



# **Gilgit-Baltistan**

**Caught Between A Rock and A Hard Place**

## Gilgit Baltistan: Caught Between A Rock and A Hard Place

### **Report**

### **Gilgit-Baltistan: Caught Between A Rock and A Hard Place**

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### Abstract

Situated in the midst of the world's highest mountain ranges Gilgit-Baltistan comes under the part of a larger and perpetual dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. The territory is disputed between Pakistan's governing structure and international conflict surrounding the state of Jammu and Kashmir. As a result, Gilgit-Baltistan holds an ambiguous status that defines it neither as an administrative part of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) nor as a separate province of Pakistan. It is this ambiguity in defining the nature of the region that has penetrated deep into its political dynamics. The chain of events that has once again raised questions on its status started on 5 August 2019 when the Government of India revoked the special status granted to Indian occupied Kashmir. This led to the re-emergence of the Kashmir issue at the domestic and as well as international level. Now a year later Kashmir is once again in the headlines after the Government of Pakistan disclosed its intention of making Gilgit-Baltistan the fifth province of Pakistan.

This report presents a detailed account of the mixed reactions that were received as a result. The first part of the report covers the historical background beginning with the division of the Indian subcontinent. After the division, the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was carved up into several territories each claimed by the two newly founded sovereign states. Gilgit-Baltistan was that region of Kashmir that revolted against its ruler and decided to join Pakistan. Despite the wishes of the people and the Government of Pakistan's readiness to acknowledge it as a part of Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan could not be granted the same constitutional rights as the rest of the provinces due to the United Nations resolution of declaring Kashmir a disputed territory. Now the recent decision by the government to provide Gilgit-Baltistan with the provincial status is warmly welcomed by its people. They see it as a long-awaited answer for their grievances.

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While on the other hand the reactions of the Kashmiri nationalists strongly oppose and condemn a move of this nature as they believe that it would negatively inflict the Kashmiri cause for a united land. This attitude is also shared by the people of Azad Jammu and Kashmir who see Gilgit-Baltistan as a part of their region which should be treated as a whole and advocate for them the constitutional rights but not the provincial status that will declare the region as the fifth province of Pakistan.

These unheard voices from the Himalayas that have shown their position are also the ones that are the major stakeholder in any ordinance that will be passed. What Pakistan needs to consider is the aftermath that will befall if the decision is to be passed. The retort that is coming from the people of Kashmir outlines serious implications that might severely impact Pakistan's plea for Kashmir on the international level. The government should avoid any drastic step that might prove detrimental in the long run. Instead, Pakistan should reassess its position and review its policies for both Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. By providing the regions with more autonomy, implementing progressive administrative and constitutional reforms there can be a way to develop these regions and ease the plights of their people without compromising the Kashmiri cause in its totality. The history of Gilgit-Baltistan may be tied to the region of Kashmir, but their identity is completely separate. It is a vital task to establish this truth in Pakistan, because it forms the basis for their desire to live independently of Kashmir. People must be reminded that Pakistan itself was founded on the principle of self-determination. The language, culture, ethnicity and identity of Gilgit-Baltistan must be recognized and celebrated separately from the Kashmir narrative.

Fortunately, Pakistan's forte is its great success in establishing diplomatic relations with China and its strategic partners. If the

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country continues in its path of playing ally, then the goal becomes relatively easy to achieve. Pakistan's land holds great strategic importance, and the international community is witness to this. It is time for Pakistan to act accordingly and set agendas on its own terms.

**Keywords:** *Gilgit-Baltistan, Kashmir, AJK, Provincial Status, Self Determination, Constitutional Rights*

# Gilgit Baltistan: Caught Between A Rock and A Hard Place

## Introduction

Gilgit-Baltistan is deemed part of its own territory by Pakistan's northeastern neighbour. In fact, India considers it to be part of the princely states of Jammu & Kashmir, which borders Gilgit-Baltistan to the south-east along with Ladakh. Both Ladakh and Indian-occupied Kashmir have been turned into Union territories with the abolishment of Article 370. India, however, does not have the jurisdiction to put Gilgit-Baltistan to the same fate but continues to propagate it as contested area<sup>1</sup>. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan do not hold the same sentiment and have for decades fought to be part of Pakistan.

