**Gilgit-Baltistan is rising**

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Monday, Nov 08, 2021

Gilgit-Baltistan is undergoing a change largely unnoticed by the mainstream media. The change is transformative for the region and its inhabitants. Given its peculiar location and the evolving situation in the region, particularly in Kashmir and now in Afghanistan, a reconsideration of the traditional attitude of indifference towards the region was imminent.

When the new government took charge of the affairs of the region the single most priority of the government was to secure enough funds for the financial year to kickstart development in the region. Chief Minister Khalid Khursheed and his team were successful in securing an unprecedented Rs370 billion worth of financial package for Gilgit-Baltistan. This package has allowed the new government to plan integrated development interventions, develop a roadmap for the infrastructural upliftment of the region, increase interconnectivity and ensure investment in health and education.

Building on this, the government of Gilgit-Baltistan under the leadership of the current chief minister has prioritised the resolution of the issues close to the hearts of the local population. The decades-old issue of the question of identity now seems to have finally settled for good. The chief minister and his team have launched coordinated efforts to engage the federal government on the vital issue of constitutional rights.

As I write this piece, he has finished his negotiations with stakeholders in Gilgit-Baltistan and Islamabad who have agreed in principle to constitutionally mainstream the region in the federation of Pakistan – something the current prime minister of Pakistan has long been advocating. The contours of the recent proposed integration of Gilgit-Baltistan centres around provincial autonomy, representation in the national legislature and in other allied federal entities which historically had no representation of the province.

The new government is also reconsidering the traditional approach to development in the region. The latest focus is on integrated human development and human security. The government is prioritising a micro-level development approach with a focus on pushing the region towards grassroots self-sufficiency and food security through investment in agriculture, small business, and rural development.

To this end, for the first time, a fully autonomous policy initiative has been created with a focus on guiding policymaking based on data and integrated human development priorities. Named after Soni Jawari, the 17th century ruler of Gilgit city, the centre is both a development towards liberalised policymaking and women’s empowerment – something the government is committed to ensure. This centre is tasked with devising policy initiatives, engaging donors, and suggesting interventions to promote inclusive and integrated development in the region.

There is also a realisation at the highest level to increase regional connectivity and maximise human flow. This is a strategy for both small businesses migration with a long-term aim to give the people several all-weather options to stay connected with the rest of the county. The decision to provide an alternative CPEC route through the recently agreed Gilgit-Chitral expressway will pay dividends for the region. The road will not only be an alternate road link but will also be instrumental in reducing the tourist density through opening new valleys to exploration and excursions. The tourist bulge in Hunza – inarguably the only district with amenities for tourists – is reeling with challenges such as rapid urbanisation, unregulated constriction, and pollution – again something the government is wary of and committed to address.

There is a firm realisation that Gilgit-Baltistan has the potential to be a billion-dollar tourism industry and it is increasingly becoming a mainstay of the locals. However, this industry also has the potential to disturb the ecosystem of Gilgit-Baltistan. Given Prime Minister Imran Khan's highest consideration for environmental security and the CM’s desire to see eco-friendly tourism in the region, the government is committed to revamping the tourism industry to make it sustainable and pro-environment. In this regard, legislative and administrative efforts are afoot to regulate the tourism industry and make it diverse and sustainable. The legislative mechanism will limit the scope of concrete construction and put in place limitations to secure the natural habitat of Gilgit-Baltistan.

In a nutshell, the government of Gilgit-Baltistan is all set to operate as a province with rights and guarantees beyond the lip service of the federal government – all of which will undoubtedly contribute to development in Gilgit-Baltistan.

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