

From intra-sectarianism to fragile peace: the Gilgit-Baltistan model

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Introduction

Gilgit-Baltistan, known for its scenic landscape, has experienced a vicious cycle of sectarianism for the last three decades; a region which otherwise was an exemplary example of peace and stability. The rise of sectarianism has damaged almost every fabric of society in a region that enjoyed social and cultural diversity. Although efforts at reconciliation by local leaders, religious elders and politicians has restored temporary security, resulting in decreasing sectarian attacks over the last two years, local residents remain sceptical about this partial lull in sectarian-related clashes. According to local sources, the root cause for increased sectarianism needs to be addressed, to restore permanent peace and tranquillity in this region.

Previously known as the Federally Administered Northern Areas (FANA), Gilgit-Baltistan is situated in the extreme north of Pakistan. Bearing strategic and economic importance, it stretches over 72,496 square kilometers, surrounded by China in the north-east, Afghanistan and Central Asia in the northwest, and India in the east. The geography of Gilgit-Baltistan holds significance because the locale hosts three major mountainous ranges - the Karakorum, the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas - which are not only strategically important, but also provide natural resource, including glaciers comprising the main source of the country's water requirement. With a population of over 2 million, it comprises two administrative divisions, Gilgit and Baltistan, and seven administrative districts. Five districts fall under the jurisdiction of the Gilgit division including Ghizer, Gilgit, Hunza-Nagar, Diamer and Astore, while Skardu and Ghanche districts are located in the Baltistan division.

Demographic dynamics and sectarian divisions

Four major sectarian groups are known to be found in the Gilgit-Baltistan region: Shia, Sunni, Ismaili and Nurbakhshi. Among the inhabitants of Gilgit-Baltistan, 39 percent are Shias, 27 percent Sunnis, 18 percent Ismailis and 16 percent are Nurbakhshis (Hunzai, 2013: 2). Despite these sectarian affiliations, the local people of this region have co-existed for centuries. After joining Pakistan on November 14, 1947, the area remained largely peaceful for over three decades though some minor ideological and sectarian clashes were noted to occur periodically. It has been observed that a culture of inter-sectarian marriages was encouraged and other social connections that existed were supported by subscribers of different sects (Shekhawat, 2011). Apart from the people, local rajas (rulers) also nurtured the tradition of inter-sectarian marriages, which helped build a harmonious and peaceful society.

During British rule in India, sectarian conflict in the region - with roots in the 7th century - almost disappeared mainly due to the British Indian government's refusal to recognize the jurisprudence of *takfir*,

or apostatisation of other sects, and a competent encoding of the Muslim Family Law that treated Sunni and Shia sects separately. Sectarian conflict in Gilgit-Baltistan, however, became a prevalent phenomenon after Partition in 1947. (Muhammad, 2011: 13).

Renowned historian and researcher on Gilgit-Baltistan, Sherbaz Ali Barcha believes that sectarian conflict is not a new phenomenon in the region.¹ According to his analysis, these differences are centuries old, but it was because of the effective policies of the British regime and Dogra Raj that sectarianism was not allowed to flourish. He refers to a letter by a local ruler Raja Suleman Shah of Gilgit written to Syed Ahmed Shah in the 1800s seeking the latter's help to exterminate certain 'non-Muslims' living in the area. However, in this letter, he does not identify the 'non-Muslims', although it is known that Shias and Ismailis had been living in this area, besides the Sunni population for centuries.

Emerging sectarian conflict post-1970s

Initially, sectarian tensions were limited to Gilgit that entailed clerics' bellowing insults at each other from their respective mosques, and clashes among Shia and Sunni youth, especially during Muharram processions which were rapidly quelled by local elders. The first case of sectarian violence resulting in the loss of life occurred in 1975, when a Shia Muharram procession in Gilgit was fired at from a Sunni mosque. The subsequent arrest of a Sunni religious leader known as Qazi instigated riots in Sunni areas of various valleys across the Indus, south of Gilgit, and its side valleys of Gor, Darel and Tangir. Sunnis from these areas threatened to attack Gilgit (Hunzai, 2013).

