

Sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan

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Sectarianism in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of undivided State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), currently controlled by Pakistan, needs to be highlighted as it not only fuels mass discontent but also keeps the region boiling. The brunt of the radical Islamization policy of General Zia-ul-Haq in this region focused on settling outsiders in the area, impacting directly and adversely on the local people. The policy of Islamization, the Afghan crisis in the 1980s, the revolution in Iran in 1979, have all had a cumulative effect on sectarian turmoil. Even after these events subsided and the General Pervez Musharraf regime adopted the policy of 'enlightened moderation,' followed by the 'restoration of democracy' in Islamabad, nothing spectacular has happened so far to assuage the wounds of the people. In fact the sectarian monster has raised its ugly head more menacingly.

Besides oppression from above, factors such as illiteracy, poverty and lack of political organization have weakened any prospects of a rising democratic voice in the region. Pakistan has promoted sectarianism as a calibrated policy to keep the people engaged in trivial issues and to promote the Sunni variety of Islam in Gilgit-Baltistan. The text book controversy, the killing of

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a prominent Shia leader in 2005, and the refusal of the administration to a commonly agreed proposal for the resolution of the conflict, are some of the indications that the region would likely undergo such turmoil for quite some time to come.

Unrest in Gilgit-Baltistan has received sparse attention in informed circles.¹ For more than six decades the area lacked not only a constitutional status but also even the modest demands of people such as a legal system respecting rights of the people and the provision of a system of self-governance remained unheard and have, on many occasion, been countered violently. Low literacy rates, extreme poverty and the lack of a democratic culture have not only led to the growth of unrest, but also increased the ranks of religion-fed fanatics. And this culture of fanaticism is further spurred by a divide and rule policy promoted by Islamabad from time to time. As a result, no unified voice has emerged from the oppressed people. The sectarian turbulence in Gilgit-Baltistan could also have serious implications for the whole of South Asia.

The Growth of a Monster

Gilgit-Baltistan is sparsely populated, with just around 870,000 people according to the 1998 Census (the last to be held). This population comprises a conglomeration of numerous ethnic groups and tribes. According to the latest available estimates, the population of the region is now approximately 1.5 million, with around 39 per cent Shia, 27 per cent Sunni, 18 per cent Ismaili and 16 per cent Nurbakhshi.² The district wise breakdown is: Gilgit: 54 per cent Shia, 27 per cent Ismaili and 19 per cent Sunni; Skardu: 87 per cent Shia, 10 per cent Nurbakhshi and 3 per cent Sunni; Diamer: 90 per cent Sunni, 10 per cent Shia; Ghizer: 87 per cent Ismaili, 13 per cent Sunni; and Ghanche: 87 per cent Nurbakhshi, 8 per cent Sunni, 5 per cent Shia. Astore, created as a

¹ For details on Kashmir under the occupation of Pakistan see Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra and Seema Shekhawat, *Kashmir across LoC*, New Delhi, Gyan Books, 2008.

² For details see, F. M. Khan, *The History of Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral: A Short History of Two Millennia*, Gilgit, 2002.

District in 2005, comprises 70 per cent Sunni and 30 per cent Shia.³

Traditionally, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan are peace loving. There are reports of many inter-ethnic and inter-tribe marriages in the region and ethnic ties and tribal loyalties conventionally surpassed sectarian identities. However, things have drastically changed in the area since it came under Pakistani rule, and took a sharp turn for the worse since the late 1980s. Today the entire population has been divided on a sectarian basis. The situation has reached such a stage over the past two decades that petty issues are enough to spark bloody sectarian clashes.

