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### Empowering Opinions: The Role of Political Parties in Enhancing Political Participation in Gilgit-Baltistan

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#### Abstract

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**Keywords:** Political Participation Political Parties, Gilgit-Baltistan, Civic Engagement Democratic Governance

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## Title

## Empowering Opinions: The Role of Political Parties in Enhancing Political Participation in Gilgit-Baltistan

### Abstract

This study explores the crucial role of political parties in enhancing political participation in Gilgit-Baltistan, a region characterized by unique socio-political dynamics and historical marginalization within Pakistan. The strategies and activities of various political parties, this research seeks to understand how they influence political engagement among the local population. This study examines the pivotal role political parties play in enhancing political participation in Gilgit-Baltistan, a region of strategic significance in Pakistan. By analyzing the dynamics of political engagement, this research highlights how political parties act as conduits for citizen involvement in the political process. The study delves into the mechanisms through which parties mobilize support, foster civic awareness, and facilitate voter turnout, emphasizing the unique socio-political landscape of Gilgit-Baltistan.

### Keywords:

[Political Participation](#)  
[Political Parties, Gilgit-Baltistan, Civic](#)  
[Engagement Democratic](#)  
[Governance](#)

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### Introduction

The federally-administered Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), with an area of 72,496 square kilometers and a population of 1,492,924 (2017 census), is located in the north of Pakistan. With its amazing history and natural beauty, Gilgit-

Baltistan has a unique geographical composition, sharing a border with world economic power China in the north, India in the east, and Afghanistan in the west. The narrow belt of 'Wakhan' separates Gilgit-Baltistan from Central Asian Republics. It is also a meeting point of four world's highest mountain ranges, the Karakoram, the Hindu





Kush, the Himalayas, and Pamir. It is home to various highest mountains in the world. Gilgit-Baltistan, previously known as the Northern Areas of Pakistan, is rich in natural resources, glaciers, fresh water, rivers, beautiful lakes, cold deserts, eye-catching waterfalls, wildlife, and various flora and fauna. The highest mountains including K2 (the world's 2<sup>nd</sup> highest peak), the world second highest Plateaus, gorgeous valleys, historical tourist points, attractive landscape, and rich culture of multi-ethnic societies of Gilgit-Baltistan make it one of the most attractive places for tourists, and travelers. Therefore, Gilgit-Baltistan is also known as Heaven on Earth for tourists. Unfortunately, despite being one of the strategically, economically as well as geographically most important regions of Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan is deprived of political or constitutional rights after 75 years of independence from Dogra Raj mainly due to its long and complex political history.

Politically, Gilgit-Baltistan remained under the control of various Empires, Kingdoms, Rajas, and invaders from Central Asia, China, and the Indian subcontinent. However, after the signing of the treaty between the ruler of Kashmir, Gulab Sing, and the British in 1846, Gilgit-Baltistan became part of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, the largest princely State of India. The colonial history of the region came to an end after the partition of Pakistan and India. Gilgit Scouts, a local paramilitary force, trained and equipped by the British, revolted against Dogra Raj and declared independence on 1 November 1947. After two weeks of independence, Gilgit-Baltistan acceded to Pakistan unconditionally. Since then, Gilgit-Baltistan has been administered by the Pakistani government. The history of Gilgit-Baltistan since the accession to Pakistan on November 16 1947 has been a history of struggle to be a full member of Pakistan. After more than 70 years of silent loyalty, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan are deprived of their basic political and constitutional rights. The government of Pakistan had avoided the right of self-determination and political participation in national politics. Various constitutional reforms such as the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-governing Act 2009, were brought by successive governments to enhance the political participation of Gilgit-Baltistan, however, they are not up to the desires of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

The mainstream political parties are playing a central role in the political landscape of Gilgit-Baltistan. After the implementation of the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly came into effect in 2009. The first-ever election was won by the Pakistan People's Party, followed by the Pakistan Muslim League in 2015, and the last 2020 election was won by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI). The turnout in three consecutive elections was more than 60%. Political parties have ceded more

authority to the local democratic forums of Gilgit Baltistan allowing the people of the region greater control over their administrative and political affairs. Political parties are actively participating in the process of empowering the people of the region. People of Gilgit-Baltistan are actively participating in democratic activities and practice their political rights to some extent but there are limitations. They are not part of national politics yet.