However, according to Barcha, the first case of sectarian killing was reported in 1971 when a Shia arms dealer from Gilgit was kidnapped in Kohistan and later killed while travelling to Gilgit from Rawalpindi. Barcha claims this was the first incident of its kind after 1947 that followed pockets of sectarian-related killings in Gilgit city, but locals have never perceived these incidents as associated with sectarian conflict.² Most believe that these incidents marked the beginnings of weakening administrative control in the area. Vested interests also emerged promoting a host of social, ethnical and sectarian issues in a traditionally peaceful society. The independent princely kingdoms of the region were abolished between 1972 and 1974 and replaced by a single administrative territory cryptically called the 'Northern Areas'. This new entity was neither given autonomous status like that of Azad Kashmir, nor provincial standing which had been granted to other regions of Pakistan. Instead, it was placed under the direct rule of the non-local, unelected Federal Minister of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (Ali, 2008).

A 2011 report by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency noted that in order to thwart secular nationalist aspiration and deflect political energy and agreement, state institutions embarked upon a divide-and-rule policy of sponsoring Sunni and Shia religious organizations (Muhammad, 2011). As the traditional social order disintegrated, resulting in an identity crisis, many resorted to religion to establish a collective identity (Dad, 2011).

During the 1980s, Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies not only encouraged religious parties in mainstream politics, but polarized Pakistani society to an extent that tolerance of other religious sects was not perceived

¹ Author's interview with Sherbaz Ali Barcha, an historian and researcher on Gilgit-Baltistan, conducted in Gilgit in July 2014.

² Author's interview with Sherbaz Ali Barcha.

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as the norm. This emerging religious ideology had a ripple effect through Gilgit-Baltistan as sectarian intolerance emerged to the fore after the worse tragedy in Jalalabad, Gilgit in 1988. When a large number of Shias were killed by Sunnis, allegedly with the help of certain outsiders, the Shia community placed the blame on the then president and military chief General Zia-ul-Haq. This tragedy triggered burgeoning sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni communities in the region that had been living peacefully for centuries.³

Besides the Islamization policies of Zia, it was Iran's Islamic Revolution, the war between Iran and Iraq and Pakistan's Afghan policy that were contributing factors that gave impetus to a cycle of unending sectarianism in Pakistan, including the Gilgit-Baltistan region (Shekhawat, 2011). The 1988 Jalalabad tragedy was triggered by a quarrel between Shias and Sunnis in Gilgit. On May 17, 1988, Shias celebrated *Eid-ul-Fitr*, the festival marking the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, a day earlier than the Sunni population. The latter who were still fasting, clashed with the Shia community, as a result of which a Shia student leader was seriously wounded. As the violence escalated, two people were killed. After news of these clashes spread to other parts of the region and beyond, Sunni religious clerics in what was then the North West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) declared a religious war or *jihad* against Shias, calling on volunteers (Sorbo, 1988). Sunni zealots, assisted by local Sunnis from Chilas, Darel and Tangir, attacked several Shia villages on the outskirts of Gilgit. By the time army units were sent in to quell the violence, at least 150 people were killed, several hundred injured and property worth millions of rupees destroyed (ICG, 2007).

Tracing the links: increasing sectarian violence in the 1990s

After the 1988 incident in Gilgit-Baltistan, sectarian violence continued through the next decade in this region, while the governments of the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz took hold of power successively in Pakistan after the Zia regime. In the aftermath of this tragedy, both Shia and Sunni communities began to strengthen their positions.

The historic proliferation of armed, militant religious organizations meant the rise of sectarian killings and violent clashes through the 1990s in Gilgit-Baltistan and continuing throughout the decade that followed; much supported by vested political interests at a particular time. The Zia era had witnessed the creation of religious groups purporting Wahhabi ideology – such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) – which meant in response Shia groups disillusioned with Islamabad and motivated by the need to unite on a common platform to ensure their collective survival, organized and supported the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Fiqah-e-Jafria (TNFJ). Initially a religious organization, but transformed, through sheer numbers, the TNFJ has become a formidable political force. The TNFJ and the Shia community boycotted the election to the Northern Areas Council in 1991, accusing the then KANA minister Sardar Mehtab Abbassi of redrawing constituencies in Gilgit in favour of the Sunni community. In 1994, soon after the Legal Framework Order (LFO) for Gilgit-Baltistan was passed and concerned about Shia alienation, Islamabad held early elections when the TNFJ won ten seats out of 24 and was included in a coalition government (ICG, 2007).

In 1996, the SSP created an armed wing, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). This led to the Shias forming their own armed outfit, the Sipah-e-Mohammad Pakistan (SMP). The impact of the aggressive Sunni

³ Author's interview with Sherbaz Ali Barcha.