The history of the ongoing sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, when the religious leaders of Sunni and Shia sects started a campaign of mutual invective. The international scenario in the form of the Iranian revolution and the Afghanistan war contributed further to sectarian troubles in the late 1980s and 1990s. Increased activities of religious extremists in the wake of Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan war, coupled with the freedom given to religious groups, vitiated the atmosphere in this Shia-majority region. Sectarian tensions and killings in Pakistan contribute directly to sectarian tensions in the region. Significantly, the recent period has witnessed the emergence of a vicious circle, with sectarian violence in Pakistan directly inflaming strife in Gilgit-Baltistan, and vice versa. Pakistan's manipulation of religious groups for internal and external policy objectives is a major reason for the current sectarian situation in Gilgit-Baltistan and across the country.⁴

The basic dynamics of sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan are, thus, a replica of the situation in Pakistan, being an offshoot of the policies of the same rulers. The deliberate ambiguity over the constitutional status of the region, compounded by Islamabad's authoritarian grip, has played a key role in spreading this peril. The International Crisis Group (ICG) thus notes,

By denying the Northern Areas a constitutional identity, administering it through a highly centralized bureaucracy

³ For details see, Manzoom Ali, *Atlas of the Northern Areas*, Gilgit, 2004.
⁴ Zaigham Khan, "Gilgit on Fire," *The News*, Karachi, January 15, 2005.

and depriving its residents of political rights and recourse to justice, Pakistan has created an environment in which increasing numbers, particularly youth, have no outlet to express themselves except through sectarian violence... Wherever there is a lingering sense of deprivation, the eventual outcome can only be chaos and destruction.⁵

The first reported sectarian clash in Gilgit-Baltistan took place during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's regime in the mid-1970s, when Sunnis raised objections to the Shias making a stage in the middle of a road and delivering speeches. Acting on the objection, Bhutto prohibited the Shias from engaging in this practice. The consequent Shia resentment resulted in firing by the Police, injuring many.

Things deteriorated dramatically during the tenure of General Zia-ul-Haq through the 1980s. After coming to power, under the slogan of Nizam-e-Mustafa he imposed *Sharia*, in a largely anti-Shia interpretation, in order to legitimize his military rule and to promote *jihad* in Afghanistan and in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) with the help of Sunni Islamist parties and Deobandi groups. The Zia era witnessed the creation of extremist groups like the anti-Shia Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and, in response to these, the Shia Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Fiqah-e-Jafaria. In 1996, the SSP created an armed wing, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ).⁶ At the other end, the Shias formed their own armed outfit, the Sipah-e-Mohammedi Pakistan (SMP).⁷ The impact of the aggressive Sunni Islamization drive initiated by General Zia fell

⁵ "Discord in Pakistan's Northern Areas," ICG Asia Report No. 131, Brussels/Islamabad, April 2, 2007.

⁶ Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), a Sunni-Deobandi terrorist outfit, was formed in 1996 by a breakaway group of radical sectarian extremists of the Sunni extremist SSP. The breakaway group accused the parent organisation of deviating from the ideals of its slain co-founder, Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi. It is from Maulana Jhangvi that the LeJ derives its name. It was formed under the leadership of Akram Lahori and Riaz Basra. The LeJ is one of the two sectarian terrorist outfits proscribed on August 14, 2001, by President Pervez Musharraf. For a profile of the LeJ, see the *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, www.satp.org.

⁷ The SMP is the second sectarian terrorist outfit proscribed on August 14, 2001, by President Musharraf. For a profile of the SMP, see the *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, www.satp.org.

substantially on the Shia-dominated Gilgit-Baltistan region. The importance given by Islamabad to the Sunni *ulema* (religious scholars), to the Deobandi extremist groups, and to the politics played by the regional administrative officers appointed by Islamabad, was largely responsible for fuelling sectarian clashes. Besides, it was always in the interest of the Army in Pakistan to keep Gilgit-Baltistan divided on sectarian lines to retain tight control over this strategically important area.

Since the region remains deprived of substantive powers and as all high ranking officials are from the Sunni sect, it is no surprise that the area has become a hub of sectarianism and that Shias are repeatedly and violently targeted. The dependent and fragile political system, along with an ineffectual judicial system, has aggravated the conflict further. Poor economic conditions and the lack of educational facilities have also contributed their share in making the region a hub of communal strife. In the absence of governmental educational institutions, Gilgit-Baltistan has witnessed a mushrooming of *madrassas* (seminaries) that preach sectarian hatred.

