

# **Changing Political Dynamics in Gilgit-Baltistan: A Socio-Historical Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

*This article is a socio-historical analysis of the politics of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). By exploring the intersection of the formal political structures and the local cultures, this study has addressed the question of political dissent found in some areas of GB. Factors were found responsible for this perception of political alienation like sectarian divide, political history of the region and its exploitation both by the local as well as the national politicians. This region was socio-culturally divided into the Gilgit and the Baltistan blocks. Whereas kinship is the basic criteria for constituting a corporate group in Gilgit, it is the village which is the basic unit of cooperation in Baltistan. The most important issue raised by local people in this regard was the non-integration of the GB with Pakistan. Clifford Geertz interpretative theory and primordial versus instrumentalist paradigms have been used in this study. This study would help to understand the political process in postcolonial states and highlight problems related to state formation and nation building in culturally diverse and strategically marginal and peripheral regions.*

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## **Introduction**

This paper is an attempt to understand the political system of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB hereafter) and particularly the question of who rules GB. Politics of this region is complex due to its political history and its cultural diversity. Its basic design is defined by local cultures. Furthermore, this design has been altered and manipulated by several federal governments, who have wielded a major influence upon the province due to its given status as a territory 'disputed' between India and Pakistan. This study analyses the political history of GB, particularly the Kashmiri/British colonial rule, the partition of India and the constitutional status of GB on the one hand and place and the status of political parties, ethnic groups, religious sects, families and individuals on the other hand. In short, this is an attempt to understand the intersection of the formal political structures and the local cultures in running the state affairs. This study questions that how the federal government, local political parties and politicians use the political history of GB, its cultures and religions to acquire and maintain power? This effort should help to understand the political process in postcolonial states and highlight problems related to state formation and nation building in culturally diverse and strategically marginal and periphery regions.

The most prominent geo-physical feature of this region is its high mountain ecology. This influences almost every aspect of life including history, culture, economy and politics. The strongest and most direct impact of high mountain nature of the region is its culture. A large number of diverse cultures are found and about a dozen different languages are spoken. Four different denominations of Islam have flourished in significant proportions among a number of different ethnic groups. In order to find out who rules GB is important to understand the local cultures and their impact on politics.

The high mountain ecology has also influenced the political history of GB. About a dozen princely states existed side by side with an acephalous (tribal) political structure.

Historically GB's 'strategic location in what is known as the 'Great Game' (between Tsarist Russia and British India) has led to strange arrangements like the 'dual control', i.e. the simultaneous rule of the Kashmiri and the British government. Such conditions of the past influence the present political and administrative framework to a major extent. Thus, for almost seven decades GB is a 'disputed territory' and governed on a sort of 'stop gap' arrangement. Accordingly, these are the major themes in any political debate with the local people as well as the decision-makers in GB.

With a reference to Geertz this study could be called a 'cultural analysis of politics'.<sup>1</sup> Any understanding of politics, in his view, does not merely lie in debates about rules, laws, statutes, democratic process, state power and transnational influences. The functioning of politics is, in fact, embedded in debates relating to the family, kinship and marriage, death and birth practices and conceptions, in short, in local culture. 'Culture' for him was to be understood as "the structures of meaning through which men give shape to their experiences" while 'politics' meant the "principal arenas in which such structures publicly unfold."<sup>2</sup> About Indonesia, Geertz observed what he equally might have said about GB and Pakistan, because political processes are:

wider and deeper than the formal institutions designed to regulate them; some of the most critical decisions concerning the direction of public life are not made in parliaments and presidiums; they are made in the unformalized realms. (...) the pattern of official life and the framework of popular sentiment within which it sits have become so disjoined that the activities of government, though centrally important, seem nevertheless almost beside the point.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis of political process in GB may be initiated by a reference to the wide spread criticism against Pakistan especially the contradiction that many local people

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1 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 312.

2 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 312.

3 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 316.

criticize Pakistan but yet the majority want full accession with it. It has frequently been an important aspect of election campaigns of diverse political parties just as it was a constant theme during author's political discussions with most people. The critique against Pakistan even seems to have generally increased over time, though it witnessed intermediary ups and downs and the beginning of the new era in 1947 was overwhelmingly festive and euphoric. Why were the people of GB disenchanted with Pakistan? Striking for the external observer is the fact that the popularly elected political parties in the province are local chapters of the mainstream Pakistani political parties such as Pakistan Muslim League(s) (PMLs), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) and the rest. Furthermore, this critical attitude remains despite of the fact that massive economic development has been witnessed since 1947.<sup>4</sup>

The idea to choose 'criticizing Pakistan' as a starting point of this article was not intended to highlight an anti-Pakistani sentiment in GB, nor this study is planned to emphasize the local people's 'lack of gratitude' to Pakistan. Using Geertz' words, this is rather an intellectual effort to refine the debate about politics of GB that was initiated by other