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Islamization drive initiated by Zia fell substantially on the Shia-dominated Gilgit-Baltistan region (Shekhawat, 2011)

Many local Sunnis who had participated in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan returned home to join anti-Shia sectarian groups like the SSP and the LeJ. Local Shia graduates from Iran's religious schools also returned home and with Iranian financial backing and support joined Shia militant organizations (ICG, 2007).

Towards the end of the 1990s, yet another sectarian controversy appeared in the Northern Areas. In 1999, after the federal education ministry suddenly introduced amended textbooks produced by the Punjab Textbook Board, Shias believed, they contained material that exclusively promoted Sunni beliefs and practices, blackening out the Shia perception from the syllabus for subjects such as Islamiyat (or Islamic studies) and history.

According to a 2007 report by the International Crisis Group, which recorded figures from the Gilgit Police, there was a progressive increase in sectarian murders between 1990 and 1992, with seven accounted for in 1990, twelve in 1991, and 30 in 1992; in 1993 the number decreased to twenty (Ibid). The assassination of Gayyasuddin, a Sunni leader, on May 30, 1992 led to at least 30 sectarian-related 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 (Shekhawat, 2011).

The controversial curriculum

In 2001, Shia and Sunni students in a Gilgit high school clashed violently, sparking demonstrations and strikes in the city. As this discord continued through the coming years, the government was not interested to resolve the issue. In May 2004, a local attempt was made to resolve the curriculum issue and all sects from this region agreed to a settlement on a three-point formula. Firstly, in Shia majority areas, instead of the controversial aspects of the curriculum, the one suitable to the Shia faith would be taught. Secondly, in Sunni majority areas, the curriculum would be taught as it was originally conceived. Thirdly, in the areas where there was a mixed population, the curriculum would specifically focus on the faith of both sects (Shekhawat, 2011).

Local communities agreed on separate Islamic Studies courses for Shia and Sunni students, signifying their willingness to resolve differences peacefully, but the Ministry of Education refused to withdraw contentious material. This led to strikes and protest demonstrations by Shias, bringing Gilgit to a standstill.

By 2004, it had been four years since the Shia community in the Northern Areas had started agitating against the controversial curriculum. Delegations had repeatedly appealed to the Ministry of Education as well as the Ministry of Kashmir and Northern Areas Affairs in Islamabad, only to be dismissed each time. Discouraged and angered, Shia students began to boycott classes and stage rallies: on May 17, 2004, more than 300 went on a three-day hunger strike in Gilgit. Within days, the situation gravely deteriorated as thousands took to the streets, blocking roads and bringing businesses to a halt. When a prominent Shia leader, Agha Ziauddin Rizvi, declared June 3 as a day of protest, if the government failed to resolve the syllabus issue within that timeframe, the army was called in and a curfew imposed in Gilgit. However, street processions continued in defiance of the curfew, leading to violent clashes between protestors and security personnel in several parts of the Northern Areas (Ali, 2008).

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On January 8, 2005, Rizvi, who was the Imam of the central Shia Mosque and was spearheading the movement against the textbook issue in Gilgit-Baltistan, was critically injured in an attack, later succumbing to his injuries at the CMH, Rawalpindi on January 12, 2005. Soon after this attack, enraged Shias took to the streets in Gilgit, destroying government and private properties, resulting in a loss of lives. A senior government officer belonging to the Ismaili community and six others were burned alive in an attack on his house by an enraged mob, and the Sunni director of the local health department was shot dead in his office. At least fifteen people were killed and scores injured before the government imposed a shoot-on-sight curfew. Riots spread to Skardu, where hundreds of Shias protested, attacking government property and blocking roads. On January 12, Rizvi succumbed to his injuries, triggering more violent protests. Although leaders of the two main religious groupings in the Northern Areas, the Shia Anjuman-i-Islami and the Sunni Tehreek Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat, signed an agreement brokered by the NALC to restore peace, neither side was sincere. Despite the agreement, target killings continued and followed with the assassination of Sakhiullah Tareen, a Sunni police chief from KPK in the Northern Areas at the time of Rizvi's assassination.

On April 26, 2005, the federal minister for education, Lt. General (retd.) Javed Ashraf Qazi chaired a high-level committee meeting that decided the Punjab Textbook Board's contentious textbooks would be withdrawn and replaced with those published by the NWFP Textbook Board and the National Book Foundation. However, the education minister has not delivered on his pledge to replace the national curriculum with revised textbooks from which all contentious sectarian material has been removed. The old textbooks, with minor modifications, are still used in the region, although the controversial chapters are not taught (ICG, 2007).

