

From bad to worse

Sectarian conflict, socio-economic neglect, and political deprivation in Gilgit-Baltistan



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THERE HAS RECENTLY BEEN AN INCREASED INTERNATIONAL INTEREST IN THIS AREA. UNFORTUNATELY THIS IS NOT DUE TO POSITIVE TRENDS, BUT BECAUSE OF A LACK OF HUMAN RIGHTS COMBINED WITH THE ABSENCE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF THE LOCAL POPULATION IN DECISION-MAKING

Gilgit-Baltistan, a part of Pakistan administrated Kashmir, is one of the least known parts of South Asia. There has however recently been an increased international interest in this area. Unfortunately this is not due to positive trends, like economic prosperity, social development or free and fair elections as part of a stabilised process of democratic consolidation but because of a lack of human rights combined with the absence of political participation in decision-making. Furthermore, the area came into the spotlight because of the growing influence of Taliban like fundamentalist forces which are contribute heavily to the rise of sectarian violence, despite the 'omnipresent' Pakistani security apparatus. The recent large scale sectarian violence in Kohistan (February 28, 2012) and Chilas (April 3, 2012) which left dozens killed and injured, was another sad example of the deteriorating law and order situation, raising international concerns. Despite increasing violence and media coverage Gilgit-Baltistan, Baroness Emma Nicholson of Winterbourne, a prominent European politician spearheading the efforts of putting this region on the agenda of the international community, describes these parts of the worlds as "black holes". Therefore, a brief historical contextualisation seems to be inevitable in order to understand the complexity of the conflict.

Basically one can state, that Gilgit-Baltistan (also known as Northern Areas), was an integral part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir ruled by the Hindu Dogra dynasty. Actually it's one of two areas - besides the so called Azad (free) Jammu and Kashmir - of the former Dogra realm, which Pakistan took over in the late 1940ties. After the partition of British India in 1947, a rebellion among the Muslim inhabitants broke out and the then still commanding British officer Major William Brown of the Gilgit Scouts decided to side with the rebels and hand over the territory to Pakistan. In fact, this was a military coup against the Maharaja of Kashmir, who at the time officially was the supreme authority. As such the accession to Pakistan lacks legitimacy tremendously. Nevertheless, large scale violent clashes between the opposing factions, either in favour of Pakistan, India or independence as well as an pre-empt invasion from pro-Pakistani forces from neighbouring areas like Swat were avoided. The 'accession' however created a historical lega-

cy of a legal-constitutional limbo, which was unfortunately continued by Pakistan's government which started to keep this area under strict central control which was interpreted as sine qua non for national interests, especially after the first war with India over Kashmir, resulting in a unsatisfying situation for Islamabad.

This strategic rationale gained more momentum over the last decades, as Indian conventional military superiority became obvious, most visible in the disastrous experiences of the lost wars of 1965 and 1971.

In retrospect, it appears today that Pakistan's security circles are following a twofold-approach regarding the improvement of its position in the Kashmir dispute: First, being aware that a military solution (meaning victory in a full-scale war with India) is highly unlikely, they have turned to goal achievement through the use of 'limited coercive force', either by regular army interventions (e.g. Kargil conflict 1999) or by proxies in form of militant-non-state actors like several Jihadi-groups. However, due to the failures of these measures - Pakistan had to retreat from Kargil and support for pro-Pakistan elements in Indian Jammu and Kashmir did not help to achieve any political goal - and increasing international pressure it seems that coercive force as an instrument in Pakistan's India politics is losing significance. Nevertheless, regarding several analysts remarkable Jihadi infrastructure in Pakistan controlled Kashmir still exists.

Second, since several developments, like the India-Pakistan composite dialogue and Islamabad's urgent need to boost economic development, indicate that a political solution is becoming a realistic scenario. Having this in mind, Pakistan is trying to reduce the 'bargaining chip'. In other words, by integrating Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan, Islamabad aims to delink the area from Kashmir as such reducing the disputed area mainly to the Indian administered part of the former colonial state of Jammu and Kashmir state.