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4 The following is based on author's personal research in this area during 1981-1996 and again during 2013 and 2015. In the past, most of GB was plagued by a food shortage almost every winter, next to no roads or other means of communication existed. Hospitals, schools and similar facilities were mostly lacking. The construction of Karakorum High Way (KKH hereafter), completed in 1979, which connected GB with China and the rest of Pakistan, was the game changer. Subsequently, a network of roads and other communication systems, since 2015 a multi-billion China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, has been inaugurated. It will further improve the transport and communication systems. A huge water reservoir (Diamer-Bhasha Dam) is under construction creating new jobs and economic activity. The princely states have been abolished as also the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) of the British/Kashmiri colonial era. Hospitals, schools, colleges and a university have also been established. Thus, the economic opportunities for the local people have increased significantly in GB and other parts of Pakistan. GB today can offer the highest educational standards and has the highest literacy rate in Pakistan. For their advanced education, locals can easily move to Islamabad or Karachi. Food shortages are a problem of the past.

anthropologists who wrote about "... fierce opposition and at times incidents of insurrection against both Kashmiri and Pakistani rule but much less against the British. ....What is the reason for this difference?"<sup>5</sup>This prominent author, chose to treat Britain, Kashmir<sup>6</sup>as well as Pakistan as colonial powers, carries the opinion that: "not only the British domination but also all kinds of domination perceived locally—that is, by those colonized—as 'foreign' is colonialism."<sup>7</sup>He developed an 'outline of a theory of power and violence' based upon Michel Foucault and RanajitGuhawho differentiate power (agency) of the subalterns and power of the dominant. The latter is further subdivided into coercion and persuasionand the former into collaboration and resistance. Sokefeldappears to conclude that due to the 'wise' policies of the British,(persuasion and not coercion as the dominant mode of relations due to which subalterns collaborated rather than resisted) the locals preferred British ruleover Pakistani and Kashmiri rule.

The present study intendsto contest his premises on several grounds. The Shina word used in GB when referring to Pakistan is *khairoor*lowland. Clearly the termstands for the opposite of 'highland', orGB. This at best could be called 'othering'in the sense of differentiating between 'we' and 'they'. Perceiving'us' versus 'them' is a very fluid categorization and redefined from one occasion to the other such as 'we Shia' 'they Sunni', 'we Gilgiti', 'they Balti', 'we Shin', 'they Yeshkun'.All of these 'others' are part of local juxtapositions which are often applied in a derogatory context. GB cannot be treated as a homogenous unit when

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5 Martin Sokefeld, "From Colonialism to Postcolonial Colonialism: Changing Modes of Domination in the Northern Areas of Pakistan," *Journal of Asian Studies* 64, (2005): 940-41.

6 In using 'Kashmir Rule' I want to follow Sokefeldas quoted: "Although technically speaking the area was not ruled by the Kashmiris, but by Dogras (and earlier by Sikhs) who ruled over Jammu and Kashmir State, I will for reasons of convenience employ the shorthand of "Kashmir rule" throughout the article—as does most of the literature on the history of this region." Sokefeld, "From Colonialism to Postcolonial Colonialism",940.

7 Sokefeld, "From Colonialism to Postcolonial Colonialism",943.

discussing its relations with Pakistan. For instance, Gilgit, where Sokefeld did most of his research, offers numerous cultural differences when compared to Diamer in the South and Baltistan in the East. Finally, important innovations such as the freedom of speech, formal education, widespread modern media, regular political elections and many other changes have made politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a very different kind of activity in view of the scope under British/Kashmiri colonialism during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Conditions are incomparable.

Modern political relations reveal people claiming power rather than colonial subjects under rulers wielding ultimate power. Current politics is part of the state-nation construct and accordingly, one of the following two major theories concerning a nation must apply:

1. The 'prime-ordeal' theory relates to a nation as an ethnic community: blood and kinship—actual at least perceived—are taken to constitute a nation.
2. The 'instrumental' theory rather poses a nation as a political community which is based on reason and interest of its members.

A more realistic approach is the combination of both the ethnic and the political community as was described by Tonnies: "primordial attachments are typical of a small community (*Gemeinschaft*), within larger communities (*Gesellschaft*)."<sup>8</sup> A state may be called a territorial equivalent of a nation whereas politics is about running the affairs of a state-nation. The terms nation-state-politics are almost universally in use though in fact the content of these concepts differs considerably in the different countries of the world. Every nation has its own chemistry. It may contain a single culture or different ones. This may relate to different religions, ethnic units, and political histories which gives rise to very specific internal and external dynamics. At least theoretically, people decide through their elected representatives how to run a country in a democratic

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8 Viera Bacova, "The Construction of National Identity – on Primordialism and Instrumentalism," *Human Affairs* 8, no. 1 (1998): 34.

system. Elected representatives vote for a constitution as a broad guideline to run the affairs of a state and they are entitled to amend it. Ideally, a constitution reflects the aspirations of the country's people.

