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## Making a Nation in High Mountains: *Balawars* and Balawaristan Nationalism in Ghizer District of Gilgit Baltistan

Sohaib Bodla

### Introduction

The words Balawaristan and *Balawar* are derived from a Persian word *bala*, meaning high; thus *Balawar* is someone who lives high up in the mountains, and Balawaristan is a place of heights (Sökefeld 1999: 354). These words have been coined to create a nation of the inhabitants of Gilgit Baltistan (GB), and to unite a diverse population on the basis of a shared geography, history and culture. These words do not have any historical background, though Balawaristan sounds familiar with Boloristan<sup>1</sup>, the historic name of areas around Gilgit. Balawaristan is a classic example of what Benedict Anderson has termed '*Imagined Communities*' (Anderson 2006: 6). The name was formulated by Nawaz Khan Naji in 1988 and published for the first time in a pamphlet titled Balawaristan. Since then, the number of people who agree with the nationalist discourse of Balawaristan has steadily risen. The Balawaristan discourse about GB contradicts the Pakistani state's historical stance over GB. In the name of Balawaristan, activists challenge the Pakistan government's control over their lives and geography. Officially, Pakistan considers these areas as parts of the larger territory of Jammu and Kashmir and links their fate with the resolution of the Kashmir dispute with India. The Balawaristan National Front (BNF), the party established by Nawaz Khan Naji in the name of Balawaristan, on the other hand, considers GB as a separate territory that accommodates a separate nation. According to the BNF, these areas were not a legitimate part of Jammu and Kashmir; rather, Kashmir was controlling them by military power in collaboration with the British Crown.

The BNF calls for an independent state named Balawaristan, comprising the areas of GB plus districts of Kohistan and Chitral which are today part of Pakistan's Province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; and it also includes Indian controlled Ladakh. The movement believes in a peaceful struggle for the ultimate cause of a separate homeland for the inhabitants of these areas. Furthermore, the BNF has also struggled to highlight the demand that the people of GB should be given the right of determining their future in light of the long awaited plebiscite under the UN. Further, the BNF wants to be a fourth party in the Kashmir dispute; India, Pakistan and Kashmir being the other parties. In the current setup, the people of GB do not have representa-

1 "...Great Bolor is identical with present Baltistan, Little Bolor with the Gilgit upper valley" (Jettmar 1980: 6).

tion in the national legislature of Pakistan. Using electoral politics, the BNF is attempting to mobilize the local people to make sense of their own identity in a situation where they are surrounded by India, Kashmir and Pakistan's quest to take or to perpetuate control of the area.

The by-elections of 2011 in Gilgit Baltistan for the Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA) witnessed an exceptional win for BNF's leader Nawaz Khan Naji in Ghizer, the most western district of GB. In the electoral ward Ghizer 1, Nawaz Khan Naji obtained 8,299 out of 27,817 registered votes; the turnout of the elections was 67% — the highest turnout in the electoral history of GB.<sup>2</sup> The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had won all elections in this constituency since the abrogation of Frontier Crimes Regulation<sup>3</sup> (FCR) in 1974 by the then PPP Prime Minister Zulifqar Ali Bhutto. The victory of a nationalist leader in Ghizer district paved the way for the nationalist movement to reach the masses in an unprecedented manner. Previously, the nationalist leaders in the area either remained aloof from electoral politics or secured very little votes in elections. The youth played a key role in mobilizing people to vote for the BNF, but also elders of the area supported the party by giving its candidate a chance to represent them in the GBLA. Along with the party vote, Nawaz Khan Naji also secured votes for his charismatic personality and being an active public figure.

Although the party is not officially banned, the BNF is vituperated by government authorities as an anti-Pakistan party. Previously, local people abstained from associating themselves with the party because it demanded a separate homeland for the people of Gilgit Baltistan. The strength of the BNF is the youth of GB that is getting education in down-country Pakistan, i.e. in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. Students coming from GB have formed the Balawaristan National Student Organization (BNSO) in these cities. Since GB was named Northern Areas of Pakistan before 2009, people living in the area felt the lack of a common identity when they came in contact with people from other parts of Pakistan as the designation "Northern Areas" denotes the geography of the area only in relation to Pakistan.

