

## **Gilgit Baltistan: The Dawn of Democracy or the Continuity of Blemished Political System**

**By Zafar Iqbal**

The election of Northern Areas Legislative Assembly has completed the most considerable constituent of the Constitutional Package enforced by the Government of Pakistan to empower the local population in Pakistan Controlled Gilgit-Baltistan region, however, allegations of massive procedural irregularities, government interference and rigging have been levelled against the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) which emerged as the single largest party in the election on Nov 12, 2009 with 11 seats from total 23 and then rose its legislators to 20 who elected Syed Mahdi Shah as first Chief Minister of Gilgit Baltistan, while, permanent Governor is likely to be announced and appointed by the Government of Pakistan soon.

Pakistan administrated Gilgit-Baltistan region has no representation in the country's Parliament; therefore, recently, government of Pakistan enforced political reforms to fulfil public demands.

Pakistani political and democratic system has a long history of accusations of rigging and use and abuse of power by ruling parties to achieve desired results in almost all elections. Apart from the majority of the political parties some independent observers and groups have also raised the questions on the legitimacy and transparency of the recent elections in Gilgit-Baltistan. An NGO-Free and Fair Election Network in its report said that Government interference, weak administration, procedural irregularities and erroneous voter lists characterized the Gilgit-Baltistan polls.

Similarly, another independent watchdog the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) which monitored the election process with more than 66 local observers also mentioned that the entire electoral process was marred by flaws caused by haste in holding the polls and insufficient preparations. The HRCP in its report regretted that the Pakistan's federal government representatives—including Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani, members of his cabinet and the acting governor of Gilgit-Baltistan—tried to woo voters at government cost and with a string of financial incentives.

The opposition parties also highlighted many procedural weaknesses in order to give leverage to PPP candidates. For instance, many stern mistakes were observed in the voters list and related documents of the Election Commission regarding the statistics of population of different constituencies. In certain constituencies number of registered voters was shown only marginally less than their entire population e.g. in GBLA-I (Gilgit) the population was cited as 56,641 and the number of voters was 48,574; in GBLA-VII (Skardu) the

population was shown as 35,310 and the number of voters was 27,833; the population of GBLA-XV (Diamer) was mentioned as 40,680 and the number of voters was 39,249. No doubt, these incredible statistics raise the questions over the fairness of these elections and support the allegations raised by the opposition parties.

Almost all political parties showed their reservations on the election. Country's major political party, Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q), Mutahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) which controls Southern Sindh province and financial capital of the country, religious Jammat Ulma-e-Islam (JUI) which are also partners of PPP in central and provincial governments, got representation in the newly parliament of Pakistan's controlled Gilgit-Baltistan, have lodged their stern protest against the irregularities and temperance in the recent election.

On the other hand, refuting to the opposition's allegations of rigging in Gilgit-Baltistan elections, the Government of Pakistan insists that it was a 'fair and transparent election'. Paradoxically, Pakistani Prime Minister Mr. Gillani, while addressing a public rally in the Skardu, also claimed the transparency and fairness of the election on same occasion announcing many lucrative incentives for the people of the region. The observers argue that how an election could be transparent with the immense use and abuse of state resources to influence the will of the voters? The real picture of this election could be seen unambiguously in the remarks of opposition leader in National Assembly of Pakistan, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan who commented that "the PPP won the election, but the democracy lost in Gilgit-Baltistan."

The noticeable feature of this election is victory of candidates of the MQM, which mostly has been accused for being a regional party confined to the Karachi. It seems that the MQM is expanding its political influence and popularity across the country. The MQM has already two seats in the Legislative Assembly of Pakistan Controlled Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The majority of the political parties and groups from Pakistan Administered Kashmir have categorically rejected the political reforms in Gilgit-Baltistan areas, nevertheless, it is irony that none of these parties has any organizational set up in the region nor they joined the recent election.

Pro-Pakistan Jamaat-e Islami (JI) is the only political entity from Jammu and Kashmir which has its organizational structure in the region and it also contested the election through three of its candidates. This is really a matter of thinking for all those who claim the reunification of State of Jammu and Kashmir in their announcements and statements, but, cannot deliver and demonstrate in the realm of practical actions. It has been argued by the observers that if all main political parties from Islamabad can extend their

networks in the Gilgit-Balitistan, political forces of Jammu and Kashmir should also think about their extension to the region, which they claim as the ‘integral part’ of their state.

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