

# Sectarian changes along Gilgit Baltistan puts added pressure on Pakistan Army

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**Abstract -Gilgit-Baltistan region is shia dominated region of Pakistan, sectarianism within the society remains a prominent issue of contention. External and internal issues have greatly influenced the dynamics in Gilgit Baltistan. This article discusses Pakistan's strategy, CPEC and its influence on sectarianism and India's options.**

## INTRODUCTION

Sectarianism in Gilgit Baltistan is a persistent challenge to the Pakistani state. This challenge was exacerbated after military coup in 1979. Sectarian strife persisted; however, they were kept at bay by the Army. It was under General Zia Ul Haq when sectarian forces sunk their roots in Pakistan (International Crisis Group, 2022). Troubles began for Gilgit Baltistan, a region which is Shia dominated. Two epoch-making regional developments – the Islamic revolution in Iran by Ayatollah Khomeini and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan changed the overall regional and internal landscape for Gilgit Baltistan. These two events were prominent for power consolidating and institutionalising religious Sunni fundamentalism in Pakistan. The US support to mujahedeen against the Soviets in Afghanistan and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry laid the roots of an extremist religious infrastructure in Afghanistan Pakistan region that aided the larger US strategic interests during the Cold War. General Zia consolidated this power and the fundamentalism unleashed the horrendous sectarianism within Pakistan.

## ORIGINS OF SECTARIANISM SCHISM

Gilgit Baltistan is a multilingual diverse ethnic society, the issue of religious conflict persisted since the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. Arab advances in Central Asia led to Islam becoming the prominent religion in the region. The region has seen a long altercation between Buddhism and the local Balti religion of Bon Chos in the eighth century and then between Islam and

Buddhism from the beginning of the eighth century until the 12th century AD. The Arab conquest of Central Asia had a huge impact on Gilgit Baltistan; Muslim religious figures filled up the void after the withdrawal of Tibetans and Chinese (Dad, 2017). Gilgit Baltistan is a unique case melting pot for religion diversity, various religions permeated into the society and were assimilated by the locals with the coexistence of their cultural values. The emergence of sectarianism began with the advent of Sikhs and British in the region; exogenous lifestyles altered, and the concept of pure Muslim was introduced into the society (Dad, 2017).

There are four main sects of Islam in GB: Shia, Sunni, Noorbakhshi and Ismaili community (Muhammad, 2011). The sect-wise division includes 41 percent Shias, 30 percent Sunnis, 24 percent Ismailis, and 6 percent Noor bakhshis (Muhammad, 2011). Theological differences between Shia and Sunni and between the sub-sect of Sunni Islam crept in after General Zia ul Haq supported Sunni Islam, which could help him perpetuate and legitimise his military rule (Mishra V. , 2019).

Table 1: Percentage of various Sects of Islam in GB

Sect of Islam	Percentage	Region
Sunni	30	Southern GB
Shia	41	Northern GB and Skardu city
Ismaili	24	Hunza and western GB
Noor Bakhshi	6	Khaplu, Zaskar and Purig

Source: (Chandrashekhar, 2017)

## GENERAL ZIA UL HAQ'S ISLAMISATION

One of the early features of the Islamisation program was Zakat (an Islamic Tax) Ushr ordinances in accordance with the Hanafi sub-sect of Sunni Islam (Gul, 2002). These policies saw massive resistance

from Shia all across Pakistan, which led to anti-Shia sentiment among Sunni groups, thereby dividing the pluralistic society into sectarian groups. The extension of martial law to Gilgit-Baltistan was followed by a power vacuum that was filled by Sunni ulemas, this led to a sectarian power imbalance in the region. (Mishra V., 2019). Pakistan Army tried to widen the sectarian divide to fulfil its strategic interests in Gilgit-Baltistan, given the area is rich in mineral resources and high yielding potential for Hydropower energy. While Islamabad refused to empower local Shias, they maintained ad-hoc policies to govern the region with an iron fist (Sering, 2009). The killing of Turi Shias in Parachinar by Sunni Afghan mujahideen and armed confrontation by Sunni extremist groups (allegedly 80,000 supported by Gen Zia Ul Haq), who travelled from Mansehra to Gilgit and attacked villages- Jalalabad, Bonji, Darot, Jaglot, Pari, and Manawar (Mishra V. K., 2019). Shia youth of GB disillusioned by perceived official patronage to Sunni extremist groups gravitated towards Shia radical groups. Post 1988, the problem was externalised with actors like Iran and Saudi Arabia providing money and training to extremists on both sides in Gilgit Baltistan. Groups like Tehrik-e-Fiqh-e Jafaria (TNFJ), Lashkar e Jhangvi (LeJ), and Sipah e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) rose to prominence and the inter-sect rivalry ensued (Rafiq, 2014).

