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## The Sectarianization of Society, Culture and Religion in Gilgit-Baltistan

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### Introduction

Landlocked between Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and India, the region of Gilgit-Baltistan, now administered by Pakistan, is a disputed and culturally unique space that remains vastly understudied in politico-cultural analyses of Pakistan and South Asia as a whole. Gilgit-Baltistan is politically connected to the Jammu & Kashmir conflict, and, as the Republic of India claims the entirety of the erstwhile Princely State in line with the Instrument of Accession signed in 1947 by the legal ruler of the princely State of Jammu & Kashmir, New Delhi continues to discern Gilgit-Baltistan as a part of its territory that has been illegally occupied by Pakistan since the partition of India. Despite being ruled by the Federal Government in Karachi, and later in Islamabad, since the partition of British India, Gilgit-Baltistan's legal-constitutional status remains an ambiguous and peculiar one as Gilgit-Baltistan is not constitutionally part of Pakistan, with Islamabad historically conceptualizing Gilgit-Baltistan as a semi-autonomous region within Pakistan which legal status is tied to the enactment of a possible plebiscite in Jammu & Kashmir.

The legal-constitutional conundrum surrounding Gilgit-Baltistan has decisively shaped its social, economic, and political fabric as its inhabitants have been denied fundamental constitutional rights as well as representative capacities in national political institutions such as the Parliament, the Finance Commission, and the Judicial Council (Sering, 2010). As such, Gilgit-Baltistan is excluded from much of Pakistan's political process, and Gilgit-Baltistan is a part of the Unrepresented Peoples & Nations Organizations (UNPO), a body that claims to *"empower the voices of unrepresented and marginalized peoples worldwide and to protect their fundamental human rights"* (UNPO mission statement). In lieu of being a part of the Pakistani body politic, the post-partition history of Gilgit-Baltistan has ultimately been characterized by marginalization and exclusion from Pakistan's political system.

Control over the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan is key for the Pakistani government due to the region's access to natural resources and its strategic location. The flow of the mighty Indus penetrates Gilgit-Baltistan and implies an immense hydroelectric power potential, which, if exploited by the State, could enable Pakistan to address the chronic electricity shortages that shed up to 2.5% of its annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP), (Naseem & Khan, 2015). Besides its hydroelectric potential, southern Gilgit-Baltistan has also registered high reserves of nickel, cobalt, copper, lead, tin, mica, quartz, zircon, coal and actinolite of extraordinary good quality, and the north and north-eastern region of Gilgit-Baltistan possess high stocks of iron, silver, gold, zinc, marble, granite, sulphur, calcite, fluorite, limestone, arsenic, spinel, garnet, epidote, topaz, moon stone, pargasite, tourmaline, aquamarine, pyrite and feldspar (Ali &

Akhunzada, 2015). Additionally, Gilgit-Baltistan is located within the Karakoram mountain range, which spans over the borders of China, India and Pakistan, with its most northeastern flank reaching as far as Afghanistan, and control over Gilgit-Baltistan subsequently equals the facilitation of trade and connectivity with these adjacent countries. Gilgit-Baltistan's strategic value has been boosted further by the 2014 announcement of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a part of which is constituted by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), routinely called a "*game changer*" by the Pakistani government and business officials that is going to enhance Pakistan's access to global economic markets (Khan et al., 2018). As CPEC and CPEC-pertaining infrastructure projects are designed to run through Gilgit-Baltistan upon their completion, controlling Gilgit-Baltistan has obtained additional strategic-economic dimensions for Pakistan.

Despite its theoretically advantageous conditions, Gilgit-Baltistan lags behind (the rest of) Pakistan in terms of economic growth and social development, and the region looks back onto a troubled and often violent history since being administered by Pakistan. In many a way, Gilgit-Baltistan differs significantly from Pakistan; being ethnically diverse and linguistically distinct from Pakistan's predominantly Punjabi and Pashtun population, Gilgit-Baltistan is also the only majorly Shia region in a country that is otherwise dominated by Sunnis, leading to ethno-nationalist movements advocating for the region's independence vis-à-vis Pakistan. To *inter alia* silence these demands for self-determination, different Pakistani administrations have sought to alter the demographic and religious composition of the region over time, thereby heightening sectarian tensions in Gilgit-Baltistan between Shias, Sunnis and religious minorities. Although some sections of young people in Gilgit-Baltistan nowadays consider themselves to be Pakistani rather than belonging to one of the various local ethnic groups (Ali & Akhunzada, 2015), there are also local voices in Gilgit-Baltistan which demand the institutional integration of Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan as a province, because such a move could bestow Gilgit-Baltistan with more autonomy and rights (Shahid, 2019). Such demands notwithstanding, the Federal Government has officially repeatedly refuted such requests, noting that the legal constitutionality of Gilgit-Baltistan is inextricably interwoven with that of Jammu & Kashmir, illustrating how a thorough understanding of Gilgit-Baltistan and the challenges to its cultural, religious and social disposition is incomplete without a contextualization with South Asia's broader historical dynamics. Gilgit-Baltistan has been decisively implicated by developments such as the British colonization of the Indian subcontinent, the partition of British India, the ensuing conflict surrounding Jammu & Kashmir, the ethnocentric nation-building efforts of the Pakistani State, and the impact of religious fundamentalism on Pakistani politics, particularly since the late 1970s.

Discussing the trajectory of Gilgit-Baltistan from a historical perspective, this contribution elaborates on Gilgit-Baltistan's complex political and social history, with a specific focus laying on transformations in the interconnected realms of culture, religion, and society. Conceptualizing Gilgit-Baltistan as a space that is in the complex process of transitioning from one societal model to another, this paper examines the historical developments shaping Gilgit-Baltistan and its society today, ranging from the spread of Islam to the integration of Gilgit-Baltistan into British India, Gilgit-Baltistan's involvement in the Jammu & Kashmir conflict, and Gilgit-Baltistan's legal status and the effects of this status in post-partition

Pakistan. Very much like Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan is in the process of undergoing (neo-) Islamization at the hands of the Pakistani State, which has employed a sectarianizing '*divide-and-conquer*' strategy that has begun to fundamentally alter Gilgit-Baltistan's unique cultural heritage.