In reality, a constitution is a document of a compromise. It is passed by the majority; half or two-thirds of the members, which implies that it only represents the aspirations of the majority. Generally, dissenting members belong to the marginalized, the minority, and the underprivileged sections of a given society. Similarly, the elected members of assemblies are generally not true representatives of the group who voted them into the assemblies. Elections have become a game involving a lot of money in most countries.

Marginalization can also be geographical, since some areas make up the core of a state and peripheral ones have little to say in the affairs of the state. Similarly, international factors may come into play or the colonial past and disputes with neighbouring countries that have their effects on the making of the constitution. Nations, as mentioned above, are generally made up of people with numerous diverse identities and affiliations in the domains of religion, ethnicity, language and region. If politics is 'an art of acquiring and maintaining power', politicians manipulate and exploit such primordial and civic sentiments as listed above. The struggle to get a maximum out of the limited economic, political and social resources leads to competition, antagonism, frustration and even animosity at the local, the national and the international level. Within such a framework, the politics of GB must be understood.

The reason, why people of GB criticize Pakistan, must be linked to those who rule them, with the regional politics being defined by a variety of local cultures graded on account of their respective religion and ethnicity. This given situation is strongly influenced and manipulated by the given federal government in Islamabad. Due to its particular political history and because of the national policies in the past, GB is still to be integrated into Pakistan. In fact, this constitutional limbo indirectly implies that the local people have limited

constitutional rights. This study argues that Pakistani politicians and successive Pakistani governments have exploited the political history to achieve their personal and party's political interests. Furthermore, the non-fulfilment of the high expectations at the time of independence has led to the disappointments and the criticism of Pakistan. Likewise, some politicians of GB have exploited these negative sentiments to achieve their own personal vested interest by further promoting the anti-Islamabad sentiments.

### Who Rules GB: The Cultural Givens

GB is spread over three very high mountain ranges, i.e. the Karakorum, the Hindukush and the Himalayas with a climate that is generally very cold though some regions in the south experience very hot summers. Owing to the high mountain ecology, the cultural heritage is very diverse. More than a dozen different languages—Khowar, Balti, Burushaski, Wakhi, Shina (including many of its dialects), Kohistani, Domaki, Gujari, Kashmiri, Pushtoo, Urdu, Persian, Turki and Hindku—are spoken in the region.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the local population is divided into a number of different ethnic units. Excluding Baltistan, old accounts<sup>10</sup> mention four major ethnic units (Shin, Yashkun, Kamin and Dhom).<sup>11</sup> The most

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9 Fussman, a French linguist, wrote about some of these languages: "For a linguist trained in historical linguistics these are languages with very different origins. Wakhi is an Iranian language, Balti a Tibetan one, Burushaski is quite isolated; Khowar, Kalasha, Shina, the Kohistanis together with Kashmiri and some languages of the neighbouring Afghanistan form the Dardic branches of languages. Damaki is an Indo-Aryan language heavily overlaid with Dardic and Burushaski elements." G. Fussman, "Languages as a Source for History," in *History of Northern Areas of Pakistan* ed., Ahmad Hasan Dani (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1991), 43.

10 John Biddulph, *Tribes of the Hindoo Koosh* (Karachi: Indus Publications, 1977); Dani, *History of Northern Areas of Pakistan* and Karl Jettmar, "Northern Areas of Pakistan—An Ethnographic Sketch" in *History of Northern Areas of Pakistan* ed., Dani

11 K. Jettmar, the region's major ethnological researcher, wrote: "The population was divided into four castes—Shins, Yashkuns, Kamins and Doms—since in a very early time. This may be according to a model taken from the neighbouring areas where Hinduism was still prevalent." Jettmar, "Northern Areas of Pakistan," 66.

significant division of the population is based on religion, since Shia, Sunni, Noorbakhshi and Ismaili are found in significant numbers. Each has entered the valleys on different roots and found its own specific niche.<sup>12</sup> Though these denominations were always opposed to each other due to some internal and external political dynamics, the sectarian division has now reached the very central position that was previously held or at least shared by ethnicity. Keeping in view the social structure and religious adherence of the people of this region, GB may be divided into three broad parts which approximately correspond to the official administrative structure of Divisions: Diamer Division, Baltistan Division and Gilgit Division (see map 2).

### **Sunni-Tribal Diamer**

Diamer Division consists of the districts; Diamer and Astor. The latter is inhabited by culturally quite different people, compared to those of Diamer, mainly because of their past close contacts with Kashmir in the South. The majority of them are Sunni complemented by a small Shia segment in Astor. In their cultural and political orientation, they are closer to Gilgit in GB than to Diamer. Thus, the people of District Diamer include those of Tangir, Darel and Chilas who almost exclusively adhere to the Sunni faith of the Deobandi orientation that had been introduced from the south by Pakhtun preachers. The Pakhtuns not only taught the Sunni faith but also thoroughly changed the political and social fabric of the society. For instance, a system of land re-allotment called *wesh* and a system of organized vengeance came to prevail. The Pakhtun impact is also evident from the fact that—in contrast to princely states in all other regions of the province—except one or two very short periods, no centralized state existed in this area.

