

Rising Sectarianism and the Use of Religious Groups for Policy Objectives Contribute to a Deteriorating Situation

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Zalgham Khan



Recent incidents in Gilgit show how the Northern Areas have turned into a barrel of gunpowder. On January 8, some unidentified gunmen attacked and fatally wounded a local spiritual and political leader Agha Ziauddin. The attack triggered off a violent mob that went on a rampage, setting public property on fire, shooting and even burning alive some government officials and their family members. By the next day, official death toll stood at fourteen and a number of government buildings had been gutted. Till the time of writing, the city was under curfew and the dead waited for burial at mortuaries as government officials pitched extra time to see the city's burial place as they have in the disputed area that federation has chosen to administer directly. These events are symptomatic of the situation prevailing in the region and may also be a sign of worse things to come.

The dynamics of sectarianism in Northern Areas resemble the rest of the country as they share the same historical trajectory and are the product of the policies of the same ruling establishment. External involvement, mostly from 'brotherly' Islamic countries, a weak judicial system, proliferation of small arms, mushrooming of sectarian madrassas and the state's use of religious groups for internal and external policy objectives are cited as the major reasons for the current sectarian situation in the country.

These reasons hold true for the Northern Areas also where the situation is more precarious because the state's half century of misrule over this disputed territory has already turned it into a hotbed of ethnic and sectarian movement; even a nascent separatist movement is fast taking root here. This is an area where geographic and linguistic boundaries often coincide with the sectarian identities. Different valleys speak different languages and follow different denominations, while Gilgit, the largest city, is the proverbial melting pot of these diverse communities.

While such cultural and linguistic diversity can be a great asset and a source of attraction for international tourism, it can also become a serious liability, hindering peaceful co-existence and fueling trouble. Such a situation certainly demands people's involvement in governance, uniform and participatory development, and a careful management of the intricate demographic balance.

Islamabad, unfortunately, has chosen policies that trample upon people's sensibilities, impose an insensitive central rule and pit people against each other and against the state. The area has not been given Azad Kashmir-like self-rule, nor has it been incorporated into the 'mainland'. People have no representation in the parliament and are thus denied any say in decisions that affect them.

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This political limbo has created denial of justice and democratic governance. Northern Areas people feel that they are non-citizens or at best second-class citizens. The Kargil episode, which involved a large number of casualties of jawans from the area added a whole new set of grievances.

The area is ruled by omniscient bureaucrats and omnipotent officials of security agencies and secret services all sent from Islamabad. Unlike Azad Kashmir, the region has been opened up to outside settlers, disturbing the already intricate demographic balance and further fuelling ethnic and sectarian feelings. Although lack of development is not a major grievance, uneven development in the region has not helped the situation.

While some communities have made tremendous progress due to large-scale involvement of NGOs, others have lagged behind. It is indeed the government's duty to provide equal development to all areas and arrange for basic services. With Islamabad studiously sticking to the status quo, the last decade has seen complaints turning into slogans and slogans into violence.

The first-ever effort to reverse this situation was made by the People's Party government, which introduced a package of reforms and held the first party based elections here in October 1994. The new set-up was meant to grant a quasi-provincial status to the region. However, the euphoric atmosphere following these announcements soon gave way to further frustration. As the powerlessness of revamped Northern Areas Council became evident and the elected representatives were humiliated by the bureaucrats, residents of the area felt deeply betrayed.

The Northern Areas Council has since remained a dysfunctional consultative forum, presided over by the Minister for Kashmir Affairs, who is also the de-facto Chief Executive of the Northern Areas. Sharing common grievances against the state, an ethno-national movement is fast getting popular that asserts the region's unique cultural identity. As in many other areas of the country, the government's hand is seen behind sectarian terrorism, which is believed to be a tool being used to divide the people.

This deep mistrust of government is the main reason behind attacks on state property and officials whenever any sectarian incident takes place or some other serious complaint takes birth. It is also an indicator of the peoples' lack of ownership of government properties and facilities. The time to set things right in the Northern Areas is running out fast. The situation requires imagination and courage on the part of the policy makers, scarce commodities indeed in Islamabad.

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