

## **Rumblings in Northern Areas**

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The ambush on Agha Zia ud Din Rizvi the Shi'ite prayer leader of the Imamia mosque in Gilgit on January 8 raised the sectarian temperatures in the northern areas of Pakistan, the forgotten part of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir under complete control of Pakistan. The driver of the vehicle and a security guard died on spot and the Imam and another guard were critically injured and admitted to the district health centre. Both of them were shifted to the Combined Military Hospital, Rawalpindi later, when their condition worsened.

The reaction from the followers of the Imam was on the expected lines. They poured out onto the streets and set fire to several government and private buildings and torched the home of Divisional Forest Officer, Taighun Nabi, burning him and five people present in his house to death. In another attack, the local Health Department Chief, Dr. Sher Wali was shot by the infuriated mob. The injured included Akhtar Khattak, Assistant to the Northern Areas home secretary, and Syedul Hasnain, member of the Gilgit Municipal Committee. By January 13, when the news of the death of the Imam and his other bodyguard reached Gilgit, the riot had left 15 people dead and 30 injured. The curfew imposed in major towns in the area for the whole of the month of January ensured there was no further escalation of the sectarian conflict. However, the incident reminded one of the long simmering discontent of the people of the area, who have been at the receiving end of the Pakistani administration ever since Northern Areas were taken over by them in 1948.

The local disaffection now has a profuse sectarian content thanks to the policy of the Zia-ul-Haq administration in the eighties to introduce a Deobandi-Wahabi variant of Islam in Pakistan. When the orthodox Sunni-Deobandi constituency, consisting of aggressive elements like Sipah-e-Sahaba, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Lashkar-e-Toiba, etc. were countered by the law enforcing agencies in core areas like Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore and other prominent townships, it spread its tentacles in the peripheries: the Tribal Areas and the Northern Areas. The policy of intimidating non-Sunni populace in remote areas became more visible during the mid 1980s. At the local level, the administration was also seen to be operating hands in gloves with the radical Sunni-Islamist forces and this contributed largely to the increasing level of disaffection in the non-Sunni population in Pakistan.

Such disaffection has assumed critical levels in the Shia dominated northern areas since 1988, when the tribal lashkar from the tribal areas of NWFP laid siege on the Gilgit township and destroyed many Shia mosques. That they had marched on their way over quite a long distance (on the heavily guarded Karakoram Highway) without any effort from the Force Commander

Northern Areas (FCNA) to stop them lends credence to the argument that the Zia administration wanted to intimidate the predominantly Shia population there. There have been other allegations of the Pakistani authorities seeking to change the demography of the region by a steady and incremental insertion of Sunni population from NWFP and other provinces of Pakistan. The strategic importance of the place has made the people doubly vulnerable. The spurious nexus between the sectarian elements and the state of Pakistan, which has developed in the last two decades, has clearly made things insufferable for the people of the region.

The disaffection has led to formation of political groupings as well like the Balwaristan National Front (in 1994, which demands recognition of the national interests of the people of the terrain. The majority Shia population of the area, acutely aware of their shrinking numerical strength due to massive demographic changes initiated by the Pakistani state (from close to 90 percent in 1947 to 53 percent now), have been very protective about their identity and rights. This was reflected in the way they raised serious objection to the course curricula being imposed on them in the schools. The ensuing text book controversy in Gilgit, in 2003-2004, led to Shia anger and drew so much of popular support that the authorities had to come down and accept the Shia point of view. After the riots in June 2004, the Pakistani authorities had taken the help of the Imam Agha Syed Zia-ud-Din Rizvi in the process of text book revision. This had annoyed the Sunni conservatives very much. Perhaps that has led to his assassination. The 45 year old Shia scholar, prayer leader of the leading mosque in Gilgit for last 15 years, had received religious training in Iran and was widely respected in the Northern Areas. His death is sure to harden Shia sentiments further in the region.

There is another dimension to the anti-Shia feeling in this particular region. The Shia population in the region is Ismailis and followers of the Agha Khan. The Agha Khan Foundation has initiated many developmental projects in the region and has been responsible for raising the literacy level and awareness of the people here. The good work that the Agha Khan Developmental Network has done has provoked the ire of the Sunnis in the neighbourhood who have attributed missionary motives to such efforts. The anti-Shia feeling has led to anti-Ismaili feeling among the Sunni radicals in Pakistan in the recent years especially after they felt that the Pakistani state has sought to introduce anti-Islamic elements into the course curricula through tie up with Agha Khan Foundation upon American persuasion. The Islami Jamiat Talaba (IJT) which is opposing the Agha Khan Educational Board had taken the plea that it is pursuing 'the agenda of tyrannical powers' which aims at secularizing the educational curriculum and damaging ideology of Pakistan. Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) has claimed that majority of people of Pakistan have unanimously disapproved government decision to set up Agha Khan Educational Board as all religious parties are united to accelerate their efforts to deter government from going ahead with its "imprudent" decision. The inter-sectarian relations are assuming lot more complexity in Pakistan as such.

Another less known fact is the increasing attention paid by the Pakistani military establishment to the entire terrain, spread over an area of 28,000 square miles, with a population of 2 million divided into five districts: Skardu, Ghanche, Gilgit, the capital city, Ghizer and Diamir. There are nearly one dozen languages/dialects spoken in the region. The language of one valley is alien to their adjoining neighbours. The military establishment is quite determined to manage such a diverse populace inhabiting such a strategic area through which passes the Indus and the

Karakorum Highway, through force and fraud, and they have hardly tried tact and diplomacy in this regard. It has to be mentioned here that the present president of Pakistan, Musharraf was reportedly employed way back in 1988, when 300 people officially died in the anti-Shia riots, to bring peace to the region. And he was harsher on the Shias than on the perpetrators of violence.

The Pakistani state on the other hand has sought to introduce nominal representative administration strictly under the control of the central administration. The elected representatives are balanced out by nominated members in the northern areas council and accorded inferior positions. The highest position a representative can aspire for is the position of a Deputy to the central minister in charge of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas, who for all practical purposes is the Chief Executive. The resultant sense of disaffection can be well anticipated. The sectarian angle adds to such disaffection and in the days to come may prepare the grounds for more open resistance in the region.

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