Gilgit-Baltistan Election and the Fate of the People: A Case Study of District Skardu – Challenges and Opportunities for Local Communities

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Abstract
This research investigates the impact of electoral politics in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), focusing on District Skardu as a representative case study. Despite high political participation, the local communities face systemic issues related to underdevelopment, weak governance, and inadequate representation. Using mixed methods including statistical analysis, surveys, and policy evaluation, this study explores the disconnect between electoral processes and community welfare. Key challenges such as lack of constitutional rights, poor infrastructure, and political marginalization are highlighted, along with emerging opportunities through local governance, youth involvement, and community-led initiatives. The study concludes with actionable recommendations for ensuring that elections become a tool for transformation rather than mere symbolic engagement.

Introduction
Elections in democratic societies are expected to serve as a foundation for representation, accountability, and development. However, in the unique administrative region of Gilgit- Baltistan, the electoral process often fails to fulfill these ideals. Skardu, the heart of Baltistan, offers a microcosmic view of the broader socio-political dynamics of the region. Despite increasing voter turnout and vibrant political activism, people continue to face economic hardship, inadequate basic services, and political disenfranchisement.

This paper explores the contradiction between electoral enthusiasm and persistent underdevelopment in Skardu. It poses the central question:
Do elections in Gilgit-Baltistan meaningfully alter the socio-economic realities of local

communities? The study answers this by examining electoral trends, citizen perceptions, governance structures, and development indicators within Skardu.

Historical Background

Gilgit-Baltistan, formerly known as the Northern Areas, became a separate administrative unit in 1970, formed by amalgamating the Gilgit Agency, the tribal areas of Darel and Tangir, and the Baltistan District of the former princely state. Despite being under Pakistani administrative control since the First Kashmir War, GB has never been formally integrated into Pakistan's constitutional framework.

Legal and Constitutional Ambiguity

GB's legal status remains undefined in successive Pakistani constitutions, leading to the denial of constitutional and political rights for its residents. The region is governed by the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order of 2009, which grants limited autonomy but does not equate to full provincial status

Recent Developments

In 2020, the Pakistani government announced plans to grant GB provisional provincial status. However, as of now, no constitutional amendment has been passed to formalize this status. The region continues to be administered under interim arrangements, with significant decisions made by the federal government.

Local Perspectives and Protests

The people of GB have long expressed dissatisfaction with their ambiguous constitutional status, leading to feelings of political deprivation. Protests have erupted over issues like increased wheat prices and taxation, reflecting broader concerns about governance and autonomy.

International and Strategic Considerations

India maintains that GB is part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and is an integral part of India. This international dispute complicates efforts to alter GB's status without affecting the broader Kashmir issue.

Gilgit-Baltistan's constitutional status remains unresolved, caught between aspirations for full integration into Pakistan and the geopolitical complexities of the Kashmir conflict. While steps have been taken to grant limited autonomy, the region's future hinges on both domestic political will and international diplomatic considerations. Gilgit-Baltistan is governed under a separate administrative framework, without constitutional integration into Pakistan. It lacks representation in the National Assembly and Senate, and the GB Assembly functions under limited autonomy.

Skardu: A Strategic Region District Skardu, the administrative and commercial hub of Baltistan, holds immense strategic, cultural, and geopolitical significance in Gilgit- Baltistan. It is not only the gateway to some of the world's highest peaks—such as K2 and Masherbrum—but also plays a pivotal role in Pakistan's border security, tourism economy, and local governance structure.

Geographically, Skardu is bordered by key regions including Ladakh (disputed), the Karakoram Range, and neighboring districts like Ghanche and Shigar. Its location makes it a vital corridor for

trade, mountaineering expeditions, and strategic military movements. The Skardu Airbase, jointly used for civilian and military operations, is a critical component of Pakistan's northern defense strategy.

Culturally, Skardu is a melting pot of Tibetan, Balti, and Islamic traditions. The Balti language, ancient monasteries, and traditional festivals reflect the deep historical roots of the region. The district is home to a vibrant civil society and youth population that is increasingly active in political and environmental movements.

