

YOUTH ACTIVISM, RELIGION, AND DEMOCRATISATION IN GILGIT-BALTISTAN, PAKISTAN: SECTARIAN CLEAVAGES AND CIVIC MOBILISATION

Burhan Ali¹, Ibrahim Ahmed²

¹MPhil from National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad

²PhD Candidate at National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad

¹burhanali@nips.qau.edu.pk, ²ahmed_ibrahim0091@yahoo.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20524798>

Keywords

Youth Activism; Democratisation; Gilgit-Baltistan; Hybrid Regimes; Religion and Sectarianism; Democratic Space

Article History

Received: 03 April 2026

Accepted: 12 May 2026

Published: 30 May 2026

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *

Burhan Ali

Abstract

The process of democratisation in the peripheral and conflict regions is prone to unequal development due to the limitation of hybrid governance, poor institutions, and sectarianism. Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), one of the strategic yet constitutionally ambiguous areas of Pakistan, is an example of such dynamics. Although the national politics and sectarian politics of Pakistan have been well researched, little of the literature has addressed the influence of youth in democratisation in GB. This paper fills that gap by posing two questions: (a) How does youth activism influence the process of democratisation in GB? (b) What is the role played by religious institutions and sectarian identities in enabling or limiting youth activism? The study relies on a mixed-methods approach and is based on survey data gathered via Google Forms which is a combination of Likert-scale responses with thematic coding of open-ended narratives. The findings indicate that, youth activism is a key accountability, rights-based mobilisation, and civic awareness driver in GB. Religious organizations were identified as having an ambivalent role in that they sometimes legitimised activism, preventing undivided unity and at other times, strengthening sectarian boundaries. Democratic space was also defined by respondents as fragile, which is influenced by state limitations, social forces, and infrastructural limitations. This paper finds that youth activism is an important driver of democratisation in Gilgit-Baltistan, but its transformative capacity is mediated by structural constraints and sectarian division. The study adds to the discussion of democratisation in a hybrid regime and highlights the importance of policies that strengthen the youth, promote cross-sectarian unity, and increase civic mobilisation.

INTRODUCTION

The process of democratisation in the peripheries and contested areas becomes uneven due to the weak institutions, hybridity in governance, and sectarian cleavages. A case in point is Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), a strategically located yet

constitutionally obscure region of Pakistan. Although it does conduct regular elections to a legislative assembly, GB does not have representatives in the Pakistani national parliament and continues to be ruled by executive decree in Islamabad, placing it in what observers call a constitutional limbo (ICG, 2007). The

control of the military and the instability of the democratic institutions have been widely documented in the existing scholarship on Pakistan (Shah, 2014; Jalal, 1995), and the lack of governance and sectarian conflicts have been pointed out in studies of GB (Rieck, 2016; HRCP, 2013).

Nevertheless, there has been little systematic focus on the agency of youth in the creation of democratic practices. Though the concept of the youth bulge in Pakistan has been examined in the context of urban politics and the national development agenda (UNDP, 2018), there is an absence of literature on how youth in marginal regions such as GB can contribute to democratisation based on hybrid and sectarian cleavages. In addition, although the research on religion and politics in Pakistan focuses on how the clerics and other sectarian organisations implement a political culture (Nasr, 2001; Abbas, 2005), the impact of the same on youth activism and its democratic potential remains unaddressed. This paper fills that gap by posing two related questions: (1) How does youth activism influence democratisation processes in Gilgit-Baltistan? (2) How do religious institutions and sectarian identities support youth activism in the area or limit it? Through the foregrounding of youth voices by using primary survey data coupled with open ended responses, the study transcends the institutional narratives about democratisation and explores how democratic practices are felt and practised at the bottom. The relevance of the research is its contribution to practise. Empirically, it offers some rare data on a marginalised area that has generally been neglected in South Asian democracy research, thus bridging a significant gap in the research.

Literature Review

The literature available about Pakistan and the GB political scene might be subdivided into three sections of democracy in hybrid regime, youth activism and democracy and Religion, Sectarianism and Democratic Space. Pakistani scholarship has repeatedly represented a kind of hybrid political order, in which military power and unstable institutions fail to consolidate democracy

(Shah, 2014; Jalal, 1995). Such dynamics could be illustrated in Gilgit-Baltistan, with its democratic gaps that are maintained by ambiguity in the Constitution and poor autonomy (ICG, 2007; ICG, 2012; Mahmud, 2010; Ali, 2015). Although youth activism has long been a part of Pakistan politics (Waseem, 2006; UNDP, 2018), the youth in GB are still a mostly unheard-of topic in the academic discourse despite being visible in their mobilisations. In GB, democratic space is further limited by religion and sectarianism, which are at the center of Pakistan politics (Nasr, 2001; Abbas, 2005) and by their deep-rooted divisions (Rieck, 2016; HRCP, 2013). Thus, this literature demonstrates that there is a consistent ignorance of the grassroots democracy struggles in GB.

Democracy in hybrid regime

Pakistan is generally regarded as a paradigmatic example of the hybrid democracy in which government, elected by people, exists alongside the domination of military and bureaucracy. One of the most detailed explanations of how the military limited the development of democracy is offered by Aqil Shah in the book *The Army and Democracy in Pakistan* (2014). He says that the democratic course of Pakistan cannot be considered without exploring the institutionalised superiority of the armed forces that have intervened in politics directly by coup or indirectly by manipulating the constitution. To Shah, the prerogatives of the military force, along with its position as guardians of democracy, have established a culture of poor democratic consolidation, where civilian institutions fear coercion or dismissal at any time (Shah, 2014).

