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# POLICY BRIEF

## Between Hope and Despair

The 2026 Elections and Gilgit-Baltistan's  
Constitutional Uncertainty

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## Executive Summary

2026 witnessed a shift in political winds in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), the mountainous territory nestled in the Karakoram range. The June elections to the GB Assembly's 24 directly elected seats marked the [Pakistan People's Party's return](#) to regional power, echoing the first elections held under the 2009 Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, which the PPP had also won. Yet the election was not merely a routine alternation of parties. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), which had formed government in GB after the 2020 elections but lost control following Chief Minister Khalid Khurshid's disqualification in 2023, entered the 2026 contest in a constrained electoral position: its candidates were unable to contest under the party's "bat" symbol and instead appeared on the ballot as [independents](#) or PTI-backed independents. The eventual election of PPP's Advocate Amjad Hussain as Chief Minister consolidated this transition, while also reaffirming GB's recurring pattern of political alignment with power centres in Islamabad. These brief analyses the elections in historical context, drawing attention to GB's fraught constitutional history, its absence from decision-making corridors and the sectarian strife that underpins the social fabric of Pakistan's 'tourism capital'.

## Turning Tides in June: Election Results at a Glance

Home to a population of [1.7 million](#), scattered across three divisions - Gilgit, Diamer and Baltistan, Gilgit Baltistan boasts a legislative assembly of [33 members](#), 24 of whom are elected directly through elections. Contrary to popular imagination and conception of the region, [GB is exceptionally diverse](#), with its sectarian and religious terrain traversing diverse sects including Sunni, Shiite, Naqshbandi and Ismaili communities. Political affiliations often mirror sectarian majorities, but religious realities do not dominate political discourse or outcomes. Questions and campaigns are instead centered on local issues, particularly development, access to resources and national representation.

This context informs the coming conversation and is explored further in the paragraphs ahead. A snapshot of the election results, meanwhile is below:

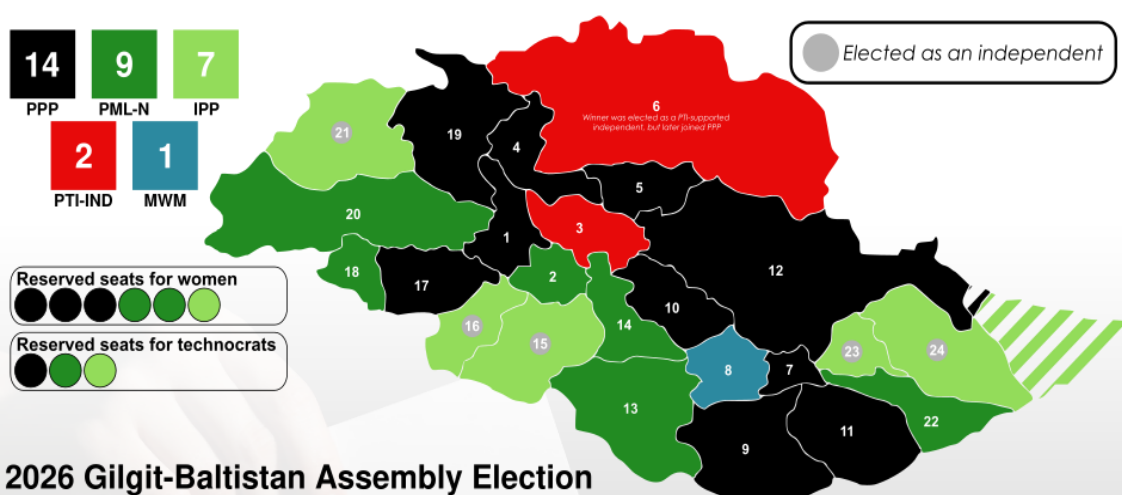


Figure 1: The results in geographical context (includes reserved seats)

