

# Significance of Nov. 1 for Gilgit-Baltistan

*Pak. Pol. News 3-11-03*  
**Ahsan Wali Khan**

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan regularly celebrate November 1 since 1947 to commemorate the day on two counts, firstly, end of Dogra regime on November 1, 1947, and secondly, beginning of a promising era (unfulfilled). The series of celebrations known as the *Jashne Azadi* (independence festival) starts in the mid of October. Traditionally the festivity includes grand polo tournaments, other sports and cultural galas. The events of the day usually include public meetings in almost all the major cities of the country, mostly organised by student organisations, besides official/non-official functions in Gilgit-Baltistan. Over a period of time, the non-official functions of the day have turned into occasions to denounce aggressively the existing political status and the mode of governance, at times violently. A clear reflection of the emerging volatile political environ of Gilgit-Baltistan in the absence of basic political rights against ever-increasing popular demand of the masses.

Gilgit-Baltistan, prior to British/Dogra influence in subcontinent, consisted of sovereign independent states divided under the rule of several local Rajas. The people forcefully resisted foreign occupation/interference. The crushing defeats to the Dogra invading/occupying forces by the legendary Raja Gohar Aman of Yasin in collaboration with the tribes of Chilas and surrounding areas between 1840 to 1860s. The battles by Hunza Nagar people against the British led by Col Durand in 1891 are few specific historical facts. Dr Ahmad Hasan Dani very correctly writes in his book 'History of Northern Areas' that "Raja Gohar Aman was a mighty military commander that the region produced in the mediaeval period. He even disdained the invasion of the well-trained Sikh divisions and so arranged his military strategy that the Sikh and the Dogra had to flee from Gilgit".

He further writes that "the fire of freedom spirit that Raja Gohar Aman enkindled in the heart of the people, even at the sacrifice of his own family members later at the hands of Dogras and the British, continued to smoulder until the people of Gilgit-Baltistan fought bravely shoulder to shoulder to finally drive away the Dogras in the freedom struggle of 1947-48".

The liberation of the Northern Areas including substantial part of AK in 1947 by the people of NAs after eliminating Dogra rule from their land and the voluntary accession to Pakistan against all odds speaks volumes about their patriotism. The sacrifices rendered by these valiant people during wars with India from 1947 to date inclusive Kargil episode need no citation.

After independence somehow the area was conjoined to the Kashmir dispute. The people of the area accepted the challenge to remain part of the conflict to vote for Pakistan in the event of a plebiscite on the future of Kashmir. The people instead of being rewarded were denied the basic political right to vote and run their own affairs. Unfortunately the area neither became part of Pakistan nor of the Azad Kashmir setup. The government of Pakistan initially ran the administration from NWFP with the help of the local Rajas through FCR and later via Ministry of Kashmir affairs and the Northern Areas (KANA). A grade 19/20 bureaucrat used to head the local administration and functioned as one-man head of judiciary.

Raja system and FCR got abolished in 1972-74. The present elected forum of Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC) with some judicial reforms was introduced in 1993-94. Minister of KANA was again imposed as the Chief Executive and the highest position for the elected representative of Gilgit-Baltistan area remained Deputy Chief Executive.

The denial to have their own government by their elected representatives and lack of a promising judicial system, like everywhere inclusive Azad Kashmir, has caused a sense of deprivation and resulted in political despondency. The nationalist elements taking advantage of the lingering vacuum have lured the educated youth into their folds. Resultantly anti-Pakistan sentiments are now on the rise. The sectarian disharmony remains a constant sensitive destabilising factor. The bloody sectarian clashes of 1988 and the ongoing agitation for the change of the Islamiat syllabus may not be ignored and looked at in isolation. Parochialism is again a fast growing phenomenon due to dominance in vital government posts and hegemony in business by the people belonging to other parts of the country. The strategic location of the area under the prevailing geopolitical situation makes it more delicate to let anti-Pakistan sentiments flourish.

In view of above-mentioned facts, it is honestly felt that the existing ambiguous political status of Gilgit-Baltistan has caused significant harm to the opinion of the people of the area and has failed to contribute towards the Kashmir cause. The legitimate popular demand of the masses for basic political rights and judicial reforms are human rights concerns. The political/judicial reforms enforced to ease the sufferings of the effected people will remain reversible administrative arrangements till the final settlement of Kashmir issue in accordance with UN mandate. Such step taken by a country in the best interest of the trapped people for a little solace during the transitional period (Kashmir settlement) could not displace UN reso-

lutions on any outstanding dispute. The government has many options open for extension of political/judicial reforms to the area in line with the wishes of the masses remaining within the ambit Kashmir policy. In this regard following three plausible solutions, listed priority-wise, are worth considering and implementing:

(1) Make Gilgit-Baltistan the fifth province of Pakistan, preferably by amalgamating Chitral and Kohistan also (both these areas are more close to NAs in all angles rather than NWFP) with a precondition for the NAs to remain eligible to participate in case of plebiscite on Kashmir in accordance with the UN resolutions.

(2) Grant the status similar to Azad Kashmir by appointing a senior high-ranking military officer belonging to the Gilgit-Baltistan as a lieutenant governor to represent the government of Pakistan and the elected representatives of the area to run their government headed by an elected Chief Executive.

(3) Amalgamate Gilgit-Baltistan with Azad Kashmir government on equal footings/share of President/Prime Minister and all other ministries/political positions.

It would be appreciated that under the prevailing circumstances the government cannot hold back the decision on the political future of Gilgit-Baltistan in abeyance forever on the face of the uncertain Kashmir imbroglio and due to growing resentment against the existing method of governance. An immediate favourable decision will have to be taken in the best interest of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, the country, and in the true spirit of the Kashmir cause. In this regard Supreme Court's decision of 1999 on the matter may also be taken into consideration. The Supreme Court in its historic judgment directed the federal government to take steps within six months for the enforcement fundamental rights of Gilgit-Baltistan people, as they have an independent judiciary and can elect representatives to govern them. A favourable decision in line with the demands of the people will have far reaching impact on the morale of the people of the NAs and will go a long way in the advancement of vital national interests.

A televised discussion programme focused on the political, judicial and related issues of Gilgit-Baltistan, comprising of two episodes, 50 minutes with Geo on October 18 and 25, filmed at the sprawling lawns of Serena Hotel Gilgit, brought out the gut sentiments of the people belonging to various segments of the political divide of the area. Geo undoubtedly deserves appreciation for highlighting the burning issue of the rights of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

The writer is a freelance columnist belonging to the Northern Areas  
ashpaar@hotmail.com