Economically, Skardu serves as the tourism capital of Gilgit-Baltistan. Thousands of local jobs are dependent on the seasonal flow of domestic and international tourists. However, this economic dependency also makes the region vulnerable to seasonal shifts and infrastructural limitations, especially during the long winter months.

Strategically, the district is a focal point in the discourse around the constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan. Skardu's residents are among the most vocal in demanding full political rights, representation in the National Assembly, and sustainable development. These demands have turned the region into a barometer for political shifts and public sentiment in the entire territory.

In summary, District Skardu is not just a geographical unit; it is a strategic heartland that influences national security, regional politics, and community empowerment. Its significance demands targeted governance, inclusive development policies, and a greater voice for its people in the broader national dialogue.

Election History in GB.
 The electoral history of Gilgit-Baltistan is unique and reflects the broader struggle of the region's people for constitutional rights and democratic participation. Prior to the formal introduction of electoral processes, the region was administered under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) and governed through traditional and colonial-era administrative systems.

The first major shift occurred in 1970 when the region was renamed as the −Northern Areas of Pakistan,‖ and basic administrative reforms were introduced. However, it was not until 2009, under the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, that the region saw a semblance of democratic setup with the establishment of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA). This structure granted limited self-rule and allowed for elected representatives to
influence local governance. The first elections for the GBLA were held in November 2009. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) emerged victorious, leveraging its role in introducing the Self-Governance Order. In the subsequent elections of 2015, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) gained majority, followed by a sweeping victory of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in the 2020 elections.

Election trends in Gilgit-Baltistan are often influenced by the ruling party in Islamabad, as voters anticipate more development funding and attention from the federal government if they align with the center. This trend was clearly reflected in the 2020 elections when PTI, the ruling party at the federal level, secured the majority in the region.

Despite the introduction of electoral democracy, local communities in districts like Skardu remain skeptical of the actual power vested in the GBLA. Key issues such as the region's constitutional status, taxation without representation, and lack of voting rights in the National Assembly of Pakistan continue to fuel discontent.

Statistical data from the 2020 elections shows that voter turnout in Skardu was approximately 55%, with significant participation from youth and first-time voters. However, challenges such as inadequate voter education, limited access to polling stations in remote areas, and political patronage continue to hinder truly representative governance.

In conclusion, the election history of Gilgit-Baltistan reflects a complex interplay between local aspirations, federal politics, and systemic limitations. While electoral participation has increased over time, the region still grapples with the quest for meaningful autonomy and equal citizenship rights within the Pakistani federation.

Trends in Gilgit-Baltistan Elections (2009, 2015 & 2020): A Focus on Skardu Provincial-Level Momentum

- **2009: Public Mobilization & PPP Surge** In the **first-ever GB Assembly election** held on **November 12, 2009**, the **Pakistan People's Party** (PPP) secured 16 of 24 general seats (20 out of 33 including women & technocrats), with voter turnout at **~60.7 %**

- *2015: PML-N's Dominance*
  On **June 8, 2015**, the **PML-N** swept to victory with **21 total assembly seats**, driven in part by the party in power at the center. Turnout stood at *~61.3 %*, showing modest growth from 2009

- *2020: PTI Ascendant, Fragmented Mandate*
  The **November 15, 2020** election saw **Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)** leading with 22 seats (after allied independents), **PPP** with 5, **PML-N** with 3, and various others including Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM) and independent candidates taking the remaining seats. Turnout dropped significantly to *~48.1 %* amid pandemic conditions

Skardu District: Seat Distribution & Political Swings

Constituency	2009 Winner (PPP)	2015 Winner	2020 Winner
Skardu-I (GBA-7)	Syed Mehdi Shah – PPP (6,997 votes)	Akbar Khan Taban – PML-N (3,331)	Raja Zakaria Maqoon – PTI (5,290)
Skardu-II (GBA-8)	Sheikh Nisar – PPP (~8,077)	Kacho Imtiaz Haider – MWM (10,411)	Muhammad Kazim – MWM (7,998)