Founded in 1988 by Nawaz Khan Naji in Gilgit city, the party is now attracting more and more people in Ghizer district as well as in other parts of Gilgit Baltistan. The party is divided into two main groups, yet both parts disseminate the same discourse of history and identity of Gilgit Baltistan that is also shared by other nationalist parties like the Karakoram National Movement (KNM). The two groups of Balawaristan employ different strategies to achieve the ultimate target of freedom. The BNF Naji group believes

2 Data obtained from the Election Commission of Pakistan's office in Gilgit city.

3 FCR was introduced by the British in India in 1901 to control the frontier districts of their Empire in order to benefit colonial power as it lacked basic democracy. In this set-up, a political agent runs virtually all the affairs of a district. Pakistan run the GB under this legal arrangement from 1947 to early 1970s; local people call this *kala qanun* (black law).

in a peaceful struggle based on negotiations with the states of India<sup>4</sup> and Pakistan<sup>5</sup> for the solution of the Kashmir problem, while the BNF Hamid group has earned a reputation in the area of being pro-India.<sup>6</sup> Both groups are based in Ghizer, but the former group is strong in Punial and Gupis *tahsils* (subdistricts) of the district, while the latter has more support in the Yasin valley. The BNF Hamid group is headed by Abdul Hamid Khan, who is in exile since 2001 and operates from Europe. Being absent from the area, he is blamed by local people for receiving foreign funds for the cause of Balawaristan. BNF Naji group is headed by Nawaz Khan Naji, who is considered a *Quaid* (leader, commander) by having earned the reputation of being an honest and dedicated politician. The success of nationalist leaders in Ghizer helped the Balawaristan movement to go beyond the accusation that nationalists are engaged in separatism, in anti-Pakistan and pro-India propaganda; it made people think of a *Balawar* identity not as ominous but as a new way to look at the history and geography of the area in secular terms and also to think of GB as a place of a shared political identity, rather than adopting a policy for or against Pakistan or any other neighboring country.

On 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1947, two and a half months after the inception of Pakistan, the local people of the ‘Gilgit Agency’<sup>7</sup> fought for their accession with Pakistan against the *Dogras* (Rulers) of Kashmir in the name of Islam. Still today, the 1<sup>st</sup> of November is celebrated as the day of freedom from *Dogra*, that is, Kashmiri, rule. These areas were virtually disconnected from the rest of Pakistan until the completion of the Karakorum Highway (KKH) in 1978. The construction of the KKH was a landmark for the strategic friendship of Pakistan and China. The impact of this road on the lives of the people living in GB has been enormous.

At the time of the opening of the Karakorum Highway, the Government of Pakistan published a pamphlet that claimed that this route would bring revolutionary changes to the Northern Areas, and that it would help to promote national integration of a kind heretofore unknown to the mountain-locked inhabitants (Karakorum Highway pamphlet 1978, cited in Stellrecht 1998: 7). The highway enabled the people of Gilgit Baltistan to interact with the people of *khairo*.<sup>8</sup> Students from GB joined universities in Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Rawalpindi and Islamabad for higher education. Many of

4 India controls the territory of Ladakh. The BNF includes Ladakh in the imagined country of Balawaristan and claims to demand the area once the constitutional status of GB becomes clear.

5 Nawaz’s faction believes that Pakistan should be responsible for protecting the borders of the area, while all other rights belong to the local people.

6 The Hamid group demands the complete separation of GB from Pakistan.

7 The British Gilgit Agency comprised the areas of Gilgit, Hunza, Ghizer and Chilas.

8 In Shina language *khairo* means “down”. The word is commonly used to refer to down-country Pakistan.

them started businesses or took jobs in the big cities. Those who eventually returned to their home areas became aware of their peripheral identities and compared the under-development of their own area with the more developed regions in other parts of Pakistan. Returning students established different small movements in the region to acquaint the people with their political rights. They started to imagine a Nation of Balawaristan in the late 1980s (Sökefeld 1999). On the other hand, Pakistan penetrated the areas deeply through a web of roads; the state became a visible entity in the region through the construction of roads (Haines 2012: 8). For the government of Pakistan, these roads were important to connect with the geographically and strategically important region. Today, China's wish to access the Gwader deepwater port on the coast of Baluchistan from its western provinces makes the KKH important for bilateral trade between Pakistan and China and for their long standing strategic friendship.