Islamabad's deliberate policy, since the Zia era, of altering the demographic balance of Shia-dominated Gilgit-Baltistan by settling outsiders in the area, has exacerbated tensions. This part of Kashmir was historically known for its demographic sanctity, since outsiders were not allowed to settle down in the area under the old order. The region has, however, paid a heavy price under Pakistani occupation. It is reported that, as of January 2001, the old population ratio of 1:4 (non-locals to locals) has now changed to 3:4 (non-locals to locals).⁸ The Shia pockets of Skardu and Gilgit are witnessing a constant increase in the population of non-Shias. Abdul Hamid Khan, Chairman of the Balawaristan National Front (BNF) argues,

The Pakistani administration has also been involved in efforts to alter the demographic profile of Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan, reducing the indigenous people to a minority. In the Gilgit and Skardu areas,

⁸ Abdul Hamid Khan, "Balawaristan: The Heart of Darkness," *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Volume 1, No. 5, August 19, 2002, South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org.

large tracts of land have been allotted to non-locals. Other outsiders have purchased substantial stretches of land since they are economically better off than the locals. The rapid induction of Punjabi and Pushtun outsiders has created a sense of acute insecurity among the locals.⁹

The people from Kargil, who went to Gilgit-Baltistan to meet their relatives, told the author that most of the business in the area is in hands of the outsiders settled there.¹⁰

The easy availability of arms in the area, including AK-47 assault rifles and rocket launchers, is another reason for the violence. Despite scores of checkpoints, arms and narcotics flow unabated into the region. The setting up of training camps for the *jihadis* to fight for the 'independence' of Kashmir has made Gilgit-Baltistan a place where weapons can easily be purchased. Islamabad has turned the whole region into a military depot, which could explode anytime. Many local Sunnis, who had fought against the erstwhile Soviet Union as *mujahideen* (holy warriors) in Afghanistan, returned home after the Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s, and joined the anti-Shia sectarian groups. In most of the Sunni-dominated areas, there was an increase in the growth of training camps where Sunni militants were given training along with arms and ammunition.¹¹ The period also witnessed the return of many local Shia graduates of Gilgit-Baltistan from Iran's religious schools. 'With Iranian financial backing and support,' they formed Shia militant organizations to counter the Sunni extremist groups.¹² Retired Shia officials from the Pakistan Army also started training the Shia youth.¹³

The Kargil War also had an adverse effect on the already volatile situation. The use of the extremist anti-Shia Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) alongside regular troops during the Kargil intrusion of 1999 further fuelled the cycle of sectarian violence. The

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The author has made surveys to study the prospects of opening of the Kargil-Skardu route and the issue of divided families in Ladakh region in July 2006 and May 2007.

¹¹ ICG Asia Report No. 131, n. 5.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

presence of militant groups like the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) in the area have transformed it into a hub of anti-Shia extremism. According to Hamid Khan, many terrorist training camps exist in Gilgit-Baltistan, including Tangir and Darel, Astore, Darul-Uloom, Juglote, Gilgit, Madrasa Nusratul-Islam, Konodas, Skardu city, and Ghowadi village near Skardu.¹⁴ There is also a big camp near Mansehra in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP, formerly known as the North West Frontier Province, NWFP) on the Karakoram Highway. Following the announcement by President Musharraf of the dismantling of the entire terrorist training infrastructure in Kashmir under its control in January 2005, it was hoped that the situation would improve. On the contrary, despite the ban on many of these groups continue to be active in the region.

