MEMBER PROFILE

GILGIT-BALTISTAN

Gilgit-Baltistan Democratic Alliance

Last updated: September 2017
**Status:** Disputed territory currently occupied by Pakistan

**Population:** 1.9 million

**Area:** 72,496 km²

**Capital:** Gilgit

**Languages:** Urdu, Shina, Burushaski, Balti, Tibetan, Wakhi, Khowar

**OVERVIEW**

Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan comprises approximately 72,000 km² of territory, bordering Afghanistan to the north, the Xinjiang province of China to the northeast, the Pakistani administrated state of Azad, Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) to the south and the Indian administrated state of Jammu and Kashmir to the southeast. With an estimated population of 2 million, Gilgit-Baltistan’s legal identity and constitutional status has been disputed ever since the Indo-Pakistani partition in 1947. The area is currently under the occupation of Pakistan, in violation of the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) resolution of 28 April 1949. The occupation took place without the consent of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and, despite the UNCIP’s calls for Pakistan to withdraw its forces from the disputed area, the occupation remains to this day. For over 60 years now, the area of Gilgit-Baltistan is lacking a proper constitutional status, a working legal system and political autonomy.

The critical shortage of a democratic setup in the region has led to constant human rights violations, extreme poverty, low literacy rates, slow economic development and growing sectarian turbulence. While Islamabad earns billions in revenue from Gilgit-Baltistan annually from trade and transit, water resource exploitation, trophy hunting, eco-tourism, mineral exploration and direct and indirect federal taxes, the significant majority of these earnings are not allocated for the development of the region.

Moreover, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) cuts through the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan, forcing the local population to accept the terms and conditions of the development project without consultation nor compensation.

Deprived of accountable governance structures, as well as of constitutional and human rights, more than two million people in the region wait for their fate to be resolved. Declared a disputed territory by the UNSC in 1948, the United Nations has the responsibility to fulfil the fundamental rights of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. The international community, in turn, must remind Islamabad that it is an occupier in Gilgit-Baltistan.

**UNPO REPRESENTATION: Gilgit-Baltistan Democratic Alliance**

Gilgit-Baltistan is represented at the UNPO by the Gilgit-Baltistan Democratic Alliance (GBDA) an umbrella organization which also represents groups such as the Balawaristan National Front, Karakoram National Movement, Gilgit Baltistan United Movement, the Bolor Research Forum and the Gilgit Baltistan Laddakh Democratic Movement. These groups remain committed to non-violent methods of advocacy, despite a deteriorating situation on the ground.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1846, after having been a conglomerate of several independent princely states, the region of Gilgit-Baltistan was incorporated into the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir by the Dogras, one of the region’s many ethno-linguistic groups. In 1947, following a century under domination, the local population of Gilgit-Baltistan overthrew the rulers and declared independence as the Republic of Gilgit, led by President Raja Shah Rias Khan and Army chief and Head of the revolutionary country Colonel Mirza Hassan Khan. The newly formed political entity would last only 16 days, as the Indian Independence Act 1947 led the British government to assign the control over Gilgit-Baltistan to the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, in the absence of Hassan Khan. When pressured into joining one of the newly independent states, the Maharaja refused to join either, triggering violent clashes between the Hindu and the Muslim population. Upon massacres and revolutions on his territory, the Maharaja asked for military assistance from India, leading to the signing of the Instrument of Accession, a decision that was not favoured by the Gilgit-Baltistan’s population nor Pakistan.

On 16 November 1947, Pakistan forcefully took over the administration of Gilgit by invading the territory of Jammu and Kashmir. India addressed the United Nations Security Council regarding this issue and in April 1948 the Council’s resolution called for Pakistan and India to withdraw its military and civilians from the disputed territory and to hold a plebiscite to determine the people’s will (UN Resolution 47). Pakistan refused to compromise and, as a result, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) remain under Pakistan’s occupation. The UN established a cease fire line in 1949, which to this day is referred to as the Line of Control and forms a de facto border between Indian controlled Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan controlled AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan.

Gilgit-Baltistan was administered by the North-West Frontier Province (today known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) for a short period. In 1949, with the notorious Karachi Agreement, Pakistan’s Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (KANA) took full control over Gilgit-Baltistan. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan had no active participation nor were consulted in the process. Governed by the Frontier Crimes Regulations, laws applying to “tribal people” imposed fines and punishments and denied their freedom of movement, legal representation and right to appeal. In the early 1970s, the newly created Northern Areas Advisory Council (NAAC) only reinforced Gilgit-Baltistan’s lack of any significant representation in Pakistani politics. Throughout the following decades, several reforms were introduced, but none allowing the people of Gilgit-Baltistan to have a say.

In 2009, the so-called Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009 was passed by the Pakistani cabinet. An attempt to deceive the international community, the order created a fraudulent body called Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA) which not only has not granted self-rule to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, as Islamabad claims, but also consolidated the dominance of Pakistan over the region. The Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly has no legislative power and its resolutions need to be submitted to the Ministry of Gilgit-Baltistan and J&K affairs in Islamabad. The other body that has been established
as per Article 33 of Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment & Self Governance) Order, the Gilgit-Baltistan Council is comprised of 14 members, of which 6 are elected by the GBLA and the other 6 nominated by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, who is also the Chairman of the Council. Under the absence of a representative political system as well as of an independent judicial system in the region, the real powers remain in Islamabad and the people of Gilgit-Baltistan continue to live without basic rights and representation.