Gilgit Baltistan has a long history of being controlled by foreign powers: The State of Jammu and Kashmir, the British and, since the partition of India, Pakistan is controlling the area. But there has always been a considerable indigenous resistance against all colonial powers. The legend of Gohar Aman,<sup>9</sup> a ruler from Yasin who fought against the intruding Sikh and Kashmiri army, is still alive. The Punial Revolution of 1951<sup>10</sup> is an example in which local people were killed while demanding their rights. Today, many people of GB make efforts to claim their rights against the control of Pakistan over the region. The daily life of an individual in the area is replete with situations where he notices being ruled by others. People come in contact with the Pakistani state through the military and bureaucracy. All these organs of the state symbolize the holding of important powers by lowlanders and signify a sense of having no control over their own affairs among local people.

The view of nationalists of Ghizer district on their area contrasts the Pakistani view. According to my respondents, to control the routes in the region has been more important for Pakistan than for the people of the area. It is evident that in the rest of Pakistan GB is perceived as a place that is geographically important because it is the gateway to China and home of some of the world's highest mountains, and because tourists from all around the

9 Gohar Aman was a famous warrior who belonged to the royal family of Chitral and became ruler of the Yasin valley from 1830 till 1860. He extended his rule from Yasin to Gilgit and is famous for his fight against Kashmiris in 1846. He is remembered as a hero by some nationalists in GB. He is also notorious as a cruel man who killed and sold many people of Gilgit into slavery. In his home town Yasin, he is part of local poetry and portrayed as a hero of the town in Gilgit city he enjoys both cruel and hero tags. He was a *Sunni* Muslim and people regard him anti Shia.

10 In 1951 people of Punial assembled at Singal village and protested against Raja Anwar Khan of Punial. They wanted to get rid of the Raja's despotic rule. On the commands of the Raja, security officials opened fire on the crowd and killed seven of the protesters. Many others were arrested.

world come to see the region. Yet, information about GB provided in the rest of Pakistan by TV or newspapers does not include any knowledge about human beings living there. There are many travelogues about GB in Urdu<sup>11</sup> available all over Pakistan. These books hardly speak about the people but rather about yaks, *markhors*,<sup>12</sup> lakes and mountains. Hardly anyone<sup>13</sup> in the Punjab, the largest province and center of power in Pakistan, knows about the languages and customs of the people of GB. Since the 1980s, another aspect of GB is becoming notorious in the rest of Pakistan: the Shia-Sunni conflict. According to the nationalists I interviewed, this conflict is linked to the increasing control and presence of foreign powers, including the Pakistani state. GB and the rest of Pakistan are now linked through a web of roads, through the bureaucratic and military set up, and through mobile communication and TV. This interaction has resulted in the increasing realization of deprivation in GB as compared to the rest of Pakistan, particularly the Punjab. One of the students who studied in Karachi told me: “From Rawalpindi to Karachi I travel by train, and throughout the journey I see developed cities, factories and asphalt roads. These sights make me think of underdevelopment of my city Gahkuch.”

The nationalist discourse of Balawaristan and *Balawar* identity contradicts the Pakistani state-driven discourse of identity. The Pakistani state gives primacy to religion as the basic marker of the nation's identity (Jalal 1995: 74). Furthermore, Ayesha Jalal states that “Proclaiming itself an Islamic state created on the bedrock of a non-territorially defined Muslim nation or *ummah*, [Islamic Nation] the architects of Pakistan embraced the idea of the nation-state without conceding space to territorial nationalism in their official ideology” (ibid.). The Balawaristan narrative, in contrast, unites all the sects and GB and envisages a state where religion is a matter of self-identity, rather than an identity imposed by the state apparatus.

### Religion, Army, Bureaucracy and GB in today's Pakistan

Since the creation of Pakistan on the basis of the Two Nations Theory<sup>14</sup> Islam has been projected as the country's *raison d'être*. The Islamic Republic

11 The travelogues written by Mustansar Hussain Tarar are commonly read in down country. They represent GB as a land of fairies, lakes and high pastures. About the people, languages and customs these travelogues remain silent.

12 A rare wild goat which is considered a national animal of Pakistan and also a symbol of Balawaristan.

13 I completed most of my education in the Punjab and do not remember reading anything about the people of GB in my school and college syllabus. I myself came to know about the people and languages of the area when I took admission in university and met fellow students from GB who told me about the diversity of languages in the area.

