

Pakistan: The rise of a politics of resistance in Hunza

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There is a progressive movement brewing in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) — Pakistan’s proverbial “Northern Areas”.

It is rising from the Hunza Valley, which lies under the shadow of the breathtaking Mount Rakaposhi in the Karakoram mountain range. Once an independent state at the cross-section of major rival empires, it is now the most touristic and commercialised part of GB.

In the Pakistani imagination, Hunza is a pristine place of summer getaways and yoga retreats, of high literacy rates and stories of women’s entrepreneurial success, of the benefits of donor funding and development led by non-governmental organisations like the Aga Khan Development Network.

But the *dharna* (sit-ins) that took place here in early October replaced this imagery with something much more powerful and compelling: men and women, in their thousands, occupying the Karakoram Highway (the main thoroughfare linking Pakistan to China), in front of a small town called Aliabad, and refusing to leave until their demand to release all political prisoners was met.

These political prisoners include Baba Jan and his 13 comrades, incarcerated for almost nine years on bogus charges of terrorism (in response to their support for protests for the rights of the Attabad landslide disaster victims and against police brutality).

The sit-in did not just consist of men and seasoned activists — who were out in force — but also young women, calling for the release of their fathers and brothers. They asked tough questions of a government that relegates their genuine demands to the side, on the pretext of security threats in the disputed region.

They were flanked by older women, refusing to go home when it got cold and dark; and demanding to know if anyone could understand the pain of not having their sons come home.

The image is unsettling, because it depicts the people — especially the women — of Hunza, not simply as recipients of foreign aid, objects of developmental statistics or figures sculpted for humanitarian sympathy, but as political actors shaping their own narratives.

And this image becomes even more astonishing: First, when the protests spread to all parts of GB, and large delegations from other districts arrived in Aliabad in solidarity; and on day 4 of the sit-in, when a large Shia religious procession joined the crowd in Aliabad. A sea of black-clothed mourners, linking their own ritual memory of the historic injustice wrought at Karbala with the injustice meted out to the sons of Hunza, and with it, to GB as a whole.

Constitutional rights and terrorism charges

Gilgit-Baltistan, a mountainous region of about 73,000 square kilometres and a population of about

two million people, has long been held in a constitutional limbo because of its proximity to Kashmir (both historically and geographically), and consequent entanglement in the Kashmir dispute.

Since it acceded to Pakistan in November 1947, the region has been ruled from Islamabad variously as part of Azad Kashmir, as an Agency under the *Frontier Crimes Regulation* (a particularly draconian colonial law), as autonomous princely states, as unified Federally Administered Northern Areas, and through various presidential ordinances like the 2009 *Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Government Order* (which established a separated, but crippled, legislative assembly for the entire region) and the 2018 *Gilgit-Baltistan Draft Order*.

As a result of this constitutional limbo, the people of GB have been denied representation in Pakistan's parliament as well as access to fundamental rights guaranteed to all Pakistani citizens.

The current GB legislative assembly received limited powers of legislation under the 2009 presidential order, but the subsequent 2018 order took some of the powers back, leading local activists to characterise it as a "dummy", "controlled" and "powerless" assembly.

In addition, a parallel judicial system has been set up, whereby Pakistani legislation is adopted by GB, yet the residents of GB cannot access Pakistani courts.

While security measures are in place across the country, and the War on Terror has resulted in the use of anti-terrorism legislation and discourse against resistance movements everywhere, the people of GB have no recourse to impartial courts to appeal their convictions and sentences.

This is because the Supreme Appellate Court of GB is politically compromised, as its judges are hired on contract by the political parties in power.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has historically been barred from exercising its jurisdiction in GB.

In January 2019, the court handed down a landmark judgment extending its own jurisdiction to GB, and arguing that the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Pakistani constitution are also available to the people of GB.

