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# Chinese Rise Impacting Human Rights Situation in Gilgit-Baltistan

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Recently, a group of unknown assailants shot and killed 18 Shias of Gilgit-Baltistan, who were travelling in a bus on the Karakoram Highway. As usual, Pakistani officials and media personnel wasted no time in blaming India, the USA and Israel for the unfortunate incident, which, according to them, helps the 'foreign elements' fan separatism in the disputed region. However, one fails to understand how the USA and India can strengthen separatism by killing local Shias and weakening the natives by dividing them on religious and ethnic lines. Freedom of a region from an occupying force requires unity among its inhabitants, and the alleged patrons would expect the natives to shun ethnic and religious differences to enhance strength among the ranks. Fragmentation and weakening of the society on religious and ethnic lines, on the other hand, can only suit existing occupiers who fear that a unified resistance movement could cut their unjust control short.

Anti-Shiaism was unknown in Gilgit-Baltistan till 1947, when the Pakistani political agent, after forcefully occupying the region, employed sectarianism to solidify his control. In 1972, the regime of Zulfikar Bhutto once again fuelled sectarian issues to abrogate the State Subject Rule which then culminated in the arrival of thousands of illegal Pakistani settlers in Gilgit-Baltistan. These settlers later became the long arms of the establishment to help tighten control over the region. Then came 1988, when Gen Zia-ul-Haq sent the Mujahideen to Gilgit to clear the villages along the Karakoram Highway of Shias. In an episode that lasted for more than 16 days, 14 villages were razed to the ground and thousands of

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people were killed. Hundreds of Shias of Gilgit-Baltistan have lost their lives since then, owing to state-led terrorism and the assailants remain at large, under the protection of the secret service agencies.

Six decades of Pakistani rule in Gilgit-Baltistan shows that the occupiers have treated the land like a colony and its inhabitants like subjects, and for that, they did not have to receive any direction or help from either the USA or India. Till date, all apex political, judicial, financial and administrative positions remain in the firm control of Pakistani officials. Although Islamabad claims to have granted self-governance to Gilgit-Baltistan, it has failed to delegate financial autonomy to the regional government. Without financial sustainability, the locals remain dependent on handouts and grants from Islamabad which restricts their chances to unite to achieve political, cultural and environmental rights. Today, the local administration in Gilgit has no money to pay salaries to the employees and lacks funds to repair schools, medical centres, roads, hydel units, bridges and homes which were damaged during the flashfloods in 2010. The government is bankrupt on many accounts, so much so that now it will have to borrow Rs 5 lakh from a local bank to pay for the Pakistan Day celebrations which will commence on March 23.

Through the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, the occupiers control and plunder the natural resources of Gilgit-Baltistan without the consent of the natives. To the dismay of the natives, foreign companies, including those from China, enjoy the right to explore minerals in Gilgit-Baltistan with impunity while the locals are banned by law from benefitting from their own resources. The malicious policy promotes nothing but economic insecurity and denies employment to hundreds of thousands of local people.

Even as hundreds of thousands of college graduates remain jobless and live in abject poverty, the Pakistani prime minister has recently passed an ordinance which guarantees double salary to Pakistanis taking up jobs in Gilgit-Baltistan. Such policies also promote a demographic change in Pakistan's favour. At the same time, Islamabad denies patronage to local languages and other cultural traits. In the last six decades, Islamabad's policies have wrought irreparable damage to the local identities, and the rich civilisation, which dates back to the Scythian, Mon and Tibetan eras, is on the verge of extinction.

Although Pakistan was created on the principles of superiority for a certain ethnicity and religion, where ensuring equal rights for all inhabitants is not possible, in the case of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan also lacks the constitutional capacity to satisfy the political and socio-economic needs of the locals. It was

against this backdrop that a resolution was passed in the European Union in 2008 which called Gilgit-Baltistan a black hole where fundamental human rights are altogether denied to its inhabitants.

Today, Gilgit-Baltistan is ruled through ad-hoc presidential ordinances, the current one being the twelfth in a row, and all of them have failed to gain the trust of both the locals and the international community. As Islamabad lacks the constitutional framework to provide a permanent solution to the growing needs of the natives, the situation then makes way for the illegal occupiers to intensify oppression, and create religious and ethnic clashes among the natives to weaken and subdue their ambitions and dreams. To a great extent, the occupiers have succeeded in using these divide and rule tools to thwart the genuine demands of the locals for justice, and political and socio-economic rights.

Growing religious and ethnic tensions also enable Islamabad to beef up security and station thousands of paramilitary personnel in the region. These barbaric tactics help the occupiers kill many birds with one stone, including maintaining social divisions, promoting economic marginalisation and then inducing fear among the largely poor, illiterate and socially fragmented masses.

Pakistan's inhumane policies reflect its desperation to hold on to Gilgit-Baltistan, which is strategically located as a pivot between China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. However, given that the UN declared disputed area of Gilgit-Baltistan remains a legal anomaly, Pakistan remains disillusioned about its political future.

It was India which took the case of Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan to the UN in 1948, accusing Pakistan of occupying one-third of the territory of the former princely state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). Later, the UN resolutions asked India to station forces and administrators in Gilgit-Baltistan to maintain law and order and help with the process of plebiscite. Further, the letter of accession which the ruler of J&K signed with the Indian government also puts responsibility on the Indian forces to protect the life, honour and property of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

On the other hand, the resolutions passed by both the UN Security Council and UN Commission on India and Pakistan (UNCIP) have asked Pakistan to withdraw from Gilgit-Baltistan. According to the Pakistani Constitution and verdicts of the Pakistani Supreme and High Courts, Pakistan has no legal claim over Gilgit-Baltistan or Kashmir. Several among the Pakistani presidents and prime ministers have admitted on public television that Pakistani presence in Gilgit-Baltistan is unconstitutional and temporary. The 1963 Pakistan-China border

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agreement which deals with demarcation between Gilgit-Baltistan and Xinjiang also enforces the view that Pakistan lacks sovereignty over Gilgit-Baltistan and that China will renegotiate the border agreement regarding the final authority over Gilgit-Baltistan once the Kashmir issue is resolved. These legal documents converge on a single point that Pakistan's presence in Gilgit-Baltistan violates its own Constitution as well as international agreements.