14 The Two Nations theory refers to the idea that Hindus and Muslims in the Subcontinent form two different nations which cannot live together in the same state.



of Pakistan is united on the basis of its religion – Islam – though Moham-mad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, wanted to form a secular modern nation-state on the European model, as he said in a famous speech on 11<sup>th</sup> August 1947.<sup>15</sup> Jinnah’s idea of Pakistan was soon overruled. A year after Jin-nah’s death in 1948, the national assembly of Pakistan passed the so called “Objectives Resolution”<sup>16</sup> which has remained part of the preamble of the constitution since drafted. The turbulent history of Pakistan is replete with events like the separation of East Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign country in 1971 that prove that Islamic identity alone was not enough to keep the diverse linguistic and ethnic groups under one umbrella. There have been many separatist nationalist movements like in Baluchistan, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or in Sindh that challenge the state’s narrative of a singular Islamic identity uniting all citizens of Pakistan. Although this project has not been successful, Pakistan did not see much religious tension until 1979, except riots against Ahmadis (Ahmad 2009: 20). It was Zia ul Haq’s dictatorial rule that made all efforts to *Islamize* the country and invoked the authority of the Objectives Resolution along with other Islamic clauses that had been introduced in Pakistan’s constitution of 1973 by Zulifqar Ali Bhutto. *Islamization* became the *raison d’être* of Zia’s regime and since then no government has been able to readdress the role of religion in national politics (Akhtar 2009: 23). GB is the only territorial unit of Pakistan that is dominated by Shias. Except for Diamer District all districts of GB are pre-dominantly *Shia*. *Shias* are further divided into *Ismailis* (Sevener Shias) and *Athna Ashari* (Twelver Shias) in Gilgit Baltistan.

Religious and sectarian identities in GB have become dominant since the 1980s when the Iranian revolution was at its peak and the Saudi Arabian government supported the establishment of *madrassas* across Pakistan in order to support *Sunni* Islam: “Support rendered by Iran, Saudi Arabia and some other Muslim countries to various Shiite and Sunni groups of Pakistan resulted into the outbreak of sectarian proxy war” (Ahmar 2006: 5). The fan-ning of sectarianism in Pakistan in general and in GB in particular is linked with the Iranian and Saudi support to their respective groups. The USA and its allies wanted the ouster of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, and *Sunni madrassas* (Islamic seminaries) in Pakistan funded by Saudi Arabia provid-

15 The crux of his speech is: You are free to go to your temples; you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State.

16 Summary of this is: Sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to God Almighty alone, and the authority which He has delegated to the State of Pakistan through its people for being practiced within confines prescribed by Him. Principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as articulated by Islam shall be fully abided by. Muslims shall be enabled to order their lives in the individual and collective spheres in accord with the teaching and demands of Islam as listed in the Holy Qur’an and the Sunna.



ed *Jihadis* (those who fight to defend Islam) against the Soviet Union. It is believed by nationalists in Ghizer district that General Zia Ul Haq supported Sunni Islam for the USA and Saudi Arabia's interests; the former wanted *Jihadis* and latter was against Shiites.

During Zia's regime, also the Pakistan Army<sup>17</sup> was Islamized and many generals and officers propagated the cause of Islam and *Jihad* (the struggle to defend Islam against non-Muslims). This shift in the Pakistani Military from a secular force to the arbitrators of a certain definition of Islam further fractured the country as a whole, and GB was no exception. The Pakistan Army is often considered the torch-bearer of a certain Islamic ideology. In 1988, Shiite villages of Gilgit were attacked by thousands of Sunni tribesmen from Diamer district and a mass murder of Shiites occurred around the villages of Gilgit. Shiite villages were burnt down; Sunni tribesmen continued killings for days and went unhindered by the Pakistan Army that was deployed not far away from the villages under attack. This incident is still fresh in memories of local people and nationalists believe that this onslaught was realized with the help of the Pakistan Army. They call Pakistani Army a Sunni army. For the Pakistan army GB's importance lies in its geography as it borders directly with China, India, and Afghanistan and is close to the Central Asian states. A number of my respondents in GB praised the role of the more recent military dictator Musharraf. They claimed that since the area had always been seen as a strategic region by the army, it had received more development funds during military rule. The development work undertaken in GB by the Musharraf regime was enormous. Many roads and bridges were constructed between 2000 and 2006. In Ghizer district alone there are 16,734 retired army men and the total number of "martyrs" in the district, who died while in military service, is 909. The Pakistan Army is the biggest employer for people of Ghizer.<sup>18</sup> Retired army men bring money and establish businesses in Ghizer. Many retired army men are members of BNF and vote for nationalists. BNF activists believe that retired army men benefit the movement with their experience and exposure of down country. These roles of the army in the area make it ambivalent; its development of infrastructure increases the mobility between the villages and cities. Being the biggest employer for people in Ghizer, the army contributes to the local economy and reminds people of its institutional power.

