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**The Naltar tragedy and beyond**

The unfortunate incident of an attack on a passenger van and the killing of six people in the picturesque Naltar valley of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) a couple of weeks back came as deja vu for many of us. A few years ago, in separate tragic incidents in Chilas and near the LuluSar Lake Shias were dismounted from GB-bound passenger buses and were killed brutally.

Even today the unforgettable tragedy of homicide and the memories of the nightmarish scenes of horror and gruesome acts of butchery on the highway continue to haunt our fragile veneer of humanity and morality. The horrifying incident of Naltar reminds us of the instinct to kill and the ephemeral nature of civility that is outdone by the inner bestial being whose lust for power and control knows no bounds.

The news of mayhem at Lower Naltar spread like wildfire across GB, sending shock waves all around amidst the social media frenzy of associating the incident as a prelude to sectarian conflict in the area. Some religious outfits were quick to proclaim this incident as an attack on their belief system and went on to instigate mobs for sectarian violence. The leaders of banned religious outfits were also seen on social media making public sermons to mobilize people for jihad against what they call infidels.

The tragedy of Naltar has left in deep shock peace lovers, beauty seekers and nature enthusiasts whose summer touristic destination was made to bleed by a handful of miscreants.

The madness inflicted upon the peaceful, hospitable and valiant people of GB at a time when they were celebrating the euphoria of the political transition of the area into a provisional province has many far-reaching implications. This madness has a pattern for sure. Those who are losing the political moorings in the new equation of peaceful coexistence are out with their gloves off to instigate sectarian conflict to control resources. As they say, every conflict boils down to the economy and to resource control, and those who wage such unholy attacks have an eye on the larger pie of the potential riches of the area.

It is, therefore, important to dig deep into the strategic objectives of the apparent phenomenon of sectarian violence in GB. The most logical first step to locate the enemies of inclusive peace and shared prosperity is to identify the beneficiaries of the conflict. The people of GB, regardless of their faith orientation, are losers of the divisive conflict; in fact, their livelihood is directly linked to peace, tranquility and interfaith harmony. GB cannot really be compared to any other restive parts of the country where there is a perceived sense of insurgencies and centrifugal drift. The people of GB have always shown allegiance to Pakistan and have aspired for political mainstreaming, constitutional protection and territorial integration.

In GB, people of all political persuasions including the nationalists, the progressives, the conservatives and the liberals have invariably converged upon the demand for the political integration of the region. The narrative of political integration does not have much esoteric complexity when it comes to defining the strategic roadmap of good governance and empowerment.

In this, there are four possible political roadmaps: a) granting internal autonomy and local governance in line with the UN resolutions on the Kashmir dispute; b) provisional provincial status with meaningful representation in the constitutional bodies of Pakistan and legal protections till the resolution of the Kashmir dispute; c) declaring the Line of Control as the international border with visa-free regime for Kashmiris across the border; and d) full territorial integration through amendments in the articles 1, 51, 59, 257 and 258 of the constitution of Pakistan. None of these options proposed by the indigenous political groups of GB tantamount to acts of treason, anti-state moves or a centrifugal drift.

In the newly emerging regional and international political situation, Pakistan has finally decided to go with option two by granting GB a provisional provincial status. Though this is in line with one of the long-awaited demands of the people of GB, its legal and constitutional contours are not fully drawn to the satisfaction of the local people.

The people of GB have also shown great unity about their political future despite the linguistic and faith plurality found in the area. The unity and peaceful coexistence expressed through converging collective political aspirations is seen by power contenders as a threat to their economic interests of controlling the resources of the area. These powerful interests have fomented sectarian conflict in the past as a means to divide people and unleash violence to control resources of the area.

The question then arises: can we not identify the traitors, the anti-state elements and take them to task? Many right activists and innocent people of GB are languishing in jails on false allegations of being anti-state. This act of incarcerating these young political activists without legal due diligence has given rise to frustration and a sense of political exclusion.

It is however encouraging to note that the mainstream religious leaders, political representatives, civil society, media and representatives of law-enforcement agencies unanimously condemned the killing of the innocent passengers as an act of terrorism. The people of GB have seen the benefits of peaceful coexistence during the last few years and therefore the incident was unequivocally condemned by all schools of thought as a conspiracy to disrupt the enduring endeavors of interfaith harmony in GB. The provincial government of GB was quick to order an investigation into the daylight killings and the local police also arrested 16 suspects based on intelligence reports.

The government of GB also issued a notification to take stern action against hate mongers and venomous sectarian campaigners on social media for sabotaging peace efforts. Far from the peace speeches of politicos, an impressive peace initiative was taken by a group of young people in Gilgit city whose message of building interfaith harmony went unnoticed by mainstream media. This group of young peace enthusiasts organized a tea for peace party – or Aman ki Chai – in Gilgit city which was attended by people from all faith groups who pledged their support for peace building.

There is much to learn from such progressively organized efforts for peace put together by the people of GB. Such efforts show that people can be the best custodians of building a peaceful and inclusive Pakistan.

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