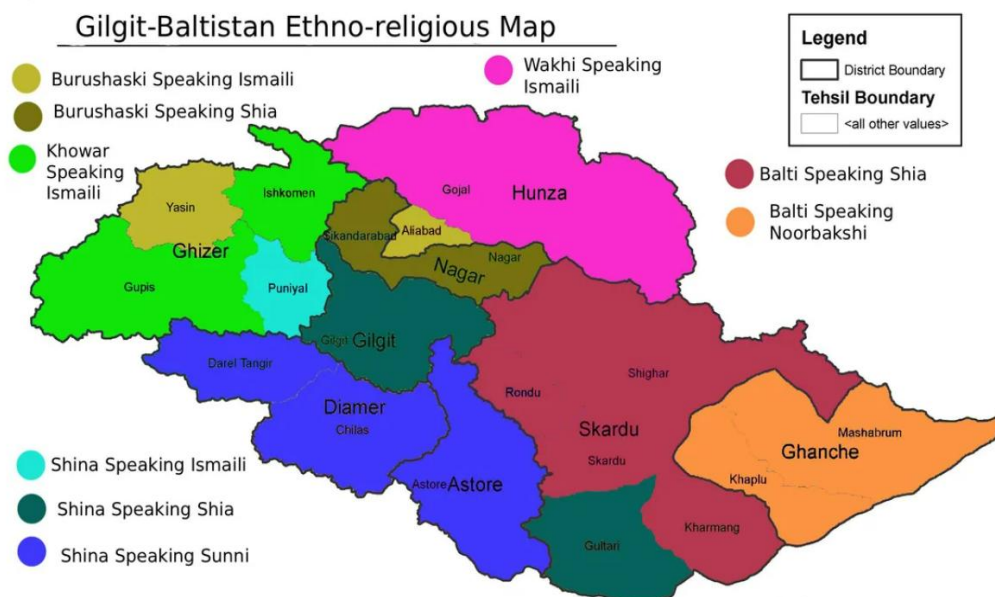


Figure 2: Administrative & social makeup of GB

Any party in the region requires 17 seats to form an independent majority. At 14, the PPP came closest but failed to secure government on its own accord. Through negotiations that spanned several days, the PPP and the second largest party, the PML-N, assented to a power sharing model that mirrors their coalition at the federal level. On account of its position as the dominant party, the PPP will place its Chief Minister and has secured the position of assembly speaker. The PML-N, meanwhile, will nominate the governor of the region, the deputy speaker and the opposition leader in the assembly. A fascinating outcome this is, since it permits the ruling coalition to place the opposition leader as well, effectively stifling authentic opposition. Echoes of the prevailing political dispensation across the country thus manifest in GB as well, with no real political opposition existent. Under the arranged framework, the PPP's stalwart Advocate Amjad Hussain, who won from Gilgit, will be GB's next chief minister.

### What's in a Name: GB as a Province or Lack Thereof

Gilgit Baltistan possesses the [nomenclature](#) and administrative structure of a province. A Chief Minister heads government, the Governor is the ceremonial head and yet, GB does not feature as a province in Pakistan's official parlance. It is structured along the lines of a province but effectively denied that status. This holds important implications and adds a layer of nuance to elections in the region. The omission of provincial status has a direct bearing on GB's fiscal and political standing. First, denizens of Gilgit Baltistan hold no representation in Pakistan's National Assembly or Senate. Their fate is decided in corridors that exclude them on the basis of geography, tying their fate to Kashmir, the disputed territory between Pakistan and India, and which shares a fraught history with Gilgit Baltistan. For [107 years](#), GB fell under what its residents call occupation by the Dogra regime in Kashmir, achieving independence in [1947](#). GB has never considered itself a part of Kashmir, emphasizing instead its separation and independence from Kashmir. Interestingly, in fact, GB celebrates its independence on November 1<sup>st</sup>, the day it secured liberation from Kashmiri rule.

