[**Listening to GB**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1732071/listening-to-gb)

[Afzal Ali Shigri](https://www.dawn.com/authors/4611/afzal-ali-shigri) Published January 17, 2023

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

Listen to article

Local protesters have been peacefully demonstrating in Skardu for two weeks, under the shadow of the fluttering green-and-white Pakistani flag. All profess to be Pakistanis, and have Pakistani passports and ID cards. Their elders liberated this region after an armed struggle with the regular army of the Kashmir state.

Today, the protesters lobby for GB as a federating unit of Pakistan. Their major demands include: integration of the region as a province thus resolving its status as disputed territory; land ownership rights in the liberated area; exemption from taxes without defined status; opening the border with Kargil to facilitate cross-border interaction of divided families; and restoring the wheat subsidy granted by the PPP government in 1973.

Provincial status is key to settling all other demands. After acceding to Pakistan in 1947, the trusting GB residents presumed that the deputation of a semi-literate junior officer as political agent by the Pakistani government signified acceptance of their request for integration. However, the region’s fate was sealed by the Karachi Agreement with Kashmiri leaders who consented to indefinite bureaucratic control of GB without consulting the local leadership. And yet, GB residents remained loyal.

For almost 25 years, the area was ruled under the black colonial FCR. In the hope of creating support for a plebiscite, our foreign affairs czars defined GB as a disputed territory of Jammu & Kashmir. This twisted narrative was used to legitimise the repressive GB administration in the name of national interest.

The demand for rights is getting louder.

Education and awareness via social media have fuelled the demand for resolving GB’s contested status. Civil society took its case to the Supreme Court. After years of hearings, a landmark judgement in 2019 rescinded the Government of Gilgit Baltistan Order, 2018, in favour of a newly agreed draft Gilgit-Baltistan Governance Reforms Order, 2019. On the pretext of converting it into an act of parliament, the PML-N continued to administer the area through the 2018 order, thus diluting the powers delegated by the PPP under the 2009 law. The subsequent PTI government also continued with the 2018 order, reneging on its pledge to accord GB full provincial status and rights.

Impelled by public pressure and the verdict, the PTI government finally launched a process to grant provisional provincial status to GB via a constitutional amendment, ensuring its representation in parliament and in all constitutional institutions.

However, ignoring the two earlier, unanimous resolutions of the GB Provincial Legislative Assembly, the centre referred it to the local government for endorsement, a ruse to stall the process. Unexpectedly, the highly educated GB chief minister played along, referring the reference to a committee of the local assembly, which delayed the endorsement to protect their tenure for two more years in the local assembly. Sadly, the CM chose opportunism over the chance to right a historical wrong.

In rare concert, the PML-N federal government and the PTI GB government proved to be complicit in trampling on GB residents’ constitutional rights. Despite a positive earlier record in supporting the locals’ demand, the PPP has remained silent out of political expediency. Such decisions by national parties compel a blind subservience from the local leadership, causing the latter to be party to GB’s continuing subjugation. Locked in squabbling, political parties are too distracted to deliver on local electoral promises to resolve the issue of GB’s fundamental rights. Thus, two million GB residents, who are proud to call themselves Pakistanis, feel let down.

As the current local government is too impotent to address the issues of constitutional and land ownership rights, taxation, wheat subsidy and border management, the discontent engendered by an authoritarian legal framework has ignited unprecedented protests.

GB’s residents cannot be denied the right to be integrated into Pakistan. Nor can their status remain in limbo. They are justified in demanding ownership rights to the land they liberated and in refusing to accept laws/practices of the former Dogra occupiers. With reference to the Kargil border management policy, the policies adopted in AJK, Punjab and Sindh can easily be replicated in GB.

While the Indian media projects these peaceful protests as anti-Pakistan, the high-flying Pakistani flag at the venue of the protest and the desperate demand for integration remain unacknowledged. A word to the powers that be: these protests must be shown on our national media to dispel misgivings about the intentions of the protesters who not only state but also truly believe that they are more ‘Pakistani than Pakistanis’, a fact borne out by their record of loyalty to Pakistan.

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

*Published in Dawn, January 17th, 2023*