### Gilgit-Baltistan: A brief history

Gilgit-Baltistan's distinctive cultural trajectory continues to shape its modern existence within Pakistan, constituting the sociocultural backdrop for the contemporary struggle for provincial status in Pakistan and institutional recognition for its distinct cultural identity and history. Socially, Gilgit-Baltistan's divergence from the remainder of Pakistan is exhibited by its linguistic and ethnic diversity; according to UNPO, Gilgit-Baltistan is counting up to around two million inhabitants who belong to at least 24 ethnic and linguistic groups (Kreutzmann, 2007) and are mostly of Turkic-Mongoloid origin (Bansal, 2008). The spoken languages (such as Shina, Donski, Brushaki, Wakhi, Khowar, and Balti) differ from Punjabi and Pashto, which are dominant in the rest of Pakistan (Bansal, 2008), as well as Urdu and English, Pakistan's two official languages. The legal-administrative concept of Gilgit-Baltistan is a historically colonial one as Gilgit and Baltistan were two separate entities prior to the colonization by the Sikh Empire and the British in the 19th century, with people in Gilgit speaking an archaic Dardic language that was an intermediate between Persian and Sanskrit (Feyyaz, 2011). Today, Gilgit-Baltistan consists of a total of 14 districts, and although Shias are still the largest group in the region, the proportional number of Sunnis is growing, with Ismailis and Nurbakhshis being the largest minority groups (Shaikh, 2018). In general, in Pakistan, Sunnism is the country's largest and most dominant branch of Islam by far (Shaikh, 2018). To contextualize how and why Gilgit-Baltistan developed so distinctively, its history must be revisited.

Islamic faith has been a major factor in Gilgit-Baltistan since the 14th century and is believed to have been introduced by Turkic Tharkan rulers, who entered the area alongside the Sufis who introduced Islam in neighboring Kashmir. Prior to the arrival of Islam, local peoples displayed high levels of linguistic similarities with classic Tibetan and predominantly practiced forms of Buddhism (which was introduced in the 3rd century BC), (Warikoo, 2014a), Bon Mat, another Tibetan religion (Feyyaz, 2011), Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and forms of Animism (Dad, 2017). The historical role of these beliefs structured and shaped local practices and beliefs and Baltistan indeed became popularly known as "*Little Tibet*" (Sering, 2014, p. 61). This idiosyncratic cultural legacy continued to be significant following the introduction of Islam, which emerged as the dominant religious belief system around the mid-millennium, with Shia belief and Ismaili crystalizing as the most prevalent forms, followed by Sunnism and Nurbakhshism. The prevalence of various religious, ethnic and cultural identities culminated in the forging of a unique and hybridized cultural identity that diverged from the Sunni practices regnant in most of what today is Pakistan, and this tradition prevails until today as Balti Muslims, for instance, have continued traditional and partially animistic hunting practices (Sering, 2014).

As Islam was regionally consolidated and hybridized with pre-existent cultural traditions, the regional rulers, known as *Rajas*, began to expand their territory to Ladakh in India, fostering close cultural ties that prevail until this day. The *Rajas*, which reigned over small, independent valley states, often differed in ethnicity and religious intricacies but encouraged politico-religious cooperation and harmony through interethnic and interreligious intermarriage (Feyyaz, 2011). Owing to this distinct ethnic and religious setup predating the introduction of Islam and the trajectory the region took following the introduction of Islam, Gilgit-Baltistan developed in an idiosyncratic manner that was distinguishably different from the religious developments in other parts of the Mughal-dominated subcontinent of the time, ultimately highlighting a remarkable extent of ethno-religious diversity and, mostly, harmony. In the process, Gilgit-Baltistan, although not always internally peaceful due to its constitution of a variety of heterogeneous political units, developed its own rich culture.

By the midst of the 19th century, the political expansion of the Sikh Empire beyond Punjab and the wave of British colonization that had begun to penetrate Southern Asia also started to impact the sociopolitical developments in Gilgit-Baltistan. In 1839, the Sikh Empire of Maharajah Ranjit Singh attacked Baltistan and Baltistan fell to the Sikhs in 1842, remaining under Sikh control until 1846, when the victory of the British East India Company in the first Anglo-Sikh war led to the subjugation of the Sikh Empire (Singh, 2004). Following the end of the conflict, the 1846 Treaty of Amritsar established the princely State of Jammu & Kashmir, which was henceforth under British suzerainty, and the British installed the Hindu Dogra Gulab Singh as Maharajah. The Treaty of Amritsar incorporated the territories that were previously held by the Sikhs into Jammu & Kashmir, effectively integrating Baltistan into British India. Gilgit was added to Baltistan following its annexation by the British in 1860 (Ali, 2013), culminating in the birth of Gilgit-Baltistan as an administrative-legal unit.

Over the years, Gilgit-Baltistan obtained a decisive strategic role in the British colonial designs for the broader South Asia region. Importantly, Gilgit-Baltistan's physical location and its topography of being surrounded by the largely impassable Karakoram mountain range made it a key strategic deterrent against a potential invasion of British India from Afghanistan, which was then the main space for the '*Great Game*' between Britain and Imperial Russia (Fromkin, 1980). Deterring a potential Russian aggression was prioritized by the colonial administration over negotiating and mediating the distinct historical identities that people in Gilgit-Baltistan had developed over the past centuries, and people in Gilgit-Baltistan generally saw themselves as ethnically, culturally, and religiously different to their new Kashmiri and Hindu rulers. Sources of alienation included the low number of Gilgitis and Baltis in Kashmiri State forces, differing religious practices (for instance the criminalization of slaughtering cows), (Ali, 2013), the general fact that the British had installed a Hindu ruler in a predominantly Muslim area (Bouzas, 2012), and the increased institutional subjugation of Gilgit and Baltistan areas to Kashmiri rulers, which ultimately reduced political autonomy (Warikoo, 2014b). According to some, the integration of Gilgit-Baltistan into British India disrupted the highly regionalized character of local cultures and introduced the region to new material as well as ideological structures, thereby challenging the local cultures that had reigned unrivalled until then.

Britain's strategic competition with the Russian Empire ultimately drove Britain to establish an Officer on Special Duty in Gilgit town in 1877 to ensure the security of the border, a mandate that was extended in 1889 when the respective officer was upgraded to the position of a Special Agent. In 1935, Britain leased the Gilgit *wazarat* (district) from Jammu & Kashmir for a period of 60 years, a lease that was rendered void with the partition of British India. Although serving a key function in Britain's colonial designs and over time adopting cultural structures such as polo as one of Gilgit-Baltistan's most popular sports (*Express Tribune*, 2017), many voices in the region, also due to the region's distinct heritage, never truly began to consider itself *Kashmiri* per se, rather emphasizing their unique identity and their sense of belonging to the respective ethnic groups. Disregarding these cultural and identity-relating complexities, however, the British decision to integrate Gilgit-Baltistan into Jammu & Kashmir would have far-reaching implications for Gilgit-Baltistan's people and cultures in the years to come.

