

Rumblings in the Northern Areas

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Pakistan seems to have realised that with the silting of Tarbela Dam (it has lost more than 30 per cent of its storage capacity), it needs to build at least one, if not two, mega dams on the Indus at the earliest. President Musharraf has made an impassioned plea for the construction of new reservoirs and canals to ensure sustainable agricultural development¹ and is trying to build a consensus in favour of the Kalabagh Dam but does not seem to be making any headway. The Sindh, North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan assemblies have already passed resolutions opposing the dam and are unlikely to change their mind. It seems the Pakistani establishment is now veering around to the idea of construction of a dam near Skardu, which will invite much lesser opposition. It has been propagated that the dam will be able to store the floodwater that becomes available once in a decade and that this water can be used to irrigate large parts of the country, including those downstream. It will have a storage capacity of 35 million acres feet (maf) as against 6.1 maf and 7.3 maf in the Kalabagh and Bhasha dams, respectively.² This will avoid the inundation of large tracts in NWFP and will eliminate the province's opposition to the dam. It will still raise tempers in Sindh, but despite its larger population, Sindh hardly enjoys the status within Pakistan that the NWFP enjoys because of its immense contribution to the Pakistani Army.

Unique Status of Northern Areas

The dam will lead to inundation of vast areas around Skardu in the Northern Areas (NAs), but the feelings and aspirations of the people there have never mattered to the ruling elite in Islamabad, which often treats the region as a colony. The Pakistani elite, which habitually complain about the alleged violation of human rights in Jammu and Kashmir, rarely raise a voice in support of the exploited population of the NAs. In the Pakistani scheme of things, the NAs have an extremely ambiguous constitutional status vis-a-vis the government in Islamabad. Officially still considered a disputed area, the region is neither a province, nor does it have the status Azad Kashmir (POK) enjoys with its own legislative assembly. In fact

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since the NAs accession to Pakistan, the people have been denied the right to vote for their own representatives and have been governed by administrators from Islamabad.³

The sparsely populated mountainous region has an area of 28,000 sq. miles, which makes it slightly smaller than NWFP and more than six times the size of Azad Kashmir.⁴ Famous for its peaks, rivers, glaciers and exotic cultures, the region is divided into six districts of Gilgit, Skardu, Diamer, Ghizer, Ghanche and Astore. With the Karakoram, Himalaya and Hindukush ranges as a backdrop, the region shares borders with China, Jammu and Kashmir, Afghanistan and Chitral district of NWFP. The more than one million population (562,000 according to 1981 census) comprises numerous ethnic groups and tribes. The major languages spoken in the region, Shina, Balti, Brushaski, Wakhi, Khowar and Domski, are linguistically distinct from those spoken in Pakistan.⁵ Gilgit-Baltistan, as this region is often referred to in local literature, acceded to Pakistan when the British Commander of Gilgit Scouts, Major Brown declared accession to Pakistan on November 4, 1947.⁶ Soon the region was named 'The Northern Areas of Pakistan' and was put under the direct control of Islamabad, separate from Pakistan-Administered Azad [Independent] Kashmir. The region is strategically important as the Karakoram Highway linking China to Pakistan passes through it and reportedly generates trade worth billions of dollars. The region, however, has become the stage for violent protests by the impoverished population of the NAs, which believes that their unique ethno-cultural and religious identity is being threatened. The alienation of the populace in the NAs is increasing and ethnicity has acquired a strong sectarian undertone.

Sectarian Violence in Northern Areas

On January 8, 2005, prominent Shia leader Agha Ziauddin was critically injured when gunmen opened fire on his car in Gilgit, the administrative headquarters of NAs. Fifteen people died in violent protests before some modicum of governance was restored. On January 13, 2005, Agha Ziauddin died of his wounds in the military hospital in Rawalpindi. The news of his death enraged his supporters, mainly in the NAs and a curfew had to be imposed in Gilgit and Skardu, the two major towns of the region. A large number of government buildings were set on fire and a number of officials and their families were attacked and troops had to be deployed to restore law and order. The NAs continued to simmer weeks after the incident. A number of towns remained under curfew for weeks, telephone lines were disconnected and night time curfew continued for over a month. Sectarian

violence has been on the rise all over Pakistan in recent months, and is a manifestation of religious extremism, not terrorism, as is being propagated by the Pakistani Government to win sympathy in the West. However, in the rest of Pakistan, bomb blasts targeting mosques or attacks on processions have not led to sectarian riots, but in Gilgit the attempt on the life of the religious leader sparked off violent riots, with the fire spreading to other parts of NAs. Even the Karakoram Highway was blocked.

Causes

The acts of violence in Gilgit and surrounding areas are indicative of the simmering discontent within the populace of the NAs, due to the absence of any genuine democratic and constitutional mechanism to resolve their problems. The people in the NAs have been demanding democratic rights for a long time. The Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC) created in 1994 has remained a dysfunctional consultative forum, presided over by the Minister for Kashmir Affairs, who is also the de-facto Chief Executive of the NAs. This was reflected in the voter apathy during the last NALC elections in October 2004.