Killing fields: new targets, widespread violence

In 2012, it was noted that sectarian attacks that had earlier targeted towns had shifted focus to the longest passenger route, the Karakoram Highway (KKH), the only land route connecting Gilgit-Baltistan with the rest of the country. This new phenomenon and locale of violence on the transport route has created anxiety among the people of Gilgit Baltistan, particularly Shia communities, who have to travel longer routes by crossing Sunni populated areas amid a poor security mechanism provided by the government.

On February 28, 2012, in a chilling sectarian attack, sixteen men were hauled off buses at Harban in district Kohistan and shot dead in cold blood by unidentified assailants disguised in military fatigues. The gunmen who flagged down the buses, and climbed on board, asked passengers for their identification, then proceeded to drag a group of men off the bus, lining them by the roadside, and mercilessly spraying them with bullets, a senior police official had told *The Express Tribune*. Fifteen out of the sixteen passengers killed were Shias. The militant group Jundallah claimed responsibility for the attack when a commander, Ahmed Marwat, contacted the media soon after the attack (*The Express Tribune*, 2012).

Later, on April 3 the same year, at least nine passengers were killed by a mob in Gunar Farm area close to Chilas in reaction to a sectarian incident of violence that erupted in Gilgit which in turn was in reaction to an attack with a hand grenade that morning, leading to the death of 7 Sunnis protesters and injuring 50. In retaliation, nine Shia passengers were killed near Chilas. Protesters in Chilas also burnt down six buses, pushing two into the Indus River. Police and administration officials failed to control the angered mob. A Superintendent of Police and two guards were injured while trying to protect passengers. A curfew was imposed in Gilgit and the surrounding areas and cell phone services were suspended for months.

This was followed by yet another incident of carnage on August 16, 2012, in what appears to be a replay of the Harban Nala attack in Kohistan district, when gunmen killed 19 people after establishing their identity (identity cards) at the Babusar Top Pass in Mansehra district. They were travelling to Skardu from Rawalpindi.

Local assessments: reasons for internal sectarian violence

A former police Inspector General for Gilgit-Baltistan, Hussain Asghar believes that the dynamics of conflict in this region has cultural and ethnic overtones rather than sectarian.⁴ This region plays home to three different culturally diverse areas, including Balti, Diamer and Gilgit. Previously, the Shia-dominated Baltistan never connected with Gilgit and Diamer. It was when the Gilgit-Skardu road was constructed in the early 1960s and KKH was constructed in the 1970s that people of different cultures and regions started travelling and this connection forged through travel and trade became a merger of ideas and communities. Therefore, Baltistan was connected with Gilgit. The lack of frequent interaction between the people of Baltistan with Gilgit and Diamer before the construction of KKH meant an isolated vision of the other. When communities started integrating with each other, it was the period of urbanization, after the construction of connecting roads, which led to different cultures meeting and clashing, later giving the impression that sectarianism had arisen, state analysts. Indigenous communities in Gilgit and Diamer were proudly connected to their ethnic background like the Shins, Yashkuns and, Kasgharis and Kashmiris – key ethnic groups that have inhabited Gilgit for centuries. According to Asghar, another major factor is related to economic and social interests of different groups that also began colliding after the above mentioned demographic changes.

As mentioned earlier, the construction of the KKH caused demographic changes in Gilgit-Baltistan. About 70 percent of the businesses, particularly in the Shia dominated Gilgit region, were dominated by non-locals, mostly Pashtuns from Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Kashmiris with a largely Sunni background. This trend frustrated the local Shias. Gradually, non-locals purchased land, built properties and started to prepare domiciles to enter government departments with the help of non-local officers. The outsiders relied on sectarian affiliations to protect their economic and commercial interests by drumming up support from local Sunnis.

According to Ghulam Nabi Raikoti, a peace activist from Chilas, the sectarian tragedy of 1988 was engineered by Zia regime. But it was the local and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa administrations which were responsible for allowing extremist Sunnis to enter Gilgit and kill local people.⁵ He believes to maintain peace in Gilgit-Baltistan suspicious outsiders should be banned from entering the region as there is no conflict among local communities but that outsiders fuel clashes.

Ever since the 1988 incidents, when Shia- Sunni sectarian rifts blew out of proportion due to a minor misunderstanding and weak local governance, Gilgit-Baltistan has never been the same, notes Jamsheed Khan Dukhi, a Sunni poet and historian. He affirms that gradually the writ of the government has weakened mainly due to the propagation of sectarianism serving vested political interests. Presently,

⁴ Telephonic interview in July 2014.