Pakistan's government, to the contrary, labeled GB a central part of Kashmir, firmly intertwining the region's destiny with the protracted dispute with India. Official narratives elide reasons for this alignment, but historical



analysis surmises GB's Muslim-majority as a factor, which could potentially tilt outcomes in Pakistan's favor in case a referendum ever took place in Kashmir. This imposed association between GB and Kashmir germinated the constitutional quagmire that has gripped GB, forcing it into legal limbo and uncertainty since Pakistan cannot accord it provincial status. Doing so would signal a *de facto* acceptance of the status quo in Kashmir and extending legitimacy to India's hold over the majority of the Kashmir region. This equilibrium could however witness a change following the revocation of [Article 370 in India in 2019](#) and the passing of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Bill which stripped the region of its autonomous status in India. Pakistan's opposition held little sway globally, but raised questions on Pakistan extending provincial status to GB as a result. Seven years on, however, GB remains embroiled in constitutional uncertainty.

### The Financial Void: On the NFC, Taxes and Land

The absence of a political voice echoes in financial circles as well. GB and Kashmir are excluded from Pakistan's National Finance Commission (NFC) award and the National Economic Council (NEC) of the country. The NEC is the highest economic decision-making forum in Pakistan, while the NFC determines provincial shares and revenue distribution of the [federal divisible pool](#). The NFC is determined through an established formula that determines provincial shares for Pakistan's recognized provinces, Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, emphasizing population as the key factor in each province's share.

GB and Kashmir's absence from the NFC and their absence from decision-making centers in the NEC and Council of Common Interests (CCI) perpetuates an entrenched and intense dependency of these regions on the federal government. GB, for instance, owes most of its revenue sources to block grants provided by the Federal Government or to projects supported through the Public Sector Development Program (PSDP), which under [IMF-imposed austerity](#), remains equally unpredictable. Controlling the region's fundamental source of revenue permits the federal government key control over GB. This also partly explains why election outcomes in GB and AJK often follow political dispensations at the federal level.

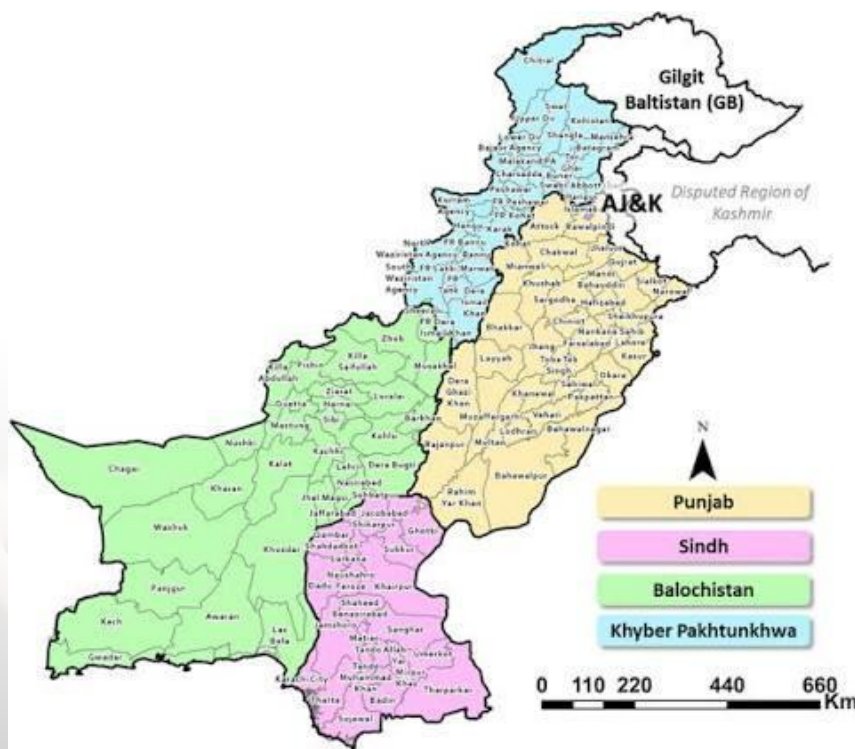


Figure 3: Pakistan's administrative structure

Constitutional uncertainty shapes public finance in other forms as well. Stemming from its legal ambiguity, GB imposes very limited taxes unlike other provinces. The region's own source revenues thus remain minimal, relying mostly on motor vehicle taxes collected by the Excise Department and tourism fees, road tolls, park entry tickets, hunting permits. Development and economic progress have thus remained increasingly checkered in the region, marred by financial constraints and political volatility.