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12 Biddulph observed that: "(...) three different types of the same religion have met, and are now striving for the mastery. From the south, Soonnee Moollahs have carried their tenets up the different valleys with more or less success. From the eastward a current of Shia doctrine has set in from Iskardo; and from the westward the curious Maulai". See, Biddulph, *Tribes of the Hindoo Koosh*, 116.

The most prominent and most relevant tribal values for the purpose of political analysis of Diامر relate to the ideal of a sort of social egalitarianism and the blood feuds. Though economic disparity has gradually been arisen, the social hierarchy has still found no roots. This was perhaps a bi-product of the *wesh* system in which land and other natural resources were communally owned and periodically redistributed. The custom of 'organized vengeance' is perhaps the practical demonstration of social equality. The society is segmented on feud lines. Blood feuds are a part of a larger system called *badal* (revenge) which relates to the underlying principles of local justice. Revenge demands 'a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye' and it demands group solidarity. In any case of murder, the society is divided into two sections, friends and enemies following the basic principle defining an 'enemy of my enemy is my friend'. It is first of all close male relatives such as father, son, and brother of the victim who are bound to take revenge. They are supported by other relatives, cousins and friends, as well as more distant associates of this kind. Finally, the entire population is bifurcated in this manner. This is perhaps not totally new. A similar phenomenon was observed already by Biddulph in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "In more serious disputes the whole valley makes common cause against its neighbours: but this does not prevent all the communities combining, when threatened by an external foe".<sup>13</sup> An apparently simple situation becomes rather complex when conditions on the ground indicate a number of ongoing feuds simultaneously with many of these confronting very close relatives, especially paternal cousins.<sup>14</sup>

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13 Biddulph, *Tribes of the Hindoo Koosh*, 17.

14 In the year 1988, the preparations for a big *lashkar* (a civilian armed force) were being observed that attacked Shia villages near Gilgit. More than a hundred people were killed in this conflict. Similar mobs organized attacks in Babusar or Gunarfarm. If a Sunni hailing from Diامر district is killed by Shias in Gilgit, the people of Chilas feel obliged to take revenge. Such obligations were not limited to the question of denominations. In an armed clash between two Sunni forces (*lashkar*) of Diامر and Kohistan, two neighbouring regions of GB and the adjoining province of Khayber Pukhtunkhwa, at least seven people were killed and a large

Similar systems called 'segmentary opposition' in social anthropology have been described by other anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard, Barth and Lindholm.<sup>15</sup> Evans-Pritchard identified the process as one of fission and fusion. Any group tends to split into opposed segments that tend to fuse in relation to other groups.<sup>16</sup> Lindholm wrote about Swat, a neighbouring Pukhtun valley:

(...) principle of "complementary opposition" (...). Each lineage or *khel* stands in a relation of opposition to its closest neighbour of an equal level. Thus the different sections of a village are in opposition, but will unite should they be threatened by another village. (...) this system not only structures political, economic, and social life, not only organizes people spatially, but also provides a worldview, pervades child raising, forms values, and permeates all possible spheres of human activity and thought.<sup>17</sup>

Political decisions are made in the same manners. The first and most prominent division of the population of Chilas is based on the issue of being an original inhabitant (*malik*) or an immigrant (*gair-malik*). The *malik* historically belong to the four main ethnic groups of Shin, Yeshkun, Kamin and Dhom. There are only one or two remaining families of Kamin and no Dhoms in Chilas in the contemporary times, almost all *malik* of Chilas belong to the tribes of Shin and Yeshkun. The infighting among *malik* is frequent, but they stand united against others especially against the *gair-malik*. The *latter* are quite heterogeneous consisting mainly of Pakhtuns and gold washers locally known as Soniwal or Maruts. These *gair-maliks* are certainly not recent migrants. The vast majority of them have lived in this region since generations. The gold washers are perhaps the oldest inhabitants of this region but they did not live at one place and some of them settled only later in Chilas. They have low social standing.

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number of others injured. The dispute arose over the location of the boundary between two tribes who perceived each other almost as cousins.

15 F. Barth, *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* (London: University of London, 1959); Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940) and Charles Lindholm, *Generosity and Jealousy: The Swat Pukhtun of Northern Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

16 Pritchard, *The Nuer*.

17 Lindholm, *Generosity and Jealousy*, xxvii.

Even today gold-washing is not considered to be a respectable profession. Moreover, unlike the *malik* they gave their daughter in marriage to outsiders, especially to Pakhtunimmigrants who had come to Chilasas refugees after killing somebody at their original home. The *gair-malik* group is quite significant in Chilas proper. In the side valleys, the so-called, *dehkans* may be added as farm labourers who are mostly slaves of the dominating *malik*. The original inhabitants outnumber the *gair-malik*. In the absence of sectarian division (all are Deobandi Sunni) ethnicity or the area of origin are important aspects of the divisions. The Shin and Yeshkun may be compared to rivaling cousins. Depending upon the situation the people are further divided into Shins of Bhutto Gah or ThakGah, though all Shin or Yeshkun unite when facing *gair-malik*.