### Statement of Purpose

The current study aimed to define the role of political parties in the political participation of Gilgit-Baltistan. The novelty of the study is to explore how mainstream political parties help the people of Gilgit-Baltistan to develop and express their opinions, take part in decision-making, participation, and involvement in community problem-solving, and influence the public to vote. Moreover, this paper also examines the role of political parties in enhancing the participation of Gilgit-Baltistan in the national politics of Pakistan. The study is based on the present political scenario of Gilgit-Baltistan and people's participation in building the political structure of the region. The objective of the study is to highlight the performance of political parties and their contribution to political participation.

### Literature Review

Political parties can play an instrumental role in the political participation of people of any region, bringing together people with the same political ideas. Parties not only mobilize people for the broad range of democratic activities such as taking part in elections by giving votes, joining a political party, standing for election, etc. but also allow people to take part in the decision-making process. It helps people through a broad range of political activities through which masses develop and express their opinions or beliefs on the country and how it should be governed (Hussain, 2009). After the inception of Pakistan and India on the map of the world in 1947, the region of Gilgit-Baltistan was administered by Pakistan by following the British policy of allowing local rulers to rule the respective region. Shafqat Hussain (2021) argues in his article, "The History of Gilgit-Baltistan" that without political representation of the region, the Pakistani government administered Gilgit-Baltistan (under Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR), in much same way as the colonial master had done in between 1947 and 1974. However, under the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the government of Pakistan People's Party abolished princely States in Gilgit-Baltistan and introduced a new administrative setup, known as the Northern Areas Council Legal Framework Order in 1974 which led to the gradual political participation of the region (Aziz Ali Dad June 2016, 2) Though the new setup of administrative and

judicial reforms was a milestone in the political history of Gilgit-Baltistan, it did not provide fundamental democratic rights for the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. The civil and political bureaucracies were dominant over the political representatives of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. There was no say of local indigenous people in the political affairs of the region. In another attempt, aiming to increase the political Participation of Gilgit-Baltistan, the Northern Area Legal Framework Order was introduced by the Pakistan People's Party in 1994 which vested all executive Powers with the Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (Ahmed, 2021).

Political Parties have taken various steps for the political participation of Gilgit-Baltistan since 1947; one of the most important among them is the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009. In May 1999, the Supreme Court of Pakistan delivered a landmark judgment, declaring the people of Gilgit-Baltistan as citizens of Pakistan and asked the government to take proper administrative and legal setups to ensure the people of Northern Areas enjoyed fundamental and legal rights under the Pakistan Constitution (Aziz, 2020). In the wake of Pakistan's Supreme Court decision, the Pakistan People's Party government introduced The Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order in August 2009. Under this presidential order, the government of Pakistan changed the name of the region from Northern Areas to Gilgit-Baltistan and created the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly, and new offices of the governor-general, and chief minister. People of Gilgit-Baltistan can now elect their own representatives or members of the Legislative Assembly directly on the basis of adult franchise (Ali & Akhunzada, 2015).

The Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009 increased the political participation of Gilgit-Baltistan by increasing the autonomy of the region and making the administrative structure of GB close to that in other provinces, but the people of Gilgit-Baltistan continued to press their demands for further constitutional and democratic rights. According to Sartaj Aziz, the former Finance and Foreign minister, the government of Pakistan Muslim League PML-N, set up a committee to review the current administrative setup and constitutional structure and fulfill the aspirations of the people of GB, keeping in The United Nations Resolution on Kashmir. The committee proposed a new order known as the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018. Under this order, Gilgit-Baltistan was given representation in the National Assembly, Senate, National Finance Commission, and all other federal bodies (Iqbal, 2018; Khan, 2018). The present government of Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf under the leadership of Imran Khan is also determined to give Provisional Provincial Status to Gilgit-Baltistan (Dawn Editorial, 2021).

