

Sectarian Strife in Gilgit Baltistan

Priyanka Singh

Priyanka Singh is Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.

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Summary

Gilgit Baltistan, a part of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), has been in the grip of another bout of violence and unrest for the last three months. February 2012 witnessed the blatant killing of Shia pilgrims in Kohistan on the Karakoram Highway when they were returning from Iran. In the aftermath of this particular incident, a series of clashes have taken place in the region, the most grievous among them being the massacre of Shias at Chilas on April 3, 2012. The spate of killings has unleashed fear and uncertainty among the people and there is an open outcry about the government's inaction and inability to control the situation. And it has also once again stirred sectarian sentiments, heightening tensions not only between the rival sects but among the public at large.

Gilgit Baltistan, a part of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), has been in the grip of another bout of violence and unrest for the last three months. February 2012 witnessed the blatant killing of Shia pilgrims in Kohistan on the Karakoram Highway when they were returning from Iran. In the aftermath of this particular incident, a series of clashes have taken place in the region, the most grievous among them being the massacre of Shias at Chilas on April 3, 2012. The spate of killings has unleashed fear and uncertainty among the people and there is an open outcry about the government's inaction and inability to control the situation. And it has also once again stirred sectarian sentiments, heightening tensions not only between the rival sects but among the public at large.

Repeated Outbreak of Sectarian Violence: The Underlying Factors

The killings in Gilgit Baltistan have once again highlighted the widening Shia-Sunni divide in Pakistan as a whole and which has specifically affected Gilgit Baltistan since the late 1980's. Gilgit Baltistan was predominantly Shia even under the Maharaja of Kashmir although there was hardly sectarian conflict in the region at that time.¹ Post 1947 too, sectarianism may have existed as a latent force but largely without any violent manifestations. It was under the Zia ul Haq regime, however, that this latent force was ignited to serve Pakistan's larger goals within Gilgit Baltistan and elsewhere. The Iranian revolution propelled Zia's anti-Shia policy to limit Iran's influence on the Shias of Gilgit Baltistan in particular. Zia pursued a policy of Sunni Islamisation wherein Sunnis were patronised and given preferential treatment by the state in all public spheres. This caused widespread discontent in Shia majority Gilgit Baltistan where riots and other acts of violence consequently broke out frequently. Sectarianism was also cultivated by Pakistan as a negative force through concerted efforts to change the demographic reality and reduce the Shia to a minority in Gilgit Baltistan. By encouraging Sunni population from outside of the region to settle in Gilgit Baltistan, the state created a permanent divide between the various groups in Gilgit Baltistan.

Consequently, there have been many instances of sectarian violence in Gilgit Baltistan beginning with the large scale riots of 1988, which erupted over a minor controversy on the sighting of the moon during the holy month of Ramzan. Several hundreds were killed, villages were destroyed and even livestock were not spared while the administration watched the unfolding crisis like a mute spectator. The next major outbreak of violence

¹ "Sectarian conflict in Gilgit Baltistan," *PILDAT Background Paper*, May 2011, available at http://www.pildat.org/Publications/publication/Conflict_Management/GB-SectarianConflict-BackgroundPaperEng-May2011.pdf, p. 13.

occurred during 2003-04, when there was controversy over the introduction of a Sunni-centric curriculum in the schools of Gilgit Baltistan. Because of strident opposition, the federal government was compelled to take on board the Shia leaders and chart out a resolution to the problem. This, in turn, enraged the Sunni constituency, leading to the assassination of Shia religious leader, Zia ud-din-Rizvi, in January 2005. Sectarian sentiments at this point were raised considerably resulting in violence and eventual loss of life.

The second major factor contributing to the repeated outbreak of violence is the region's Kashmir connection, which has kept its political status unsettled. During the last several decades, Pakistan has imposed *ad hoc* governing structures without giving the region either an independent or a provincial status. The political yearnings of the locals, suppressed for long, occasionally find vent in the demand for autonomy because of such sectarian clashes. Political mobilisation along sectarian lines has complicated matters and widened the divide between the Shias and the Sunnis.