### The Politics of Partition and Gilgit-Baltistan

Anti-colonial sentiment in British India had intensified throughout the early stages of the 20th century, and the costs inflicted on Great Britain by the two World Wars accelerated the push for independence on the subcontinent, ultimately culminating in the partition of British India into majority-Muslim Pakistan and majority-Hindu India on the 14th and 15th of August 1947. Upon partition, the Maharajah of Jammu & Kashmir, Hari Singh, refused to align his State with either India or Pakistan, rather thinking of remaining independent. Singh's pro-independence thought was swiftly undermined by the attack of Pakistani forces on Jammu & Kashmir in October 1947, after which Singh requested Indian military support to deter the Pakistani aggression, a conflict that ultimately escalated into the first Indo-Pak war. To enable the incursion of Indian troops into Kashmiri territory, Singh signed the Instrument of Accession on the 26th of October 1947, formally making Jammu & Kashmir a part of India. The first Indo-Pak war culminated in the partition of Jammu & Kashmir into Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir and so-called 'Azad' (Free) Jammu Kashmir, more correctly - Pakistan Administered Jammu & Kashmir (PAJK), which was controlled by Pakistan, and both territories are now separated by the Line of Control (LoC) that was established by the 1972 Simla Agreement.

Attempting to mediate between the two conflict parties, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 47 in April 1948, which built on the previous UNSC Resolution 39 (adopted in January 1948) and aimed to ensure conditions under which an impartial plebiscite could be enacted that would determine whether Jammu & Kashmir was to accede to either India or Pakistan. For a plebiscite to occur in a manner that was impartial and free, the Resolution required Pakistan to withdraw its affiliated troops from the territories they had occupied, namely Pakistan Administered Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. Viewing India's claim over Jammu & Kashmir as fraudulent and having accused India of committing a genocide against Muslims (Raghavan, 2010), Islamabad has until this day failed to live up to its legal obligations as stipulated by Resolution 47, and, referring to Resolution 47, India has historically contended that an impartial plebiscite could only be performed once Pakistan removed its military presence in Kashmir, and as that did not happen, India continues to base

its legal claim to Jammu & Kashmir on the Instrument of Accession signed by Maharajah Hari Singh. The enactment of the plebiscite, then, is bound to the removal of Pakistani forces, meaning that Pakistan engenders conditions in which a plebiscite cannot take place, domestically vindicating the military occupation of PAK and Gilgit-Baltistan and sustaining the uncertainty faced by people residing in Jammu & Kashmir. Ultimately reflecting the deeply antagonized relations between India and Pakistan, the forced annexation of PAK and Gilgit-Baltistan saw Pakistan obtain political *de-facto* control over Gilgit-Baltistan that prevails until this day.

The politics of partition and the Jammu & Kashmir conflict decisively implicated Gilgit-Baltistan, which was an inherent part of Jammu & Kashmir and was subsequently drawn into the legalities of the broader Jammu & Kashmir conflict. For Gilgit-Baltistan, the unrest and political uncertainty associated with partition had engendered an opportunity for political self-determination that had been absent since the integration into Jammu & Kashmir. The British handed over their 1935 lease of Gilgit to Maharajah Singh on the 1st of August 1947, and Gilgit-Baltistan legally became a part of India alongside Jammu & Kashmir when Maharajah Singh signed the Instrument of Accession to India (Basu, 2020). Refuting Singh's signature of the instrument and the (re-) integration of Muslim-majority Gilgit-Baltistan into Hindu-majority India, a local paramilitary unit called the Gilgit Scouts, commanded by the British Major William Brown, seized the opportunity to take control of Gilgit-Baltistan, and Gilgit-Baltistan declared independence from India/Jammu & Kashmir on the 1st of November 1947 (Sökefeld, 1997). In his memoirs *Gilgit Rebellion: The Major Who Mutinied Over Partition of India*, Brown justified the controversial decision to politically de-link Gilgit-Baltistan from India/Jammu & Kashmir with the intention to enable Gilgit-Baltistan to join their '*Muslim brothers*' in Pakistan rather than being subjected to Hindu rule once again (Joshi, 2017), indicating how the goal was not independence as such, but a communal thought of independence from Hindu-rule. Although an interim pro-independence government called *Aburi Hakoomat* was briefly installed, Brown had already established contact with the Pakistani leadership, and the Pakistani political agent Khan Mohammad Alam Khan took over the administration of the region 16 days after it had declared independence, thereby effectively annexing Gilgit-Baltistan into the political orbit of Pakistan.

Gilgit-Baltistan's prior legal integration into Jammu & Kashmir under the suzerainty of the British revealed itself as decisively shaping Gilgit-Baltistan's status within Pakistan as the newly independent Pakistani leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah viewed Gilgit-Baltistan not as an independent political State but as part of the disputed Jammu & Kashmir area, therefore tying the legal status of Gilgit-Baltistan to that of Jammu & Kashmir. This interconnection reversed and indeed denied the autonomy gains made by the Gilgit Scouts and was formalized in Article 257 of the Pakistani Constitution, which stipulates that "*When the people of the State of Jammu and Kashmir decide to accede to Pakistan, the relationship between Pakistan and the State shall be determined in accordance with the wishes of the people of that State*" (The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, p. 154). Interestingly, the legal wording of the Constitution leaves little ambiguity concerning the presumed future fate of Jammu & Kashmir; the matter is not *if* Jammu & Kashmir is to accede (which is expressed in the formulation of the UN Security Council and the and very definition of a plebiscite), but *when*