**CURRENT ISSUES**

**Cultural assimilation**

A confluence of many different cultures and languages, especially those related to Tibet, Central Asia and India, Gilgit-Baltistan today faces what some experts call a “cultural genocide”. Among the most spoken languages in the region are Shina, Balti, Burushaski, Khowar, Domki, Wakhi and Ladakhi, but Pakistan’s educational policy bans mother tongue learning as a strategy to promote cultural assimilation and to erode indigenous identities. Besides teaching in Urdu, plans to implement Mandarin as an optional language in schools of Gilgit-Baltistan has further raised concerns over the linguistic heritage of the region.

**Sectarianism**

Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan has suffered from sectarian conflicts fuelled by Pakistan’s policies since 1947. Islamabad has consistently increased its purposive influx of Sunni into Gilgit-Baltistan, a region otherwise populated by Shias, aiming to alter its demographics and reduce the indigenous population to a minority. The local population is comprised of several different ethnic groups and tribes who prior to the occupation lived peacefully with each other’s identities and faith. By depriving the indigenous peoples of their constitutional identity, their political rights and access to justice, Pakistan creates a propitious environment to escalate sectarian divisions. As Gilgit-Baltistan does not have any substantive powers and as most of the authorities are Pakistani Sunni’s, the Shias in Gilgit-Baltistan are often violently targeted. Tensions between Shia and Sunni communities have increased since the 1980s, especially after the construction of the Karakoram Highway, which connects this previously isolated region with China and mainland Pakistan.

The first major sectarian clash in Gilgit-Baltistan occurred when anti-Shia riots broke out in May 1988 over the sighting of the Ramadan moon. When Shias in Gilgit celebrated Eid-ul-Fitr, the Sunnis, still fasting because their religious leaders had not sighted the moon, attacked them. Following interventions by local leaders, the situation was brought under control, but after a brief calm of nearly four days, Pakistan’s military regime called Afghan and Pakistani Wahhabis to ‘teach a lesson’ to Shias, which led to hundreds of killings. During the massacre, 23 villages and worship places, as well as holy books, were burnt down. In 2012, sectarian violence resurfaced, triggered by a quick succession of well-organized killings targeting Shia travellers on the three routes that connect Gilgit-Baltistan with Islamabad, killing more than sixty innocent people.

**China-Pakistan Economic Corridor**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a collection of different development projects currently under construction at a cost of US$46 billion. Intended to connect western China to the Indian Ocean via Pakistan, CPEC cuts through the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan and is directly affecting more than 400,000 indigenous people and at least 200km² of natural environment and cultural heritage sites. Central to the project of linking China to the southern port of Gwadar in Balochistan is the 660km long Korakoram highway. Being upgraded since 2014, thousands of containers and trucks passing thorough Gilgit-Baltistan are causing serious damage to the environment.
The implementation of the project is being violently enforced against the will of the local population, who view the CPEC as a threat to their culture and natural resources. Furthermore, while the CPEC Committee does not have a single representative from Gilgit-Baltistan, the Pakistan’s security agencies have intensified their operations to implement the CPEC, ruthlessly committing gross human rights violations while doing so. The local people of Gilgit-Baltistan fear that once the project is completed, a large number of outsiders from mainland Pakistan will resettle in the area, further hurting the demographic balance of the region.

**Diamer Bhasa Dam**

Pakistan plans to build five mega dams in the disputed area, in violation of UNCIP resolutions. The most controversial of the mega dams is the Diamer-Bhasha dam project, approved without the participation nor consent of the local population. The estimated cost of the project is US$14 billion. The land for the dam has already been acquired, though the affected population is yet to be paid compensation for their land. When concluded, the dam will have inundated cultural heritages such as carvings and edicts, as well as destroyed 32 villages and displaced more than 50,000 people. Thousands of acres of agricultural land of the local people will be inundated in the reservoir and the catchment area of the dam. Soil erosion will deteriorate a vast area of land and will cause instability in irrigation channels due to the fluctuations in the reservoir level.

Altered stream flow and nutrient contents will also cause changes in the habitat, resulting in other downstream effects on water supply and fishery. The dam is located in a seismically sensitive area, being in the ranges of Hindukush and Himalayan mountains. Some research indicates that creating large water reservoirs in the vicinity of a fault line area poses an enhanced threat of earthquakes. Thus, the very site of the dam is faulty and could cause a major catastrophe if and when a high magnitude earthquake hit the area.
The people of Gilgit-Baltistan firmly believe that Pakistan has no right to build a dam in an area which is disputed and whose fate is still to be settled under the UNCIP Resolutions. When protests against this construction arose, the Pakistani security forces brutally repressed the protesters by detaining, injuring, torturing and killing scores of them.

**Marginalisation and human rights violations**

For over six decades now, Gilgit-Baltistan has seen systematic human rights violations. Its people continue to live in a constitutional limbo, where the Pakistani government does not include the region in its constitution, but neither gives its people their right to self-determination or political representation. What is more, the region lacks an effective judicial system, suffers from poor economic conditions, has no proper health facilities and in most areas no education system. A recent education survey found that more than half of the children of Gilgit-Baltistan lack access to schools, the majority of whom are girls. The region does not have a single technical, engineering or medical college. Furthermore, medical centres lack medicines and the poor conditions of local hospitals force people to travel 600km to seek treatment in Islamabad.

Moreover, the Gilgit-Baltistan population is stripped from their right to freedom of movement, freedom of speech, right to peaceful protest and freedom of association. Far too many examples exist of peaceful activists being beaten and arrested, charged with sedition, tortured and killed. Central to this persecution is the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), which makes the charge of sedition unfounded, as Pakistan's constitution does not recognize Gilgit-Baltistan and claims that the region is part of the dispute with India over Jammu and Kashmir. The case of Baba Jan, a progressive youth leader who in 2014 was sentenced to 40 years in prison, is illustrative. The Pakistani government has also systematically silenced any attempt of media coverage on the human rights violations in the region. People who report on the government's abuses are commonly persecuted or killed.
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