistan consider the UNCIP (UN Commission for India and Pakistan). To do otherwise would be seen as publicly abandoning the Kashmir cause. There is consensus among legal experts that the interim status of province will allow GB to come under the full jurisdiction of the Constitution; either by amending Article I or Articles 51 and 59, or all three. Thus the end goal, however it is achieved, is to make Gilgit-Baltistan the country’s fifth province, even if only temporarily. In this way, Pakistan’s stance on Kashmir will not be comprised.

Yet the impact on the local population as well as regional dynamics must be considered. Except for independent candidate Nawaz Khan Naji, all the members of the GB Assembly belong to national parties. The March resolution that won interim provincial status was moved by the newly-elected Chief Minister who belongs to PTI. Those who joined him in tabling the motion were: Opposition leader Amjad Hussain (PPP), Ghulam Muhammad (PML-N), representative, Muhammad Kazim (MWM, Majlis Wahdatul Muslimeen) and Rehmat Khaliq (JUI-F).

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan have been here before in one way or another. In August 2015, the local Assembly passed a resolution to grant the area special autonomous status while integrating into the federation. By October of the same year, then prime minister, Nawaz Sharif established the nine- member Sartaj Aziz constitutional committee as a panacea for all legal woes. The bottom line, then, like now, was to achieve the status of interim province. Thus, the approach to the GB ‘orphan child’ has never truly been a bottom-up demand as per the wishes of the local population and their democratic representatives.

The area is rich in natural resources — including water-resources which carry substantial hydroelectric potential — and is home to tourist hot-spots as well as precious gems. This allows Pakistanis to reap the benefits of trade and transit routes, trophy hunting, mineral exploration and honeymoons under the clearest of blue skies. Yet the realising of local aspirations is treated as mere tokenism. Thus subjecting the people of Gilgit-Baltistan to a perpetual state of liminality.

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