Jammu & Kashmir is to accede. Besides this implicit admission that Jammu & Kashmir is inherently conceived of as a part of Pakistan rather than a territory that can freely determine its own future, there is no explicit constitutional recognition of Gilgit-Baltistan as such, neither as a province nor as a legal demarcation of Pakistani territory, as Gilgit-Baltistan is not constitutionally treated or recognized as a singular administrative-political unit, but as part of Jammu & Kashmir. In this constitutional context, the political fate of Gilgit-Baltistan became inextricably (re)connected with that of Jammu & Kashmir; as the columnist Aziz Ali Dad (2016) notes, the continuation of the Kashmir conflict has seen Kashmiri leaders discursively integrate Gilgit-Baltistan's diverging cultural identity into that of Jammu & Kashmir, whilst the involvement of the United Nations and the consequential internationalization of the Jammu & Kashmir conflict as well as the promised plebiscite linked Gilgit-Baltistan's legal and constitutional standing to that of Jammu & Kashmir. For the Pakistani government, this legal context constrains and defines the options it perceives itself to have; formally and internationally recognizing Gilgit-Baltistan as a part of Pakistan (i.e. by making it a province) would mean legally de-linking the region from the Jammu & Kashmir conflict. Although currently being internally treated as a *de-facto* part of Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan is internationally framed as a part of Jammu & Kashmir rather than Pakistan to maintain Islamabad's international claim over Jammu & Kashmir vis-à-vis the international community and India in particular. As neatly summarized by the influential Indian legal scholar A.G. Noorani (2013), "*Once the Northern Areas are shown to be part of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, as it existed on 15 August 1947, Pakistan's occupation of any part of its territory coupled with a denial that it formed part of Kashmir disables it completely from asking for any plebiscite in Kashmir*" (p. 650). In other words, Pakistan will remain unwilling to bestow Gilgit-Baltistan with legal rights and recognition internally, and keep the region henceforth in a state of constitutional-legal limbo, while internationally claiming that it cannot as long as there is no solution to the Jammu & Kashmir conflict that is accepted by both India and Pakistan - a scenario that appears unlikely to manifest any time soon.

### **Gilgit-Baltistan: Rights and Limitations**

The connection of Gilgit-Baltistan to the Jammu & Kashmir conflict and its extra-constitutional status has had utterly decisive implications for Gilgit-Baltistan and its people, most prevalently by excluding people in Gilgit-Baltistan from the legal rights and structures commonly granted to the Pakistani citizenry. The 1949 Karachi Agreement legally formalized Gilgit-Baltistan under the administrative division of the '*Northern Areas*', a term that had been previously employed by the colonial British administration and that negated the unique cultures that characterized the region, with the name being legally changed as late as 2009. Whilst PAJK was given some political autonomy that was further institutionalized via the 1974 interim constitution (Singh, 2015), Gilgit-Baltistan has never enjoyed the expansion of such legal rights, and the region consequently remains in a state of legal ambiguity and marginalization, which has allowed the Federal Government to commit human rights abuses in the region and change the demographic layout of the region, creating immense challenges for Gilgit-Baltistan's distinct culture.

Gilgit-Baltistan's extra-constitutional status has enabled and continues to enable the Pakistani government to act with impunity and deny Gilgit-Baltistan the most basic rights of democratic representation. What can be theoretically conceptualized as a process of internal colonization (Stone, 1979) was institutionalized immediately following the annexation of Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan, with the Pakistani government upholding the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) in the Northern Areas. The FCR had been introduced by the British colonial administration in 1901 and had been applied throughout the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), an area in northwestern Pakistan bordering Afghanistan that the British historically struggled to control. The FCR entailed three key provisions; individuals charged under the FCR have no right to request a change in conviction in any court, are not entitled to have legal representation, and have no right to present reasoned evidence, thereby effectively creating ultimate power for authorities with little to no accountability (Khan & Khan, 2012). The FCR was extended from the FATA to the Gilgit Agency in 1901 and to Baltistan in 1947 and continued to be applied to these regions until 1974, when Pakistani Prime Minister (PM) Zulfikar Ali Bhutto introduced the Northern Areas Council Legal Framework Order, which abolished the FCR but did not grant the population of Gilgit-Baltistan fundamental rights (Ali & Akhunzada, 2015). Commencing with partition, the continuation of the FCR created a security climate in which Pakistani authorities could treat their subjects in Gilgit-Baltistan however they saw fit without any immediate accountability, creating a culture of impunity that can be assumed to have only been intensified by the role of ethnic and sectarian issues and violence during the partition of British India. The upholding of the FCR in Gilgit-Baltistan epitomizes how the extra-constitutional status of the region generated a legal framework in which people residing in Gilgit-Baltistan were denied basic rights.

The non-constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan also resulted in an effective exclusion of Gilgit-Baltistan from domestic decision-making processes, thus reducing dimensions of political agency and self-determination. Following Gilgit-Baltistan's annexation into Pakistan in 1947, executive political power in the region was initially vested with the position of the Political Agent and the regional *Rajas*, who maintained certain legal and administrative functions (Bouzas, 2012). Be that as it may, PM Bhutto reorganized this structure of power-sharing in 1972, creating the positions of Resident Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner and the institution of the Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC), which effectively abolished the little authority previously held by the *Rajas* (Bouzas, 2012). This system was modified again in 1994, when the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) led by PM Benazir Bhutto introduced the Northern Areas Legal Framework Order (LFO), which gave political power over Gilgit-Baltistan to the Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs, who operated as the Chief Executive of the NALC and who had to approve any legislative decision made by the NALC (Ali & Akhunzada, 2015). Crucially, the Chief Executive could alter the LFO on his own accord without consulting with the NALC, granting the chief executive almost total executive power. As ministry positions were and are assigned by the respective Federal Government in Islamabad, this indirectly vested immediate political control with the central government and hence ensured that the government would sustain its effective control over political decisions concerning Gilgit-Baltistan, with the existence of the NALC being a mere formality that had little political influence.



In a 1999 landmark case, the Pakistani Supreme Court ruled that the government had to extend fundamental rights to Gilgit-Baltistan within six months, after which the government assigned expanded financial and legislative capacities to the NALC (Ali & Akhunzada, 2015). Furthermore, the Chief Secretary of Gilgit-Baltistan was to be treated equally to the Chief Secretaries of Pakistan's four provinces (Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh), which enhanced the legal status of Gilgit-Baltistan on an administrative level. From a legal-constitutional standpoint, however, the applicability and legal pertinence of this ruling is doubtful at best, given that the Pakistani Supreme Court derives its legitimacy and jurisdictional basis from the Pakistani Constitution, which, as discussed above, does not view Gilgit-Baltistan as part of Pakistan. As a result, the Supreme Court has no technical legal jurisdictional grounds to adjudicate over the rights or the lack thereof in Gilgit-Baltistan. Here again, the inherent conflict between the way Gilgit-Baltistan is conceptualized and treated internally (namely as a *de-facto* part of Pakistan and thus subject to the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court) and externally (as part of Jammu & Kashmir and hence not part of Pakistan) becomes apparent, exhibiting how Gilgit-Baltistan exists in a convoluted legal conundrum in which the *de-jure* and *de-facto* status of the region display little convergence and consequently produces a structure of legal ambiguity and unclarity.