## Historical Background

Gilgit-Baltistan has a history of being ruled by independent monarch families since the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. The most notable of which was the Dogra Family which acquired the region in 1840 under Gulab Singh<sup>3</sup>. This acquisition was made after the First Anglo-Sikh War, and to the dismay of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, the part was now to be ruled by Hindu Rajput rulers who were despised by the majority Muslim population.

Moreover, Gilgit-Baltistan became a part of the princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. This was again done against the wishes of the people who considered themselves to be ethnically and culturally

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<sup>1</sup> Hussain, Zakir, and Umbreen Javaid. "Situating Gilgit-Baltistan in growing China Pakistan Interdependence: Post 9/11 Scenario." *Journal of Political Studies* 25, no. 2 (2018): 291-310.

<sup>2</sup> Khan, Khushbukhat, Muhammad Hassan Siddiqi, Shakoor Ali, Shujaat Ali, and Muhammad Farooq Sabar. "Mitochondrial DNA control region variants analysis in Balti population of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan." *Meta Gene* 23 (2020): 100630.

<sup>3</sup> Sökefeld, Martin. "'Not part of Kashmir, but of the Kashmir dispute': The Political Predicaments of Gilgit-Baltistan." *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation* (2017): 127-144.

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different from the Kashmiris and could not bear to be ruled by a Kashmiri state. The Indian subcontinent was under British rule at the time, and the British colonial rulers leased the Gilgit-Baltistan territory from the Dogra rulers until 1947<sup>4</sup>.

### After 1947

Post-Independence, Gilgit-Baltistan remained independent for a couple of weeks<sup>5</sup>. However, the Dogra ruler made a plea to India soon after and signed the Instrument of Accession<sup>6</sup>. This was unacceptable to the Gilgit Scouts who led a mutiny in protest, in which they encountered success. This was followed by setting up a provisional government in Gilgit-Baltistan.

This series of events is important to establish in this discussion because it provides irrefutable proof that the region of Gilgit-Baltistan had long ceased to be part of the princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. It remained an independent region contesting for Pakistani support and accession. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan represent a different cultural and ethnic identity which must be protected under a governance system separate from that of J&K.

Thereafter, the provisional government wrote a letter to Pakistan's first Governor-General, Mohammad Ali Jinnah expressing the people's desire to be accommodated into Pakistan<sup>7</sup>. Unfortunately, before much could be done, a UN resolution for Kashmir meant that Gilgit-

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "How and Why Gilgit Baltistan Defied Maharaja Hari Singh and Joined Pakistan," *The Wire*, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/how-and-why-gilgit-baltistan-defied-maharaja-hari-singh-and-joined-pakistan>.

<sup>6</sup> Ali, Syed Waqas, and Taqi Akhuzada. "Unheard voices: engaging youth of Gilgit-Baltistan." *London, UK: Conciliation Resources* (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Bangash, Yaqoob Khan. "Three Forgotten Accessions: Gilgit, Hunza and Nagar." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 38, no. 1 (2010): 117-143.

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Baltistan would be immobilized for 73 years to come because of its neighboring contested territories.

The political dynamics that surround Gilgit-Baltistan run deep into the history of the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Before the United Nations Security Council announced the long-awaited plebiscite in 1948; the people of Gilgit-Baltistan showed where they stood and passed their verdict of accession to the recently partitioned states.

### The Reality of Accession

The status of Gilgit-Baltistan has been hazy since the beginning; there exists a key fallacy with the Dogra ruler signing the Instrument of Accession in 1947 with India. In reality, the Hindu Rajput ruler never had the sovereignty to make this move. While the British did surrender their lease of the region, the Raja did not reclaim it in any way before the interference of the Gilgit Scouts. This nullifies the Instrument of Accession altogether<sup>8</sup>.

The age-old narrative tells the story of people of Gilgit-Baltistan who revolted in Kashmir against their leader and his decision to join India, with the majority of them demanding to accede to Pakistan and showcasing their determination by upholding the flag of the newly created nation. The sentiment was prevalent all over Gilgit and was duly supported by Major Brown; this was indicated in a journal entry by his supervisor and the governor of North-West-Frontier-Province (NWFP) George Cunningham, that these areas joined Pakistan without any violent conflict and "within two days all the Hindu and Sikh shops

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<sup>8</sup> "How and Why Gilgit Baltistan Defied Maharaja Hari Singh and Joined Pakistan," The Wire, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/how-and-why-gilgit-baltistan-defied-maharaja-hari-singh-and-joined-pakistan>.

