

Pakistan: Gilgit-Baltistan protests

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PROTESTERS in Gilgit-Baltistan, demanding the release of political prisoners imprisoned since 2011, called off their agitation on Saturday after the region's caretaker government assured them that the held individuals would be released. The protest, in Hunza's Aliabad area, lasted for six days and most of the region's political and religious parties, along with families of the incarcerated individuals, participated in large numbers. At the heart of the matter is a protest held in 2011, in the aftermath of the Attabad Lake incident, when locals started demonstrating against the administration for what they said were insufficient relief efforts. As a scuffle broke out between protesters and police in Aliabad, hundreds of activists, including Baba Jan, were rounded up by the authorities for 'rioting' and later given lengthy prison terms under the antiterrorism law. It is for the release of these men that the large, peaceful protests have been held in the northern region over the past few days. Along with Aliabad, activists held protests in other GB cities and towns in solidarity.

With an election in the region due next month, the authorities need to handle the situation with care. Demonstrations have up till now been peaceful, but discontent is brewing, mainly due to the harsh penalties imposed on people exercising their democratic right to organise. The GB administration has said it will release the 14 political prisoners in a month and a half; this process needs to be expedited and those incarcerated simply for expressing their opinions must be given maximum relief under the law. But beyond the Aliabad incident, the leaders in Islamabad must ensure that an atmosphere of political freedom and a democratic culture are allowed to flourish in GB. Muzzling the people's opinions simply because they differ from the official line will have counterproductive results, and will add to discontent in a geopolitically sensitive region. We have seen the failure of this approach before — particularly in Balochistan. In that province, due to the mistakes of the establishment, alienation from the national mainstream grew; this was exploited by forces internal and external. The same mistake must not be made in GB. The educated, politically aware populace must be allowed to make informed decisions at the ballot box, while more needs to be done to give the region the same rights the rest of Pakistan enjoys. Heavy-handed tactics must be abandoned in favour of a democratic, inclusive approach.

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