An element often overlooked in constitutional discourse is the status of the very land that comprises Gilgit Baltistan. Since Sikh dominion in the [19<sup>th</sup> Century](#), ownership of land has remained contested between state and society in GB, reflecting again how the undercurrents of history continue to shape daily existence.

In the 1800s, under a desire to settle lands in Skardu, Astore and Gilgit, Sikh rulers allotted land to the people to cultivate, maintaining ownership with the state and collecting the revenue generated. Post-independence, the PPP government in the 1970s and General Zia's subsequent rule devised rules to transfer ownership from the state to local residents which was subsequently prohibited again in the 1980s.

Any land left 'ownerless' or not-transferred, referred previously to '[shamilat](#)' land (common property) was claimed by the state, a harkening back to the paradigm under Sikh rule. Today, locals vehemently oppose the state's claims to this land, asserting their right to occupation, sale and transfer. This carries a direct bearing on the existence and livelihood of the locals, who are unable to cultivate, build or sell the land they live on. Under surging tourism and interest from investors outside GB, this has birthed significant fiscal and social strain, as residents have come into direct confrontation with the state on the status of this land.

Yet again, legal voids impact the very essence and fabric of society, throwing GB into perpetual tumult. Land has been central to the identity and stability of societies across the world, but in the north of Pakistan, this relationship and connection remains severed, embroiled in a legal battle that has increased crime and violence in a peaceful region.

### **Burdens of History: Constitutional Development in Gilgit Baltistan**

Understanding Gilgit Baltistan's uncertain provincial status necessitates critical engagement with its history. This section emphasizes post-independence history, scrutinizing interaction between the Pakistani state and GB as a territory that joined the country. As the graphic below depicts, GB has witnessed [multiple legal alterations](#), transitioning from a federally-administered territory to the present iteration and structure.

## Constitutional Evolution of Gilgit-Baltistan

Key governance milestones from 1947 to 2018

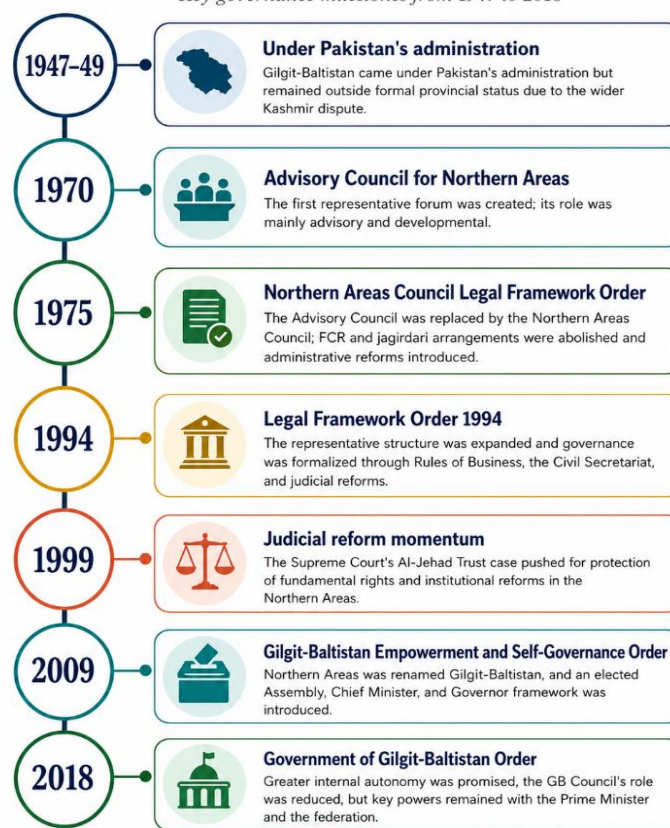


Figure 4: Constitutional development in Gilgit Baltistan

The most critical change came in 2009 through the GB Order which formed the GB legislative assembly and permitted elections in the region. 2009 was also when the first chief minister was elected, Syed Mehdi Shah of the PPP who hails from Skardu, a Shiite-dominated city in the division of Baltistan. The 2009 order also altered the territory's name from 'Northern Areas' to Gilgit Baltistan.