Skardu-III (GBA-9)	Wazir Shakil – PPP (~6,432)	Fida Muhammad Nashad – PML-N (6,246)	Wazir Mohammad Saleem – Independent (6,865)
Skardu-IV (GBA-10)	Wazir Hussain – PPP (~3,578)	Captain Sikandar – ITP (4,949)	Raja Nasir Ali Khan – Independent (5,124)

Key Points:

2009: Complete sweep by **PPP across all four Skardu constituencies** (Part of the province-wide PPP surge)

2015: High-voltage swing in Skardu–I and Skardu–III to **PML-N**, while **Skardu-II went to MWM**, and **Skardu-IV to Islami Tehreek Pakistan (ITP)**—signaling growing acceptance of non-PPP actors amid anti-incumbency and national-level influence

2020: A fractured outcome—**PTI captured Skardu-I**, **MWM retained Skardu-II**, while **Skardu-III and Skardu-IV** were won by independents (who later aligned with PTI). This reflects the rise of **individual reputation-based politics** and importance of local networks is overshadowing party brands

Underlying Patterns & Political Implications

Fiscal and Federal Alignment: Skardu's electoral outcomes appear to align with whichever party controls Islamabad, suggesting that development funding and federal patronage remain strong electoral currency.

Decentralization of Political Authority: Over time, starting in 2015, voters increasingly favored local, personality-driven candidates—particularly in 2020 when **3 of 4 highest-voter- growth Skardu seats** were won by persons unaffiliated with mainstream party hierarchy **Decline in Voter Turnout (2020)**: The **drop to 48 % turnout** suggests COVID-19 impact, voter apathy, or distrust in political efficacy—especially in mountain-side constituencies like Skardu where access and messaging posed barriers

Shifting Role of Religious-identity parties: **MWM's consistent hold** on Skardu-II in 2015 and 2020 shows a base rooted in Shia religio-political networks. Its growth mirrors both local identity politics and national fragmentation of PPP's traditional secular appeal

Summary & Analytical Insight

The **2009 election** saw **Skardu replicate GB-wide enthusiasm for PPP** in the first political opening under the 2009 Self-Governance Order.

By **2015**, **PML-N had consolidated Skardu seats** amid broader swing—yet **Skardu-II showed MWM's growing sway**, pointing to religio-political identity making gains.

In **2020**, the map changed again: **PTI's national ascendancy translated locally in Skardu-I**, independent candidates captured the lion's share in **two seats**, while **MWM remained rooted in Skardu-II**.

Electoral volatility in Skardu indicates:

A shift from **party-driven to candidate-centric politics**;

Greater fragmentation, with independents and smaller parties now central;

Opportunity for future reform-driven movements, if local government powers are transferred from federal technocrats to elected voices.

These provincial and district-level trends underscore that while national political waves influence GB elections, **Skardu voters have shown increasing willingness to diverge from major party cues**, shading their decisions on local reputation, clan and sectarian affiliations, resource access, and historical grievances.

Electoral Dynamics in Skardu

Skardu District is divided into four general constituencies (GBA-7 through GBA-10), with an electorate totaling ~109,000 voters in the 2020 Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly elections (17,127 in GBA-7; 39,567 in GBA-8; 25,562 in GBA-9; 26,839 in GBA-10)
The district is predominantly Shia-Muslim (estimates suggest ~80% Shia, ~10% Noorbakhshi, ~10% Sunni), concentrated especially in Skardu I and III; these sectarian demographics have historically influenced vote patterns in favour of candidates perceived as representing the Shia-majority sentiment

Historical Party Landscape (2009–2015)
2009: The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won all four Skardu seats, buoyed by the 2009 Governance Order and high-profile visits from PPP leaders, which generated enthusiasm especially in Baltistan constituencies

2015: Skardu I swung to PML-N after a razor-thin recount in which Akbar Taban was declared winner by **one vote** over PTI's Raja Jalal in GBLA-7; in Skardu II, III, and IV, the vote consolidated around PML-N, PPP, and MWM respectively, signaling the fragmentation of previously unified political loyalties.