⁵ Ghulam Nabi Raikoti was interviewed by author in Islamabad in July 2014.

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Gilgit-Baltistan is divided on sectarian lines including its politics, civil society, judiciary, and bureaucracy, he explains.⁶

As a former police inspector general belonging to Skardu, Afzal Ali Shigri is of the view that sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan cannot be explained in isolation from rest of the country. Shigri notes the spillover of sectarianism to this region was mainly caused by poorly coordinated local administrations.⁷ Locals believe that strict action should be taken against government officials found involved in instigating sectarian strife in Gilgit-Baltistan. Strengthening the criminal justice system is also crucial. Additionally, political and sectarian affiliations of government employees should be seriously investigated.

Peace initiatives: why religious clergy must unite communities

Despite the dangerous brew of sectarian hatred perpetuated during the last 30 years in Gilgit-Baltistan, certain religious leaders and elders from all sects have periodically played their role to reduce such divisions. This has reduced the tit-for-tat violence and killings between rival sects. Take the example of the *ulema*, and leaders of Diamer who promptly acted to rescue as many as 200 passengers, sending them safely to Gilgit. These passengers had reportedly been kidnapped by a violent mob on April 3, 2012 at the Gunar Farm, in Chilas, where seven other passengers were also killed. This intervention points to the support and protection provided by the clergy adding to the security of the region and providing the message of peaceful co-existence. Public circles have appreciated the religious clergy for protecting unarmed passengers and ensuring their safe return to Gilgit. It is being said that if not for these efforts, the bloodshed could have escalated. (*Pamir Times*, 2012).

At the same time, some Sunni persons including a doctor and judge were taken hostage by Shias in Nagar valley in reaction to the Gunar farm incident in April 2012. However, the elders of the community and the Shia clergy intervened and rescued them, handing them over to the administration despite adverse reactions by Shia activists.⁸

Later, in 2012, following the Gunar farm incident and killing of protesters in Gilgit city, the Gilgit-Baltistan administration sealed two major mosques belonging to both sects in the city. The government had linked the opening of these mosques with the acceptance of the code of conduct that bars prayer leaders from making hate speeches that would rile communities.

⁶ Even development and social service organizations have adopted religious tags such as Kashrot Hospital for Sunnis and Barmas Hospital for Shias; Kashrot School for Sunnis and Basin School for Shias. Sectarian polarization has further created a gulf coupled with weak governance at the core of all challenges.

⁷ Interview by author in Islamabad, August 2014.

⁸ A federal government initiative on September 21, 2005, resulted in the formation of a *jirga* (traditional tribal assembly), headed by the speaker of the Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC), Malik Muhammad Maskeen, including representatives from both the sects, to bring peace to the area. Sunni and Shia organizations signed a six-point peace deal. According to this agreement, the Tanzim Ahle Sunnah wal Jamaat, representing the Sunni community, and the Central Anjumane-Imamia, known as Anjuman (community), representing the Shia community, agreed to immediately stop issuing religious *fatwas* (edicts) and counter-fatwas against each other and to foster sectarian harmony by resolving other outstanding issues. Each agreed to ensure law and order during Muharram processions and to be held responsible for protecting the communities living in their areas and localities. Despite, this peace agreement, the killing did not stop and religious leaders of both sects continued preaching against the others' communities.

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After four months of hard work, in April 2012, a 15-point Code of Conduct was prepared by a parliamentary peace committee, which was constituted by the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly.⁹ The committee not only prepared a 15-point effective Code of Conduct for both Sunni and Shia mosques in Gilgit, but also gave it legal cover through legislation, titled the 'Masjid Regulation Act 2012' passed by the legislative assembly. Under the Act, a 20-member Masjid Board was constituted representing ten members from both Shia and Suni sects, bound to implement the code.