This name change is significant, because much like the North West Frontier Province (NWFP)'s change to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, it signals a recognition of the diversity prevalent in these regions and partially acknowledges ownership of these ethnicities over the territory. De Jure acknowledgements of the residents' rights to land, as we witnessed in the previous section, remains very much controversial.

2009 was thus the major catalyst towards a provincial framework. With a Governor, Chief Minister and elected assembly, GB residents finally possessed a modicum of agency in their political trajectory. The 2009 Order, however reasserted the region's constitutional precarity as well through the formation of the Gilgit Baltistan Council headed by the Prime Minister and with membership that extended across members from the federal and GB governments. The Council held significant legislative powers with the ability to make decisions on critical sectors including taxation, minerals, hydropower and banking, essentially maintaining a stranglehold over the financial jugular vein of GB.

It was not until 2018 that a subsequent [wave of legislative reform](#) emerged in GB. Passed towards the end of the PML-N led federal government, the 2018 Government of Gilgit-Baltistan Order diluted the control of the Council, empowering the GB Assembly in matters related to power generation and taxation. And yet, the Order eschewed genuine devolution, concentrating power instead in the office of the Prime Minister. The 2018 Order thus tacitly

shifted the locus of power, from the GB Council to the Office of the Prime Minister which held final sway over matters related to finance, law and order and legislation. [Article 60\(4\)](#) of the Order made this concentration of power explicit, empowering the Prime Minister to override any legislation made by the Assembly if the Prime Minister felt this was necessary in public interest. With the stroke of a pen, the Prime Minister could neuter the elected Assembly of an entire region, reflecting how punctuated genuine reform has been in GB and the myriad interests that exist in the region.

### The Silent Gatekeepers: The Bureaucracy in GB

A nascent political structure straitjacketed by legal inventions drastically curtails the authority and power the citizens and their representatives possess in the region. Effective control, instead, has centered on the powerful bureaucracy, dominated by federal civil servants but with strong representation from local civil servants. Prior to 2009, full power vested with the Chief Secretary, the senior most civil servant in a province/region and almost always a high-ranking officer of the prestigious [federal cadre](#), the Pakistan Administrative Service (PAS).

The administrative structure in GB eschewed any provincial accountability over the Chief Secretary who answered directly to the Prime Minister through the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit Baltistan, whose minister remained the dominant force in local affairs. The Chief Secretary (CS), in turn, held complete authority to conduct administrative affairs, brokering also relations with other stakeholders including local communities and the military establishment.

The preponderance of bureaucratic power extends to all tiers of government. At the district level, the deputy commissioner (DC) wields powers removed from all other [administrative jurisdictions](#) apart from Islamabad and Kashmir. DCs, beyond their administrative control, are also district magistrates (DM), deciding cases relating to public nuisances, disturbances and law and order. The DC as DM is yet another colonial relic, inherited from the British Raj and their legal ingenuity deployed to mollify the local native population. Legislative reforms across Pakistan in 2001 divested DCs of the power of magistrates, but failed to extend this to GB, AJK and Islamabad.

Institutional authority at the local level, thus, concentrates firmly in the office of the DC who in leading districts is very often a federal civil servant from PAS. DCs play critical roles in local service delivery, serve as administrators of local governments, lead rescue and relief efforts and are the focal persons to maintain social, inter-faith and ethnic harmony.

The office of the DC thus plays a multi-pronged role, its ambit extending beyond mere administrative authority into political management, community engagement and running local government. District and division level civil servants remain answerable to the Chief Secretary, reflecting again the vertical structure of power that extends from the grassroots all the way to the federal secretariat, bypassing local agency and authority.