Despite this, as well as assurances from former Supreme Court Chief Justice Saqib Nisar, no relief has been forthcoming for Baba Jan and his comrades, who continue to languish in jail and have not been allowed to appeal their case before the Supreme Court.

Factors behind the sit-in

After six days, the sit-in was called off, when an agreement was reached between GB's interim government (with elections due in mid-November) and representatives of the sit-in, with the help of intermediaries.

Under the agreement, all political prisoners would be acquitted, and released one by one, after the elections. While there is not a great deal of trust in promises made by the authorities — and broken before; many in Hunza and GB are committed to regrouping and continuing their struggle if their demands are not met within the proposed timeline.

There is a real sense in the community that this particular sit-in has demonstrated the strength of the people of GB, and the movement will only grow from here on.

Why this unprecedented show of strength in the form of the October sit-in?

Why have the people of Hunza and other parts of GB come out onto the streets for the first time in such large numbers to demand the release of Baba Jan and his comrades and to demand justice for the victims of police killings?

Free Baba Jan campaign

Firstly, for the past nine years, local activists from Hunza and GB, left-wing activists from cities like Lahore and Islamabad, as well as international groups and individuals have been campaigning to popularise the case of the Hunza political prisoners.

For example, the work of the Free Baba Jan committee has been crucial in spreading Baba Jan's story far and wide. It has received support from a wide variety of sources and has helped keep the conversation about the jail sentences alive.

This committee, along with other left activists and supporters, have politicised the struggle and the jail sentences and have pushed back against the state pressure to couch the issue in terms of terrorism and security threats.

At the same time, they managed to avoid reducing the struggle to a question of human rights and misuse of terrorism provisions. Rather, the issue of the incarceration of Baba Jan and his comrades was intimately tied in with the question of the political futures of GB.

The biggest of these politicisation campaigns came when Baba Jan ran for the GB Legislative Assembly on the Awami Workers Party ticket in the 2015 elections, while behind bars and still on trial.

The election campaign mobilised huge numbers of people in Hunza on the basis of Baba Jan's working-class activism, kept alive by the work of activists from the Free Baba Jan committee, Awami Workers Party and others.

Transport workers voluntarily contributed their cars, women contributed with their presence and small donations. Slogans and songs like these rang through the air: *"Karorun wo lagate Hain, wo kharbunmeykamateyhain, Wo tajirtusiyasatdaan, Baba Jan Baba Jan!"* ("They invest millions and earn billions. They are traders but you do politics, Oh, Baba Jan!")

A narrative was built through speeches and songs that contrasted Baba Jan to the corrupt, inefficient and disconnected parties and leaders. Baba Jan came second to the ruling party candidate (who also belongs to the local royal family), and once the latter became governor and vacated the seat, Baba Jan contested it again and was likely to win.

However, the by-election was delayed and the Supreme Appellate Court challenged Baba Jan's candidacy. It also overturned the Chief Court of GB's earlier acquittal, handing down sentences of up to 70 years to Baba Jan and his comrades.

While the decision to contest elections resulted in the establishment trying much harder to convict Baba Jan and his comrades and keep them behind bars, it also helped lay the groundwork for political consciousness and the GB-wide movement we are witnessing today.

Prisoner families

The second key driver behind the current movement and sit-ins was the creation of the Aseeran Rihai Committee (Committee for the Release of Prisoners) in 2019. The committee consists of the family members of all fourteen incarcerated comrades.

Previously, the struggle had been focused largely on Baba Jan and to some extent also on Iftikhar Karbalai, both prominent activists. The Aseeran Rihai Committee was able to bring all families on board, a step that led to wider community involvement, as the families could use their familial networks inside Hunza to gain wider support. It also meant that those affected were now leading the campaign for release of all prisoners, thereby providing more legitimacy to the cause.

Thirdly, as the prominence and legitimacy of the struggle grew, with both the political and the familial dimensions coming into play, local religious authorities also became involved.