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were open as usual"<sup>9</sup>. These records not only serve to prove the sense of belonging to Pakistan in the hearts of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan but also shed light on the historical position the leaders took regarding the Kashmir issue. Raj Pruthi in his book *Paradox of Partition: Partition and Kashmir Imbrolio* quoted,

*"The people of Kashmir should be asked whether they want to join Pakistan or India," Gandhisaid in his prayer meeting on July 29, 1947. "Let them do as they want. The ruler is nothing. The people are everything. The ruler will be dead one of these days, but the people will remain...I am not going to suggest to the Maharaja to accede to India and not to Pakistan. This is not my intention. The real sovereign of the State are the people of the State. If the ruler is not the servant of the people, then he is not the ruler. This is my belief, and that is why I became a rebel because the British claimed to be the rulers of India, and I refused to recognize them as rulers"<sup>10</sup>.*

When the people of Kashmir opposed the decision of the Dogra ruler to join India, it was the region of Gilgit-Baltistan that had revolted against the Maharaja, and this clearly identified Gilgit-Baltistan as a region of Pakistan. However, India laid claim to the whole region, including Gilgit-Baltistan, which led to the area becoming a disputed territory until a plebiscite could be held in accordance with the United Nations' resolution. The recent actions by the Indian Government have shown its position and utter disrespect it has for any resolution that

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<sup>9</sup> Bangash, Yaqoob Khan. "Three Forgotten Accessions: Gilgit, Hunza and Nagar." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 38, no. 1 (2010): 117-143.

<sup>10</sup> Rekha Chowdhary, "Kashmir in the Indian Project of Nationalism," in *The Parchment of Kashmir: History, Society, and Polity*, ed. Nyla Ali Khan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2012), 153-76, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137029584\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137029584_8).

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was once decided by its illegal occupation of Kashmir, while previously the Indian forefathers had a very different stance regarding the Kashmir issue.

Jawaharlal Nehru, in his speech in parliament on June 26, 1952, said:

*"Do not think you are dealing with a part of UP, Bihar or Gujarat. You are dealing with an area, historically and geographically, and in all manner of things with a certain background... Let us suppose there was a proper plebiscite there and the people of Kashmir said, 'We do not want to be with India.' Well, we are committed to it, we would accept it. It might pain us, but we would not send an army against them; we would accept that however much hurt we might feel about it and we would change our Constitution about it. We do not think that would happen – that is a different matter<sup>11</sup>."*

Now seven decades later, the people of the region still hold the same consensus. Despite it not being an official province of Pakistan, the general consensus from the people of Gilgit-Baltistan regarding its constitutional status has edged towards Pakistan. The majority of the youth attributes themselves to the governing ordinance of Pakistan and has distanced themselves from their Kashmiri identity. The vast ethnic diversity of the region and the social culture that penetrates there has fundamentally separated it from Indian occupied Kashmir (IOK).

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<sup>11</sup> "Murder of Insaniyat, and of India's Solemn Commitment to Kashmir," The Wire, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://thewire.in/law/murder-of-insaniyat-and-of-indias-solemn-commitment-to-kashmir>.

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### History of Administrative Reforms

As far as the case of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is concerned, differences are majorly due to the autonomous status granted to AJK which provides it with separate institutions, leadership creating an enormous trust gap between the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK. The ridge between the two regions came about in 1947-1948 at the time of partition resulting in the first Indo-Pak war over Kashmir. The territory of AJK was created as a nominally self-governing entity and as a successor government to that of Maharaja Hari Singh. While the administrative and governance status of Northern Areas now known as Gilgit-Baltistan came under the control of Pakistan, dividing the once adjoined lands.

Over the period of time, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan might have held their prior wish to become a part of Pakistan. However, it is also true that the inconstancy in the Pakistani establishment agitated their longing and has failed to provide them with their rightful constitutional rights. There were various initiatives taken by changing governments<sup>12</sup>.

In 1949, the Karachi Agreement took place between Pakistan and the State of Azad Kashmir, and largely laid down the rights of the former over the latter<sup>13</sup>. Azad Kashmir gave the administration over the department of defence, foreign affairs and communications to the Government of Pakistan along with the region of Gilgit-Baltistan then known as Northern Areas. According to Christopher Snedden, an authority on the history of Kashmir, the Government of Azad Kashmir at that time acknowledged that it was easier for the Pakistani state to

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<sup>12</sup> Saranjam Beyg, "Policy Failure in GB," DAWN.COM, August 15, 2013, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1035981>.