The absence of constitutional status, political deprivation, Pakistan's exercise of forceful control on the region and its deliberate strategy of playing the sectarian card have all proved to be a lethal combination that continues to adversely impact peace and security in Gilgit Baltistan. Escalating sectarian tensions and Pakistan's reluctance to address popular grievances and aspirations could potentially lead to increasing demands for autonomy and independence in the coming days.

The Kohistan Killings, February 28, 2012: In hindsight

It has been over two months since the horrific incident on the Karakoram highway on February 28, 2012 when at least 18 innocent pilgrims belonging to Gilgit Baltistan were killed by unknown assailants.² Those killed were part of a group returning from a pilgrimage to holy shrines in Iran. They were travelling in a convoy of four buses from Rawalpindi to Gilgit. The attack took place on the Karakoram Highway in Harban Nullah in Kohistan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The victims were forced to disembark from the buses after having been identified as Shia from the CNIC (Computerised National identity cards) issued by Pakistan's NADRA (National Data Base and Registration Authority). The deceased were all men, including three of the bus drivers. The injured, however, included men, women and children.³

² "Kohistan sectarian attack: 18 shot dead after being pulled out of for buses," *The News*, February 29, 2012, available at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-12812-Kohistan-sectarian-attack-18-shot-dead-after-being-pulled-out-of-four-buses>.

³ Farman Ali, "Sectarian violence: Jundallah claims responsibility for Kohistan bus attack," *The Express Tribune*, February 28, 2012, available at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/342909/18-dead-in-bus-ambush-on-karakoram-highway-police/>.

Ahmed Marwat, commander of an outlawed terrorist group, Jundullah, owned up responsibility for the attack, stating clearly that these people were targeted because they belonged to the Shia community. Jundullah, which allegedly has links to the Taliban and the al Qaeda, is based in Balochistan. This group is said to be different from the Jundallah active in neighbouring Iran. The killers, dressed in military uniforms, managed to escape the scene of attack without much difficulty.

The Kohistan incident jolted public perceptions in the region about their safety and security. It moved the Pakistan Government and the local administration to initiate quick action. A three member committee constituted by Pakistan's Interior Minister, Rehman Malik, to investigate the killings was asked to submit a report within three days. Initial reports suggested that the incident took place in revenge for the killing of two Shias in Chilas earlier, as noted by the local parliamentarian Abdul Sattar. Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari expressed concern and ordered that the injured be given the best possible treatment. The Pakistan Army offered assistance in the investigation process. The incident drew international attention and UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon condemned it.⁴

Islamabad's Response

The Government of Pakistan claims to have made certain arrests in the case. However, the real culprits have not been apprehended yet. With few options in hand, the district administration of Kohistan constituted a 70 member Jirga consisting of elders and Ulema of Kohistan on April 1, 2012.⁵ This Jirga, as reports stated, would visit Gilgit Baltistan to interact with the local jirga in Diamer in an attempt to find a solution to the current crisis. The Pakistan Government was keen to entrust the peace jirga with the responsibility for the maintenance of peace and order in Gilgit Baltistan, emphasising the role of dialogue in resolving the problem. The Jirga was also required to suggest measures for preventing the recurrence of similar incidents in future.

The Kohistan incident is horrific and alarming, executed more like a full-fledged terrorist attack where men dressed in army uniforms went on a rampage. Because of the gravity of the incident, Section 144 was imposed in the area and schools and offices were closed as a precautionary measure and also as a matter of protest and expression of grief by the people. This particular incident has heightened concerns for locals in Gilgit Baltistan and trepidation

⁴ "UN chief condemns Kohistan massacre," *Daily Times*, March 1, 2012, available at http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2012%5C03%5C01%5Cstory_1-3-2012_pg7_18.