Hunza has a majority Ismaili Shia population and Ithna'shri Shias are in the minority (known locally as Ismailies and Shias, respectively).

Although they have lived in peaceful coexistence, with intermarriages and mutual understanding for the most part, in the past two to three decades the two communities have experienced phases of strained relations.

In 2014-15 for example, there was a conflict over the extent to which the Ashura procession could proceed into Aliabad. (Ashura is the annual religious procession of Ithna'shri Shias that commemorates the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussain at Karbala.)

Despite this, in the lead up to the October sit-in, Hunza's chief Shia cleric, Sheikh Musa Al Karimi, was approached by the Aseeran Rihai Committee along-with religious institutions of the Ismailies, to build a larger coalition around the demands of the sit-in.

This was a success. The Shiekh led the demonstration of Shia community solidarity at the sit-in, as did representatives of a community organisation of the Shia majority village called the Ganish Supreme Council.

Consequently, this year's thousands-strong Chelum procession (a traditional Shia event marking the end of 40 days of mourning that begins with the Ashura procession) joined the protesters on October 8.

Their cries of anguish in memory of Hussain's historic martyrdom shifted into roaring slogans calling for the prisoners' freedom.

Sheikh Musa Al-Karimi spoke to the crowd of Ismailies and Shias united in struggle in Aliabad, formerly a site of conflict; terming the struggle of the prisoners as the struggle for the "Hussainiyat" versus the "Yazidiyat" (those who have kept them in prison).

Women

Fourthly, the women of Hunza have played a significant role in developing and sustaining this movement. Many commentators depict the presence of women in the movement as an anomaly: in a remote region of a conservative Muslim country like Pakistan, women's public presence itself is supposedly astonishing.

Yet, this narrative ignores the fact that Hunza's particular form of Islam has its own cultural flavour, which includes the active participation of women in public life.

Despite this, "politics" has usually been eschewed in Hunza, as it has a less than favourable reputation, and women have historically not taken part in it.

What has shifted with the growing popularity of this movement, and especially with this month's sit-

in — is not the presence of women in public life, but the normalisation of their political agency.

According to Aseeran Rihai Committee General Secretary Nasir, it was the pressure from the women (especially family members of prisoners), who had grown tired of multiple delays and unfulfilled promises of the establishment, that made the sit-in possible in the first place.

Protecting resources

A fifth factor that has played a role in the movement's popularity and growth is the larger context of the changes being wrought in GB due to a burgeoning tourism industry, as well as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which will pass through GB.

Many non-locals have started to buy large tracts of land in Hunza and elsewhere in GB and invest in the hospitality sector. This threatens to displace local communities, wrest the control of resources away from them, and potentially lead to significant cultural and demographic changes in the area. This has led to anger among the locals, as well as more interest in the politics of Baba Jan, who fought for community control of natural resources long before the 2011 incident that led to his incarceration.

Upcoming election

Finally, the sit-in was called just 42 days before the Legislative Assembly elections in GB, pulling the energies of all political parties and candidates into it.

As the sit-in's numbers rose each day, it became a way for potential candidates to connect and communicate with their constituencies. It was now impossible for candidates from even mainstream political parties to ignore the sit-in and refuse to engage with the questions and demands raised there; which in turn amplified the numbers, voice and legitimacy of the movement.

As mainstream political leaders gear up for the elections in GB, TV presenters emphasise the future importance of GB to Pakistan's political and economic landscape on daily talk shows and mainstream foreign media tries to hijack the movement's narrative towards its own warmongering or imperialist ends.

It is heartening to see the people of Hunza and GB coming together to construct a strong progressive movement, which builds on Baba Jan's working-class political struggle, is broad-based and inclusive of religious difference, puts the demands of families of the incarcerated comrades at its centre, and follows the lead of local women and their often radical political agency.

There are many lessons here for the left in Pakistan and elsewhere, as well as useful strategies for GB's leftist activists to build on for the future.

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