<sup>13</sup> Wood, Russell. "India, Pakistan and the Kashmir Dispute: On Regional Conflict and its Resolution." *Peacekeeping & International Relations* 27, no. 4/5 (1998): 26.

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administer Gilgit-Baltistan from Rawalpindi or Peshawar than to administer it from Azad Kashmir.<sup>14</sup>

Under the tenure of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a Northern Areas Council Legal Framework Order (NALC) was passed which provided some administrative and judicial reforms but didn't register any basic rights for the people of Gilgit-Baltistan<sup>15</sup>.

India justifies the abrogation of Article 370 in Indian-Occupied Kashmir by stating that Pakistan too abolished the State Subject Rule (SSR) in Gilgit-Baltistan in 1974<sup>16</sup>.

The State Subject Rule entails that only subjects within said State are allowed to enter government office and own or use the property. However, no legal documentation exists of Gilgit-Baltistan ever being put under the SSR rule in the first place. It is true, however, that the government of Bhutto in 1974 did introduce administrative reforms in the region which changed operations at the structural level but not at a constitutional one.

However, in 1993, the courts in Azad & Jammu Kashmir tried once again to amalgamate the area of Gilgit-Baltistan with their territory<sup>17</sup>. This was met with vehement protest from the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, who once again were threatened by the possibility of being put under Kashmiri rule, as had happened before in history. Due to this protest, the Supreme Court of Pakistan quelled the attempts of

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Snedden, *The Untold Story of the People of Azad Kashmir* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 92S.

<sup>15</sup> Kreuzmann, Hermann. "Kashmir and the Northern Areas of Pakistan: boundary-making along contested frontiers." *Erdkunde* (2008): 201-219.

<sup>16</sup> "Pakistan's Kashmir Hypocrisy," *American Enterprise Institute - AEI* (blog), accessed December 21, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/pakistans-kashmir-hypocrisy/>.

<sup>17</sup> Siddiq, Arhama. "Reforms in Gilgit-Baltistan." *Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1 (2017): 108-123.

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the Kashmiri courts rescuing the people of Gilgit-Baltistan from a future of subjugation<sup>18</sup>.

It was in 1999 that further administrative and financial power was granted to the NALC partly due to the internal political pressure from Gilgit-Baltistan and partly in light of the decision to give fundamental freedom to Northern Areas ordained by the Supreme Court of Pakistan<sup>19</sup>.

The real change came in August of 2009 when the federal government implemented the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order 2009<sup>20</sup>. This step was in accordance with the previous 1999 verdict of the Supreme Court and held significant importance, as it not only worked towards granting the fundamental rights to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, but it was this legislature that changed the name from Northern Areas to Gilgit-Baltistan. Under this presidential decree, an upper house was formed in Gilgit-Baltistan Council, further strengthening the administrative wing. The Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order 2009 is on the same lines as the AJK Interim Constitution Act of 1974. However, this autonomy still remains less than the one granted to the provinces of Pakistan. Speaking on the issue Advocate, Shehbaz Khan stated that:

*"The 'Empowerment and Self-governance Order 2009', under which a chief minister and a governor were elected for the first time in G-B's history, was an administrative arrangement and not a constitutional one as was ruled by the apex court. "We will approach*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ali, Syed Waqas, and Taqi Akhunzada. "Unheard voices: engaging youth of Gilgit-Baltistan." *London, UK: Conciliation Resources* (2015).

<sup>20</sup> Zaheer, Muhammad Akram. "Constitutional Developments and Challenges to Autonomous and Self-governing System of Gilgit-Baltistan." *Journal of Indian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2018): 253-261.

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*the Supreme Court of Pakistan to let it know that its decision has not been implemented<sup>21</sup>."*

While this was deemed a great success, in reality, the move only provided Gilgit-Baltistan with minimal power in the Assembly with Islamabad keeping tight control over the region. The Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC) was abolished in favour of a newly formed Legislative Assembly, with 24 directly elected members. The separate Gilgit Councils were abolished, and a greater amount of power was then handed to the Gilgit Legislative Assembly after the annulment of the 2009 ordinance.