The institutional inadequacies of the Pakistani state that were also foregrounded by Ayesha Jalal are equally foregrounded by the fact that after independence, no strong democratic norms have been developed since that time. As Jalal (1995) notes, the Pakistan constitution was created as a product of elite politics and dictatorship with very little room to develop participatory democracy. She argues that the shift to democratic accountability was undermined by weak institutions, as well as overcentralised governance. All these historical circumstances are why civilian

governments were in most occasions not legitimate, they failed to oppose either the military invasion or the populist dictatorship (Jalal, 1995). Iftikhar Malik, author of *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia* (1995) bolsters this analysis by putting the Pakistani experience in regional context. Malik defines the political order in Pakistan as the pattern of alternating between democratic civil rule and military dictatorship. He observes that in contrast to India where democratic institutions have become fairly institutionalized, Pakistan has a history of collapses of democratic order since then making the establishment of a hybrid regime, which perpetuates authoritarian habits despite formally democratic regimes, permanent. (Malik, 1995). Although the foregoing scholarship offers valuable information about the general democratic trend in Pakistan, most of it addresses the institutions at the national level and the association between the civil and military. There has been little focus in democratisation in the subnational level, especially in regions like GB which have no concrete place in the constitution. In contrast to the four provinces of Pakistan, GB has never been integrated into the federal system of the nation since the outstanding Kashmir problem. Consequently, it has stayed in what most academics term a constitutional purgatory, without representation in the Pakistan parliament, but governed by executive diktats issued by Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan (Ali, 2022). The International Crisis Group (ICG) has already published some of the most comprehensive descriptions of the democratic deficit in GB. In 2007, it released its report, *Discord in Pakistan*, which stated that the governance structure in the region was built to focus more on control than participation. This lack of provincial status deprived the citizens of GB a voice in national decision-making, and the local legislative house lacked teeth, with all final decisions instead being placed in the hands of federally appointed officials. This was again echoed in a later ICG report of 2011, which pointed out that even reforms like the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order of 2009 could only provide cosmetic changes, as far as Islamabad

remained firmly entrenched in the control of the main policy areas. The ICG found that the so-called ambiguous position of GB sustains the process of disenfranchisement and compromises the hope of any true democratisation (ICG, 2007). Writing widely about GB, Ershad Mahmud (2009) and Hira Ausaf Muhammad Shoaib Pervez (2025) also refer to the issue of governance within the region. In policy briefs and commentary, Mahmud (2009) has maintained that despite the 2009 reforms being hailed as a breakthrough, the reforms did not change the balance of power between the federal centre and the local assembly (Mahmood, 2009). Such a gap between formal institutional structures and substantive democratic empowerment is also exploited by Ausaf and Pervez (2025) who state that the further possession of the critical areas of the economy (natural resources, security, the system of justice) by Islamabad prevents the realization of a truly autonomous democratic order in GB. Both authors emphasize that political institutions are shaky and could be easily manipulated in Pakistan; without the clarity of the constitution and representation in the national parliament (Ausaf, & Pervez, 2025).

Therefore, the dynamism of the literature of democratisation in GB is low and the majority of the available analysis is based on policy or legal-institutional framework which dwells on the constitutional status, administrative set up, and the lack of governance (ICG, 2007; Mahmud, 2009; Ausaf, and Pervez, 2025). In this regard, little research connects directly with the ways in which democratisation is experienced and influenced by ordinary citizens and young people, in particular. This stands out as a curious exclusion considering that the youth are a majority of the population in GB and have over the years continued to spearhead dominant mobilisations in relation to matters like subsidies, education, and connectivity. This lack of information is considerable as it makes us unable to perceive the process of democratisation in peripheral regions as taking place at the bottom. The national democratic struggles in Pakistan have been subject to thorough research, but GB has remained peripheral to the discussion, either as a

constitutional anomaly or a security sensitive province. But its hybrid political structure, which includes some autonomy, ineffective local institutions, and problematic sovereignty, renders it a perfect place to study how democratisation is negotiated in places where democratic institutions are only truncated. To make matters even more complicated, the point where sectarian politics and youth activism intersect introduces more layers to the concept of how democratic space is formed and challenged.

Youth Activism and Democracy

The world is witnessing a lot of literature that emphasizes the role of the youth in the democratisation processes. The Arab spring, in particular, demonstrated how digitally aware young people organised protests in the streets, which broke authoritarian systems that were long established and firmly fixed (Howard and Hussain, 2013). Just as the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Lee & Chan, 2018) and the climate strikes around the globe (Pickard, 2019) have demonstrated that this youth age group incorporates both digital mobilisation and physical protest to hold those in authority accountable. In both instances, the scope of democratic involvement through activism was broadened by confronting exclusionary frameworks in youth activism.

In modern Pakistan, the issue of the youth bulge has taken centre stage in discussions. Having more than 60 % of the population below the age of 30, the analyst says the democratic process in the country will depend on how the young people become political participants or political mobs. The UNDP Pakistan National Human Development Report on Youth (2018) has highlighted that youth have the potential to propel social and political change should they be given the opportunity to participate meaningfully (UNDP, 2018).