The process to control GB by the state of Pakistan started with the arrival of the Pakistani Political Agent in Gilgit. On 16 November 1947, Pakistan sent its Political Agent to the Gilgit Agency to take its control from local people who had managed the Independent State of GB for fifteen days. The Political Agent was a Hazara named Sardar Mohammad Alam, and had

17 For details on the different generations of Pakistan army and its Islamization see Cohen 2004: 97 to 130.

18 The record has been obtained from the Soldier Board office in Gahkuch by the author.

served as an Assistant *Tehsildar* (revenue officer) before. He was welcomed with great pomp and show as the people believed that the fruit of their freedom from *Dogra* and British rule had arrived, and that now they could live in freedom, being part of an Islamic state. Yet later it turned out that Pakistan officially considered GB a part of Jammu and Kashmir, and thus under the jurisdiction of Pakistan controlled Azad Kashmir. In 1949 the government of Pakistan formally took the control of GB by the notorious Karachi Agreement without consulting anybody from GB. The bureaucratic setup established by Pakistan was reformed to some extent when Bhutto abolished the FCR in the early 1970s. However, even today the Chief Secretary, the head of the administration of GB, is never a local man but rather a bureaucrat appointed from Islamabad. The same is the case with the Force Commander Northern Areas, the army commander in GB, and the Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit Baltistan, the federal minister who is responsible for GB. Local people started to challenge Pakistani domination in the early 1950s and established local parties like the Gilgit League in 1956 and the *Tanzeem e Millat* (National Organization) in the late 1960s.

One event in Gilgit town in 1971<sup>19</sup> sparked protest against the administrative structure in GB and the arrogance of the Pakistani bureaucracy in the area. Many local people believe that after this uprising that the government in Islamabad sent many clerics to the area in order to divide the people over sectarian issues. Nationalists consider this strategy a new form of colonialism. In 2009, through an ordinance, Pakistan renamed the Northern Areas of Pakistan as Gilgit Baltistan and upgraded the Northern Areas Legislative Council to the Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly. For the first time, the people of the area had the right to indirectly elect their own Chief Minister. The GBLA consists of 33 members. The ordinance of 2009 gave GB a province-like status and gave the local people some control over the budget as well as the right to legislate on 61 subjects as long as legislation would not violate the constitution of Pakistan. It is interesting to note that GB is not mentioned in the constitution as a part of Pakistan. Consequentially, nationalists ask why legislation in GB has to be in accordance with this constitution if GB is not mentioned in the constitution. The process to control GB by Pakistan started in 1947 and since then many packages have been given to fulfill local peoples' demands by Pakistan, but still the constitutional status of GB lingers and the resistance of locals to achieve a defined constitutional status continues.

In today's Pakistan GB can be considered a colonized territory, as colonialism did not end with the end of British control but rather changed its

19 A local female school teacher was insulted by the wife of a Punjabi bureaucrat posted in Gilgit, and all the city got together to protest against this injustice. Many men were arrested for protesting and put in jail. Subsequently, local people attacked the jail and freed the men who had been arrested by security officials (see Sökefeld 1997: 284ff).

form. This internal colonialism, where peripheral areas are totally dependent on the center without enjoying full political rights, is evident in many parts of Pakistan including GB (Sökefeld 2005: 970) and Baluchistan.

### Identity Question and Nationalist Movements in GB

GB is home of diverse languages, ethnicities, sectarian and tribal identities. Different identities are claimed by people in different contexts, yet there is no singular identity that would unite them politically. Such an identity is proposed in the name of *Balawar*. Local identities like coming from a Raja family, *Yeshkun* or *Shin* tribes, speaking a particular language and sectarian affiliation were also significant, but being associated with Pakistan served as a unifying identity. Pakistan considered GB as ‘the other’, and tried to accommodate the area with the rest of Pakistan (Sökefeld 2010: 252). This endeavor of Pakistan is symbolized also by a replica of the *Minar e Pakistan*<sup>20</sup> built on the main road in Gilgit.