⁵ "Gilgit-Baltistan:70 Member Delegation to visit Diamer to Avert Future Incidents," *Gilgit Baltistan Bulletin*, April 2, 2012, available at <http://gilgitbaltistanbulletin.wordpress.com/2012/04/02/gilgit-baltistan70-member-delegation-to-visit-diamer-to-avert-future-incidents/>.

about travelling on the highway.

The incident also highlights certain pertinent points. It raises serious questions about the credibility of the local administration, which allowed such an incident to take place in broad daylight. Another elementary concern is the absence of proper security mechanisms on the Karakorum Highway that could possibly avert such killings and prevent the culprits from easily getting away. At the same time, this incident also questions the extent of Pakistan's control on Gilgit Baltistan. The federal government in Pakistan was caught reacting under mounting pressure from all sides. In the immediate aftermath, Rehman Malik hinted that a major operation would be launched in the region to restore law and order (to be conducted by the Gilgit Baltistan Scouts), but this was later shelved for unknown reasons. Even before getting into the semantics of the whole issue, Rehman Malik tried to brush it aside as another incident of sectarian violence, only to later state that external forces were responsible for the heinous act. Malik was possibly trying to deflect attention as the government was under the scanner for its failure to take concrete steps to nab the culprits. Besides, the government's resort to Jirgas to resolve the case hints at its eroding control over law and order situation in the region.

The Massacre at Chilas, April 3, 2012: Fallout of Kohistan Killings

Even before Gilgit Baltistan could recover from the shock of the Kohistan killings, at least 15 to 20 people were killed and almost 50 injured in yet another incident in Chilas, Gilgit on April 3, 2012.⁶ These casualty figures are conservative estimates and reports claimed that many more people died and were injured than what the official numbers admitted. This incident occurred in the wake of a procession led by *Ahl-e-Sunnat-Wal-Jamaat* (ASWJ is known to be the front of the banned terrorist outfit *Sipah-e-Sahaba*) protesting against the arrest of some of its leaders (especially Attaullah Saqib, the head of Gilgit branch of the *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan*) in connection with the Kohistan incident.⁷ In Gilgit, these protesters burnt tyres on the roads to create a sense of fear and forced shops to close. Grenades were lobbed at this procession by unidentified men riding on motor cycles. Simultaneously, armed men killed 10 Shia passengers after forcing them to get down from the bus they were travelling in Chilas. The fallout was immediate: Sunni mosques made public pronouncements against the Shia community and similarly Shias in Baltistan mobilised to avenge the killings.

These events escalated sectarian tensions in Gilgit Baltistan and the security situation went from bad to worse. Some people, noted to be Sunnis, were taken hostage by a mob in order

⁶ Farooq Ahmad Khan, "Riots erupt in Gilgit, Chilas: 14 killed," *Dawn*, April 4, 2012, available at <http://dawn.com/2012/04/04/riots-erupt-in-gilgit-chilas-14-killed/>.

⁷ "Violence grips GB, Army called in," *Daily Times*, April 4, 2012, available at http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2012%5C04%5C04%5Cstory_4-4-2012_pg1_1.

to pressurise the authorities to take steps to control the situation. The hostages included a civil judge and a district health officer.⁸ A group consisting of ministers and members of the Gilgit Baltistan council was constituted to deal with the situation and negotiate with the abductors. This group led by Law Minister of Gilgit Baltistan, Wazir Shakil, was able to achieve a breakthrough between the government and the clerics.⁹ The weeklong hostage crisis came to an end when 31 Sunni hostages were released. Alongside, there were cases of disappearances, forcing the administration to start thinking in terms of launching a massive operation to nab those behind the violence and the deteriorating law and order situation.

The unfolding crisis and the series of violent incidents made the situation in Gilgit Baltistan tense and brought daily life to a standstill. Movement and traffic on the Karakorum Highway was affected. Due to the disruption of links between Gilgit Baltistan and Pakistan, the supply of essential items to the region was badly hit. The common people were affected the most by the crisis.

The bedlam compelled the administration to take firm steps. These included imposition of curfew in the entire area, closing of schools and offices, restriction of traffic, gagging of private TV channels and jamming of mobile services.¹⁰ Further, Army vehicles and other security forces patrolled the area in bullet proof vehicles.