Gilgit-Baltistan has used the powerful platform to ask Pakistan for political and administrative reforms time and time again. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan have fought a tough battle for the protection of their cultural and ethnic identity. The State of Pakistan can stand alongside them by introducing the long-sought reforms that the people demand.

The turbulence created by the shifting government has sowed seeds of resentment for Pakistan's federal government, however; the desire for Gilgit-Baltistan to attain provincial status still remains a ray of hope in the eyes of its inhabitants. In a survey, 82 per cent of the young people responded positively to Gilgit-Baltistan being integrated as the fifth province of Pakistan<sup>22</sup>. In a recent survey conducted by CSPR before the recent elections of Gilgit-Baltistan, it was revealed in our primary data that almost all of the people that were interviewed favored allotting the provincial status<sup>23</sup>. The research team

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<sup>21</sup> "Al-Jehad Trust: Lawyers Rise up against Inaction," The Express Tribune, October 3, 2013, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/613147/al-jehad-trust-lawyers-rise-up-against-inaction>.

<sup>22</sup> Ali, Syed Waqas, and Taqi Akhunzada. "Unheard voices: engaging youth of Gilgit-Baltistan." *London, UK: Conciliation Resources* (2015).

<sup>23</sup> GB Elections At A Glance: A Report By Team CSPR. (2020, November 14). *CSPR*. <https://cspr.pk/gb-elections-at-glance-a-report-by-cspr/>

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interviewed political representatives of almost all contesting parties, independent candidates, religious and tribal leaders in Gilgit-Baltistan. All the respondents were positive about granting the constitutional rights and a merger with Pakistan.

After facing years of political turmoil, lack of rights and experiencing an identity crisis, many respondents believe that a provincial status will provide them guaranteed ownership, transparency, and unity, while some hope that such a move would provide them with legal grounds for judicial reforms in advocating local issues. There was some general apprehension and opposition by the people with some full demanding autonomy for the region. At the same time, only a minority called for a merger of Gilgit-Baltistan with AJK. Despite this, the general view has been optimistic, seeing this step as a progressive advancement and a much-awaited unification with the other provinces of Pakistan. Sharing these aspirations, a resident of Hunza valley stated,

*"This should be taken as the start of a journey, which should end on the provincial setup where we must be given equal rights and representation in the National Assembly and Senate of Pakistan<sup>24</sup>."*

### **Gilgit-Baltistan's Position in The Kashmir Issue**

The question of Gilgit-Baltistan is often raised with the Kashmir issue. The interlinked nature of the close territories presents a complex view regarding Gilgit-Baltistan's merger with Pakistan.

The administrative arrangements in Gilgit-Baltistan are largely different from those in Azad and Jammu Kashmir. Azad Kashmir essentially functions as an autonomous administrative division under

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<sup>24</sup> Ali, Syed Waqas, and Taqi Akhunzada. "Unheard voices: engaging youth of Gilgit-Baltistan." *London, UK: Conciliation Resources* (2015).

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Pakistan's national government. The region has its own separate constitution, national flag, and legislative body, which elects a separate prime minister and president through elections. In this, they enjoy a certain degree of autonomy due to their unique circumstances.

Those belonging to Kashmiri nationalists openly condemn any such move fearing that it would be a direct attack on a uniform state of Jammu and Kashmir, ultimately negating the conflict of Kashmir and compromising the struggle for its joint unity. Over the line of control (LOC), the idea of Gilgit-Baltistan as a separate region is met with a sharp rebuke. These leaders holding nationalist views see the proposed move by Pakistan as unconstitutional as they believe that Pakistan has no jurisdiction over Gilgit-Baltistan and is in direct opposition to the Jammu and Kashmir's United Nations resolution. They stress their point by emphasizing the fluctuating nature of association that Pakistan has undertaken towards Gilgit-Baltistan over the years. Pakistan took control over the region from AJK but neglected to provide it with any seat in the constitution of Pakistan as it is not in the position to do so until the Kashmir conflict is resolved.

### **Kashmiri Resentment**

Pakistan's intention to make Gilgit-Baltistan the fifth province, which is an important part of the disputed territory, renders the Kashmiri narrative irrelevant as claimed by various Kashmiri groups. The president of Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), Tauqeer Gilani, spoke against the recent political move and declared it no different from India's revocation of Article 370 last year, which stripped Kashmir of its self-autonomous status. Speaking to a news outlet, Gilani further stressed,

"Gilgit-Baltistan province would be a step toward the division of Kashmir. It is also against international laws and Pakistan's own stance about the region's

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disputed status<sup>25</sup>."