Continuing to ignore such issues, the stipulations made by the 1999 Supreme Court ruling were buttressed by further reforms initiated by the administration of President Musharraf in 2007 that turned the NALC into the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA), which was led by the Minister for Kashmir Affairs, additionally also vesting more financial and political influence to the new Legislative Assembly (Hong, 2012). To enhance the compliance with the 1999 Supreme Court ruling, the 2009 Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order created the new offices of Governor and Chief Minister, besides which Gilgit-Baltistan was to have its own Public Service Commission, a Chief Election Commissioner and an Auditor General (Hong, 2012). The GBLA could elect some of its representatives, and the 2009 order also created the Gilgit-Baltistan Council (GBC), which was chaired by the President of Pakistan and legislated on policy-issues such as tourism, forestry, minerals and mineral wealth, economic planning, development of industries, electricity supply and bulk water storage (Hong, 2012). The GBC furthermore oversaw the appointment of constitutional positions (such as Judges, Commissioners, etc.) whereas the position of Governor, appointed by the Pakistani President on advice of the PM, effectively meant that although the GBLA existed and operated according to its mandate, direct political decisions were made by the GBC and therefore by the Federal Government. The 2009 order consolidated the official "*Pakistani stand on Kashmir without denying rights to a territory in which the majority of the population may have pro-Pakistani sentiments (as compared with the ambivalence of the nationalist-separatist leanings of the Azad Kashmiris)*" (Bouzas, 2012, p. 874) and was replaced by the 2018 Gilgit-Baltistan Order, which ceded some powers from the GBC to the GBLA but again did not provide equal rights to people in Gilgit-Baltistan (Nagri, 2018), who are still unable to elect representatives in Pakistan's General Assembly and appeal legal cases in Pakistan's Supreme Court. Whilst the relative autonomy of Gilgit-Baltistan has thus improved over the past decades, Gilgit-Baltistan does remain marginalized in its autonomy in real terms vis-à-vis '*regular*' Pakistani provinces.

As is observable throughout the legal-constitutional trajectory of Gilgit-Baltistan, the rights granted to the Pakistani population have routinely been denied to the inhabitants of Gilgit-Baltistan, and although legal gains have been made, the region and its people remain ostracized. Recent initiatives such as the 2009 Self-Governance Order and the 2018 Gilgit Baltistan Order can be discerned as attempts to respond to the increasingly loud demands within Gilgit-Baltistan for equal rights and equal representation without granting Gilgit-Baltistan the fundamental rights that locals require and deserve. Given the connection between Gilgit-Baltistan and the Pakistani strategy and interests surrounding Jammu & Kashmir, the demanded concessions hereby appear unlikely to materialize unless there is a significant shift in Jammu & Kashmir's legal status quo, which, again, seems evasive.

### Sectarian Violence in Gilgit-Baltistan

One of the most defining differences between Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistani provinces is the numerical predominance of Shias over Sunnis. Shia-dominated areas (or States) are a rarity in the Islamic world given that around 85% of the global Muslim population identifies as Sunni (Council on Foreign Relations). The historically complex Shia-Sunni relations have been further complicated by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following the end of World War I, which caused the emergence of new, ethnically diverse Nation-States, most of which were predominantly Sunni, and even in States such as Bahrain and Kuwait, where Shias are the demographic majority, they are ruled by Sunni minority governments (Freer, 2019). The emergence of new Nation-States in the Middle East and South Asia and the often failed attempts of nation-building have helped to intensify and internationalize the sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shias, integrating sectarian issues into interstate relations and the relations between intra-State and cross-border communities. The international dimension of this conflict is exemplified by the competing geopolitical designs of Iran and Saudi-Arabia/the United Arab Emirates for the Middle East and the Islamic world more generally, with each sectarian side supporting a variety of non-State actors throughout the region (Latham, 2020). In spite of its (mostly) harmonious religious history and its hybrid traditions, Gilgit-Baltistan has in recent decades become another space for this sectarian divide and has undergone a process of (neo-) Islamization.

Although pre-colonial Gilgit-Baltistan was certainly exceptional for its time regarding the extent of ethno-religious harmony and diversity it displayed, it was never fully free of the social conflict that often accompanies various forms of cross-community diversity. Sections of locals had been opposed to being ruled by a Hindu Dogra, sectarian disputes along Shia-Sunni lines had already been noted by British colonial officers, and oral history in Gilgit town especially attributes the institutional separation of Shias and Sunnis to the policies of Sardar Mohammad Akbar Khan, who was governor of Kashmir in the outgoing 19th century (Grieser & Sökefeld, 2015). Khan, a Muslim, was instructed in 1898 by the Maharajah to erect a Hindu temple in the center of Gilgit, but Khan defied his orders, rather asking his workers to construct a mosque for both Shias and Sunnis to pray in (Grieser & Sökefeld, 2015). Whilst the historical record remains vague as to why both communities stopped praying together in the years and decades to come (Grieser and Sökefeld, 2015), both groups appeared to

become more spatially and ritually separate in their religious practices in the first decades of the 20th century.

To some extent, this increasing temporal divergence in religious codes correlated to the connectivity impact of colonization as the British investment into regional transport and trade networks allowed religious communities to deepen their connection further with larger host communities abroad as it enabled Shias to travel to Iran and Sunnis to Iraq and Central Asia, thus shaping religious ideals in a way that were aligned with the way religion was practiced in these regions, which often came at the expense of regionalized communal harmony and local forms of interaction (Dad, 2016). By 1960, interreligious marriages had decreased in pertinence due to increased sectarian disagreements about religious practices such as the slaughtering of animals, slowly dissolving the local-traditional social fabric that had previously connected religious communities (Grieser & Sökefeld, 2015). Despite these conflicts, Nosheen Ali (2013), an anthropologist from New York University narrates, the years prior to the 1970s are remembered in Gilgit-Baltistan as times of religious and cultural fluidity and plurality, with people of different backgrounds displaying significant overlaps in their respective “*life-worlds*” (p. 103).