Nevertheless, with all these accomplishments, the literature regarding youth activism in Pakistan is overwhelmingly inclined towards big cities like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad. Anita Weiss (2016) has reported how young people in urban Pakistan express modernist as well as rights-based

demands through activism. Minor attention has been given to marginal areas like Gilgit-Baltistan, however, where youth activism is as alive as in other areas but conditioned by other structural limits, such as sectarian divisions, poor connectivity, and uncertainty over constitutionality (Weiss, 2016). By doing so, the current literature on GB youth activism is little and sparsely distributed in journalistic descriptions, policy reports, and scholarly work on the topic in the area. Protest movements have been documented by Nargis Khatoon (2022), but very little academic literature has analysed and organised the results of how youth activism will impact democratisation in the region (Khatoon, 2022). Local scholars and these and others have started to fill this void, yet this area is underexplored (Ali, & Akhundzada, 2015; Dad, 2016).

Sectarianism, and Democratic Space

Religion in Pakistan has been at the forefront in the process of state formation and democratization. According to Farzana Shaikh (2009), it is Islamic identity, which has historically informed the legitimacy of the Pakistani state, that has generated the persistent conflict between Islamic power and democratic pluralism (Shaikh, 2009). Vali Nasr also discusses the reduction of the democratic space of the manifold voices, by state elites using Islam as an instrument to consolidate power. Religion institutions and movements have been instrumentalized by this, allowing them to become part and parcel of the politics of Pakistan (Nasr, 2001).

Democratic development has had a perennial challenge in sectarianism. The rise of sectarian organisations since the 1980s (often in complicity with the state) is recorded by Hassan Abbas (2005) and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (1998). The policies of Islamisation implemented by General Zia-ul-Haq not only helped to reinforce the status of the Sunni but also fuelled Shia-Sunni hostility. Such sectarian divisions undercut democratic consolidation when they broke up civil society, polarised political discourse and made possible patron-client relations mediated by religious identity (Abbas, 2005; Zaman, 1998). Expanding

on the issue of sectarian violence, the international crisis group (2012) also notes that voter confidence on democracy institutions and inclusive political engagement has been limited by sectarian violence (ICG, 2012).

Gilgit-Baltistan is a significant location with respect to exploring ways in which religion and sectarianism influence democratic space in a peripheral state. There is a sketch of sectarian polarities throughout the history of GB between Shia, Sunni, Ismaili, and Noor Bakhshi groups. The Shias of Pakistan (2016), by Andreas Rieck, gives a precise insight into the ways in which both the Shia communities in GB have affirmed themselves, and have been victimized in sectarian violence against them, respectively. Rieck cites sectarian flashpoints in Gilgit of the 1980s and 1990s as destabilising societal factors in addition to limiting democratic activism potential due to an atmosphere of fear and mistrust (Rieck, 2016).

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2017) found itself repeating several times that sectarian tensions in GB limit the political freedom and that demonstrations are often discussed in sectarian, not civic language (HRCP, 2017). On sectarian politics in Gilgit, Aisha Javed, Muhammad Abid Nazir, and Kinza Tasleem (2022) emphasize that religious institutions organize collective action, and also maintain restrictions on the scope of cross-sectarian mobilisation through a role as gatekeepers. Political gatherings take place frequently in the physical infrastructure provided by mosques and madrassas, but this infrastructure reinforces sectarian borders that block any wider coalitions (Javed, Nazir, & Tasleem, 2022).

The scarcity of research concerning the topic of youth and religion in GB creates a necessity in conducting new studies. Most studies on sectarianism emphasize violence and elite politics, and not the ways young people cross sectarian lines in their activism. The work of the International Crisis Group and HRCP present useful records of sectarian episodes but seldom discuss how those affected democratic processes among young people (ICJ, 2012; HRCP, 2017).

Democratisation at the Contested Regions

Lastly, one should also consider the context of democracy in a conflict area. Here the literature on Kashmir offers a welcome comparative prism. Another finding that has been underscored by Chatterji, Bose and Zutshi (2010) regards the contested sovereignty of Kashmir as generating the lack of democracy, as well as induction of mass mobilisation process (Bose, & Zutshi, 2010). Elections may be conducted on a regular basis in Indian-run Jammu and Kashmir, but, according to scholars like Waheed (2018), the legitimacy of democracy is still destabilised through militarisation, low-scale repression, as well as unresolved political status of the territory. One area where this issue of youth activism has been especially acute is in Kashmir, where youth people mobilise primarily on material demands yet extend to political and patriotic concepts of dignity and self-determination (Waheed, 2018). According to Bose (2003), it is these mobilisations which are democratic in form at the same time as being subversive of state-centric democracy, as they undermine the legitimacy of the governing framework itself (Bose, 2003).

The abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 and the further downgrading of Jammu and Kashmir to a union territory are another clear example of the fact that disputed areas usually face democratic backsliding. The erosion of autonomy has shrunk the democratic space to isolate young people whom scholars like Noor Ahmad Baba (2021) argue is frustrating them. The case study highlights that the process of democratisation is weak in those territories that have sovereignty difficulties (Baba, 2021). An example can be seen in Ladakh, which was completely separated and partitioned in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019. On the one hand, it is a bonus because it has led to a situation whereby women are now empowered; on the other hand, some view that the new union territory of Ladakh has created gaps in governance since the elected councils are still weak in comparison with their federally appointed counterparts (Sikand, 2020). Similar to GB, the vague autonomy of Ladakh reflects that institutional reform usually does not have significant democratisation impact on

autonomy, even when the decisions are made by the higher authority.