During the last five years, the elected Deputy Chief Executive has ruled the regions of Gilgit and Baltistan. But the popular perception had always been that Islamabad indirectly rules – obviously in the name of a nominated federal minister of Kashmir and Northern Areas. In fact, the non-local chief secretaries have since long been the sole authority to run the areas on behalf of the federal minister while unchecked deputy commissioners run district management answerable to the chief secretary instead of the deputy chief executive. Such bureaucratic rule mainly from the NWFP and the Punjab has heightened the sense of alienation and completely eroded the notion of self-rule from amongst the people's minds.⁷

The local people are extremely poor and live in some of the harshest environmental conditions of weather and terrain. In summers, the mercury often rises above 40°C; whereas in the winters, it drops below -25°C. The entire region does not have any kind of industry and over 85 per cent of people live below the poverty line. People mostly depend on government offered jobs and join defence related institutions to earn their livelihood. Before Pakistan went nuclear, tourism was the economic lifeline but the nuclear explosions mixed with the aftermath of the 9/11 have almost dried up this avenue. The resultant unemployment and lack of opportunities have created an explosive situation and have led to widespread unrest and frustration amongst the masses.⁸

Poor economic conditions and lack of educational facilities have made the NAs a hub of communal strife during the last two decades. The basic dynamics of sectarianism in this region resembles that in the rest of Pakistan as they share the same historical trajectory and are the product of the policies of the same ruling elite. External involvement, mostly from 'brotherly' Islamic countries, a weak judicial system, proliferation of small arms, mushrooming of sectarian madrassas and the state's use of religious groups for internal and external policy objectives are cited as the major reasons for the current sectarian situation in Pakistan.⁹ Ironically, the impoverished parents have no choice but to put their children in madrassas – the ubiquitous nurseries of religious extremism. As a result, today, the NAs produce more ulemas (religious scholars) than Punjab or Sindh. Due to the lack of true understanding of the Islamic teachings and aversion towards the modern education of science and technology, the ulema unintentionally and at times on purpose instigate communal hate that quite often leads to violence.¹⁰ The Northern Areas comprise a high percentage of Shia, some tribal in their ethnic origin and many Ismaili Shias, the sect led by the Aga Khan and considered heretics by hard-line Islamists.¹¹ From being a completely Ismaili region in history, it has been injected with external populations through natural immigration from the rest of Pakistan. As a result, there has been a competition of sorts between the big sects, and clerics from other parts of the country introduced the Twelver or Imami Shias (official religion of Iran) and Sunni faiths too.

Currently, this is an area where geographic and linguistic boundaries often coincide with sectarian identities. Different valleys speak different languages and follow different denominations. Today, Gilgit is 60 per cent Shia, 40 per cent Sunni; Hunza, Punial, Yasin, Ishkoman and Gupis are 100 per cent Ismaili; Nagar 100 per cent Shia; Chilas and Darel/ Tangir 100 per cent Sunni; Astor 90 per cent Sunni, 10 per cent Shia; Baltistan 96 per cent Shia, 2 per cent Nurbakhti, and 2 per cent Sunni.¹²

Traditionally, the people of the Northern Areas have lived peacefully, inter-married and even joined hands to improve their lot on a self-help basis. However, the activities of religious militants in the wake of Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan war and the freedom given to religious groups have vitiated the atmosphere. The Lashkar-e-Toiba gained influence in the NAs during the Kargil Operation in 1999. Today the entire population is divided on the lines of belief and faith (sect). Different interpretations of the same faith (Ismailis consider themselves as distinct from other Shias) have bifurcated the society into hard-line groups. Although people of differing shades of faiths normally cohabit side by side in peace and harmony,

yet petty issues tend to spark bloody clashes amongst them. Recent decades have thus witnessed many a sectarian clash that have ominously resulted in loss of innocent lives.

For the past eight to nine months, in particular, sectarian tensions have been running high in areas where Shia and Ismaili populations are concentrated but where power and influence have passed on to Sunni clerics with the connivance of the government. The Pakistani media has been reporting that there is a hidden desire within the governing elite to exclude one more community from the pale of Islam after the Ahmadiyas.

Increasing Alienation and Rise of Separatism

The acts of violence in Gilgit area are indicative of the damage being done to the NAs in the absence of any genuine democratic and constitutional mechanism to solve their problems. The people feel that they are non-citizens, or at best, second class citizens. The Kargil episode, which involved a large number of casualties of jawans from the area, added a whole new set of grievances.¹³ As in many other areas of Pakistan, the federal government's hand is seen behind sectarian terrorism, which is believed to be a tool being used to divide the people. This deep mistrust of government is the main reason behind attacks on state property and officials, whenever any sectarian incident takes place or some other serious complaint emerges. It is also an indicator of the peoples' lack of ownership of government properties and facilities.

The time to set things right in the Northern Areas is running out fast. Sharing common grievances against the state, an ethno-national movement is rapidly gaining momentum that asserts the region's unique cultural identity. The Pakistan government has routinely cracked down on 'nationalist' groups in this region, targeting one called the Northern Areas Thinkers' Forum, which advocates the formation of two independent states in the North West region of the subcontinent. The first would include the Pakistan and Indian administered parts of Kashmir, minus Ladakh; the second would include the Gilgit-Baltistan-Ladakh areas.¹⁴ Another group seeks to create 'Balwaristan,' and wants statehood for Baltistan, Gilgit, and Dardistan. Claiming to be an 'oppressed people' owing to sectarianism, intolerance, poverty, terrorist camps, and the theft of resources, the movement actually has a tiny population linked by their opposition to the alarming expansion of Sunni sectarianism into the region.¹⁵

The starting of the bus service between Kargil and Skardu may expose the

population of the region to the freedom and democratic rights being enjoyed by their ethnic kin across the Line of Control in Ladakh and Kargil. For these reasons the revival of old routes with Ladakh might not suit General Musharraf, who came close to accepting Gilgit-Baltistan as part of Azad Kashmir in his controversial seven point formula for talks on Kashmir.¹⁶ The proposed Skardu dam will submerge all of Skardu, capital of Baltistan¹⁷ and bring in settlers from outside the region. This is bound to increase the alienation further. In the absence of any suitable legislative forum to express this resentment, the populace of the NAs may resort to more violence. The potentially tumultuous region needs to be watched carefully, as developments in the region will have ramifications on the discussions to resolve the Kashmir dispute.

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