In the early 1970s, the Federal Government began to implement a series of policies that went on to change the demographic constitution of Gilgit-Baltistan and altered the politics pertaining to sectarian-religious belonging and identity. Demographic-topographical shifts in Gilgit-Baltistan had begun to occur as early as 1963 when according to the Sino-Pakistani Agreement, Pakistan ceded a significant portion of Gilgit-Baltistan to China. Naturally, due to its constitutional status, Gilgit-Baltistan was neither made part of the negotiations nor the final agreement, further splitting up the cultural space to which it used to lay claim. A legally and demographically even more defining moment in recent Gilgit-Baltistan history was the abrogation of State Subject Rule in 1974 by the PPP government of PM Ali Bhutto. Comparable to the Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir-related Article 35 in India’s Constitution, modified by the Modi administration in 2019, State Subject Rule in Gilgit-Baltistan had been implemented by the Maharajah of Jammu & Kashmir in 1927 and sought to limit the influx of foreigners into Jammu & Kashmir and its subsidiary states by making it illegal for foreigners to purchase land in the region (Pandya, 2020). Bhutto’s abrogation of State Subject Rule enabled non-Shia Muslims to migrate to Gilgit-Baltistan, which marked an active attempt by the government in Islamabad to *Sunnify* the Shia-dominated region and highlights an ethnocentric approach towards nation-building by the Pakistani elite (Sering, 2014). This is also reflected in the fact that syllabi and school books started to be published in Urdu, which eroded traditional scripts and partially made cultural messages and codes illegible, thus further undermining local cultures and their historical legacies (Sering, 2014). According to Abbas Kazmi, a famous Balti author, “*To wear our traditional clothes or even to speak Balti is considered a sign of backwardness. We dress and eat like the Punjabis even though many of their customs are just as foreign to us as those from the West*” (in Sering, 2014, p. 65). In lieu of these historical distinctions, however, the State went on to push Punjabis and Pashtuns into the region, and while Gilgit-Baltistan was 85% Shia or Shia Ismaili in 1948, this number dropped rapidly after 1974, with Shias and Ismailis now making up around 50% of Gilgit-Baltistan's population (Rubin, 2019). Rather than a process of ethnic cleansing, then, such a

development can be conceptualized as ethnic flooding, referring to a process in which a space is “flooded” with non-locals to change its demographic structure (Ganguly, 2020).

Crucially, this political development reflects the increased re-organization of Pakistani politics along sectarian lines in the 1970s, which is further embodied by the 1974 declaration by Bhutto’s government that the Ahmadiyya community was no longer to be considered Muslim, a bow to the political pressure of the Sunni extremist clergy (Hunzai, 2013). Indeed, the *Sunnification* of Pakistan and the sectarianization of Gilgit-Baltistan marks not necessarily the Islamization of Pakistan (given that the vast majority of Pakistan already adhered to some rendition of Islam), but the *neo-Islamization* of the country, conceptually referring to “a process intended to turn ‘nominal’ Muslims into ‘good’, observant Muslims”, with the respective parameters of acceptability being delineated by the dominant Islamic community (Grieser & Sökefeld, 2015, p. 86). The abrogation of State Subject Rule in 1974 inevitably facilitated the increased influx of Sunnis and non-locals to Gilgit-Baltistan, and locals and non-Sunnis in particular began to discern the influx of Punjabi language and culture as a threat to their cultural and linguistic heritage (Bansal, 2008).

Following the abrogation of State Subject Rule, the first violent regional clashes occurred in 1975 when Sunnis fired at a Shia congregation commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in Gilgit city (Grieser & Sökefeld, 2015). To protect their co-religionists, an angry Shia mob formed and marched towards Gilgit city, where it encountered Sunni counter-protesters. An escalation of the violence was prevented by local paramilitaries, who managed to diffuse the situation under the condition that Shias would not gather in front of the Sunni mosque to celebrate Muharram, which culminated in the increased alienation of the Shia community from the local authorities (Grieser & Sökefeld, 2015). Although ethno-nationalist independence movements such as the Balawaristan National Front had started to emerge as early as the 1960s, the formation of political parties seeking more autonomy for Gilgit-Baltistan accelerated in these early stages of sectarian conflict. Over time, however, most of those movements were absorbed into grander, nation-wide parties without having achieved their goal of greater autonomy, and the struggle for independence for Gilgit-Baltistan has gradually disappeared from the political mainstream in the region (Dad, 2016), with the political emphasis now being on the attainment of basic human and political rights.

The contemporary situation in Gilgit-Baltistan has been profoundly shaped by the political implications of the 1977 military coup d’état that saw General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq dispose PM Bhutto, who was executed in 1979. The rise of Zia-ul-Haq also illuminates the close connection between the military establishment and fundamentalist religious belief, which, Kathy Gannon (2020) writing for *The Diplomat*, prevails until today: “*Successive military and democratically elected governments have buckled to the pressure of Islamic extremists, who critics say terrorize with their ability to bring impassioned mobs on to the street*”. Zia-ul-Haq was a fundamentalist at heart, juxtaposing Bhutto’s comparatively liberal constitutional outlook by introducing *Sharia* law as the country’s defining legal framework, Islamizing the educational curriculums, investing into new Sunni-orthodox *Madrassas* across Pakistan, filling judicial, bureaucratic and military positions with religious hardliners, and supporting legal bodies such as the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), which continues to shape Pakistani policy-

making (Shams, 2016). Supported by the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia, Zia-ul-Haq pursued a Wahhabization of Pakistan (others (Hoodbhoy, 2017) have referred to this as the ‘*Saudization*’ of Pakistan), introducing anti-Shia penal codes that were comparable to those of Riyadh and lending support to the Sunni campaign of the *Mujahideen* in Afghanistan against the invading Soviet forces, framing the fight as a *Jihad* against the Soviet atheists (Hunzai, 2013). Although Zia-ul-Haq died in a plane crash in 1988, the political impact of his reign prevails: according to Majid Siddiqui, a journalist based in Karachi, “*He [ul-Haq] used religion as a tool to strengthen his power. [...] Today’s Pakistan is a reflection of Zia-ul-Haq’s policies, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to get rid of it*” (qtd. in Shams, 2016). The Wahhabization of Pakistan under Zia-ul-Haq also informed Pakistan’s relations with other Muslim States, intensifying Pakistan’s security investment in regional conflicts, deepening religious ties with Sunni hardliners in the Gulf, and jeopardizing relations with Iran; in the early 1990s, the Iranian diplomat Sadiq Ganji was assassinated in Lahore, and in 1997, Pakistani assailants killed five members of the Iranian Air Force in Rawalpindi (Kumar, 2008). The Zia-ul-Haq years were subsequently of decisive relevance for Pakistan as a country, reinforcing and institutionally entrenching some of the fundamentalist elements that had been present since the country’s birth in 1947 on a both domestic and interstate level.