Much of these characteristics of peripheral democratisation are shared by Gilgit-Baltistan. Similar to the parts of Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Ladakh, the uncertain position in the constitution of GB is due to the fact that it is involved in the problem of Kashmir as a whole. In the past, GB has not enjoyed the complete representation in the Pakistani national legislature, acting only by executive order. The International Crisis Group (2012) restates numerous times that the governance structure in GB is generating systemic disenfranchisement (ICG, 2012). Other scholars, like Ershad Mahmud (2009), have referred to GB as being in some constitutional limbo where reforms such as the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order of 2009 gave it a semblance of power even when the reality was that substantive power remained in the control of Islamabad. Like Ausaf and Pervez (2025), the GB Legislative Assembly is also unable to exercise power over major issues like natural resources, security, or judicial systems, which negatively affects the consolidation of democracy. It is these characteristics that make GB a classic hybrid region: there is both election and assemblies, but power is still in contention and strong control is centralized (Ausaf, & Pervez, 2025). In such a way, Gilgit-Baltistan is unexplored within the framework of academic discussions on the peripheral democratisation. To date, much research on GB concentrates on its constitutional position or sectarian conflicts, without much consideration of how non-elite activism (youth, in particular) is influencing democratic trends.

Research Methodology

This was a mixed-methods research design in which both quantitative survey data and quantitative interpretation were utilized. The qualitative data was collected using a questionnaire and filled using Google Forms that promoted anonymity and made the questionnaire more available to various districts in Gilgit-Baltistan. A questionnaire has been structured according to four areas: demographic data, youth activism and democratisation, religion and

sectarian identities and democratic space. It contained both Likert-based items to measure attitudes and perceptions, and open-ended questions intended to produce qualitative narratives. Convenience sampling was used to collect 24 eligible respondents who are between the ages 18-30 and have been slightly exposed to activism in some way. In terms of gender the majority of the respondents were males that is 91.7% with female respondents being only 8.3%. On the educational front, the majority of the respondents were dependent on the Master and post master's level with 66.7% and 33.3% respectively. Equilibrium In occupational terms most respondents were operating their businesses 41.7% and a smaller majority were working in the formal sector 37.5% and only a minuscule percentage 8.3% were unemployed. The sample participants were sampled in Gilgit, Astore, Ghizar, Huna, Skardu, and Shigar. The qualitative responses were thematically coded in descriptive statistics, calculating frequencies and percentages, whereas the qualitative data were analyzed with themes based on the methodology of Braun and Clarke (2006).

Theoretical Framework

The current research paper theorises democratisation in GB based on three joint theories including literature on hybrid regimes, literatures on youth participation and social movements, and literature on religion and democratic space. The integrated model enables us to examine the role of youth activism in promoting democratic practices in GB, whilst acknowledging the mediating role of religious institutions and sectarian identities.

One, democratisation within GB needs to be seen through the lenses of hybrid regimes. As stated by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), dictatorial transitions are seldom linear, often because such transitions lead to unstable political formations in which both authoritarian and democratic modes of activity exist (Schmitter, 1986). Most of these regimes are gray zone ones defined by Carothers (2002) as neither fully authoritarian nor democratic with Diamond (2002) going further to classify hybrid ones: they have formal institutions

of electoral competition but subvert substantive accountability through elite dominance, repression or through disrespect of the rule of law (Carothers, 2002; Diamond, 2002).

It is generally considered that Pakistan is a classic example of a hybrid regime, influenced by periodic intervention of the military and poor civilian institutions. Shah (2014) shows that the military has always put restrictions on the development of democracy in Pakistan, and Jalal (1995) and Malik (1995) claim that the democratic institutions of this country have been inhibited due to excessive centralisation, a lack of legitimacy, and authoritarian reversals (Shah, 2014; Jalal, 1995; Malik, 1995). Constitutional ambiguity also contributes to this ambiguity in GB. This area does not have its own representation in the national parliament in Pakistan, but is ruled ad hoc by executive decree out of Islamabad. Despite the holding of elections in the GB Assembly, gravitational authority is with the officials appointed at the federal level (ICG, 2012; Mahmud, 2009; Ausaf, & Pervez, 2025). Under these circumstances, democratisation is not satisfiable only by the determinations involving the institutional changes, but must also comprise the informal interactions, such as the protests, mobilisation and negotiation, where the citizens draw the limits of the democratic space.

Second, theories such as participatory democracy and social movements help understand the role that youth activism plays in democracy. Following Pateman (1970), by rendering citizens into participation practices of deliberation and accountability, and Barber (1984), who determined a strong democracy as one in which citizens participate directly as a part of the political life. These understood about the movement of the youth who works on the margins of the working political system yet achieves democracies in their daily mobilisation (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984) Social movement theorists have further refined how the political work within the movement is made to create democracies. According to Tilly (2004) and Tarrow (2011), political opportunity structure, along with mobilizing networks and framing processes characterize the collective action. Young people are often central to this

effect; they have plenty of energy, can be flexible and can put complaints in new contexts (Tilly, 2004; Tarrow, 2011). In one example, McAdam (1988) identifies the use of social networks and identity frames by youth movements in the UAE during the civil rights movement as the primary way to promote systemic change (McAdam, 1988). A resultant conceptualisation of youth activism thus is established based on the understanding of it as a response to governments failing to perform their duties and also as a democratic practice that maintains and intensifies participatory spaces in a hybrid regime.