Election Overhaul of 2020
GBA-7 (Skardu I): PTI's Raja Zakaria Khan Mapoon edged out former CM Syed Mehdi Shah (PPP) by ~1,450 votes, signaling PPP's waning dominance in the heart of Baltistan.

GBA-8 (Skardu II): Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM), drawing from local Shia networks, secured GBA-8 with Muhammad Kazim emerging victorious over PPP's Muhammad Ali Shah in a close contest (~976-vote margin).

GBA-9 (Skardu III): Independent candidate Wazir Muhammad Saleem won by around 1,100 votes against PTI's Fida Nashad; Saleem later joined PTI, preserving the trend of individual electables shifting party allegiance after victory.

GBA-10 (Skardu IV): Raja Nasir Ali Khan Maqpoon also entered as an independent and won by ~1,300 votes over PTI's official nominee; his post-election decision to join PTI brought another seat under the party's effective control.

Overall, independents won **50% of the seats** across Skardu, with PTI and MWM splitting the remainder—a sharp departure from the two-party model of past cycles.

Factors Driving Swing Voter Behavior
Strong local patronage and nomadic clan loyalties lead many voters to favor known personalities over party ideologies. This was evident when multiple independents won across Skardu, and often joined PTI post-election for cabinet portfolios or development access.

Development deficits (roads, electricity, education, health) remain voter priorities. For instance in GBA-7 and 8, the absence of functional hospitals and high power outages was repeatedly flagged; these local grievances boosted non-traditional candidates who promised localized solutions.

Sympathy for ─outsider‖ parties remains fragile. PPP was seen as a ─national party‖ with central leadership, while PTI and PML-N were at times regarded as too urban- centric, giving MWM and independents a framing as more rooted in Skardu's identity.

Voter Mobilization & Gender Turnout
 Turnout in Skardu seats ranged from ~56% (GBA-8) to ~66% (GBA-10), slightly above the GB average, illustrating robust electoral engagement where grievance-based mobilization was high.

Increasing female turnout—around 40–43% across Skardu—was a significant change in 2020 compared to 2015. Many candidates cited women's issues, such as establishing girls' colleges (notably lacking in Skardu II), as campaign cornerstones.

Electoral Irregularities & Institutional Trust
Reports from 2020 and earlier highlighted sudden last-minute shifting of polling stations, inconsistent polling official deployment, and opaque handling of postal ballots— particularly in remote areas of Skardu I and III—which raised questions about the integrity of results Despite

these concerns, campaign mode largely remained peaceful. However, PTI and PPP accused each other of leveraging state resources: for example, promises of the Baltistan package and misuse of Benazir Income Support funds were cited by opposition leaders as factors skewing balance in a few Skardu battlegrounds

The Road Ahead (2025–26 Outlook)
As per the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018, the next Assembly must be elected by **24 January 2026 at the latest**; any dissolution prior to late November 2025 would trigger an early poll window in October–November

All major parties (PTI, PPP, PML-N, and MWM) and influential independent local figures are preparing for another highly competitive contest in Skardu, aware that even a small swing in one seat can determine whether the next GB government has a simple majority, or must be forged through post-poll alliances.

Challenges Facing Local Communities

Following the recent elections in Skardu, local communities are grappling with several pressing challenges that hinder socio-economic development and daily life.

Water Scarcity and Infrastructure Deficiencies
Skardu faces a chronic water shortage, exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure. The modernization of the centuries-old Sadpara Dam by WAPDA was executed without securing a reliable water source, worsening the crisis. Additionally, a flawed bidding process led to the abandonment of a diversion channel project intended to replenish water supplies, resulting in severe hardships for residents.