In order to gain legitimacy for absorbing Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan government officials are stressing that this region was never a part of the Jammu & Kashmir, therefore any legal commitments by the former Maharaja regarding India (especially the treaty of accession) does not include Gilgit-Baltistan ('Gilgit Agency Controversy'). Therefore, the integration of Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan is justified and in line with the regulations set by

the former British colonial rulers in order to implement the transfer of power as well as the partition of British India. But this manoeuvre also has a down side from a Pakistani perspective. If Islamabad officially annexes Gilgit-Baltistan, this means that Pakistan will indirectly lose its normative argument against India's incorporation of Jammu & Kashmir (the Indian administered part of Kashmir). Therefore, Islamabad has to walk a thin line between giving Gilgit-Baltistan a certain constitutional status and subsequently political rights on one side, and avoid the impression of a consequent, constitutional integration of this area. The former would lead to a violation of the pending UN resolutions of 13th August 1948 and 5th January 1949, which envisage that the future status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir will be determined in accordance with the will of the people through the democratic method of a free and impartial plebiscite. These UN resolutions are of great significance for Islamabad, since at least in theory, they keep the option that the people of Kashmir

alliance became evident when China started investing heavily in major development projects such as the Karakorum Highway, which is until today the only highway in Gilgit-Baltistan, or the Gwadar Port project in the neglected state of Balochistan, as well as significant technology transfer crucial for the country's military and nuclear build-up. In this context, one must state that Gilgit-Baltistan is also great significance to China. Only a politically stable Gilgit-Baltistan under Pakistani control seems to serve Chinese interests, which would imply secure access to the Arabian Sea. But like in other cases, for example neighbouring Afghanistan, the respective people do not play a factor in the bilateral state relations, especially when it comes to political participation and decision-making or sharing economic benefits.

As Pakistan's rivalry with Indian and Chinese interests in the region indicate, Gilgit-Baltistan is doubtless of extraordinary strategic significance for Islamabad. The fact that this region is the only part which borders China, India as

British colonial ruler securing its own borders and territory, perceived as top priority. However, this is not a phenomena limited to Gilgit-Baltistan, it is a characteristic of Pakistani politics which can be found in all regions in the country's history, especially in the bloody war of independence in former East Pakistan, today Bangladesh.

In order to keep Gilgit-Baltistan in check, the Pakistani government has applied different strategies with remarkable negative effects for the indigenous population.

First, the national leadership decided to support a Sunni Islamisation based on radical Wahabi ideology. Historically, the natives of Gilgit-Baltistan were predominantly Shia and other non-Sunni communities. But most importantly, besides some sectarianism, during the reign of the Maharaja of Kashmir, there were hardly conflicts between the different ethnic-religious communities in the region. However, this changed rapidly after Zia-ul-Haq in the 1970/80ties enforced a policy of Islamisation in the whole country, but especially in the area of Gilgit-Baltistan. Witnessing a Shia revolution in neighbouring Iran, the country's political elite was concerned about a Shia majority area within its own borders. In reaction, Islamabad supported a Sunni Islamisation by granting Sunni's extraordinary privileges, benefits and preferential treatment in all spheres of public life. A process which was also massively supported by Saudi Arabia, which at the time, felt the need to create a 'Sunni Wahabi Wall' to contain the influence of Teheran.

Second, this Sunni Islamisation strategy was flanked by efforts by a 'guided and armoured migration' to change the demography of the Gilgit-Baltistan. More precisely, in order to reduce the Shia to a minority, Islamabad encouraged Sunni people from other parts of Pakistan to settle down the area, which not only evoked tensions between natives and migrants but also brought the then still unknown Shia-Sunni divide into this isolated mountainous region. The most dramatic indication therefore, was the outbreak of the sectarian clashes of 1988 in which several hundreds of people lost their life.

Third, actions aimed at containing and/or eliminating anti-critical elements in the political sphere. This was done in two ways: By introducing and siding with pro-Pakistani parties like the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q) and by restricting political activities of the political opposition, which was not acting in

the interest of Islamabad. Being a highly diverse and fragmented society, it was not an extraordinarily challenging task to control the locals and weaken the pro-independence camp.

In consequence, having the perception of being treated like an 'internal colony', there is a significant increase in demands for greater autonomy and self-governance, even independence by sub-national groups within Gilgit-Baltistan. Additionally suffering from dramatic economic underdevelopment and a poor social infrastructure despite rich natural resources, the inhabitants of Gilgit-Baltistan are getting further alienated from the Pakistani state. However, instead of addressing the issues raised, Islamabad has responded in its usual way by promising reforms and to a certain degree deciding on them but not implementing them, either because of endemic corruption, the shortage of resources or a lack of political will. Most likely a combination of all these factors which leads subsequently to the use of all kinds of political instruments to maintain control over the region, ranking from threatening and harassment of the opposition to physically attacking protesters and carrying out targeted killings of political activists. Subsequently, being not only confronted with socio-cultural and religious deprivation through the Sunni Islamisation policy, but also with politically-economic marginalisation and coercive suppression, Gilgit-Baltistan is witnessing periodical militant upheavals in form of riots and other acts of violence. The disproportionate reaction of Pakistan's Security Forces is causing further discontent and creating an unending vicious circle of violence.

