**[Neglected region](https://www.dawn.com/news/1818491/neglected-region)**

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AFTER weeks of peaceful protests and sit-ins across Gilgit-Baltistan, two major de­m­ands of the demonstrators were finally accepted. The Pakistan government reluct­antly restored the wheat subsidy and suspe­nded the infamous Finance Act, 2023. The flour bag price, increased twice in the past two years, was brought down to pre-2022 lev­­els. Various fees, levies, and taxes — though small in amount at least initially — introduced in the Finance Act in some sec­tors, were also withheld. The GB chief mi­n­ister’s office issued a notification to wit­h­­d­raw the taxes to provide relief to the public.

Since the 1970s, GB has been enjoying a wheat subsidy and relief in direct, though not indirect, taxes due to its disputed constitutional status, poverty, and underdevelopment. For over a decade, attempts by successive governments to either impose taxes, cut the wheat subsidy, or acquire land have met with public resistance.

Periodically, GB has been embroiled in days of protests and strikes but recent demonstrations were unprecedented for two reasons. First, these protests were the longest in the region’s history. People braved the harsh weather and continued their sit-ins for more than a month until their demands were accepted. Second, the Awami Action Committee — an alliance of political, religious and traders’ unions — which led the protests, had a 15-point demand list, including reduced wheat prices and the suspension of the Finance Act. The AAC asked for land ownership rights for the people, a share for GB in the NFC Award, royalties for GB for the Diamer-Basha dam, an end to prolonged power outages, etc. Although the protests have ended for now, after the acceptance of the first two demands, leaders, and civil rights activists, through their speeches, seem to have educated many people about the chronic issues of GB.

In GB’s context, it is difficult to accept the remaining demands unless there is a maj­or policy shift on the region on the part of the federal government. However, there is significant pressure on the newly elected dispensation to take GB’s political and economic matters seriously. Lack of necessities such as health, electricity, transport, and communication has added to the people’s hardships. No serious attempt has ever been made by any government to imp­rove the health infrastructure in the reg­ion. The shortage of doctors, critical mach­inery, medical labs, and hospitals has re­s­ulted in several deaths. Stories periodically surface on social media, if not mainst­ream media, about the suffering of patients due to the absence of medical staff and facilities.

There is pressure on the new set-up to take GB’s matters seriously.

On top of that, long power outages often disrupt hospital functions. The absence of electricity for more than 20 hours every day has made people’s lives miserable. The ongoing severe energy crisis is the result of a lack of interest on the part of successive governments to tap the potential of power generation as well as the lack of accountability, and flawed planning and management. One key example is the Satpara dam in Skardu which has faced frequent technical problems and is now experiencing a critical water shortage. An arrangement to divert water into the dam did not materialise. Hence, with the gradual decline in snowfall, arguably due to climate change, there is not enough water to generate sufficient electricity for the town. Work on two more small dam projects was halted due to a shortage of funds and poor planning.

The commute of the population from GB to ‘down country’ — as the locals say — is ge­t­ting riskier. Frequent landslides disr­upt traffic on the Karakoram Highway. The situation of the Skardu-Juglot road, upgraded amid much fanfare, is even more precarious. Cont­inu­ous landslides have damaged the road at several points and have restricted the mobility of the people.

On the political front, the AAC had announced the resu­mption of protests this month for the rem­aining demands. The opinion over GB’s disputed status seems to be divided, as political and religious lea­ders call for a constitutional amendment for GB’s provincial sta­tus, while activists with more nationalist inclinations demand self-rule in their local affairs as per UN res­olutions or at least an Azad Kashmir-type set-up. The latter, however, is hardly autonomous due to the centre’s interference.

The new government will have to take up challenging tasks for the betterment of GB. Pakistan, which is already passing thr­ough grave economic and political crises, cannot afford another problem. The ha­bit of lingering on issues that require urgent attention needs to end. Time is of the essence in the resolution of pending iss­ues and urgent practical steps are needed. The only way for the government to upgrade the region, satisfy the population and build trust among the public is to display its commitment and seriousness this time.

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