It is evident from the analysis of academic literature that all the developments and political reforms in Gilgit-Baltistan are carried out by democratic governments and political parties. The role of political parties in the political participation of Gilgit-Baltistan is appreciable. However, there is a need for vigorous and effective policy to fully integrate the people of Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan's political structure.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Political participation can be defined as voluntary acts undertaken by people to influence public policy directly or by electing representatives through votes who make policies. These activities include voting in elections, running a political campaign, and working with people on social and political issues, According to Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) research, people transfer to political activity skills that they acquire from political organizations. Political participation of people increases in response to recruitment in a political organization or mobilization (Uhlener, 2015). Political participation cannot be conceptualized as a one-dimensional set of activities, but modes and styles of participation vary in several countries. It not only encompasses activities that people pursue to influence political participation but also ceremonial and supportive activities (Milbrath, 1965). Political Participation is an important indicator of healthy Democracy and political parties facilitate participation by motivating people to become engaged in the political process. They are an agent of political socialization (Jeffery A. Karp and Susan A. Banducci 2007). Political organizations play an effective role by mobilizing citizens to participate in the political process of the country, particularly in new democracies where political attachments of people are weak and voter turnout is low. The term political participation of Gilgit-Baltistan in the paper can be explained as the participation of the Gilgit-Baltistan region in the national politics of Pakistan. The study examines the role of political parties in the integration of Gilgit-Baltistan in national politics.

### **Historical Background**

Political parties became significant as instruments of Gilgit-Baltistan's Democratic practices in 1970 when Pakistan was in transition from autocratic rule to a Democratic nation after the first free and fair election. The political history of Gilgit-Baltistan has been complex and tragic as it was part of a larger conflict between India and Pakistan over the Jammu and Kashmir Issue. Before partition, Gilgit-Baltistan was part of Jammu and Kashmir under the control of Sikh ruler Maharaja Hari Singh. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan revolted against Maharaja Hari Singh. The reason for the revolt was the decision of Maharaja to accede to India (Ali & Akhunzada, 2015). Gilgit-Baltistan became an independent state after

defeating Dogra Raj on November 1, 1947, and within two weeks acceded to Pakistan unconditionally. Since then, it remained a laboratory for experimenting with different political systems, however, none of them turned out to be the desired outcome according to the wishes of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan (Ahmad & Alam, 2018, 11).

Historically, this region that is today Gilgit-Baltistan was a cluster of princely States and tribal kingdoms where absolute authority was a king or tribal leaders. The social, political, economic, and legal systems were in the hands of rulers (Dad, 2019). The people of the region were poor and had no opportunity to participate in Politics. After the independence of Pakistan and accession of the region Gilgit-Baltistan instead of devising a proper administrative and governance structure, the government of Pakistan Administered much the same way as the British had done by imposing Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR) in the area. The colonial rule of FCR gave the supreme authority with executive, legislative, and legal powers to a civil servant (Sajjad Ahmed, 2020). Furthermore, governments allow local kings to rule their respective principalities, allowing enough space for local rajas to exercise their power within their area of influence without affecting the administrative arrangements of the federal government (Azad Ali Dad, 2016). The political participation of the region began when the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited Gilgit-Baltistan.

In the 1970s political and constitutional demands and awareness rose among the people of Gilgit-Baltistan which led to the formation of the first indigenous political party known as "Tanzeem-e-Millat Party" (Zakir Hussain, 2017, 138-139). The fundamental aim of the party was to abolish the Frontier Crimes Regulations rule and to award the region as a Provincial setup. In response to the growing demands of the people, the Pakistan People's Party abolished the FCR and princely states and introduced the Northern Areas Council Legal Framework Order 1974-1975, which introduced administrative and Judicial reforms in Gilgit-Baltistan. Political participation in Gilgit-Baltistan began after these reforms. As many as 12 political parties including nationalist political parties, and religious political parties emerged in 1970 to participate in the struggle for Self-determination and political participation of Gilgit-Baltistan in national politics. Many developments have been done by political parties such as the Northern Areas Legislative Council which was upgraded to a legislative Assembly later, Northern Area Council 1970, Legal Framework Order 1947, Northern Areas Council Legal Framework Order 1994, and Supreme Court Order 1999 to bring the people of the area into the mainstream. Successive political parties in government have taken steps to integrate Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan by giving a status similar to a province in which they can have their own Legislative

Assembly, Governor, and Chief Minister. These reform packages, introduced through presidential order to create a set-up similar to Azad Jammu and Kashmir, were aimed at increasing the political participation of Gilgit-Baltistan