Reactions of Pakistani Political Parties

The outbreak of violence in Gilgit Baltistan provided another opportunity for the opposition parties to target the PPP (Pakistan People's Party) led federal government. Their basic criticism was utter neglect of the region for so many years. The *Muttahida Qaumi Movement* (MQM) sharply criticised the government's policy towards Gilgit Baltistan and so did Imran Khan, the chief of *Pakistan Tehrik e Insaaf* (PTI), who blamed the government's negligence for the continuing violence in Gilgit Baltistan.

Popular Protests

Several demonstrations were held to protest against the bloodshed in recurring violent incidents. Apart from Gilgit Baltistan, protests were held not only in Lahore and Islamabad but also in the United States where people from the Gilgit Baltistan Diaspora took active part in criticising Pakistan's high handedness in the region. Groups such as the Gilgit

⁸ "Ministers in Nagir to negotiate release of hostages," *Dawn*, April, 8, 2012, available at <http://dawn.com/2012/04/08/ministers-in-nagir-to-negotiate-release-of-hostages/>.

⁹ Farooq Ahmed Khan, "Curfew continues in Gilgit, Kidnappers free 34 hostages," *Dawn*, April 11, 2012, available at <http://dawn.com/2012/04/11/curfew-continues-in-gilgit-kidnappers-free-34-hostages/>.

Baltistan National Alliance (GBNA) and the Gilgit Baltistan National Congress (GBNC) participated in these protests, holding placards that denounced Pakistan's illegitimate control over Gilgit Baltistan, demanded restoration of the State Subject Rule (SSR), and more specifically urged the Government of Pakistan to stop targeted killings in the region.

Women also came out in Skardu to protest against state inaction and demanded that a search should be initiated to locate the people missing after the Chilas bus tragedy and that the peoples' safety must be ensured. Related to this, there were demands regarding the enforcement of better security measures and giving access to alternate routes for people's movement and transport.

Protests were also held in Kargil in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), which observed a complete shutdown on April 14, 2012 adhering to a call given by *Anjuman e Jamiyatul Ulima Asna Ashriya* (Islamia School Kargil). Markets were closed to express solidarity with the people across the Line of Control (LoC) in Gilgit Baltistan. These protesters also called upon the Government of India to take steps to stop such killings.¹¹

Pakistan Government's Response

In the initial phase, the Army was called in to take charge of the region. Later on, the Government of Pakistan, after ruminating for over 10 days on how to deal with the emerging situation, announced a judicial commission to probe the incidents on April 14, 2012.¹² The decision came in the wake of a meeting between the *Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen* and Pakistan's Interior Minister. The probe commission reportedly comprises of the Gilgit Baltistan Supreme Court and the High Court.

Identifying Commonalties in the Two Incidents

Even if there have been concerted cover up attempts by Pakistan by attributing responsibility to external actors for the violence, the fact remains that both episodes had strong sectarian underpinnings. Violence occurred in a chain of events, one fuelling the other set of killings as an act of revenge. A close examination of these incidents brings to the fore the sectarian complex which, over the last few decades, has shaped popular mindsets in Gilgit Baltistan.

¹⁰ "Situation remains tense after Gilgit Chilas bedlam," *The News*, April 5, 2012, available at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-13695-Situation-remains-tense-after-Gilgit-Chilas-bedlam>.

¹¹ "Kargil shuts down against Gilgit Baltistan violence," *The Hindu*, April 15, 2012, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/states/other-states/article3315366.ece>.

¹² "Malik says JC to investigate GB killings; says a third force involved in Chilas-Gilgit violence," *South Asian News Agency (SANA)*, April 14, 2012, available at <http://www.sananews.net/english/malik-says-jc-to-investigate-gb-killings-says-third-force-involved-in-chilas-gilgit-violence/>.

There is mobilisation, rather negative, along sectarian lines leading to impassioned outbursts in the form of protests and marches. The outbursts in most cases eventuate into violent incidents causing considerable damage in terms of law and order, loss of life and wastage of limited resources.