By now, many students, activists and businessmen write *Balawar* at the end of their name. By searching *Balawar* on Facebook page one can find hundreds of people from GB naming themselves accordingly.<sup>21</sup> *Balawar* is sometimes also used as part of the name of a company.<sup>22</sup> The trend of adopting *Balawar* as part of one’s name attracts people to inquire about this name and helps to spread the narrative of Balawaristan nationalism to a wider audience.

Manuel Castells (2010: 8) distinguishes three categories of collective identity that can be utilized to understand Balawar identity: legitimizing identity, resistance identity and project identity. A *legitimizing identity* is created by governing institutions in order to justify their domination. This applies to Pakistani identity in GB. A *resistance identity* is authored by those who are in a certain position of authority but who are devalued by others. Sectarian identities in GB can be considered as resistance identities. A *project identity* is a novice identity assumed by actors in order to construe their role in society and to propose social change. Balawar identity can be understood as a project identity. It opens an arena for political struggle and allows imagining GB as an independent state.

The Balawaristan movement has created a *Balawar* identity in Ghizer and Gilgit first. It is more popular in Ghizer than in other districts of GB,

20 It is a National monument of Pakistan built in Lahore to remember the Pakistan Resolution of 1940.

21 <https://www.facebook.com/search/more/?q=Balawar&sid=0.47190988874953177> (visited on 16-11-2013)

22 There is Balawar Autos in the main bazaar of Gilgit and the proprietor is proud of the name of his shop. Balawar Traders, Balawar Net Cafe are in the main bazar of Gahkuch bazar. In Ghizer district, the flag of Balawaristan on back number plates of motorcycles is a common sight.

yet in all districts some people identify themselves as *Balawar*, along with their other identities. In everyday discourse of the people of Ghizer, Diamer district is considered the most backward and rigid district, but in 2010 BNF has opened an office even in Chilas, the capital of Diamer. The BNF plans to contest elections in 2014 from Diamer as well. The presence of multiple individual and group identities in GB is described as a ‘multiplicity of intersecting differences’ which are derived from religion, migration, locality, descent or other affiliations (Sökefeld 2010: 254). In this framework there is always a place for a new identity at a historical juncture (ibid.). Starting from 1840, historical periods of authority over local people of GB by Kashmir, British crown and Pakistan can be termed as colonial legacy.<sup>23</sup> *Balawar* identity is a product of the periods described above; it is not a reactionary identity but a pivot on which a new social structure for GB is being constructed.

### *Balawars* and Balawaristan movement in Ghizer District

From 2001, BNF shifted its focus from Gilgit to Ghizer in order to participate in local elections. This was a big shift in the strategy of BNF to engage local people not on the grounds of anti-Pakistan slogans, but to disseminate the Balawaristan narrative among people through elections, and day to day interaction in a manner that is acceptable for all. Till 2001, considerable numbers of students had returned from Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar to work in Gahkuch, the headquarter of Ghizer district, as lawyers, journalists, businessmen, as employees of NGOs or as government servants. These people were part of the Balawaristan National Students Organization (BNSO) in the institutions of higher education in down country Pakistan. Gahkuch is a promising town with ambitions for future development. Due to sectarian conflicts in Gilgit and its proximity to Gilgit this town is growing quickly; there is a visible migration to Gahkuch from all over GB. The town is also situated on the way to the proposed road to the Central Asian states and the construction of that road would bring it to prominence just as the KKH did with Hunza.

In 2004, Hashim Khan, a BNF candidate from Damas village, won the seat of the chairman of the district council for five years. Yet nationalists do not so much see elections in terms of losing or winning as for them elections provide a platform to spread the Balawaristan-ideology to all and sundry. BNF-activists told: “We use elections to strengthen our membership and to spread our ideas.” Hashim Khan narrated that during his tenure the BNF ac-

23 These periods of dominance have been describes by various scholars chronologically like, a) Kashmiri dominated phase between 1840 and 1890, b) British dominated period between 1890 and 1947, c) the period of Pakistani independence starting in 1947 (Stellrecht: 1997: 5, Cultural Area Karakoram Scientific Studies, Vol. 3). With little changes, Sökefeld 2005: 944 also lists these periods of dominance.

tivists used all their links and powers for the movement. He said: “Since our leadership and members come from middle or working class, we are always running short of opportunities to enhance our strength.”