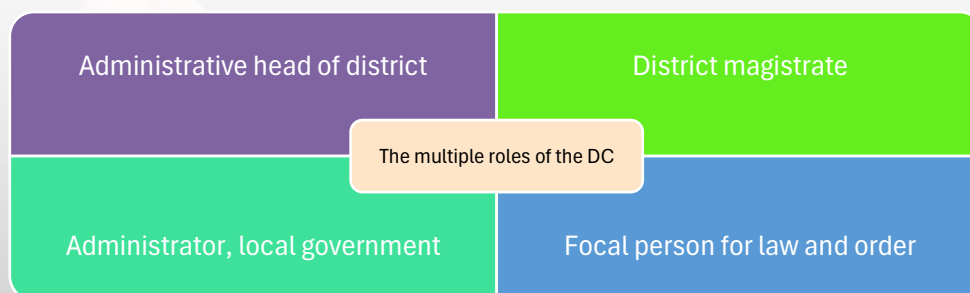


Figure 5: The all-powerful deputy commissioner



A continuous cycle of elections and the emerging role of the Chief Minister has diluted the bureaucracy's control to a relative degree. Decisions now emanate from the office of the Chief Minister and the Assembly, but the Chief Secretary and his set of administrative secretaries (all chief secretaries to date have been men) continue to wield substantial power. Critically, the relationship between the CM and the CS remains awkwardly skewed since the CS, as a federal civil servant, remains accountable solely to the federal government. In this backdrop, the [2023 political transition](#) in GB takes on greater significance. In 2020, the wave of *tabdeeli* (change) swept GB as well, with the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) forming government under Imran Khan's hand-picked Chief Minister, Khalid Khurshid. Aligned with the federal government also led by the PTI, CM Khurshid undertook genuine reform, prioritizing infrastructure, hydel projects and initiating efforts to enhance indigenous revenue sources. Political currents in Pakistan, however, are notoriously turbulent. 2022 witnessed the no-confidence motion against Imran Khan in the National Assembly. A year later in July 2023, CM Khurshid was dismissed by GB's Chief Court, the equivalent of a provincial high court, and power transitioned to a '[forward-block](#)' supporting the federal government under the PML-N-PPP lead coalition. Prior to the transition, reports of a strong fissure between the CM and the Chief Secretary emerged, portending the following transition and rupture between the PTI-led provincial government and the new coalition at the helm at the federal level.

### Conclusion: Faith in the Democratic Process

This brief has sought to situate the [2026 elections](#) in a broader historical context, weaving together political, social and legal threads to weave together a collective narrative on the checkered and uncertain status of Gilgit Baltistan. Despite the constitutional void, the fiscal restraints and the incessant tussle between elected representatives and the bureaucracy, the 2026 elections represent continuity, and a collective adherence to the democratic process. Regardless of any accusations of rigging, this only bodes well for Gilgit Baltistan and Pakistan collectively, where an unimpeded democratic journey remains critical to address longstanding issues of conflict, disillusion and violence. And yet, a long way lies ahead, requiring important steps and interventions:

1. A recognition of and active engagement with GB's constitutional imbroglio
2. Detaching GB from the Kashmir issue and considering provincial status for the region
3. Enhancing financial independence in GB and moving towards enhancing indigenous resources
4. Embracing genuine devolution and moving towards local government elections in Gilgit Baltistan
5. Recognizing the right of the local residents to land in GB and undertaking land reforms which address issues of ownership and possession.

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## About Accountability Lab Pakistan

Accountability Lab Pakistan (ALP) is a think-and-do tank focused on making governance work for people by supporting active citizens, responsible leaders, and accountable institutions. Our approach reimagines how accountability can be built and sustained, envisioning a governance ecosystem where resources are used effectively, decision-making is inclusive and evidence-based, and public institutions respond to citizen needs.

Distinct from traditional approaches, ALP positions accountability as a cross-cutting value embedded across governance systems. This includes work spanning public sector reform, civic engagement, human rights, service delivery, and institutional strengthening. Through knowledge production, leadership development, innovation and institutional reforms, ALP contributes to shaping more transparent, responsive, and resilient governance structures.

ALP's work is anchored in strengthening the relationship between citizens and the state by advancing institutional effectiveness, public trust, and inclusive governance. By integrating research, practice, and coalition-building, the Lab supports reform processes and contributes to a more accountable and responsive governance ecosystem in Pakistan.