Absence of Local Governance
The lack of a functioning local government system in Gilgit-Baltistan has impeded grassroots socio-economic development. Bureaucratic inertia and insufficient political will have stalled the establishment of decentralized governance structures, limiting citizen participation in decision-making processes and hindering the implementation of welfare initiatives.

Economic Challenges and Public Protests
Economic hardships, particularly the increase in wheat prices, have sparked widespread protests across Gilgit-Baltistan, including Skardu. The price hike from Rs20 to Rs36 per kilogram led to demonstrations organized by the Awami Action Committee, reflecting public dissatisfaction with governmental policies affecting daily life.

Youth Unemployment and Migration
High youth unemployment rates, with over 31% of educated youth unemployed in 2023, have driven migration from the region. The mismatch between graduates' skillsets and market demands, coupled with limited local opportunities, has compelled many young individuals to seek

employment elsewhere, impacting the region's demographic and economic landscape.

Educational Limitations
Despite the presence of institutions like the University of Baltistan, Skardu, educational challenges persist. Poor internet connectivity hampers access to online learning, and the overall literacy rate remains a concern, affecting the region's human capital development.

Gender Inequality and Empowerment Efforts
Gender-based challenges, including limited economic opportunities for women, continue to affect the region. Initiatives like the launch of LADIESFUND in Skardu aim to empower women by fostering entrepreneurship and leadership, but systemic issues require sustained efforts to achieve gender equality.

Legal and Constitutional Ambiguity
Gilgit-Baltistan's ambiguous constitutional status within Pakistan contributes to legal uncertainties and governance challenges. The region's lack of representation in the national parliament and undefined legal framework hinder the implementation of consistent policies and development programs.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges necessitates coordinated efforts from governmental bodies, civil society, and international partners to promote sustainable development and improve the quality of life for Skardu's residents.

Youth Alienation in Skardu Elections ‖

What We Mean by ─Youth Alienation ‖
In Skardu — and wider Gilgit-Baltistan — **political alienation** refers to the detachment or distrust that young people feel towards electoral processes. It shows up as low voter turnout, minimal youth representation in candidate lists, and a preference for online activism over real-world participation. Though general data on age-segmented turnout for Skardu isn't public, national trends, GB-specific reporting, and local perceptions all point to a deep-seated pattern rooted in political exclusion.

Youth as a Voter Group: Present but Disengaged
Nationally, Pakistani voters aged 18–35 account for over **40 percent of the electorate**— yet youth turnout averages only about **31 percent**, compared with **44 percent overall**. Many in this age group **no longer trust elections to yield meaningful change**. They report seeing no difference in candidates or platforms from one cycle to the next

Why Skardu/GB Youth Feel Isolated from Politics
Tokenism & Dynastic Politics
As one Pamir Times contributor observed:

"the youth of Gilgit-Baltistan… are kept alien to their social and political roles… [they] are mobilized…forsloganeeringpurposes"
Many political leaders rely on youth for campaign work yet seldom support them as candidates, especially those lacking family lineage or financial backing.

b) Structural Exclusion with Weak Local Governance
Though the GB Legislative Assembly can pass some laws, the **Gilgit-Baltistan Council**— chaired by Pakistan's Prime Minister—retains veto power over major policy and appointments. This dilutes the impact of votes or elected representatives, discouraging young people in places like Skardu from engaging

Campaigns That Don't Resonate
PILDAT youth focus groups found that:

—Voter apathy stems from a lack of knowledge about the voting system and the running candidates ‖ ;
—Manifestos fail to pique the attention of young people because they are out of date and not relevant to their lives ‖ Pro

Logistical & Procedural Barriers
Election monitors exposed issues such as **last-minute polling-station changes**, **non-disclosure of polling schemes**, and confusion over postal ballots in Skardu and beyond—deterring inexperienced first-time or youth voters from showing up

Online Activism vs. Physical Participation Disparity
As one observer of the 2024 —wheat protests ‖ noted:

"the online perception widely differs from the on-ground realities… while young people [are] giving opinion online, on-ground there are mostly people above the age of 40. Digital engagement is high—but translating that into marching, canvassing, or voting remains elusive for many youth in Skardu.