The leadership of the movement challenges control of politics by religious and rich people in Ghizer district in speeches and day to day discussions. In 2004 there were also elections for the Northern Areas Legislative Council. Nawaz Khan Naji contested the elections against *Pir*<sup>24</sup> Karam Ali Shah. During his speeches Naji repeated what the BNF had been telling people for many years: “My opponent candidate belongs to the 2% of elite class in our area; I represent the 98% of the masses as I am a poor man myself. I respect the religious position of the *Pir*, but I do not accept his monopoly in the political field, and to end his monopoly in politics, I shall keep on contending him. We [*Balawars*] talk about the identity and a nation of Northern Areas, we want to raise a young leadership of the area to bring young blood into politics, our problems won’t be solved by kissing the *Pir*’s hand, I request the elders of Ghizer district [to understand] that it is absolutely not a sin to vote against *Pir*, you will not be sinful if you do not vote for him. I do not agree with his authority as he materializes his religious status to get votes. And, people of the area, be aware that the time is not far when women of our area would contest elections against these religious people.”<sup>25</sup>

If one spends a day in Gahkuch by simply walking and taking food from the local restaurants, the presence of BNF, BNSO, and *Balawars* becomes visible. Many cars and motor-cycles bear slogans, flags, and pictures related to the Balawaristan movement. Ghizer has now become synonymous with the Balawaristan struggle in entire GB. The road from Gilgit to Ghizer is replete with slogans in favor of Balawaristan and its leadership. During my stay in Ghizer I met Khadim Hussain who teaches in a local private school. He narrated that it was a usual practice in school to ask tenth grade students to write an essay on a favorite personality. He said: “In the last couple of years we observed a new trend has started where students write about Nawaz Naji and other local nationalists. Before this it was common that everyone would reproduce essays from books about Jinnah, Allama Iqbal or others from Pakistan.” Jamil Balawar is one of those young people who managed the BNSO in Karachi between the years 2000 and 2005. As he came from Punial, he returned to Gahkuch and two years ago he started to run a hotel in the main bazaar of Gahkuch. His hotel is always full of customers. Since he is local and *Balawars* sit here, eat and drink, this place has become a hub of nationalists where they talk politics and plan for protests. In Pakistani hotels it is sometimes written on the wall that “*yahan siyasi guftagu mana hai*” (political discussions are prohibited here). He has written instead: “*yahan siyasi guftagu pe pabandi nahin hai*” (political discussions are not prohib-

24 *Pir* is an honorary title for a religious leader.

25 Weekly K2, 13 October, 2004, translated from Urdu by the author.



ited here). Jamil holds a Masters' degree in Management from Karachi, but he does not want to go for a job as he prefers his own business over serving the Pakistani state or being part of any NGO which in his opinion keep people busy and depoliticize them and make young people familiar with a foreign culture rather than their local one.

Hermann Kreutzmann writes that the Balawaristan movement is limited to Gilgit (Kreutzmann 2008: 213). He rightly points out that Indian diplomats and scholars have exploited the term Balawaristan for their own purposes. He further emphasizes that the Internet has played a role in spreading this name, giving it a presence in virtual space that is not matched in real life. According to my observation, however, this is only partly correct because the Balawaristan movement has undergone divisions. Only the Hamid faction is notorious for having links with and receiving funds from India. The Naji group on the other hand is considered indigenous and having no links with India. Kreutzmann is also mistaken in associating the popularity of the movement with Gilgit only. Although the movement was established in Gilgit, it is most popular in Ghizer district where nationalists contested elections for a decade now. Nationalists in Ghizer have been contesting elections for local bodies since 2004 and we saw that one of them became Chairman of the district council of Ghizer. Kreutzmann also seems to underestimate the power that social media networks have achieved in these days. The Internet has become an important tool to spread ideas that the controlling authorities try to suppress. It has now become a cliché that nationalist, feminist and identity movements across the globe rely mostly on the new social media like Internet and mobile phone. The sociologist Manuel Castells has written much about identity movements. According to him, the Internet and mobile phones have converted the world into "network society". In a new edition of his work on identity he writes: "Along with the technological revolution, the transformation of capitalism, and the demise of statism, we have experienced, in the past twenty-five years, the widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalization and cosmopolitanism on behalf of cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment" (Castells 2010: 2). For the nationalists of Gilgit Baltistan, the Internet has emerged as a space where no money and effort is needed to publish and circulate the literature; they just upload and let others know.