Although the process of neo-Islamization of Pakistan commenced prior to Zia-ul-Haq’s military dictatorship, the process of *Sunnification* and Wahhabization hit Gilgit-Baltistan particularly severely, whilst the successful 1979 Shia revolution in Iran and Afghan crisis of the 1980s further contributed to the sectarianization of relations in Gilgit-Baltistan. Zia-ul-Haq utilized religious fault lines to vindicate the *Jihad* in Afghanistan, sectarianize the Jammu & Kashmir conflict, and implement an anti-Shia version of *Sharia* law that amplified the sense of alienation that had already been prevalent prior in Gilgit-Baltistan. In addition to this, Zia-ul-Haq helped to fund several domestic Sunni groups, for instance Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), which operated on an explicit anti-Shia platform (Hunzai, 2013) and gained an armed wing in 1996 with the creation of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). Responding to this surge in anti-Shia sentiment, Shias themselves began to form Shia self-defense groups such as Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Fiqah-e-Jafaria (TNFJ) and Sipah-e-Mohammed Pakistan (SMP), (Azam & Iqbal, 2017). Adding fuel to the fire, the late 1980s and the victory of the *Mujahideen* over Soviet forces in Afghanistan saw the increased return of highly radicalized and well-trained fighters to Pakistan, many of whom found new employment in radical anti-Shia groups upon their return, further heightening the potential for violence. At the same time, the Iranian revolution in 1979 had allowed many Shias to travel abroad to Iran to undergo religious training, and many of these radicalized Shias returned around the same time and, comparable to other Shia militant groups, were backed by Iran with funding and arms (Shay, 2020). In conjunction with an already loaded sectarian atmosphere, these political developments rendered the relations with Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan a powder keg that was only waiting to explode.

The escalation of sectarian violence, stimulated by government policy and regional terrorism, occurred in 1988, when Shias in Gilgit city began to celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr, the sighting of the moon, but were attacked by Sunnis, whose religious leaders had not yet sighted the moon (Shekhawat, 2011). Sectarian violence escalated initially and then died down again, but after four days, the situation escalated again due to the arrival of 80,000 Pakistani and Afghan

fighters that had been sent by the government to “*teach the Shias a lesson*” for their insubordination (Shekhawat, 2011). These Lashkars went on to kill and rape hundreds of Shias in Gilgit-Baltistan, destroyed Shia property and religious sites throughout the region, and forcibly ‘*converted*’ Shias in villages where they were a minority (Sering, 2014). Paramilitary forces had been present throughout this chaotic time but did not intervene to aid the local Shias, and the Lashkars that had engaged in this process of ethnic cleansing were later transported out of Gilgit-Baltistan under the supervision of the government, with no one being held accountable for the crimes they had committed (Sering, 2014), illustrating how politics and security were increasingly organized along sectarian lines.

Following this escalation of violence, anti-Sunni sentiments hardened, and the ensuing years are locally known as the “*tension years*” in which the execution of sectarian violence by one side (for example against a Sunni leader by Shias or vice versa) would escalate into new flare-ups of retributive violence (Grieser & Sökefeld, 2015). Whilst the 1988 riots had very immediate detrimental implications for regional harmony by further stipulating violence, they have also fundamentally altered the sense of identification and community in Gilgit-Baltistan; as Grieser and Sökefeld (2015) contend, the understanding of individual and communal identity is inextricably coupled with sectarian identities as “*it is impossible to think and to act without taking one's own and other's sectarian affiliation into account. In an atmosphere of perceived general insecurity, to differentiate between Shia and Sunni became regarded as vital*” (p. 89). The 1999 Kargil War between Pakistan and India deepened this further as Pakistan employed anti-Shia fighters alongside its regular armed forces, with many State-backed militant organizations establishing training camps on Gilgit-Baltistan's territory, increasing the number of regionally present Sunni-militants and making arms readily available for a variety of organizations (Shekhawat, 2011). Although then-President Pervez Musharraf announced a crackdown on terrorist groups in 2005 following a surge in international diplomatic pressure, this has not decisively reduced the terrorist presence in the region (Saeed et al., 2014), rather mitigating the political control the government used to possess over these terrorist outfits. Besides this, the extension of State control in the region under the cloak of counter-terrorism operations also vindicated the intensified inductions of ethnic Punjabis and Pashtuns in the region by Musharraf's government (Bansal, 2014). In this general sectarianization of social relations and conflict, the region became militarized in the following years, and efforts to reduce sectarian violence, for instance through the segregation of public transport, have not aided in alleviating the social and cultural grievances that lay at the root of local conflict. The repeated occurrence of sectarian violence from both sides, both within Gilgit-Baltistan and within Pakistan more generally, thus invites violent retributions in a vicious cycle of violence that is unlikely to stop without significant concessions and political reforms that genuinely address the grievances of local groups.

Religious violence continues to flare up until this day, and the stronghold of extremism over Gilgit-Baltistan has further marginalized the region, undermining its economic potential. Attacks are often directed against religious leaders or against travelers on the Karakoram Highway (KKH) that connects Islamabad to Gilgit, and the KKH, which was constructed in 1966, may have indeed contributed to the extent of sectarian violence:

*“The building of the KKH highway, in combination with increased communication and interaction with regional religious centres in Southern Pakistan, the diminishing influence of kinship-based associations, the abolition of the traditional state structure, political marginalization, the economic situation and a power vacuum, this helped the new cadre of ulema, a religious scholar, to replace vernacular religion with new forms of standardized Islam, supposedly devoid of accretions of local cultural elements. A combination of new Islamization and the emergence of religio-political forces in Gilgit-Baltistan has shifted the basis of identity from culture to religion.” (Dad, 2016, p. 15)*