‘Teach a Lesson’ with Impunity

The first major sectarian clash in Gilgit-Baltistan occurred when anti-Shia riots broke out in May 1988 over the sighting of the *Ramadan* moon. When Shias in Gilgit celebrated *Eid-ul-Fitr*, the Sunnis, still fasting because their religious leaders had not sighted the moon, attacked them. This led to violent clashes between the two sects. Following interventions by local leaders, the situation was brought under control. After a brief calm of nearly four days, the military regime allegedly used Afghan and Pakistani *wahabis* from the erstwhile NWFP and local Sunnis, jointly called *lashkar* (army), to ‘teach a lesson’ to Shias, which led to hundreds of killings. For three days, the *lashkars* killed and looted with impunity, despite the presence of the paramilitary Frontier Constabulary.¹⁵

The official complicity in the attack becomes clear from the fact that the armed extremists had traveled a long way to reach Gilgit without being stopped by the security forces at any point. To quote Mohammad Shehzad,

¹⁴ Hamid Khan, “If we had a choice between India and Pakistan, we would not be part of Pakistan,” <http://www.hvk.org/articles/1201/22.html>. Accessed on March 3, 2006.

¹⁵ A. H. Sorbo, “Paradise Lost,” *The Herald*, Karachi, June 1988, p. 31.

On the fifth day, a huge *lashkar* of 80,000 Sunni extremists was sent by Zia-ul-Haq's Government to annihilate the Shias. Villages inhabited by the Shias – Jalalabad, Bonji, Darot, Jaglot, Pari, and Manawar, were completely ruined. Even their animals were slaughtered. The *lashkar* had traveled a long distance from Mansehra to Gilgit and the Government did not stop it. Instead, it put the blame on RAW (Research and Analysis Wing, an Indian intelligence agency) and CIA (Central Intelligence Agency, the US external intelligence Agency).¹⁶

Similarly, in a report published in *Dawn* on December 21, 2002, K.M. Ahmed observed,

...the raiders, who were tribals and *mujahideen* elements, could not have reached this remote place from Peshawar without someone's blessing. The Frontier Constabulary, whose check-posts dot the Swat-Besham road and the Besham-Gilgit highway, did not act to intercept the raiders.¹⁷

Since the initial clashes ended with a truce between local community leaders, the Shias were unprepared for the attack. According to unofficial reports, about 700 Shias were killed.¹⁸ It is also pointed that Osama bin Laden had led the Wahabi Pashtuns.¹⁹ The Sunni Islamization policies of General Zia-ul-Haq were not completely abandoned by the successive Governments. Islamabad's reliance on *jihadis* for its proxy war in Kashmir and its policy to keep the strategically important region of Gilgit-Baltistan under its absolute control prompted it to fuel the flames of sectarian violence in the region. Chilas and Gilgit have become center of anti-Shia extremism.²⁰

¹⁶ Mohammed Shehzad, "Textbook Controversy in Gilgit," *The Friday Times*, Lahore. July 4-10, 2003.

¹⁷ Khaled Ahmed, "Islamic Extremism in Pakistan." http://www.southasianmedia.net/magazine/islamicextremism_Pakistan.htm Accessed on August 23, 2006.

¹⁸ Public Opinion Trends, Pakistan Series, vol. 33, no. 166, July 14, 2005.

¹⁹ B. Raman, "Pakistan: The Shia Anger." www.saag.org/papers9/paper810.html Accessed on March 5, 2006.

²⁰ "The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan", *ICG Asia Report No. 95*, Brussels/Islamabad, April 18, 2005.

Even during the democratic interlude of the 1990s in Pakistan, there was a steady increase in sectarian killings, with seven in 1990, twelve in 1991, and 30 in 1992.²¹ Gilgit was in the firm grip of sectarian violence in 1992 following the assassination of Gayyasuddin, a Sunni leader, on May 30, leading to at least 30 killings. The subsequent conciliatory peace talks ended when Latif Hassan, a Shia leader, was shot dead on August 4, 1993, again leading to clashes that claimed more than two dozen lives. In 1993, at least 20 Shias reportedly lost their lives in sectarian riots.