Third, the analysis adopts the scientific literature on religion and democratic space to evaluate how the relationship between youth activism and democratisation goes through the mediating factors of religious institutions and sectarian identities. Casanova (1994) dissented to the theory of secularisation by opining that indeed the world now shows a revival of the world religions, which define civil society and the legitimacy of a government (Casanova, 1994). Stepan (2000) proceeded with the concept of the two tolerations, in which democracy needs the independence of religious institutions (quite obvious) and the political toleration of religious pluralism (Stephan, 2000). The model of consociational democracy in such a society characterized along religious or sectarian lines is that stable democracy necessitates power shares among communal groups. The views individually and in combination affirm the idea that democratisation can be promoted or limited by religion, depending on institutional or social contexts (Liphart, 1977).

Religion has been the center stage throughout the politics of Pakistan. Shaikh (2009) claims that the state legitimacy of Pakistan has been established upon Islamic identity thus leading to fixed tensions between religious authority and pluralist democracy (Shaikh, 2009). Nasr (2001) reveals how the instrumentalisation of Islam by the state institutionalised sectarian politics and Abbas (2005) and Zaman (1998) chronicle the emergence of sectarian organisations to polarise civil society and erode democratic culture (Nasr, 2001; Abbas, 2005; Zaman, 1998). These forces are more acute in GB where the political loyalties are directly

dependent on Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, and Noor Bakhshi subgroups, and these forces tend to engage in power rivalry. Rieck (2016) shows the mobilising impact of sectarian conflict in GB by and the limiting nature of cross-sectarian activism opportunities (Rieck, 2016). The reduction of democratic participation through sectarian violence limiting freedom of assembly and expression has also been reported by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (281) (HRCP, 2017).

By synthesising these three strands, the theoretical framework of this study conceptualises youth activism, as a force of democratisation in GB, through the structural limitation of hybrid governance and the mediating effect of the ambivalent role of religion and sectarianism. The model used to inform this analysis could be summarized as follows: youth activism is the independent variable, religion and sectarian identities are the mediating variables and democratisation, which can be interpreted as expansion of accountability, participation and rights, is the dependent variable. Democratisation in GB does not occur in a linear institution building process but is a contested practice through politics of activism, institutional hybridisation and religious processes acting upon each other.

Youth Activism and Democratisation

The statistical evidence revealed that the young generation in GB is getting increasingly aware of its political rights due to taking part in various types of political activism. Due to which they are playing their part in process of democratisation in GB. The results of the survey indicate that young people in GB take part in activism activities on scale, with 70.8% of those who completed the survey indicating that they have participated in one or more such forms, including protests and sit-ins, online campaigns and student organising.

Majority of the youth were involved in student organisation activities of 38.9% of the total youth, 22.2% of the youth participated in community led protests and street protests. Although 16.7 % was lower than digital activism given no internet or power facilities were available to them in the

mountainous area. The fact that Youth in Gilgit-Baltistan still use social media to demand and demand improved internet-related facilities speaks volumes, as does the nearly 22-hour outages of internet and electricity services in the region (Dawn, 2024; Pamir Times, 2020). When questioned about whether these efforts were very effective (47.4% very effective) or somewhat effective (47.4% somewhat effective), less than 5.3% said they considered their activism ineffective. Very high percentages—85%—said they agreed or strongly agreed that youth activism can enhance democratisation by enhancing accountability and involvement in the governance process. The following trends underline the idea that activism is not viewed as just a protest but an effective avenue of democratic power.

Thus, it might be noticed based on the statistical evidence that the young generation is becoming increasingly aware of the political activism in GB. This trend could be also observed in the qualitative answers of the youth. One interviewee added that activism is useful as it keeps everything within their reach, meaning that it keeps authority in check. One more was that activism fosters political wakefulness, invites civic engagement, and holds leaders accountable... marginalized voices are amplified, regional problems are debated, and social changes are enacted. The young people feel that the government leaders owe them and it is their duty to articulate their needs and requirements to the senior member by utilizing the resources and powers of political activism or the government official would remain indifferent to their problems, this was quoted by a respondent as, unless you raise your voice about your needs and requirements, how will the government official take note of the problems that people are having, or what difficulties society is going through as a whole? These problems have to be solved right, and in some cases, it is even required to do it because of the country and the community. The employees of the government are there because of the people, and we delegate to them duties by our votes. They receive salaries based on government money, so they should be responsible to the ills that befall us. In protest we

make them aware that they are not performing their duty.

On the same note, the younger generation also believes that their political activism can also lead to democratisation. They believe that by holding their political leaders responsible, the political leaders would be more conscious about their issues that will breed a culture of responsibility and openness and thereby embrace the spirit of democracy. The young guys in Gilgit-Baltistan said this, Youth activism in Gilgit-Baltistan enhances democracy because it will promote political awareness, increase civic participation and put the leaders on top. It gives a voice to the marginalised, initiates discussion over regional matters, and generates social changes. Through the assembling of communities and activism around the rights selections, youth activists cultivate tenacity, even-handedness, and even sturdier democratic institutions in the regionast. On the same note, another respondent said, Activism through civic and protest movements can be used to facilitate a democratic transition in GB, the better the youth understands their rights and responsibilities, the more it will be able to challenge colonialism and clear the way to authentically democratic government.

These thoughts explain why activism is a democratic value in promoting accountability and social consciousness. These pieces of knowledge are consistent with Pateman (1970) and Barber (1984) points that participatory democracy relies on active participation of citizens that instil the qualities of democratic practices and strengthen accountability in the world where weak institutions prevail. The recent youth political activism in Gilgit-Baltistan illustrates that the youth have become a central force of political mobilisation, leading and staging protests and shaping the public discourse in the region wide wheat-price protests in 2023-2024 (reflecting a collective demand) despite being largely led by the Awami Action Committee (Boyle, 2024). The campaigns conducted by the Public Action Committee have demonstrated the ability to mobilize across demographic barriers and engage people of various backgrounds to unite them regionally (Azadi Times, 2023). These movements

show how the youth of Gilgit-Baltistan are not passive consumers but active participants in the process of democratizing the region, and is using civic participation activities to challenge the rule and seek the assertion of their rights at the local level.