This initiative curtailed the role of mosques in politics and set a mechanism for religious clerics. The key feature of the code of conduct was that prayer leaders from both central mosques were not to malign each other's beliefs or use abusive language against the another sect's revered personalities. It also stated that prayer leaders and their deputies should not issue inflammatory decrees, nor follow any order of vested interests, especially during Friday and Eid sermons. Clerics were instructed against demanding a share in government jobs and other privileges for their respective sects under the new code of conduct. Violators were liable to be tried under the Anti-terrorism act. The prayer leader of the mosque would have to sign this code of conduct before taking charge of any mosque and had to abide by the code in letter and spirit. This act would not only apply to Gilgit, but was also extended to other parts of the country, wherever any issue arises. Advocate Amjad Hussain, a key member of the peace committee, who was also the main author of the code of conduct, says that the Act was implemented with the cooperation of the Masjid Board and the administration. He attributes the enforcement of this code to a decrease in sectarian incidents in Gilgit.¹⁰

Historically sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan could be attributed to the sudden instigation of religious sentiments, not because of a pre-meditated design, Hussain states. Religious leaders often used their offices as potential forums where they received jobs, contracts and permits, which could not be done under the Act. This is the reason why peace has remained in this region for the past two years. Besides, Hussain also points out that there was no proper political forum for the youth and politically motivated persons in the past, but that the Gilgit-Baltistan Governance and Self Rule Order-2009, granted by the PPP government in 2009 has filled this gap. "In the absence of such political forums in the past a potential religious elite had developed over time and filled the vacuum, remaining active in pursuing the vested interest of certain groups," he adds.¹¹

Conclusion: the Gilgit-Baltistan experiment in sectarian harmony

Historical facts and interviews with various stakeholders in Gilgit-Baltistan reveal that sectarian conflict, particularly when clashes turn violent can be attributed to internal and external factors. Certainly this would include the state's jihad policy during 1980s, the fall-out of Afghan war, the Iran-Iraq war, as well as demographic changes in Gilgit-Baltistan after the construction of KKH. Additionally, the denial of constitutional and political rights for almost six decades and the indifferent attitude of the local and federal

⁹ The adviser to the Prime Minister Attaullah Shahab, the G-B Legislative Assembly Deputy Speaker Jamil Ahmed, the member of the G-B Council Advocate Amjad Hussain, the adviser Forests and Wildlife Aftab Haider and others were members of the committee constituted by the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly to formulate effective regulations for mosques, aimed at ending sectarian attacks that had led to the closure of the central mosques belonging to both sects in Gilgit. This happened after the killing of passengers in Chilas on April 3, 2012.

¹⁰ Telephone interview by author in July 2014.

¹¹ Author's telephonic interview with Advocate Amjad Hussain, a key member of the peace committee, in July 2014.

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administrations further aggravated the situation. It can be asserted that other internal factors included misunderstanding among various sects, absence of an effective criminal justice system, ethnic divisions and lack of education and awareness, and the exploitation of the religious sentiments by different interest groups. Hence, the complexity of the situation as it developed in the region over years, further fuelling violence, when different local interest groups started using their respective sects to achieve their designs. These interest groups include religious groups, politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. The fundamental reason that such religious forums became powerful was because of the absence of any alternate affective platform available to better serve their interests, in the absence of strong political and constitutional institutions to redress their grievances. Thus, it remained common practice for more than two decades for the religious clerics to enjoy a dominant role in the corridors of power at a local level: this resulted in many pursuing the agendas of their respective sects. All this happened in the absence of strong political institutions and a justice system. The vacuum was ultimately filled by religious groups to protect their interests. It was the main reason that most of the youth had to rely on religious leaders from their respective sects rather than concerned political and constitutional institutions, when it came to issues, particularly employment. This trend often resulted in the exploitation of the younger generation.

Following the Majid Regulatory Act 2012, the cooperation and the commitment of religious leaders in mosques connected meant that they focused only on the religious matters, avoiding hate speeches and influencing the local administration. It could also be recommended that this code of conduct was not only strictly implemented, but also extended to other regions to ensure long-term peace and harmony. All stakeholders agreed that peace could be revived and sectarianism tackled through indigenous measures. It could also be mentioned that this peace effort demonstrated unity to fight for the common cause of restoring the wheat subsidy for the region in February 2014. People gathered from seven districts belonging to diverse sects in Gilgit and Skardu, staging a sit-in for ten consecutive days under the umbrella of Awami Action Committee (AAC), and successfully achieved their joint objective. This exemplary demonstration of unity among the four sects after more than two decades of violence gave hope to local communities.

Despite the latest show of unity, sectarian harmony in Gilgit-Baltistan will remain hostage to religious sentiments, unless the political and constitutional alienation of the people of this region is addressed through reforms at the federal level. When there is empowerment of local people – both politically and administratively – there is visible economic growth and stability with little reason to shift gears towards creating violence and political instability.

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