The government of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) has also shown resistance and opposition regarding any such move by the capital. Sharing the view that Gilgit-Baltistan is a region of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, and any attempt to change its status from a disputed territory would adversely impact the Kashmiri cause. AJK minister for information, Hussain Abid, stated,

"It's not only the government in Muzaffarabad, but all those who espouse a plebiscite in the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir will resist such a move<sup>26</sup>."

He clarified his position and added that the opposition is only shown regarding granting the provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan. At the same time, they stand in solidarity with the people of Gilgit-Baltistan for more autonomy<sup>27</sup>. The lack of social and political coherency between AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan results in such opposing public views, while the people of Gilgit-Baltistan are rooting for a provincial status that will grant them constitutional rights. The people of AJK believe that any such status would dissociate Gilgit-Baltistan from the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Nonetheless, the people and political parties of Gilgit-Baltistan have declared their constant support for the resolution of the Kashmir Issue peacefully according to the right of self-determination, and they still claim that they will guarantee their full support for the Kashmiris in the promised plebiscite.

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<sup>25</sup> "Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan 'province': Will It Make the Kashmir Dispute Irrelevant? | Asia | An in-Depth Look at News from across the Continent | DW | 13.11.2020," accessed December 21, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-gilgit-baltistan-province-will-it-make-the-kashmir-dispute-irrelevant/a-55594328>.

<sup>26</sup> "AJK Govt Opposes Moves to Convert GB into Province - Pakistan - DAWN.COM," accessed December 21, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1232018>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

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As of now, the Government of Pakistan has declared Gilgit-Baltistan a provisional province with the promise to grant it a fully-fledged provincial status later on. The decision is announced by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, at a time when the Kashmir issue is once again highlighted in domestic and international forums. Where on the one hand, this step by the government is being applauded for a historic move, which after years of disservice and political uncertainty, will provide the people of Gilgit-Baltistan with a much-awaited sense of belongingness and security, the other side is scrutinizing the possible outcomes of a move of this nature.

The status of Gilgit-Baltistan has been controversial ever since Kashmir became a disputed territory. With India and Pakistan considering it as a part of the Kashmir issue even after coming under the banner of Pakistan, it could not be given its due status due to the United Nations resolution that proclaims the region as part of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Concerning this, any step Pakistan takes will compromise its position on the Kashmir issue.

### **Possibility of Resistance**

There is already a rising opposition from AJK, which sees Gilgit-Baltistan as a part of the larger narrative for the Kashmiri cause. If the defiance from AJK increases, it might pave the way for Islamist militancy in the region. While another possibility paints a much dangerous scenario, India has accused

Pakistan of passing the decision in order to hide its illegal occupation and has been rallying against it ever since. With such dissent, India would take drastic measures and end up influencing the mainstream AJK politicians and militants to be used as a proxy in its propaganda against Pakistan. Pro-Pakistan movements operating in Indian occupied Kashmir and AJK might get furious on this move, and their anger over this decision by Pakistan will bring them in the hands of

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Indian forces that might use them as a proxy. The militant organizations would turn in opposition to Pakistan in their armed struggle making Kashmir militancy stand against Pakistan. This would not only result in threatening the peace and prosperity of Pakistan, but it might also result in a conflict between AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan.

The retaliation from the separatist movements in Indian occupied Kashmir has already been vocal about any threat to their self-determination. The provision of provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan will separate it from the State of Jammu and Kashmir; with India already having revoked the special status of Indian-occupied Kashmir, this would be a serious blow for a united Kashmir. In order to stop this, separatist groups might launch some movement to evoke anti-Pakistan sentiments by channeling their activities deep into Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK against Pakistani forces.

### The Chinese Factor

Gilgit-Baltistan is situated at the northernmost corner of Pakistan, where it borders China, specifically the Autonomous region of Xinjiang. Due to this strategic location, it plays a major role in the developmental projects undertaken by Pakistan and China, specifically, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor initiated in 2013, which is a part of the grander Belt-Road Initiative by China in Asia.