This way, most youths not only engage themselves in activism, but they also consider it effective in shaping governance and making them accountable. In their thoughts, they see activism as a political educational experience and way of making citizens feel empowered politically, and the mass protests show how activists can create physical pressure on the government. This practice is familiar to theories of hybrid regimes, which underline that in situations where institutions are weak or limited, activism is a major arena of democracy (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Carothers, 2002; Diamond, 2002). Youth activism is becoming an important practice through which democracy is realized, practiced and grown in deserted spaces within Gilgit-Baltistan, where constitutional ambiguity and lack of political representation prevails.

Religion, Sectarian Identities, and Activism

This role of religion and sectarian identity in cultivating youth activism in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) turned out to be facilitating as well as limiting. Most respondents, 70.8%, said that religious institutions encourage or strongly encourage their participation in activism (45.8% and 25%, respectively), 16.7% indicated that clerics and mosques were indifferent towards activism, and only 12.5% felt discouraged about it. Such results demonstrate the dual though prominent role of religion in political life, correcting the claim suggested by Casanova (1994) that the re-entry of religion into civic life may be provocative enough to mobilize citizens. Religious institutions also, in certain situations, have the kind of organisational infrastructure and legitimacy that enable the youth to mobilise effectively. It has been observed by one interviewee that religious leaders could bring together young people and shape justice and rights movements, and this is made possible by the facilitating attributes of clerical networks.

Parallel to this, there is the issue of sectarianism. A quarter of the questionnaire respondents said that sectarian differences exacerbate the problem of uniting the youth into one, with 25% stating always, 20.8% stating often, and 29.2% stating sometimes. A minority said sectarianism is somewhat 16.7% or never 8.3% a barrier. Similarly, 52.2 % of respondents supported the claim that sectarian politics constrain the democratic possibilities of youth activism, and 30.4 % rejected the claim and 17.4 % expressed neutrality. This feeling of constraint is validated by every qualitative response. It has been noted by one of the respondents that because of prejudice it tends to affect how religion works in terms of youth activism, but another merely claimed that sectarian divides hamper cooperation in all but the rarest movements. These views echo the argument of Rieck (2016) that the sectarian causes of cleavage in GB still persists and reported findings by the HRCP (2013) that sectarianism impairs freedom of expression and assembly.

However, a number of the respondents also provided examples of the ways youth activism has effectively transcended sectarian borders. Yes, one of the participants said, recent protests united people of all sects in Gilgit-Baltistan on the same page. People can be united on the basis of democratic rights due to the reasons such as many other typical problems. Another interviewee explained that during wheat demonstrations, Shia, Sunni, and Ismaili youths demonstrated with one common cause. The accounts emphasize that, even though sectarian identities tend to divide activism, what can join them is common grievances that allow different identities to bond, and by extension connect. Such results are consistent with the idea of Stepan (2000) of the so-called twin tolerations, according to which the liberal engagement of the parties in the name of democratic freedom is extended whenever the local religious players have accepted pluralism, and narrowed when sectarian superiority exists.

The sectarian tolerance, also occurred during the time of the protests conducted in GB against wheat subsidy and the Karakoram International University, students protests. Wheat subsidy protests in Gilgit-Baltistan throughout the year

2023-2024 have repeatedly been reported on regarding the unusual level of cross-sectarian unity with clerics of various sects openly endorsing the mobilisation of the Awami Action Committee. To the always first in decades, sectarian differences are withdrawn gave way to youth and the old, enlisted in the flag of economic justice, according to the Nation (2024). This has, however, not always been the same. In some cases, sectarian tension has scuttled youth organising, especially in student politics. In a report on protests at Karakoram International University it was stated that the various opposing sectarian student organisations often presented their pre-eminence by employing identity politics, thus restricting the democratic potential of the mobilisations in general (The Friday Times, 2024).

It has therefore been determined based on the empirical evidences that religion and sectarian identities play central roles as mediators of youth activism in GB. Activism can be promoted and ratified by the religious organisations, which offer the vital networks and authority of morals to the youth. Regardless of the artificial cheerfulness in which the sectarian identities were contextualized within a broader politics agenda, sectarian divisions are a recurrent challenge and continue to divide movements and limit their ability to change (Dawn, 2023). These dynamics affirm the enabling and limiting functions of religion in democratic process, a sentiments expressed by Casanova (1994) of the concept of public religion, by Stepan (2000) of the idea of twin toleration, and by Lijphart (1977) of plural society. In the case of GB in particular the landscape of youth activism will always have to be negotiated in the context of these sectarian loci, and in instances where the formerly dominant center of grieving trumps the formerly dominant center of identity the movement towards democracy will follow, but in instances where sectarian politics continues to reemerge perilously the opposite holds.

Democratic Space and Constraints

The ideas of the democratic space among young people in GB represent ambivalence and imbalanced exposure to political freedom. On inquiry as to whether young people liked the

freedom to share their political opinions publicly or not, 47.8 % of them answered with the reply sometimes, 17.4 % with always, rarely and never. According to this distribution, although there is a relative openness among some young people, almost two-thirds social groups have intermittent or limited access to express dissent. These findings align with those of the International Crisis Group (2011) and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2013) that GB is still a country with restrictions of assembly, surveillance and arbitrary restraints of protest.