Again, attacks display a high retributory dimension, with violence against one group causing reactive violence by the other group. This extent of religious violence makes Gilgit-Baltistan an unsafe investment environment, and the increased terrorist activity as well as the events pertaining to the 9/11 attacks has furthermore reduced tourism to the region, which had been a major source of income in the decades prior (Rahman et al., 2013). This process has been accelerated by direct attacks by extremist outfits on tourists, with the most famous one being the killing of eleven international tourists in a 2013 attack claimed by the Pakistani Taliban, commonly known as the Nanga Parbat Massacre (Craig, 2014). Sectarian violence has helped to sustain Gilgit-Baltistan's economic underdevelopment relative to (the rest of) Pakistan, and the state of Gilgit-Baltistan's public health systems is illustrative in this context. Gilgit-Baltistan possesses only 1133 hospital beds for a population of between 1.5 and 2 million people, and the maternal, infant and children under five year-olds mortality rates are significantly higher compared to (the rest of) Pakistan as infrastructure and technology for diagnosis and treatment is absent from hospitals (Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, 2017). Similarly, the GDP of Gilgit-Baltistan is a quarter of that of (the rest of) Pakistan (Sering, 2014). The region has no form of school or institute for higher education, locals are paid 25% less than their Pakistani counterparts if they do acquire government jobs (which is de-incentivized by a system of rigorous tests and personal favors), piped water infrastructure is practically non-existent, and around two third of the population have no access to electricity, which especially impacts locals in the colder winter months (Beersmans, 2014). These structures indicate the fact that Gilgit-Baltistan remains marginalized within Pakistan on a political, economic, and cultural level due to its political exclusion as well as the sectarian violence that has been burned into its body politic.

Gilgit-Baltistan's strategic importance for the CPEC has not alleviated these issues, perhaps even intensifying it via the correlating influx of Chinese workers, which further threatens local traditions and customs and modifies the demographic setup of Gilgit-Baltistan. Locals have also been opposed to CPEC projects and other large infrastructure projects in the region as they perceive the benefits to be distributed disproportionately to Sunni minority groups in Gilgit-Baltistan as well as the Pakistani State as such, with Gilgit-Baltistan yielding little advantages of the projects that are conducted on its territory (Wolf, 2016), and Gilgit-Baltistan is indeed excluded from the short-term payment benefits as well as the energy portfolio of CPEC (Howe & Hunzai, 2019). The same applies to large-scale hydroelectric infrastructure projects such as the Diamer Bhasha Dam, which generate electricity for Pakistan whilst Gilgit-Baltistan is excluded from both the energy provision as well as the economic gains made by the project, additionally detrimentally impacting regional irrigation

systems and requiring the removal of villages and communities (Choudhry, 2014). The unrest and constitutional uncertainty associated with Gilgit-Baltistan even moved China to request Pakistan to clarify Gilgit-Baltistan's constitutional status in order to pacify the situation in 2016, to which Pakistan responded that Gilgit-Baltistan was a semi-autonomous region that could only be made a formal part of Pakistan upon the completion of a plebiscite in Jammu & Kashmir (Holden, 2019). Due to its constitutional status, Gilgit-Baltistan henceforth remains ostracized from vital decision-making processes that implicate its future and that of its inhabitants, rendering it subject to the wishes of the political-military elite in Islamabad and continuing its existence as a marginalized socio-political entity that, despite its strategic importance, is denied fundamental and basic human rights.

### Conclusion

In recent decades, Gilgit-Baltistan, once a space of extraordinary interethnic and interreligious diversity and harmony, has taken on a trajectory that threatens to obliterate its traditional social fabric and the unique cultural identity and identities this fabric managed to foster. It would be over-simplistic to argue that the dissolution of Gilgit-Baltistan's social fabric and the ongoing destruction of local culture(s) has started with the integration of Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan; rather, the strategy-driven British decision to make Gilgit-Baltistan a part of Jammu & Kashmir and then lease it from the Maharaja has had implications for its people, negating them legal as well as cultural representation and rights, ultimately illuminating how the legacy of colonialism and its boundaries continues to implicate contemporary sociopolitical relations not just between South Asian States, but also within them. Gilgit-Baltistan has been made another victim of the process of partition and the institutional violence that has since then been imposed on the region by the Pakistani State, which has sought to destroy the cultural foundations that have made Gilgit-Baltistan culturally unique. In many ways, the status of Gilgit-Baltistan mirrors that of Jammu & Kashmir, and the fact that Pakistan abrogated State Subject Rule in Gilgit-Baltistan, without it holding legal jurisdiction over the region, as early as 1974 undermines Pakistan's critique against India and Delhi's decision to dissolve State Subject Rule in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir, while India does hold a legal title to the region. For Gilgit-Baltistan, history since partition has been one of submission and domination at the hands of Pakistan, with the government making full use of the legal ambiguity surrounding the region, which has allowed Pakistan to pursue a process of internal colonization that stamps out communities that do not adhere to the government's ethnocentric and *Sunnified* definition of what being Pakistani entails, resulting in some commentators referring to Gilgit-Baltistan as "*the last colony*" (Pharwana, 2005, p. 112).

What is ultimately important to recognize is that the contemporary conflict dynamics in Gilgit-Baltistan are not rooted in inherent sectarian alienation, but the exploitation, intensification and politicization of sectarian fault lines by the Pakistani military establishment and the sustenance of '*divide-and-conquer*' tactics by successive administrations, which have allowed the government to vindicate the militarization of Gilgit-Baltistan and refute the extension of basic human rights to its inhabitants. The conflict, then, is at its core a political one that has been consciously sectarianized by the government, illustrating the highly relevant role



religion continues to play in post-partition Pakistani politics. Even now, this remains apparent; although the administration of PM Imran Khan has sought to portray itself as being inclusive of religious minorities in Pakistan, the recent backlash against the construction of a Hindu temple in Islamabad indicates the continued salience of anti-minority sentiment in Pakistan (Khalid, 2020). Moreover, the passing of legal bills such as Tahaffuz-e-Bunya-e-Islam ('Protecting the Foundation of Islam') in 2020, which enables the State to monitor and censor any literature it considers non-Islamic (practically meaning non-Sunni) exhibits the continuous implementation of neo-Islamizing policies and the increased radicalization of Pakistani society, also illustrated by PM Imran Khan's description of Osama bin Laden as a "*Martyr*" (Jamal, 2020).

In this *Sunnified* and radicalized sociopolitical climate, the situation for the inhabitants in Gilgit-Baltistan is unlikely to be resolved to the satisfaction of locals without the granting of basic human and cultural rights and genuine rather than performative dimensions of political representation.

Given the perseverance of the Jammu & Kashmir conflict, the geopolitical dimensions of this conflict and the general development of Pakistan as a political unit, such a development appears unlikely, thus banning Gilgit-Baltistan to a continued existence in submission.

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