Consequences: What Alienation Looks Like Post-Election
- **Low youth representation**: Most elected office-holders from Skardu are seasoned leaders, not new blood.
- **Misaligned development priorities**:
- Issues central to young people—like IT infrastructure, internships, women's entrepreneurship—receive less attention.
- **Brain drain risk**: Persistent apathy and lack of opportunity fuel youth migration out of GB or overseas.

What Could Reignite Youth Voice in Skardu Elections

Initiative	Why It Matters
ECP-led civic/registration drives in Skardu universities	Builds familiarity and confidence with real voting.
Youth quotas or direct ticket allotments	Creating incentives for parties to introduce young candidates.
Revival of student unions on GB campuses	Encourages political training and dissent through peaceful democratic channels.
Ensuring free access for independent observers	Boosts electoral credibility and trust.

(FAFEN, media)

| **Local media + social media messaging in Burushaski/Shina** | Outreach that doesn't rely solely on Urdu/English could reach more youth. |

Youth make up an estimated 40–45 percent of Skardu's eligible voters—but their voices remain marginal pre- and post-election. Alienation stems from structural exclusion, dynastic politics, ill-tailored campaigns, and logistical confusion. Addressing this will require legal, academic, and civic reforms—coupled with a political will to view young people in Skardu not as campaign fodder, but as future constituents, trustees, and representatives.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Convene a process** to transition Gilgit-Baltistan from presidential order-based governance toward a full **constitutional federal unit** with representation and legislative autonomy.

2. **Implement the Local Government Act 2014**: hold district and union council elections, delegate revenue and administrative authority accordingly.

3. **Establish an energy-finance commission** for GB: negotiate an NFC-style financial agreement, ensure revenue-sharing from Diamer-Bhasha dam, sanction local issuance of power franchises.

4. **Strategic infrastructure investments**: upgrade Karakoram-Skardu Road all-weather access, complete stalled dam/diversion projects, pilot micro-hydro and solar arrays in villages.

5. **Recognize tourism & transport as formal industries**—with subsidies, low-interest loans, export promotion zones—and vocational training hubs in hospitality.

6. **Support youth & digital economies**: establish state funds or public–private digital hubs in Skardu connected to DigiSkills and NFTP curriculum.

7. **Reform mineral licensing**: simplify gemstone mining permits, prioritize local cooperatives, and support off-season handicraft markets.

8. **Strengthen civil society partnership**: provide block grants to local NGOs (AKRSP, women's organizations), and link local bodies to development funding with oversight boards.

9. **Institutionalize dispute resolution**: form a permanent commission with civil society, lawyers, GBLA and Secretariat members to resolve grievances on land and water rights.

10. **Conduct electoral reforms**: improved training for polling officials, transparent counting, auditing, and introduction of digital voter rolls accessible at sub-constituency level.

Conclusion: Skardu's Crossroads

District Skardu symbolizes the dual paradox of progress and marginalization: its high peaks attract international travel; its university enrolls top minds; yet its infrastructure struggles, constitutional rights remain inert, and political participation often substitutes for structural power.

Since the 2020 Assembly elections, local constituencies have expressed a growing impatience with performative politics and a yearning for meaningful autonomy—from electricity, education, local budgets, and land rights to identity and legal agency.

The sustained protests of **2023–24** and **2025 internal blockades** over trade and electricity have highlighted that grievances in GB are **not isolated economic shocks** but **political and institutional** demands for sovereignty, transparency, and inclusion.

Realizing the potential of tourism, digital economies, climate resilience, and energy generation in Skardu requires bold structural change—not only from provincial voters but from mechanisms within Pakistan's political architecture. At stake is whether constitutional reform, equitably distributed resources, and institutional empowerment will anchor the region's future—or whether Skardu will remain a highland footnote in the center-periphery narrative.

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