The responses from quality give special emphasis on the pressures that young activists are under. Some respondents clearly indicated that a key barrier was state restrictions/police force, whereas others emphasized the influence of family/social pressure (but showed that the norms and expectations set by sociology can limit participation). One considered reticent, referring to the need to avoid a backlash by authorities thus unable to mobilize his voice; another selected as an explanation the fact that even in his community, families that were politically inclined did not encourage their children to engage in politics, so as to avoid difficulties. Poor internet access was also mentioned as a problem that prevented digital activism by the respondents, especially due to infrastructural constraints. This is reminiscent of a well-publicized movement of #Internet4GilgitBaltistan organized by the youth who, in addition to framing internet access as a developmental problem, elevated it to a democratic right that is both essential to learning, communication, and effective political action.

Nevertheless, youth too came out with ways of fending off activism. The implication of the message of one respondent was that intergenerational support of politics should be encouraged-encouraging the decision to vote in the young generation, he stated, should be made by their parents. An additional proposal would be, To increase the effectiveness of youth activism in Gilgit-Baltistan systems of civic education and political participation must be increased. The government and society at large should encourage youth-driven projects, open up digital oases of conversation and also curb unsafe encounters.

Others emphasized the necessity to arouse the youth irrespective of their religious affiliations, and highlighted the idea of unity within the sectarian lines of conviction as a precondition of enhanced democratic involvement. These statements reveal that young people are painfully conscious of structural and cultural impediments to their agency, but also show their willingness to move beyond them by reforming and uniting in actions.

Further evidence of these constraints is through media accounts. The news of the wheat subsidy protests featured recurrent efforts by the government to break up educator demonstrations with police action and administrative coercion, yet the demonstrations lasted weeks in many districts (The Nation, 2024). The fact that local newspapers openly cover activist arrests is yet another example of how repressive the environment in which activism is organized can be, as those accusations were including both disruption and sedition (The Friday Times, 2024). Meanwhile, the publicity of these demonstrations - not stopped even in severe weather and by government repression - shows that young people still create democratic space even in the conditions of observance and coercion (Dawn, 2024)

It is true that youth activism is very common and better than average and yet the argument lacks strength by power of states, sectarian schisms, social forces, and lack of infrastructure. Such dynamics follow scholarship on hybrid regimes that suggests that democratic presence in such circumstances is selectively tolerated and repressed where it poses threats to established power (Carothers, 2002; Diamond, 2002). However, a more insistent activism (corporeal and online) proves that youth are not passive subjects but active agents challenged the borders of the democratic space. Through this, they represent a finding by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) that democratisation is hardly inclusivism but in most cases is a contest and negotiation process fought out at the bottom.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the role of youth activism in democratisation in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and the

mediating role of religion and sectarian identity. The evidence has been shown to be both widespread and significant as a result of a mixed-methods survey conducted among 24 youth with media account contributions and further evidence provided by secondary scholarship. Most respondents said they had personally engaged in protests, sit-ins, student organising or online movements and most felt their activism contributes to increase accountability and democratic engagement. These results complement the theory of participatory democracy, which emphasizes the importance of citizen participation, and hybrid regime scholarship, which emphasizes the importance of informal activism with weak formal institutions. The analysis also shows that the sectarian identities and religion are dual. Though mobilisation can be promoted and legitimised through religious institutions, sectarian boundaries often tear apart youth activism and constrain their transformative influence. Meanwhile, cross-sectarian solidarities like the wheat subsidy protests demonstrate that barriers to unification can be overcome when all share similar grievances and sectarian obstacles are pushed to the background. Equally, opinions of divided space depict insecurity: a proportion of youth expressed having access to political expression, but close to 50 % said the media freedom exists only occasionally, most referenced state repression, family and social pressure, and being offline. It can be proposed that the results indicate that youth activism in GB is a critical means of democratisation, but one that still cannot reach its full potential due to the impacts of hybrid governance and sectarian fragmentation. A number of policy directions can be identified to improve youth activism and democratisation in the region. First, changes in institutions that can broaden political representation in GB where protest by youth does not dominate but should be used to affect policymaking are necessary. Second, digital infrastructure should be prioritised, because education, civic engagement, and democratic participation cannot be achieved without a reliable internet connection. Third, the government and the civil society should encourage

civic education and youth-based platforms to share successful arguments and discussions on safe and inclusive platforms. Last but not least, cross-sectarian programs have to be encouraged in order to foster solidarity across communal boundaries and lessen the threats of fragmentation and maximize the democratic value of activism. In conclusion of the discussion, the examples of youth experiences in Gilgit-Baltistan reveal that the question of democratisation is not only one of institutional design at the top-down practices but also a bottom-top one of daily activism, bargaining, and coalition-building. Young people cannot stop expanding democratic space even after repression and sectarian appeals and these render them invaluable forces in the process of overcoming the politics of the more inclusive and participatory political order.

REFERENCES

- Abbas, H. (2005). *Pakistan's drift into extremism: Allah, the army, and America's war on terror*. Routledge.
- Ali, S. (2022). Gilgit Baltistan: identity crisis and a constitutional limbo. *International Journal of Human Rights and Constitutional Studies*, 9(3), 294-306.
- Ali, S. W., & Akhunzada, T. (2015). Unheard voices: engaging youth of Gilgit-Baltistan. *Conciliation Resources*.
- Ali, Z. (2015). Governance challenges in Gilgit-Baltistan. *Journal of Political Studies*, 22(1), 55-72.
- Ausaf, H., & Pervez, M. S. (2025). Pakistan state practices in Gilgit-Baltistan: a paradox?. *Contemporary South Asia*, 1-21.
- Azadi Times. (2023, September 9). The voice of unity: A turning point in Gilgit-Baltistan. <https://azaditimes.com/gb/the-voice-of-unity-a-turning-point-in-gilgit-baltistan/>
- Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. University of California Press.
- Bose, S. (2003). *Kashmir: Roots of conflict, paths to peace*. Harvard University Press.