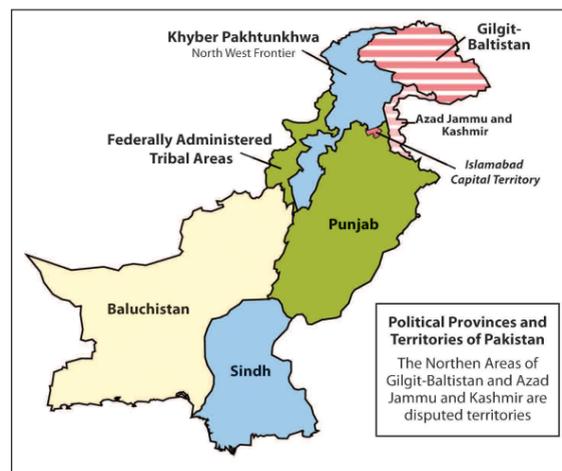
Consequently, the alienated people of Gilgit-Baltistan are increasingly constructing their own national identity. This finds its expression in a rise of separatist movement organisations demanding some form of autonomy or outright independence. Facing steadily growing anti-Pakistan sentiments, the political establishment has been finally convinced that they have to make certain political concessions. Islamabad reacted in 2009 by issuing the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order (GBESGO), which not only renamed the region from Northern Areas into Gilgit-Baltistan but also made this region "more looking like" Pakistan's fifth province. One of the major advancements was the strengthening - at least formally - of the already existing Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative

Assembly (GBLA). But critics are claiming that the GBESGO is just an attempt to calm the opposition in GB as well as to please the international community. Here, one can state that any steps toward improving political rights and liberties as promised by the GBESGO was carried out because of diplomatic pressure from the international community, especially by the European Union and related organizations like the 'Friends of Gilgit-Baltistan', a group of members of the European Parliament under the leadership MEP Juergen Creutzmann. In fact, the political opposition in Gilgit-Baltistan is concerned that when it comes to Realpolitik there will be no substantial change in the existing power structure since the supreme political authority in the region is vested in the governor who is appointed by the President of Pakistan. Additionally, the legislative power of the GB region has been restricted additionally by a newly set up Gilgit-Baltistan Council (GBC), headed by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, which functions as a controlling body of the central government for this region by taking away significant powers from the legislative assembly.

To sum up, it might be difficult to grant the people of Gilgit-Baltistan representation in the Pakistani parliament due to the nature of international obligations and binding UN resolutions on Kashmir, but that is no justification for denying them any substantial political rights and liberties. In this context, the GBESGO, like its predecessor the 1994 Legal Framework Order, remains a toothless tiger when it comes to safeguarding people's interest. Until now, Islamabad was able to keep the opposition on a low-profile. But the locals are starting to perceive the Pakistani state as ambiguous when it comes to introducing so called 'reform packages' - even more, they evaluate Islamabad's agencies to some extent as an occupying force.

Subsequently, the opposition is growing and it will be more costly to suppress it in the future. Therefore, time is running out for the Pakistan's establishment to access and incorporate the demands of the people, - namely democracy, human rights as well as socio-economic well-being - otherwise the situation will turn as almost everything in Pakistan from bad to worse.

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might vote in favour of Pakistan. This is predominantly why unlike India, Pakistan has hesitated to annex Gilgit-Baltistan.

Islamabad's strategy of demotion - which gradually began under the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq - turning Gilgit-Baltistan into to a pure 'bargaining chip' of negotiation in its foreign affairs, is not a new phenomenon. In a modified version it had already been applied in 1963 as the Pakistan government handed over parts of Gilgit-Baltistan, namely Shaksgam and Muztagh valleys (around 2300 square miles), to Beijing under the Pakistan-China boundary agreement. From a Pakistani perspective this was interpreted as a cunning move, since it reduced the amount of disputable landmass administered by Islamabad and also appeased China, a much needed ally. The implications of this

well as Afghanistan (which has historically a difficult relationship with Pakistan), underpins the strategic value of Gilgit-Baltistan. Being anxious about anti-Islamabad tendencies in Balochistan as well as in other provinces, all Pakistani administrations - military as well as civilian - are trying hard to keep Gilgit-Baltistan under tight control in order to avoid further vulnerability. Having in mind, that Pakistan must be clearly identified as a case of failed civilian control, especially in the areas of national defense and internal security, it is obvious that all decision-making in and about Gilgit-Baltistan is made by the military. Therefore, it does not come by surprise that Islamabad's policy in Gilgit-Baltistan is exclusively dominated by the security parter. Subsequently, one must state that Pakistan is just continuing the approach of the