Sectarian violence again rocked the area with the assassination of Syed Agha Ziauddin Rizvi, a prominent Shia and prayer leader of Gilgit's Imamia Mosque, in January 2005. On January 13, he succumbed to injuries sustained during an attack in Gilgit on January 8, 2005.²² One of the assailants killed by his bodyguards was later identified as a cadre of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. The assassination attempt was followed by a violent reaction by Shias. A large number of public and private properties were set on fire and a number of officials attacked. A Sunni District Forest Officer and six others were burnt alive in the house of the former. The Sunni Director of the Health Department was also killed in his office. More than a dozen people were killed and an unspecified number injured, before troops were deployed to restore law and order and impose curfew in the area. The death of the injured Rizvi within less than a week led to a fresh wave of sectarian violence. In fact, the area continued to simmer for weeks after the assassination and a curfew remained in place for one month in Gilgit and Skardu. Nevertheless, these harsh measures failed to restore normalcy in the region. The Karakoram Highway was blocked, thus obstructing movement of people and goods. The reaction to the killing of the Shia cleric also reached Karachi in the Sindh Province, where Maulana Haroon Qasmi, a Sipah-e-Sahaba cleric, and his bodyguard were shot dead by unidentified gunmen on January 30, 2005.²³ And on March 23, 2005, a former

²¹ ICG Asia Report No. 131, n. 5.

²² "Religious scholar succumbs to injuries: Curfew in Skardu," *The Dawn*, Karachi, January 14, 2005.

²³ See Pakistan Timeline – Year 2005, *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, www.satp.org/satporgetp/countries/pakistan/timeline/2005.htm

Sunni Inspector General of Police, Sakhiullah Tareen, who was in charge of the region at the time of Rizvi's assassination, was shot dead along with four Police officials near village Jotal, 30 kilometers from Gilgit.²⁴ Islamabad claimed that a 'foreign agency' had killed Rizvi to fuel sectarianism in Pakistan. In fact it has become a trend in Pakistan that, whenever there is some untoward incident, a foreign hand is blamed. To quote an editorial published in *Daily Times*,

No place, from Gilgit in the north to Karachi in the south, is safe from this menace (sectarian violence)... Every time there is a sectarian attack in Pakistan, religious leaders and officials accuse foreign intelligence agencies of committing the atrocity. The fact, however, is that every time the Police catches the culprits, we find that they belong to one or the other of half-dozen sectarian groups that have held this country hostage to their agenda. Evidence also proves that the violence has been perpetrated by zealous Muslims rather than by foreign elements... This is not a happy scenario. And it won't do us any good to follow the line of clerics who try to sweep this violence under the carpet by blaming it on foreign hands. We will have to accept that the sectarian bug has bitten us and the fever is running high. Only then can we begin to cure it.²⁵

The Karakoram Highway, linking China to Pakistan, has become a major battleground in the sectarian strife. Traveling on this road is considered a nightmare. This all-weather road, stretching about 840 kilometers, runs through a predominantly Sunni area from Gilgit to Rawalpindi, where instances of firing on passenger buses have occurred several times, claiming many lives. It also passes via the Shia dominated Nagar Valley onwards to Hunza, where incidents of selective killings and ambushing of buses are not uncommon.²⁶ Sakhiullah Tareen, the Sunni Inspector General of Police, was assassinated along with his bodyguards on March 23, 2005, while traveling between Gilgit

²⁴ "Former IG, 4 cops, killed in Gilgit," *The Daily Times*, March 24, 2005.

²⁵ "Another sectarian atrocity," *The Daily Times*, February 11, 2006.

²⁶ Ahsan Wali Khan, "Gilgit's Continuing Tension," *The News*, August 7, 2005.

and Hunza. Two Shias traveling on the highway were also shot dead in the same month. On July 17, 2005, an attack on a bus in the Gonar Farm area of Chilas led to the killing of four passengers and injuries to six others.²⁷ This incident led to a spree of tit-for-tat killings. Another six deaths were reported in revenge attacks. Later a Union Council chairperson and three others were gunned down. On July 22, 2005, sectarian hatred reignited clashes between rival groups in the area, leading to the killing of ten people. The seriousness of the situation can be gauged from the fact that people are reluctant to travel on the roads running through the areas inhabited by the rival sect. To avoid passage through the Shia dominated Ampheri area, Sunnis residing in the Basin area have constructed a bridge over river Gilgit to reach Gilgit city via Konodas. Shias have to pass through the Sunni dominated Kashrot area, as they have no alternative route to reach the airport without an ominous risk.²⁸