- The incidents shared stark similarities in the manner in which they were carried out. Innocent people were forced to disembark from the buses ferrying them and shot to death after being identified as belonging to a particular sect.
- Both incidents witnessed a complete failure of the local law enforcement agencies. Their conspicuous absence from the scene of crime is intriguing. These state agencies not only failed to avert the killings but later allowed the situation to get out of control. There has been perceived unwillingness to control the situation since the first incident which probably led to the recurrence of violence.
- In both cases, the Government of Pakistan and the local administration were caught napping. They were not clear on how the investigations should proceed and in what direction. Curfew was imposed and the Army was called in to maintain law and order. Educational institutions and markets remained closed after the incident. In terms of state action, it was more immediate in the second incident with the instant imposition of curfew as well as blacking out of communications services in order to avoid dissemination of perverse information and messages from either sect. These steps, however, were of little avail as the ensuing violence could not be curtailed.
- In both cases, the Interior Minister of Pakistan stated that there are hidden forces behind the violence – an obvious attempt to deflect popular attention and defuse popular unrest by buying more time.
- The end result in both the cases is similar: the administration struggling to nab those responsible for the deaths and damage. There are limited options for the Government of Pakistan as attempts to take strict action against those belonging to one sect is likely to incur sharp criticism and resistance from that group leading to a further worsening of the situation. For instance, in the case of the Kohistan killings, when the Deputy Commissioner was transferred after being held responsible for the carnage, the Karakorum highway was blocked by Sunni protesters urging that the order be revoked. The pattern follows in other cases where the section at the receiving end comes out in opposition against any particular action that hurts their interests.
- In both cases, the Governments of Gilgit Baltistan and that of Pakistan failed to assuage popular concerns and give the besieged sections of population a sense of relief.

- The impact of violence has multiplied to accentuate the law and order problem and thrust religious identities/ affiliations beyond acceptable limits.
- The common thinking among people in Gilgit Baltistan does not converge with that of the government. While the government sees these incidents as resulting from the involvement of external elements, the people see it more as a local issue and urge the government to take concrete steps to contain the violence.
- The incidents have received wide coverage in the mainstream media in Pakistan, which has been particularly critical of state indifference and failure to deal with the situation.
- These incidents have been considerably projected at the international level raising serious concerns about the ongoing trouble including the debate on whether it is time to put Pakistan on the Genocide Watch list.

Conclusion

The recent killings have caused immeasurable hurt to local sentiments in Gilgit Baltistan and further deepened polarisation between communities and exacerbated sectarian sentiments. There are indications that there exists in Gilgit Baltistan a huge cache of arms and ammunition and that this is being sourced from Iran, Europe and from within Pakistan as well. The scale and nature of the incidents have raised the sense of insecurity not only among the Shia and Sunni but also other groups who live in the region. These marginalised groups are living under constant fear that they may be targeted as well.

The situation after the second incident is still evolving and it has somewhat diverted attention from Pakistan's and the local government's failure to bring to book the perpetrators of the previous incident at Kohistan. Pakistan is buying time by taking symbolic actions, knowing well that the voices of dissent will tone down and the situation will become placid with time. Overall, Pakistan has failed to focus on Gilgit Baltistan and this is clear in its failure to control the spiralling incidents of violence in the region. The follow up incident in Gilgit and Chilas in April 2012 was unexpected while the authorities were still struggling to deal with the February 2012 attack on Shia bus passengers in Kohistan.

The unstable situation in Gilgit Baltistan is reminiscent of Pakistan's state policy of sowing the seeds for its own destruction. The fundamentalist constituency, which it nurtured for years to serve its interests in neighbouring countries, have transcended into a major security threat for itself. Similarly, in Gilgit Baltistan, the Pakistan Government's support for sectarian groups and its sectarian policies have led to the present situation, which is marked by recurring violence and consequently growing calls for autonomy and even independence from the people of Gilgit Baltistan.