While some may consider Chinese pressure to be the driving factor behind this move in Gilgit-Baltistan, another overlooked force is India. With the revocation of Article 370, the Occupied Jammu and Kashmir have been given the status of Union Territory<sup>2828</sup>. Moreover, the revocation of Article 35A has invited a major demographic shift in the

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<sup>28</sup> "Gilgit-Baltistan: China's Golden Opportunity • Stimson Center," accessed December 21, 2020, <https://www.stimson.org/2020/gilgit-baltistan-chinas-golden-opportunity/>.

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Kashmir territory, which is sure to have a substantial effect on a future plebiscite in the region.

Unfortunate as it was for many reasons, the revocation of the two Articles stated above did give Pakistan a much-needed jolt out of its State of dormancy. Pakistan needed to act swiftly, to safeguard the region of Gilgit-Baltistan, provides the only land route into China via the Xinjiang province, and happens to be the centre of the ambitious multibillion-dollar developmental project, the CPEC. The project benefits Pakistan in various ways, primarily by strengthening economic ties between Pakistan and China.

### **The Way Forward**

A major reason why Pakistan had not yet granted a constitutional place to Gilgit-Baltistan was that it was hoping to resolve the Kashmir issue. The fear that annexing Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir would mean letting go of the Kashmir territory in a symbolic sense by treating its neighbouring region differently. Pakistan had been playing into the Indian narrative of treating both regions simultaneously, but the time for beating around the bush seems to be up.

With India making definitive moves to secure more territory, Pakistan had to answer in the like. Granting provisional-provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan may weaken Islamabad's control over Kashmir territory. Still, the move was a long-time coming for Pakistan who had to safeguard the crucial province of Gilgit-Baltistan eventually. Contrary to opinions in the international community, it is still possible for Pakistan to continue to fight as passionately for the Kashmir issue.

### **Recommendations and Challenges**

Given the gravity of the implications that might result if Pakistan proceeds with its decision to create Gilgit-Baltistan as the fifth

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province of Pakistan, it is crucial to look at alternate policies that will work towards identifying vital priorities that must be implemented without any of the negative consequences. An effective policy goes a long way in reducing disparity and addressing the root causes of a problem. In the case of Gilgit-Baltistan, the greatest source of their grievances has been the perpetuating inequality and political uncertainty that has grappled the region and its inhabitants.

At this crucial time, when it is being planned that the region should be given provisional provincial status, it is important to undertake administrative reforms to facilitate the new arrangement. Giving Gilgit-Baltistan the provincial status would appear to be the solution; however, there are some precautionary steps that, if executed properly, will prove to be more favourable and instrumental not just for the rest of the stakeholders but also for the people of Gilgit-Baltistan itself.

Reforms are required in the development sector to safeguard the resources of the region and ensure that it sees adequate development via infrastructure projects, advancements in the education sector, and fiscal reinforcements.

- **Continued Tax Relief & Subsidies**

Firstly, the non-representation of Gilgit-Baltistan in the National Assembly has been the basis for tax relief and subsidies that the region enjoys. The declaration of Gilgit-Baltistan as a province is still provisional and should not cause an end to these subsidies. Subsidies provided for essential need items should remain part of reforms. Not only will these win the favour of the people but also satisfy separatist groups in the region.

- **Referendum and Unanimous Resolution**

By giving the people of Gilgit-Baltistan a say in their governance reforms, a referendum can be conducted for the public, and the local government can be asked to pass their own resolutions in

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their own assemblies for administrative reforms. This way, they can be granted the status of a provisional province with the rights and constitutions of a provincial one until a plebiscite is conducted.

- **The 4<sup>th</sup> Schedulers**

While the State has in recent months received backlash over forced disappearances and putting of civil society advocates into 4<sup>th</sup> schedule, it is not the time to silence the critics. Gilgit-Baltistan is well on its way to receiving an amount of autonomy never previously granted, and administrative reforms and changes must include the opinion of the people and the stakeholders involved.

- **Royalty & Infrastructure Projects**

For a region lying at the heart of a multibillion-dollar economic corridor, it is vital that Gilgit-Baltistan receives its own share of infrastructural development. The province is an untapped strategic gem, and resources from Gilgit-Baltistan must adequately serve the people within and without. For these projects, the government of Pakistan may employ royalty payment licensing and involve the private sector and international organizations.