Text Book Controversy

It is widely believed that the real cause for the killing of Syed Agha Ziauddin Rizvi was his struggle in favour of a separate syllabus for Shia students. Rizvi's killing intensified the 'textbook controversy' that has rocked the Gilgit-Baltistan for more than a decade. The trouble started in 1999 when Islamabad introduced amended textbooks, produced by the Textbook Board of the Punjab Province of Pakistan. According to Shia leaders, the curriculum promoted Sunni beliefs and practices, excluding theirs. Consequently, the Shia community started a campaign for changes in the curriculum, particularly in textbooks for religious studies that allegedly presented only a Sunni version of Islamic history. The distortions were not only limited to Islamic studies but also highlighted in textbooks of other subjects such as Urdu, History, English and even drawing books. In an interview, Rizvi warned the Government of serious consequences if the issue was not resolved:

²⁷ "Gunmen kill 4 bus passengers in northern areas of Pakistan," <http://pakistanimes.net/2005/07/19/national3.htm>.

²⁸ *The News*, August 7, 2005.

The Government has failed to address it (the curriculum issue) to our satisfaction. The textbooks promote Sunni thought and totally neglect ours. We want the books redesigned or the consequences will be extremely dangerous.²⁹

The Shia leader asserted that Islamic textbooks had been deliberately distorted to promote sectarian hatred. A senior Education Ministry official in Islamabad was subsequently quoted as saying that the Government was considering re-writing the controversial portions of textbooks. Despite initial assurances to look into the matter, however, the administration subsequently backtracked.³⁰ The issue remained unresolved, a clear indication that the Government was not serious in its approach.

In an area known for sectarian violence, the curriculum changes, tilted heavily towards the ideology of one sect, without first trying to build a consensus, cannot be categorized as an attempt to 'modernize' the education system. Despite knowing of the possibility of a Shia backlash, the series of Government assurances, followed by denials, lend credence to the suspicion that the move for curriculum change was calculated to keep the flames of sectarianism burning.

On expected lines, Shias resented the apathetic attitude of the authorities. In 2001, Shia students started school boycotts and occasional clashes became common between the two sects. Gilgit witnessed widespread unrest for a fortnight, commencing in the last week of June 2001. Instead of sincerely attempting to resolve the issue, Islamabad terminated all movement between Gilgit and the rest of Pakistan and strict censorship was imposed on media reportage of the unrest. Sporadic violence became entrenched in the region thereafter.

In February 2003, unidentified gunmen killed at least nine Shias and wounded eight, all from Gilgit-Baltistan, as they headed for evening prayers in Karachi. In May 2004, a local attempt was made to resolve the curriculum issue and all the sects of the region agreed to a settlement on a three-point formula:

²⁹ www.pakistan-facts.com/article.php?story=20030708125240298, Accessed on January 18, 2007.

³⁰ Farman Ali, "Studied Silence," *The Herald*, February 2006.

- ? In Shia majority areas, instead of the controversial aspects of the curriculum, the one suitable to the Shia faith would be taught.
- ? In Sunni majority areas, the curriculum would be taught as it is.
- ? In the areas where there is a mixed population, the curriculum would specify the faith of both the sects.