#### Emotions and Balawaristan movement: The case of Sher Qila village

Emotions have their place in political struggles; they evolve from constant attachment to a movement and from events that take place during the time of attachment. When I entered Sher Qila village for the first time during my fieldwork, I noticed a grave with a BNF flag hoisted over it. I read *shaheed* (martyr) on the gravestone and the date of death and I was shocked to note



that the deceased was a teenager activist of the BNSO who was killed by the security forces. This sent a chilling air all around my body. On 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2009, during elections in Ghizer, an eighteen years young activist of the BNSO was murdered by Police and Rangers in Sher Qila.<sup>26</sup> This terrible event united the whole of Punial against the forces who had committed this heinous crime. The Gilgit-Chitral road was blocked for many days and widespread protests took place in every village of Punial. In the chilling cold of winter, men, women and children blocked the road and protested in solidarity with the BNF and the victim's family. According to local people and newspapers people from Sher Qila were protesting on that day against unofficial election results and alleged vote-rigging when police and rangers opened fire killing one young boy and injuring two others.

The death of this young boy is never forgotten. Every year on his death anniversary BNSO arranges an event to remember him and to pay tribute to the sacrifice of *Shaheed* Zubair. This event is attended by most of the villagers and an air of sadness, anguish and high spirit prevails during the commemoration. It has become a public political ritual where activists take inspiration and vow their commitment with the cause of Balawaristan. According to Mabel Berezin, "public political rituals serve as arenas of identity, bounded spaces, where collective national selfhood is enacted" (Berezin 2001: 93). She further observes that repetitions in experience of ritual participation create a feeling of commonness among participants, and it develops collective memory (ibid.).

I stayed for a week with a family in Sher Qila. The family was divided about Balawaristan. The wife was a supporter of Naji but the husband had been an activist of ruling PPP for many years. The woman, who was educated, emphasized that Naji talked in a way that even her illiterate mother understood, while other politicians talked just for the purpose of getting votes. "Naji is one of us", she said. The emotions connected with the BNF had taken it beyond the mere politics of votes. Rather, people have started to foresee a future in which they can control their resources and make their own political decisions. The woman of the family once stated while preparing breakfast for me and her husband: "People come here from all over the world and tell us that we are living in heaven, it is so beautiful and serene here. I like to imagine that when my son is as old as you are, he lives in a place where we have all the rights and opportunities of the 'heaven' we live in."

## Conclusion

This article offered a view on the Balawaristan movement and the rising *Balawar* identity. The Balawaristan movement and *Balawar* identity have

26 <http://pamirtimes.net/2009/12/22/%E2%80%9Can-activist-of-bnf-killed-two-seriously-injured-in-sher-qillah-post-polling-riots%E2%80%9D/>. Accessed on May 23, 2013.

achieved a level where they are accepted among the people of Ghizer and other districts of GB. They have entered the day to day discussions of many people. The *Balawars* are trying to expand their space by going for elections, jobs and businesses. The arrival of new media of communication in the shape of Internet and mobile phone access has opened new ways to spread their messages. During my fieldwork I often listened to speeches of nationalist leaders stored in people's mobiles and received many text messages from activists. These text messages clearly suggested that the new networks are helping nationalists to communicate their ideas. Nationalists struggled to publish and distribute their literature under the surveillance of security agencies.

Pakistan's policies seem confused over GB: On one hand it links GB's future with the solution of the Kashmir dispute, but on the other hand Pakistan is trying to integrate this area by different packages since 1974 as a part of the Pakistani nation. Interestingly, the Supreme Court of Pakistan in its 1999 decree demanded that people of the area were given all the rights enjoyed by the other citizens of Pakistan, emphasizing that the "people of Northern Areas are citizens of Pakistan, for all intents and purposes."<sup>27</sup> The Balawaristan struggle makes an effort to bring these areas out of the confusing status given by Pakistan, making it clear that these areas belong to the people who inhabit them and who should have the right to decide about their own lives and future.

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<sup>27</sup> Decision of Supreme Court of Pakistan, 1999, p21, para no 14; quoted by Naseem 2007: 50.

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