### **Separatist-Secular-Ismaili Ghizar, Gilgit Division**

The most distinctive aspect of politics in the Gilgit Division is its Ismaili population. Of its three districts Ghizar,<sup>18</sup> Hunza-Nagar and Gilgit itself the latter has a mixed population consisting of different religious denominations, ethnicities and regional backgrounds. In the District Hunza-Nagar, Hunza is predominantly an Ismaili and Nagar a Shia area. The Ghizar District is chosen for a case study. About 80% of the inhabitants are Ismaili with remaining being mainly Sunni. Ghizar forms the north-western part of the GB and lies on the important route linking Gilgit with Chitral. It consists of the four former princely states of Yasin, Punial, Ishkomen and Gupis. Shina, Burushaski, Khowar and Pushtoo are the main languages and the 80% literacy-rate is among the highest in GB. The District is well-known in GB for its agricultural products, particularly its fruits and vegetables. Punial, the name of a subdivision of Ghizar, means 'basket of fruits' in Shina. Similarly, the grapes, formerly made to wine, have a fine taste due to the long

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18 Most of the data for this part have been taken from the research of Mr. Sohaib Bodla a former student of National Institute of Pakistan Studies who wrote his thesis under author's supervision.

sunny days here. The Ismailipopulation was not so strict with the prohibition of alcohol until the recent past. Up to the 1970s this area was ruled by rajas (rulers) who were descendants of the Sunni *Mehtar*(a word for prince in Khowar language) of Chitral.

What makes this area exceptional in the politics of GB is the popularity of the local nationalist party Balawaristan National Front (BNF) which is fighting for the rights and the freedom of the people. The Chairman of the BNF, Nawaz Naji, has contested and won the elections against a candidate supported by Pir Karam Ali Shah, a veteran politician and former governor of GB. The latter is an Ismaili saint who gives amulets and blessings to the people. Among the people of this denomination it was generally considered a sin to vote against him. The word Balawaristan is derived from a Persian word *bala* meaning 'high', thus implying that Balawaristan denotes the highlands of GB. The diverse population was united on the basis of a shared geography, history and culture. The BNF is challenging the control of the Pakistani state over GB and does not accept the claim that the latter is a part of the larger territory of Jammu and Kashmir within Pakistan. The BNF demands an independent homeland for the people of Balawaristan which in their view includes Ladakh, Chitral and Kohistan. The party is divided into two the groups called BNF Naji and BNF Hamid. Abdul Hamid Khan lives in India and his group is banned by the State whereas Naji's group believes in local support. This leader's party is popular among the middle and poor class of the society.

Historically Ghizar became famous because of its former ruler Gohar Aman who came from Yasin, another subdivision of the present District Ghizar. Gohar fought many wars against the Kashmiri and later the British (1840-1860) when they were struggling to occupy Gilgit and the surrounding areas. The interesting aspect of this historical figure is that the BNF considers him as their hero, even though he was known to be a very cruel person who killed a large number of Shias. This makes BNF controversial among the Shia who

make up the majority of GB's population. The other important political families here were those of the ex-rulers who are Sunni in an otherwise Ismaili region but wield considerable political influence, since they are major landholders and control other resources. Perhaps owing to the high literacy rate and the vast exposure to the outside world in Pakistan, especially to Karachi, the Ismailis in GB mainly support the leftist or secular political spectrum. Accordingly, Hunza, another Ismaili area, where a leftist candidate (Baba Jan, who fought elections from behind the bar) won a considerable number of votes.

### **Hierarchical-Shia Baltistan**

The Baltistan Division includes the districts of Baltistan and Ghanche. In the former, the majority of the inhabitants Shia followed by the Nurbakhshi (mainly in Khaplu) sects. The local language is Balti, a Tibetan language. Agriculture based on irrigation and animal husbandry is still the main sources of income. For understanding of the present political and social organization of this district, which is very different from other parts of GB, one has to look back in history. In the past Baltistan used to be divided into three princely states with very similar political systems. "In each of three regions (Skardu, Shigar and Khaplu), a ruling family and a military class aided by a distinct group of functionaries, ruled for more than three centuries over a Tibetan/Balti peasant population ...."<sup>19</sup> The ruling family in Skardu was known as Maqpun, in Shigar they were called Amachas and in Khaplu their name was Yabgus. Many of those who worked in Baltistan (Jettmar 1991, Emerson 1984,) agree that the region differs considerably from the rest of GB. Jettmar, for instance, wrote:

In the west, in the Gilgit region, kinship groups were the operative units (...). So we may speak of "segmentary states" ..., where kinship groups are effectively integrated within a centralized policy. ... In Baltistan, however, the basic units of the Balti population were

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19 R.M. Emerson, "Charismatic Kingship: A Study of State-Formation and Authority in Baltistan," *Journal of Central Asia* VII, no 2 (1984): 95-96.

residential rather than kinship groups: i.e. neighbours, united by shared economic and ritual tasks ...<sup>20</sup>

This observation was also supported by Emerson who presented the view that the importance of the village in Balti society is due to the importance of water in this otherwise arid and barren landscape:

If this hydraulic ecology interpretation of Balti society is sound, then the village, as distinct from the family or lineage group, must be a more important corporate social unit in Baltistan ...The reason for this is that labour must be mobilized on a scale larger than lineages provide, and it must be under the authority of units which transcend lineage groups.<sup>21</sup>

This difference between the social organization of Baltis and their neighbours, in my opinion, was not only due to the arid mountain ecology and the hydraulic society as has been mentioned above but was probably also due to the impact of the type of religion (Shia) and the Kashmiri neighbours who brought Islam to Baltistan. The Balti society was organized hierarchically. At the top of the hierarchy stood the ruler called *cho* followed by his brothers called *kha-cho's*. They were the standing militia. Especially the military commanders were trained as horsemen and soldiers. The next class contained the wazirs (*pha-cho's*) who were responsible for the administration of the state. The wives of wazirs were wet-nurses of the princes. As a rule the milk brother of the prince would be his wazir after his accession to the crown. Like the rulers, the wazirs also married only among wazirs including those of the neighbouring areas. Subsequently came the village headmen (*zharmah*) in the hierarchy who helped the wazirs in running the administration, followed by the farmers and others working for farmers.

If we look at the politics in Baltistan today, it is found that the past continues to have strong impact on the present conditions. The family background of the elected Balti members to the GB Legislative Assembly as well as the names of candidates who secured second and third

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20 Jettmar, "Northern Areas of Pakistan," 81.

21 Emerson, "Charismatic Kingship".

positions in the 2015 election reveals that in Skardu all six seats are filled by ex-rulers, as are those of the subsequent two positions in the election race. The other most important families in Skardu were Syeds who claim descent from the family of a holy Prophet (peace be upon him). Four Syed candidates filled the first three positions in the races for each of the six assembly seats.

Polzer, a German anthropologist who wrote about voting behaviour of people of Shigar, Baltistan observed that:

(...) the traditional village remains a kind of unit. It gives people living there an identity and is in many ways the main point of reference in their lives. When people say ... 'our village' ... they mean only this unit and in saying so they exclude everything outside of that particular village. ... A village as a unit is characterized by strong networks. ...: social networks, networks of kinship, and political networks. ... The affairs of a village are run by a *zharmah*. ... According to my experience a *zharmah* is the most powerful man in a village.<sup>22</sup>

### **Political History and Interference of Islamabad in GB**

Though the heterogeneous cultural background in different parts of GB explains differences in the way politics is practiced, it does not provide a complete answer to the question of who rules the province. The political history of the region and interference from Islamabad are equally relevant if the latter is not the more important of the factors in this process. The history of GB is very complex to say the least. It was under direct British Rule, it was part of Kashmir ruled by the Dogras, and it was ruled by princely states almost simultaneously. This 'confusing' history has led to an equally problematic constitutional status on the issue of whether it is a part of Kashmir, a province or something else. Such a constitutional limbo is bound to lead to political misuse on behalf of the central government in Islamabad and the politicians of GB.

The part of political history that is directly relevant for us here starts from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when in the

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22 C. Polzer, "Elections in Shigar," in *The Past in the Present*, ed. I. Stellrecht (Cologne: RuedigerKoppeVerlag, 1998), 418-21.

early 1840s Nathu Shah and Zorawar Singh, the two generals of Gulab Singh, occupied Gilgit and Baltistan for the first time. At that time Gulab Singh was himself a general of Ranjit Singh, the ruler of the Punjab. The Dogra Gulab Singh became Maharaja of Kashmir as a result of the famous Treaty of Amritsar in 1848. According to this agreement the British defined Gilgit and Baltistan as a part of Kashmir.<sup>23</sup>

From the time of the first occupation of Gilgit by the Dogra to the establishment of the Gilgit Agency in 1877 Gilgit changed its local and Kashmiri rulers several times. One of these local rulers was Gohar Aman who led a very tough resistance against the Kashmiri rule. Gohar Aman himself was controversial, a hero for some regions of GB, for instance Yashin, Gupis, and Iskomen of the present Ghizar District and a villain for others, particularly for Bagrot. Then the British decided to take care of the region directly and established Gilgit Agency with a British political agent (Major John Biddulph) in 1877. This was done mainly due to the fear that the 'Empire' might be overrun by a Russian expansion in the Central Asian regions, if it was not checked by such a natural boundary which was easy to defend due to its high mountains.