The insensitive administration, however, rejected the proposal, which could have restored peace in the area. The situation, consequently, worsened. There were large-scale arrests of school children as well as of the top Shia leadership. In response, the Shia community announced observance of a strike on June 3, 2004. However, a curfew was imposed early in the morning on the same day to ensure the strike attempt's failure. The Shias defied the curfew and protested strongly against the arrest of their leaders and consequent violent clashes with security forces led to heavy losses in men and material. There were some half-a-dozen killings. Many were injured and property worth millions of rupees was destroyed. Despite the critical situation, the Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (KANA), the Chief Executive of Gilgit-Baltistan, visited the area only once for two hours, to get a briefing from the local Administration. Surprisingly, in the aftermath of the terrible violence the local government agreed to enforce the formula drafted by leaders of the two sects, which it had earlier rejected, to calm the situation. On April 26, 2005, Pakistan's Minister for Education, Lt. General (Retd.) Javed Ashraf Qazi, chaired a High-level Committee meeting in Islamabad, which had three representatives from Gilgit-Baltistan, to resolve the issue. It was decided to replace the contentious books by those of the NWFP Textbook Board and the National Book Foundation, which were acceptable to both the sects. It was also assured that all controversial content from textbooks would be withdrawn in the revised curriculum.³¹ Though the old textbooks have not been replaced but the controversial chapters are not taught. In the absence of a permanent solution to the curriculum issue, Shias contend that there can never be a compromise on a commonly acceptable

³¹ *The Dawn*, April 27, 2005.

syllabus, especially after the ‘martyrdom’ of Rizvi, the main advocate for a separate curriculum.

The recent history of Gilgit-Baltistan is proof enough that even if a solution to the textbook issue could finally be found, the sectarian gulf in the region is not going to end. While Islamabad was proudly announcing the ‘amicable’ solution of the textbook problem, four Shias were shot during *Eid Milad-ul-Nabi* celebrations. The incident took place when Shias were returning home after celebrating the Prophet’s birth anniversary. To avoid retaliatory action, Section 144 (banning public assemblies) was imposed for two months in the region. In October 2005, Gilgit again witnessed bloody clashes between Shias and the all-Sunni Pakistan Rangers, a Pakistani Paramilitary Force deployed in Gilgit-Baltistan. The upsurge of violence in Gilgit followed an armed clash between Rangers and civilians, claiming twelve lives. The area remained under curfew from October 13 for an extended period. On December 7, 2005, an editorial published in *Daily Times* reported that intelligence agents had discovered that the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan were planning to use suicide-bombers to target Shia members of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Council. The editorial apprehended another bout of sectarian attacks in the wake of the disclosure that extremist groups were attempting to recruit members from the quake hit areas of ‘AJK’ and NWFP by distributing publications like *Zarb-e-Momin* for this purpose.³² On September 21, 2005, Islamabad formed a *jirga* (traditional tribal assembly), headed by the Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC) Speaker, Malik Muhammad Maskeen, and including representatives from both the sects, to bring peace in the area, without involving the other NALC members in the process. Despite the fact that the *jirga* signed a peace agreement, the area has remained anything but peaceful. Extremist leaders of both sects have continued their preaching of hatred.

³² “Failure to Tackle Gilgit Violence is Unforgivable,” *The Daily Times*, December 7, 2005.

Insensitive Islamabad

Despite such a tragic situation, the authorities have failed to take effective steps to neutralize the menace of sectarianism. Rather, the volatility is gaining strength, despite Government claims to the contrary. Moreover, information regarding sectarian violence in the region reaches the outside world only sporadically and there is little documentation about the arrest and punishment of those responsible. Either no arrests have been made, or if there have been some arrests, there have been no convictions. In most cases, no judicial enquiry was held. Even when some inquiry was instituted, such as the one to investigate Rizvi's murder, the report was not made public. The committee set up to investigate the October 2005 sectarian violence submitted its report to Islamabad in January 2006, but the report has not been made public till date.

There have also been large-scale arbitrary arrests of the leaders of a particular sect. On December 30, 2005, a Shia leader, Sheikh Ghulam Mohiyuddin, was arrested at a gathering.³³ Police claimed that he was apprehended for a breach of peace. Earlier, another religious leader, Sheikh Nasir Hussain Zamani, had also been arrested on the same charge.³⁴ The administration has shown a lack of understanding and sensitivity towards the local majority Shia population not only in matters like school curricula, but also in the appointment of officials. Local leaders have consistently accused Islamabad for its sectarian-based administrative arrangement in the area. According to the BNF, Islamabad's political arrangements have always been motivated by sectarianism. For instance, in 2005, the Federal Government's installation of a fundamentalist Sunni to the post of Chief Commissioner in Gilgit created large-scale resentment. To quote a *Dawn* editorial,