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Carothers, T. (2002). The end of the transition paradigm. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(1), 5-21.
- Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. University of Chicago Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Dad, A. A. (2016). Boundaries and identities: The case of Gilgit-Baltistan. *Cross Roads Asia Working Paper*. No 34.
- Dawn. (2023, September 6). *Sectarian harmony*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1786010>
- Dawn. (2024, January 3). *Protests erupt in Gilgit-Baltistan against increase in wheat price*. Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1748860>
- Dawn. (2024, January 3). *Protests erupt in Gilgit-Baltistan against increase in wheat price*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1748860>
- Dawn. (2024, March 12). *GB residents protest 22-hour power outages, internet disruptions*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1820893>
- Diamond, L. (2002). Thinking about hybrid regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 21-35.
- HRCP. (2017, April). *Gilgit-Baltistan. Aspiration of identity, integration and autonomy*. Report of an HRCP fact-finding mission. Islamabad: Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). Retrieved from <http://hrcp-web.org/publication/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Gilgit-Baltistan-report-Aspirations-for-identity-integration-autonomy.pdf>
- Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. (2013). *State of human rights in 2013*. Lahore: HRCP.
- Institute of Chinese Political Studies (ICPS). (2024, January 15). *From wheat subsidy to greater autonomy: Gilgit-Baltistan protests*. ICPS Commentaries. <https://www.icpsnet.org/comments/From-Wheat-Subsidy-to-Greater-Autonomy>
- International Crisis Group. (2007). *Discord in Pakistan's Northern Areas*. ICG Asia Report No. 131.
- International Crisis Group. (2012). *Reforming Pakistan's governance of Gilgit-Baltistan*. ICG Asia Report No. 189.
- Jalal, A. (1995). *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia: A comparative and historical perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Javed, A., Nazir, M. A., & Chaudhry, K. T. (2022). *Sectarianism in Gilgit Baltistan: An Analysis*. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 3(2), 01-12.
- Khan, A., Javed, A., Batool, S., Hussain, F., Mahmood, H., & Ahmed, V. (2016). *The role of youth in sustainable development*. Sustainable Development Policy Institute. <https://sdpi.org/sdpiweb/publications/files/commissioned-Paper-The-role-of-youth-insustainable-development-perspectivesfromSouthAsia.Pdf>
- Khatoon, M. N. (2022). *Human Right Violation: The Impetus for Causing Discontentment among the Natives of Pakistan Occupied Gilgit-Baltistan Region*. *International Journal of Society and Education*, 1(1), 16-21.
- Lijphart, A. (1977). *Democracy in plural societies: A comparative exploration*. Yale University Press.
- Lokmat Times. (2023, January 13). *Power crisis, frequent load shedding continues to trigger protests in Gilgit-Baltistan*. <https://www.lokmatimes.com/international/power-crisis-frequent-load-shedding-continues-to-trigger-protests-in-gilgit-baltistan/>
- Mahmud, E. (2009). *The Gilgit-Baltistan reforms package 2007: Background, phases and analysis*. Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies.
- Malik, I. H. (1995). *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia*. Macmillan.
- McAdam, D. (1988). *Freedom summer*. Oxford University Press.
- Nasr, V. (2001). *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the making of state power*. Oxford University Press.

- O'Donnell, G., & Schmitter, P. C. (1986). *Transitions from authoritarian rule: Tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Pamir Times*. (2020, July 17). Why #Internet4GilgitBaltistan? *Pamir Times*. <https://pamirtimes.net/2020/07/17/why-internet4gilgitbaltistan/>
- Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pickard, S. (2019). *Politics, protest and young people: Political participation and dissent in Britain in the 21st century*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rieck, A. (2016). *The Shias of Pakistan: An assertive and beleaguered minority*. Hurst.
- Shah, A. (2014). *The army and democracy: Military politics in Pakistan*. Harvard University Press.
- Shaikh, F. (2009). *Making sense of Pakistan*. Columbia University Press.
- Stepan, A. (2000). Religion, democracy, and the “twin tolerations.” *Journal of Democracy*, 11(4), 37–57.
- Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- The Friday Times. (2024, May 25). *Dynamics of politically alienated youth in Gilgit-Baltistan*. The Friday Times. <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/2024/05/25/dynamics-of-politically-alienated-youth-in-gilgit-baltistan/>
- The Nation. (2024, January 25). *Wheat revolt*. The Nation. <https://www.nation.com.pk/25-Jan-2024/wheat-revolt>
- Tilly, C. (2004). *Social movements, 1768–2004*. Paradigm Publishers.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2018). *Pakistan national human development report on youth*. UNDP Pakistan.
- Weiss, A. M. (2016). *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*. By CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT. Translated by Cynthia Schoch. London: Hurst & Co., 2015. xiv, 670 pp. ISBN: 9781849043298. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 75(4), 1154–1156.
- Zaman, M. Q. (1998). Sectarianism in Pakistan: The radicalization of Shia and Sunni identities. *Modern Asian Studies*, 32(3), 689–716.