### **Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009: A Major Step Towards Political Participation**

One of the historic developments in the political history of Gilgit-Baltistan by political parties to increase the political participation of the region is the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009. It was a significant step for the Pakistan People's Party to grant political rights to Gilgit-Baltistan. This order created new offices of governor and chief minister, similar to other provinces of Pakistan. A 33-member Legislative Assembly was created which is empowered to elect the Chief Minister, speaker, and deputy speaker. Members of the assembly can be elected on the basis of adult franchise. Sixty-one (61) subjects are under the jurisdiction of the assembly. The legislative Assembly of Gilgit-Baltistan also has reserved seats for women, technocrats, and professional members. Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order also established an upper house known as the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, having 15 members majority of them from the federal government and the Prime Minister of Pakistan was the chairman of the council. This council could legislate on fifty-five (55) subjects. Through this order, all the powers exercised by the Gilgit Baltistan Council previously were transferred to the Gilgit-Baltistan assembly.

Two free and fair elections have been conducted under the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009. The first election under the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009 was won by the Pakistan People's Party, the second election was won by the Pakistan Muslim League PMLNs, and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf won the last 2020 election. The voter turnout was 46% in the 2009 elections (ECGB), 61% in 2015 (ECGB), and more than 60% in the 2020 elections (FAFEN). This upward trend in voting turnout shows that political participation is increasing greatly. This trend is due to the active role of mainstream political parties that have increased their political activities to mobilize the people of the region in order to strengthen their position. The 2020 elections gained much media attention both nationally and internationally because the top leadership of most of the political parties were in GB for the first time in history. It is said that the masses support the mainstream political parties in Gilgit-Baltistan, especially the party that is sitting in the center. The reason behind this is that the people of Gilgit-Baltistan believe that the party that is sitting in the center would bring development to the region.

The present government of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) announced that the government would give the region Provisional Provincial Status to Gilgit-Baltistan not only giving representation to Gilgit-Baltistan in the National assembly and senate but also giving access to all constitutional bodies like the Supreme Court, National Finance Commission (NFC), National Economic Council (NEC), Council of Common Interest so on and so forth. Nevertheless, people's desire to associate themselves with the large political and constitutional structure of Pakistan is unfulfilled by the government of Pakistan due to the Kashmir issue. Due to its historic connection to the issue of Kashmir and Pakistan's commitment to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the Government of Pakistan could not fulfill Gilgit-Baltistan's long-standing demand for integration, constitutional reorganization, right of self-determination, and protection of social, political, economic and geostrategic interests. The role of political parties in upgrading the region in order to increase political participation is understandable, however, there is much more that needs to be done in this

regard to protect the political, legal, and economic due rights of the people.

### General Elections of 2009

In the general elections of 2009, out of twenty-four (24) general seats, women contested four (04) seats. The total number of candidates for the twenty-four general seats was 249, out of which three were women which makes women's participation up to 1.6%. Unfortunately, none of the female candidates emerged victorious in the elections. In the general elections of 2015, women contested five seats out of twenty-four general seats. There were 269 candidates for the general seats out of which five were women which makes their participation up to 1.8%. However, all of them lost the election. In the 2020 elections, four female candidates contested in four constituencies and none of them won the election in their respective constituencies during the elections of 2020. There were 311 total candidates, and the ratio of female candidates was 1.3%. Election Commission of GB

**Table 01**

*Women Candidates in General Elections*

Elections	Total Candidates	Female Candidates	Percentage of Female Candidates
2009	249	03	1.6%
2015	269	05	1.8%
2020	311	04	1.3%

*Source: Generated by Author.*

As per the election commission's report, the total number of registered voters during the 2009 elections was 717286, out of which 332377 (46.34%) were female voters and 384909 (53.66%) were male voters. The total vote turnout in the elections of 2009 was 44%. In the 2015 elections, the total registered voters were 618364 out of which 288889 (46.72%) were women and 329475 (53.28%) were men. Total votes turnout was 61.29% in the elections of 2015.

One woman member was also made part of the cabinet after the elections. In the 2020 elections, the total number of registered voters was 745361, 405363 (54%) were male voters and 339998 (46%) were female voters. The total vote turnout of the elections was 61.10%. During this tenure, no female member has been made part of the cabinet. However, one female member was made parliamentary secretary.