The period from 1877 to 1935 (except from 1881-1889 during which time Agency had been closed) is called the time of 'dual control' and known for its tensions between the British and Kashmiri representatives in Gilgit. In 1935, the British decided to lease Gilgit from the Maharaja of Kashmir. Earlier they had ruled GB only indirectly through the princely states. Owing to this lease agreement, the British handed over Gilgit to the Maharaja of Kashmir two weeks before the date of independence in 1947.

At the time of partition of British India in 1947 the Muslim majority areas came to Pakistan and the Hindu majority areas to India. The case of princely states was different. It

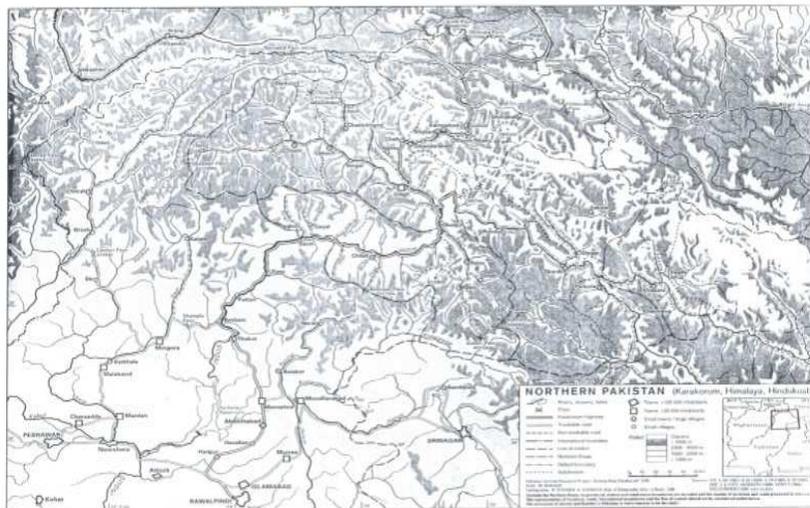
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23 Martin Sokefeld, "Anthropology of Gilgit-Baltistan: Introduction," *Ethnoscripts* 16 no.1 (2014):13-24.

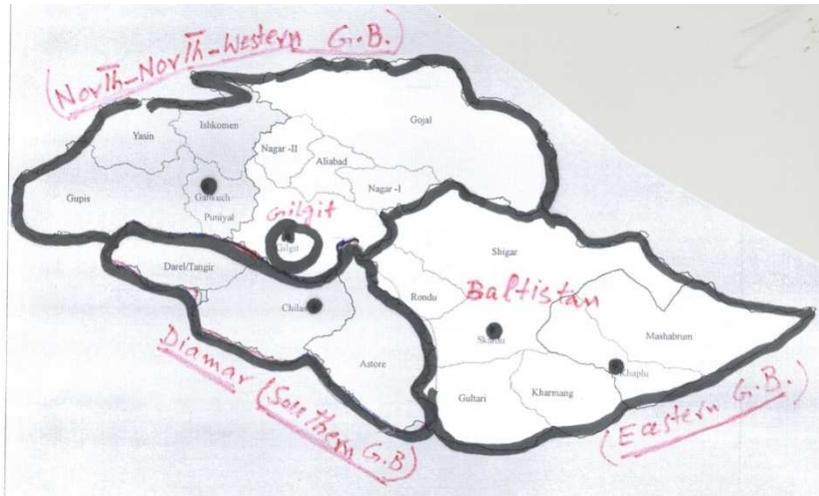
was left to the respective rulers to decide themselves for one country or the other. In most cases it was relatively easy because either, the people and the rulers belonged to the same religion or the state was located far away from the border areas. In Kashmir, the Maharaja was a Hindu but the majority of the population was Muslim and the state was located at the border between two states. For a long time, the Maharaja did not take a decision to join India or Pakistan fearing that the people of GB wanted to join Pakistan. Due to the growing unrest and revolt the Maharaja requested India to send troops and signed an agreement of accession with India. The Gilgit Scouts arrested the Kashmiri governor and declared Islamic Republic of Gilgit requesting Pakistan for accession. These troops along with tribesmen and other locals captured a vast territory. India and Pakistan finally agreed to a UN Security Council's Resolution to hold a plebiscite under the UN Security Council's auspices. UN Security Council's Resolution was never implemented. Part of the Kashmir and GB is under Pakistani control and the other is held by India.

In the period between the partition of India in 1947 and April 1949 the status of GB remained ambiguous. As a result of a contract, between the Government of Pakistan and the Government of the Azad Kashmir, known as the Karachi Agreement, GB was brought under the clear control of the Government of Pakistan in 1949. In 1952 the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (KANA) was established to run the affairs of the Northern Areas. From 1947 to 1972 the structure of administration inherited from the colonial times of the British was maintained with the political agent being nominated by the Government of Pakistan. He ruled the area with the help of the then formal rulers of the princely states. The first major reforms were undertaken by the Government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977) who abolished the offices of political agent, Mir, and Rajaas well as the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) that had been the law in GB at that time.