In the last few years, Pakistan and China have felt a growing dependence on Gilgit-Baltistan for their strategic, military and economic needs. If Pakistan loses control over Gilgit-Baltistan, it will lose its sole land link with China and Central Asia. It will also lose control over the resources of Gilgit-Baltistan, as more than 70 percent of Pakistan's water and energy needs can be fulfilled from these resources. While the economic decline and diplomatic isolation of Pakistan is forcing it to cozy up to the Chinese, the region is far more significant for the Chinese than seems apparent.

Gilgit-Baltistan provides the shortest and safest corridor for China to Afghanistan, Iran, the Arab countries and Africa, where China finds most of the raw material to satisfy its growing infrastructural development. As a pivot, Gilgit-Baltistan links China with the Muslim countries, which are seen as future partners in the evolving regional strategic alliance. That is why China is spending billions in building railways and highways through Gilgit-Baltistan to these countries. At the same time, China is planning to build several mega dams on the rivers of Gilgit-Baltistan. China also has an eye on the uranium, gold, copper, marble and precious gems of Gilgit-Baltistan.

In June 2012, Pakistan and China were to embark on their strategic programme for Gilgit-Baltistan which will eventually enable China to have a military basis in Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan. Gilgit-Baltistan is situated in the vicinity of China's two disputed regions, Xinjiang (East Turkestan) and Tibet, and control over Gilgit-Baltistan is vital to sustain occupation of both occupied regions.

The growing interest of China in Gilgit-Baltistan is worrisome for the international community. Given Pakistan's constitutional limitations, the international community could question Pakistan's right to invite China in Gilgit-Baltistan. On the other hand, the citizens of Gilgit-Baltistan could also ask the concerned international institutions to play their due role to oust the occupiers. The growing incidents of human rights violations and oppression in Gilgit-Baltistan should, therefore, be seen in the context of factors such as the rise of China; the downfall of Pakistan; growing awareness about their rights among the

people of Gilgit-Baltistan; and Pakistan's and China's desperation to hold on to the territory by employing scare tactics.

Fearing dissent in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan has placed a ban on the political activities of nationalist and separatist parties. Today, the region remains in a constant state of emergency, and urban areas like Gilgit and Skardo have literally been converted into garrisons with military check-posts dotting major streets. In Hunza, seven check posts have been established in Aliabad and Karimabad, the two important towns situated on the way to China. Reports have emerged of the Chinese military screening the citizens of Gilgit-Baltistan, and some of them have been interrogated for their alleged affiliation with separatist political parties.

Political leaders like Hamid Khan, Babajan, Manzoor Parwana, Manzoor Elahi, Irfan Karim and several others who oppose Chinese interference in local affairs are either in jail or released on bail and live incognito. Between the years 2008 and 2010, dozens of activists were booked for sedition after they protested against China's mining activities in the Yasin and Hunza Valleys. In 2011 alone, 120 sedition and terrorism charges were registered against local activists and many among them have been accused of criticising Chinese presence in Gilgit-Baltistan. Likewise, several journalists are facing sedition charges for writing about Chinese activities in Gilgit-Baltistan.

In the last two years, hundreds of local youth were arrested during arbitrary search operations which continued through the holy month of Ramadan. Many among them, accused of sedition and anti-China activities, were innocent flood victims. While Pakistan claims to be a flourishing democracy which guarantees civil liberties, the incidents of extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detentions and torture in Gilgit-Baltistan in the last two years have surpassed previous records. Recently, in Hunza, police opened fire on the protesting flood victims, killing two, while injuring six others. In 2010, the paramilitary opened fire on anti-Diamer Dam protesters in Chilas, killing three and injuring 43 others. One person was shot dead in Gindai in 2008 for opposing Chinese mining activities. Media personnel have also faced similar arrests and torture and their offices were ransacked on several occasions in 2010. The recent incident of slaughtering of 18 Shias could be seen as a continuation of the same policy to induce fear among the locals.

However, instead of becoming fearful, the local people have come out on the streets to condemn the atrocities and denial of rights. Just recently, there were more than one hundred thousand people on the streets of Skardo, demanding resumption of cross-Line of Control (LoC) trade and travel while raising the slogans of "*Chalo Chalo; Kargil Chalo*" or let us march towards Kargil.

In Kharmang Valley, thousands defied military orders and actually marched towards Indian Ladakh. Despite curfew, severe censorship, torture, detentions and verbal threats, hundreds of thousands of people remain on the streets chanting “*ye jodehshatgardihai; is kepeechaywardihai*” (the military and its sponsored militants are responsible for the Shia carnage in Gilgit-Baltistan). They are demanding reinstatement of the State Subject Rule, a ban on allotment of land to Pakistani citizens, and the withdrawal of the Pakistani paramilitary from the region.

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan have finally woken up from a long slumber. They have realised that India, the USA and Israel have nothing to do with the Shia deaths and the blame game is an age-old tactic to distract them from the actual enemies of Gilgit-Baltistan. They have realised that Pakistan and China are interested in the land but not in the people who own the land, and rather use the poor masses as cannon fodder. Now the natives will settle for nothing short of genuine political autonomy and control over their resources and means of production.