**Table 02**

*Total Registered Voters and Turnout*

Elections	Total Voters	Male Voters	Female Voters	Voter Turnout
2009	717286	384909 (53.66%)	332377 (46.34%)	44%
2015	618364	329475 (53.28%)	288889 (46.72%)	61.29%
2020	745361	405363 (54%)	339998 (46%)	61.1%

*Source: Generated by Author.*

This upward trend in voting turnout shows that political participation is increasing greatly. This trend is due to the active role of mainstream political parties that have increased their political activities to mobilize the people of the region in order to strengthen their position. The 2020 elections gained much media attention both nationally and internationally because the top leadership

of most of the political parties were in GB for the first time in history.

### Conclusion

Gilgit-Baltistan, a disputed territory administered by Pakistan since November 1947, has been deprived of legal identity, constitutional status, and political autonomy



due to a historic conflict between Pakistan and India over the Kashmir issue. It has neither the status of a province nor a state, but a semi-provincial status. People of Gilgit-Baltistan do not have the right to vote in national elections, and there are limitations to freedom of speech and expression. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan are suffering from undefined and ambiguous constitutional and political status. Despite the grievances and dissatisfaction of people, there are unanimous consequences that political parties have played a central role in the political Participation of Gilgit-Baltistan. This is the reason that people of the region actively participate in Political and democratic activities and voice their concerns by electing their own representatives. Local political institutions are evolving. Political parties are trying their best to address Gilgit-Baltistan exclusion from the political and legal forums of Pakistan. The abolition of Frontier Crimes Regulations, and princely states taken by the Pakistan People's Party was the first step of political Participation of Gilgit-Baltistan. The majority of the people lauded the Self-governance Order 2009. The order has changed the role of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly from a development orientation platform to a law-making body, where political representatives of people make laws according to the wishes of masters. It has changed the bureaucratic atmosphere of Gilgit-Baltistan into a democratic environment. Pakistan is yet to grant full constitutional status to Gilgit-Baltistan, as the prime ministers of Pakistan announced to make Gilgit-Baltistan a fifth province of Pakistan. The issue of the constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan and the crisis of identity should be resolved as soon as possible, keeping in view the issue of Kashmir and Pakistan's stand on the United Nations Resolution over Kashmir. Integration of the region into Pakistan is important for addressing constitutional, administrative, and political issues faced by the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

### **Suggestions**

The ambiguous and equivocal constitutional status has created feelings of deprivation in the people of Gilgit-Baltistan which is harmful for the national integration of Pakistan. Political parties and the establishment of Pakistan, therefore, should take effective and vigorous steps to reduce the grievances of the people. Some of the

necessary steps to reduce identical crisis and increase political participation of Gilgit-Baltistan are:

- a. The majority of the population of the region sees the best solution for the region's status as making it the 5<sup>th</sup> province of Pakistan. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan liberated the region and affiliated with Pakistan without any condition. Political parties should work together and grant provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan so that they can be full citizens of Pakistan
- b. Gilgit-Baltistan should be given an interim representation in the National Assembly and Senate of Pakistan by making necessary changes in the constitution of Pakistan until the Kashmir dispute is resolved. If all the political parties work together and bring the required amendments to the constitution of Pakistan it would be possible to grant representation of the region in the Parliament of Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan can sign an agreement like the Karachi agreement that has given administrative control of the region to Pakistan.
- c. The third best option to resolve the constitutional and political crisis of Gilgit-Baltistan is to set up a self-governing body similar to the Azad Kashmir setup that will work until the Kashmir Resolution.
- d. Before the preparation and implementation of any reforms of order, a Consultation process should be adopted to take local people into confidence. All the concerns of people should be addressed. It will create a feeling of ownership and a positive impression of the role of political parties.
- e. The power of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly should be enhanced. To make the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly an effective body, orientation, and capacity building of GBLA members should be considered a priority.
- f. The dominance of bureaucracy in administrative and political affairs in the region should be ended and representatives of people should be empowered.
- g. All basic rights guaranteed by Pakistan's constitution should be extended to the region of Gilgit-Baltistan.
- h. There is a dire need to engage the youth of Gilgit-Baltistan to utilize their potential for the development of the region.

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