- **Human Development**

The territory has a substantially high primary level literacy rate, higher than all other provinces. Yet, the people from Gilgit-Baltistan have to travel to other provinces in Pakistan to receive higher education. The lack of higher education institutions in the region is a cause of concern and must be addressed immediately. A Medical & Engineering University must be established in Skardu & Gilgit simultaneously along with these reforms.

- **AJK Reforms**

An unforeseen outcome of these reforms might occur in AJK. This is expected to brew some bitter feelings in the Kashmiri nation and is also likely to make way for controversial claims as it did during

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the Gilgit-Baltistan elections in November. Since both these territories come under Pakistan's administration, it must plan a simultaneous path of development for both. Hence, when administrative and infrastructural reforms for empowerment and development are being offered for Gilgit-Baltistan, AJK must not be kept behind.

To achieve this, Pakistan needs to work with movements both on the level and in the assembly. It is through this prudent approach coupled with integrated reforms that Pakistan needs to take in order to safeguard its position both on the local and international level.

- **Spreading the Word**

The initiation and implementation of administrative reforms must be a transparent, publicly available process. The move must be celebrated and must set precedence for policy leaders across the globe. This can include the heavy involvement of influential persons and media ambassadors.

Moreover, a political high ground can be regained by telling the true narrative of Kashmir as stated by the Indian forefathers and by broadcasting the history of Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK, highlighting their distinct features and their separate cultural identities.

- **Inviting Chinese Investments in AJK**

If Chinese pressure has indeed pushed the Gilgit-Baltistan narrative at such a swift pace, then Pakistan's northeastern neighbour must be convinced of the untapped potential of the Kashmir region. Azad & Jammu Kashmir has not seen substantial infrastructural development due to its political climate, and China's presence near the LOC will surely put pressure on India to resolve the Kashmir issue.

- **Managing Local Political Opposition in the Federal**

Another cause of resistance to the reforms might be the political opposition movement to the current 2020 government in Pakistan. While one of the parties' in the movement, namely PPP,

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has had substantial influence in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, the 2020 elections showed that popularity for Pakistan People's Party has been waning. Moreover, administrative reforms such as those proposed do not warrant any resistance on their content but might do so on the intentions behind them.

This is what the majority of the opposition to Gilgit-Baltistan reforms is expected to target, the intention of the current government behind the move. There will surely be allegations of abandoning the Kashmiri cause and of doubling under Chinese pressure; the government will simply have to brace itself. The PTI-led party, however, is no stranger to political dissent and attack, and while others may claim credit for the reforms, history will bear witness to the truth.

- **Call for Plebiscite**

The United Nations has not yet assisted in the matter of holding a fair plebiscite to resolve the issue of disputed Kashmiri territory. With the revocation of Article 35A and changing demographics in Kashmir, it is crucial that the plebiscite is held promptly. Pakistan must write a letter to the UN and offer reforms in AJK while also pushing for the commencement of the promised plebiscite.

- **The Worst-Case Scenario**

The worst-case scenario might come in the form of violence from local militia groups of separatists or from Kashmir lured by India as proxies against Pakistan, aggravated by the propaganda that Pakistan is only acting to exploit resources from Gilgit-Baltistan while keeping its own people underserved and that Pakistan has betrayed the Kashmiris. Infrastructural project sites might need added security in such a case. However, the nature and tone of reforms will certainly quench any bitter feelings in the people, who will clearly see the welfare of the Gilgit-Baltistan people in these reforms.

### Conclusion

It is apparent that Gilgit-Baltistan has been denied substantial infrastructural development and key social reforms due to political fears in the past. Pakistan was always reluctant to invest in a region that, although it was not directly disputed, was at threat of sharing in the fate of Indian-Occupied Kashmir. The provisional-provincial status of Gilgit-Baltistan has certainly pushed it in the direction of greater autonomy.

This has, in turn, quelled political fears and opened the doors of investments in the development sectors. The government of Pakistan must set out to introduce social reforms and developmental projects not only to serve the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, which is the key motivator, but also to show Jammu Kashmir and the international community the untapped potential of these regions, which have suffered for decades due to negligence brought on by political disputes.

This series of projects, along with CPEC, will provide Pakistan with an unprecedented opportunity to put the National Reserve to good use and also to invite international investments in Pakistan. This will pave the way for a much-needed economic recovery that the country needs post-Covid-19. Administrative reforms will also show the international community that Pakistan has the interests of northern disputed territories at heart.