#### STATE RESPONSE

The status of Gilgit Baltistan post 1947 use to mirror erstwhile special status of Jammu & Kashmir, Gilgit Baltistan was subjected to “State Subject Rule” under Maharaja of Kashmir. However, SSR was abolished under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1974. The abolishment of the State Subject Rule (SSR) enabled massive immigration from Punjab and KPK to GB, which changed the demographic and sectarian profile of the region (Lambah, 2016). The changes in demographic profile have further aggravated the distinctive sectarian undertone of having the tacit support of the government; for example, the Sunni population in districts like Diamer more than doubled from 1998 to 2011 (Khan, 2012). During Zia Ul Haq’s reign active attempts were made by the government in Islamabad to “Sunnify” the Shia-dominated region (EFSAS, NA), From 1980 to early 2000s, there was a rapid induction of non-locals from Punjab and Kyber

Pakhtunwa (KPK) which has created population inversion from 1:4 to 3:4 (non-locals (Sunni) to locals (Shias)). The induction of outsiders has created a sense of acute insecurity among the locals (SAIR, 2002). In addition to Islamisation under General Zia Ul Haq, Pakistan’s inter service intelligence (ISI) agency’s covert support to militant groups in FATA also accentuated sectarian violence in Gilgit Baltistan. According to South Asia Intelligence Review, ISI used upper reaches of districts in KPK like Kohistan and Swat and adjacent areas in Southern Gilgit Baltistan like Daimir to relocate Taliban fighters and to push these fighters in Kashmir across Pir Panjal range. (SAIR, 2002). The steady inflow of mujahids and Taliban cadres in Gilgit Baltistan during 2000s led spread to radicalisation of fundamental Sunni population in the region.

#### PAKISTAN’S STRATEGY

The overall strategy employed by the Government of Pakistan is to prevent local uprising sectarian tensions. The strategy includes grooming of radical Sunni Deobandi ulemas and propagating anti-Shia sentiments have seen an upsurge in Gilgit Baltistan (Mishra et al., 2018). In response to the divide-and-rule strategy, the Shia have consolidated themselves to respond to Sunni extremism (Yasin, 2014). In the past, the divide-and-rule strategy was an effective tool for the Pakistan Army. However, the spillover effect of Talibanisation, the economic aspect of sectarian conflict and the Global war on terror have resulted in a decline in state patronage of Sunni Ulemas in the region. The challenge to control sectarian conflict is paramount for the Pakistan Army as the trade of horticultural crops and Chinese projects are impacted whenever sectarian tensions are on the rise. The recent attacks of the Chinese workers in Bisham highlights the folly of Pakistan government- reliance and leniency towards on Deobandi religious groups like Mujahideen Gilgit Baltistan and Kohistan (MGB), Tanzeem-e-Ahle-Sunnah Wal Jamaat, Jamaat e Islami (Rana, 2024). Loyalties and affinity of these groups are not to Pakistan Army, but to extremist tendencies and sectarianism.

#### ADDED PRESSURE BY CPEC

The China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC) is a Chinese-funded connectivity and developmental

project, Gilgit Baltistan is the touted as lynchpin for CPEC. However, Locals continue to express discontent over development in Gilgit Baltistan because of the stranglehold grip of the Chinese and the internal migration of people from other provinces. Locals feel alienated and a minority in their region (Ebrahim, 2016). The ingress of Chinese workers and engineers in Gilgit Baltistan has resulted in militant outfits like Terik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) to recruit locals and target Chinese interests. The militant outfits have used sectarian violence as a means to entrench themselves in the region. Targeting the Chinese in Gilgit Baltistan amplifies the agenda of militant outfits as well as puts added pressure on the Government of Pakistan; for example, the attack on Chinese workers in the Daimer Basha dam led to a loss of face for the Pakistan Government at the international level (Chan, 2021). Karakoram Highway (KKH) that links China to Pakistan has been a prime target for militants as well as for Sectarian outfits. Travel and trade along the KKH are indispensable and is a vital artery for CPEC. The major challenge for the Pakistan Army is to prevent any attacks on KKH. In 2023, eight people were killed in an attack on KKH, which led to protests and sit-ins in Chilas, Gilgit, Skardu, and Hunza (Nagri, 2023).

#### INDIA'S OPTIONS

Gilgit-Baltistan remains a contested issue for Indian-Pakistan ties. Gilgit-Baltistan is legally and constitutionally an integral part of India (Mishra D. V., 2018). Successive governments in India have reaffirmed its commitment in taking back POJK from Pakistan. However, governments have maintained silence over atrocities against Shias in Gilgit Baltistan. India must highlight these serious demographic changes bilaterally. Sectarian changes are permanent, the ramification of it are irreversible. India must encourage more voices rising in favour of cultural harmony and integration and reunion with India.

#### CONCLUSION

With a Shia-Sunni inverse ratio, Gilgit Baltistan is undergoing massive internal migration. The area is rich in mineral resources, and successive Pakistani governments have exploited it in the last 75 years. The social and sectarian cohesion are stressed, and the

sectarian divide remains a contentious issue. The ramifications of this can significantly impact Pakistan, China, and India, as well as their outlook towards the region. While in the past, Pakistan's policy of divide and rule successfully secured its interests in Gilgit Baltistan, it now needs to relook into its policies for the stability and development of the region.

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