The name GB was given to this region on August 29, 2009 by the Government of Pakistan through an order named “The GB Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009”. The order of 2009 made GB almost a kind of AJK. The main elements of the order were the creation of the seats of Governor, Chief Minister and Chief Justice and similarly the creation of the two houses of parliament, the upper house i.e. the GB Council and the lower house called GB Legislative Assembly. The GB Supreme Appellate Court was also established. According to the official website of the GB ([gilgitbaltistan.gov.pk](http://gilgitbaltistan.gov.pk)) its total area is 72,496 (km)<sup>2</sup> and the population amounts to 1.301 million. It is divided into seven administrative districts Ghanche, Skardu, Gilgit, Diamir, Ghizar, Astore and Hunza-Nagar which are further arranged into three divisions: Diamer Division, Gilgit Division and Baltistan Division.



**Map1:** Showing GB: Thanks to Professor IrmtraudStellrecht, Tuebingen University, Germany.



**Map 2:** GB divided into three sub-regions.

Even according to the latest reforms; ‘the GB Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009’ key decisions are made by the Federal Government. For instance according to the 2009 order the majority of the members of the Upper House (GB Council), the Prime Minister as Chairman, the Governor, the Chief Judge, the Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and six out of a total of 12 members are to be appointed or nominated by the Federal Government.<sup>24</sup>

24 “GB Council.-

- (1) There shall be a GB Council consisting of -
  - (a) the Prime Minister of Pakistan;
  - (b) the Governor;
  - (c) six members nominated by the Prime Minister of Pakistan from time to time from amongst Federal Ministers and members of Parliament:  
Provided that the Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and GB shall be an *ex officio* member and Minister In charge of the Council;
  - (d) the Chief Minister of GB;
  - (e) six members to be elected by the Assembly in accordance with the system of proportional representation by means of a single transferable vote;
- (2) The Prime Minister of Pakistan shall be the Chairman of the Council.
- (3) The Governor shall be the Vice-Chairman of the Council.

The result is that the federal government plays an important role in deciding who rules GB. One indicator of such a prerogative is that the political party in government at the center also wins elections and forms the government in GB.<sup>25</sup> The structure of political parties as such is weak in GB. There are a very few people really committed to certain parties, whereas most of them usually change their allegiance. The fact that the Chief Minister of GB is a Kashmiri and the present Prime Minister of Pakistan has Kashmiri background is not a contingent occurrence. Similarly, the government of GB, as represented by the Chief Minister and most of his cabinet colleagues, at present is predominantly of Sunni persuasion, although Shias form a majority in the area. This was different in the tenure of previous GB government, because at that time the Pakistan People's Party formed the government in Islamabad.

How these are concerted efforts achieved? The general perception is that if the same party forms the governments in GB and in Islamabad more money will flow to the province. Similarly, the people want a politician belonging to the ruling party to win their respective constituency so that more development funds are allocated to their area.

### **Conclusion: Criticism of Pakistan?**

We have argued in this article that the politics of GB is basically designed by its culture

This basic pattern is influenced by the particular political history of GB just as it has always been manipulated by the federal governments. Due to its political history GB continues to be a disputed territory not fully incorporated into Pakistan. There is no representation of GB in the National

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(4) The Minister of State for Kashmir Affairs and GB shall be an *ex-officio* non-voting member of the Council." (Order 2009: 13)

25 The legislative period (2009-2013) witnessed a government of the Pakistan People's Party's (PPP hereafter) in Islamabad. The same party won the elections and formed a government in GB. In the present legislative period (2014-2018) Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), forming the government in Islamabad, also won the majority to form the Government in GB, as following past patterns.

Assembly of Pakistan therefore the population has no say in the constitution of Pakistan. The GB Assembly itself is almost like a local government council. Due to this constitutional limbo the federal government has a very strong influence in GB. Using different manoeuvring techniques, it achieves a submissive government in GB in sectarian and other issues. As a consequence, anti-Pakistan sentiments arise in Gilgit. Although, as mentioned above, the reasons for not merging GB with Pakistan are to be found in political history and the unresolved Kashmir dispute, it certainly cannot be the best intentions of the Pakistani State to suppress the people of GB. However, the high handedness of the ruling elite and the misuse of the power by the non-local bureaucracy have often given the impression as if GB was a colony. This inappropriate behaviour of bureaucrats, non-local officers and politicians is frequently due to their ignorance of the local culture. Quite openly, they discriminate the local people as primitives. Some of these outsiders simply dislike the local cultures, conceive them in derogative terms and take their revenge against the people for the alleged punishment of being posted in such 'difficult' office. Many of the outsiders have been posted in the highlands against their wishes.