The ministry concerned appointed a fundamentalist Sunni as chief commissioner despite its awareness that the Shias of Gilgit panic at the appointment of officers holding extreme Sunni views. What it ignored was the message contained in the earlier murder of a retired

³³ "Religious leader held near Gilgit," *The Dawn*, January 1, 2006.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Sunni IG Chief Commissioner Major (Retd.) Nadeem Manzur, a hardcore Sunni officer... (Manzur) carries no blot but his almost fanatic observance of Sunni faith should have alerted the ministry to his unsuitability. In the event, he proved ineffective and has recently been recalled. Why was he sent to Gilgit in the first place? One fears that the ministry itself could be infected with sectarian passions.³⁵

Many analysts argue that underdevelopment and the denial of rights to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan have led to the spread of sectarian violence. Gulmina Bilal thus opines,

When rights are denied to people, when justice fails them, when they don't have a political voice, conflicts will arise and they will be settled by the gun barrel rather than political negotiation.³⁶

The reality of Gilgit-Baltistan, however, is that there is also official complicity in the sectarian incidents. It is suspected that the Administration systematically stirs up tensions to divert public attention from political issues. The Administration also uses coercive tactics, such as deploying troops, imposing curfew and giving shoot-at sight orders, to control volatile situations, often of its own creation. On an average, curfew was imposed every fortnight after the Rizvi episode.

Coercive tactics, however, only create a facade of normalcy. The stresses persist, and violence continues to erupt from time to time. The official response in the form of curfews and deployment of troops, cordons and arrests are, in fact, an indication of the Administration's unwillingness to honestly address the causes of sectarian unrest, with the obvious result manifested in the frequent recrudescence of violence.³⁷

The killings and counter-killings have become routine in the region and thousands of lives have been lost and unaccounted have suffered injuries in these sectarian clashes.³⁸ The persisting

³⁵ "Failure to Tackle Gilgit Violence is Unforgivable," *The Daily Times*, December 7, 2005.

³⁶ Gulmina Bilal, "While Gilgit burns," *The News*, November 22, 2005.

³⁷ "Take Gilgit violence seriously!," *The Daily Times*, April 29, 2005.

³⁸ Seema Shekhawat, "Sectarian Violence in Northern Areas: An Analysis," *Across LOC*, Jammu, July-September 2005, pp. 8-9.

culture of sectarian hatred has made the lives of those caught in the conflict miserable. There is a constant threat of being shot merely because of being born into a different sect. Properties worth millions have been destroyed in the seemingly unending violence. Chronic conflict has also led to the disruption of even the minimal available infrastructure. The frequent suspension of educational and health services has adversely impacted the quality of the life of the people caught in this vicious circle of violence and counter violence.

The mistrust between the two sects is ever-widening, with the Shias most often at the receiving end. Shia officials are systematically kept out of decision-making and higher posts. The exclusion of Shia officials from security arrangements during a visit by General Musharraf in August 2001 exemplifies the deep mistrust amongst the Sunni-dominated authorities. A dangerous perceptible consequence of this mistrust is that the relentless strife has led to ghettoization wherein a large number of families have abandoned their ancestral homes and moved to areas where their respective sect is in majority.³⁹ Undoubtedly, Islamabad's 'divide and rule' policy has worked successfully in Gilgit-Baltistan. A sect based divided society in the region is busy in settling sectarian scores with each other rather than taking a united stand to pressurize Islamabad to address their genuine long pending political and economic grievances.

Recently Pakistan has made some symbolic gestures by announcing a package for the region of Gilgit-Baltistan that included holding of first Assembly elections in the region in November 2009 and creation of portfolios of chief minister and governor. How far these symbolic gestures will mature in bringing peace and society to a deeply divided society will be predicated on the perceptions of various parties to these gestures and also on the concrete developments in the fractured region in coming days.

³⁹ Abdul Hamid Bilal, Personal Interview, Kargil, May 23, 2007.