

EXPLAINED

What's behind the PoK protests: Weight of history, woes of the present

At the heart of the recent protests in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir are 12 seats reserved for migrants from Jammu and Kashmir to different parts of Pakistan



Police patrol an area in Muzaffarabad, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, Tuesday. (PTI)

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At least 15 people have been killed in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) as protests rage a month ahead of scheduled local elections.

Authorities have responded with a crackdown, banning the group leading the protests, announcing a bounty for the arrest of some leaders, and clashing with the locals. While PoK has seen a number of protests since 2023, a recent Pakistan Supreme Court verdict on reservation of seats in the PoK assembly has become a flashpoint.

Why are people in PoK protesting?

In 2023, residents first mobilised against rising electricity bills and shortages of subsidised wheat. PoK residents argue that since significant hydropower is generated from the Mangla project in this region, they should not have to pay hefty electricity bills. The perks and privileges given to government officials amid the economic slide in Pakistan has been another irritant.

The protests are spearheaded by the Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC), founded by traders, professionals and civil society activists.

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“The people in Kashmir are embittered and angry for a lot of reasons. They say the Mangla dam was built without their consent, and while their people were displaced for it, they still pay high power tariffs. The region has always been underdeveloped; there has been heavy security deployment because of militancy. The economic grievances have been sharpened by the issue of political representation. The Legislative Assembly is largely controlled by Islamabad bureaucrats,” analyst Ayesha Siddiqa, Senior fellow at King’s College, London, who hails from Pakistan, told The Indian Express.

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The government has been talking to the JAAC and claims that several of their demands have been met.

However, the biggest sticking point is the 12 seats in the PoK Assembly reserved for Jammu and Kashmir migrants settled in different parts of Pakistan. The locals have long demanded that this reservation be abolished, while the authorities have argued that it is a lengthy process requiring a constitutional amendment. Earlier this month, the PoK Supreme Court held that an amendment in the region’s constitution “was not a concession to be wrested” from the government.

What is this reservation of seats?

Under the PoK constitution, the 12 seats are divided among “refugees settled in Pakistan”, with some seats going to Punjab, some to Sindh, etc. The election of these members happens outside PoK geographically as well as operationally, as the local Election Commission doesn’t conduct the polling. Locals say these seats are effectively used by the federal government to get their people into the PoK Assembly.

Apart from these 12, five seats are reserved for women, one for Ulamas (religious scholars), one for Kashmiris living overseas, and one for “technocrats”. So, in a House of 53, PoK voter elect only 33 people. However, opposition is sharper against the 12 refugee reservations, as, Siddiqa said, “The local population feels that people with no connection to Kashmir get elected on these. They say MQM-wallahs (a party that represents Urdu-speaking immigrants from India), get into our Assembly.”

There is also an economic angle. “Out of the 53 seats in the Assembly, 20 are controlled by the Centre under cover of various reservations. The Army basically controls these seats. But the funds for these representatives come from PoK’s kitty. The locals argue that since they don’t elect these people, they should not have to spend on them either,” Dr. Dhruvajyoti Bhattacharjee, Senior Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New [Delhi](#) who focuses on Pakistan, told The Indian Express.

Those who support the reservation point to the fact that India too allotted seats in the Assembly of the state and later the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir for people living in parts occupied by Pakistan. However, these seats are kept vacant, unlike in PoK.

What was unusual this time?

The government has banned JAAC and booked its leaders on stringent charges, including terror and sedition. There has also been a violent crackdown. India on Tuesday condemned the “police brutality” in PoK and hoped “the international community will hold Pakistan accountable for its misdeeds and abuses.”

A significant PoK diaspora lives in the UK, and has been calling attention to the happenings there.

Bradford East MP Imran Hussain, along with other Members of UK Parliament, have written to Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper over the issue. Hussain also posted on X, “I have called for an immediate end to the lockdown, the immediate restoration of communications, and the urgent resumption of peaceful table talks and negotiations at the heart of which must be respect for Kashmiri human rights.”

What’s happening in Gilgit-Baltistan?

The other part of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir under the illegal occupation of Pakistan is Gilgit-Baltistan, where elections were held recently.

India last week lodged a strong protest regarding these elections, with the Ministry of External Affairs stating: “The Government of India reiterated its well-known position that the entire Union Territories of J&K and Ladakh, including the so-called ‘Gilgit-Baltistan’, are integral and inalienable parts of India as a result of complete, legal and irrevocable accession of J&K to India in 1947... India categorically rejects any attempts by Pakistan to bring material change to areas under Pakistan’s illegal occupation.”

Gilgit-Baltistan’s fate under Pakistan’s occupation has been both similar to and different from PoK. It is also under-developed, and has seen protests over issues of economic and political representation. Because of a large Shia population, it has seen

sectarian strife. However, sections in the region have also demanded full integration with Pakistan.

“Pakistan has always caveated the fate of Gilgit-Baltistan to what it wrongly believes is the disputed status of Jammu and Kashmir. The area is under tight control of the federal government. It has been discriminated against inter alia for sectarian and ethnic reasons, and has remained underdeveloped,” former diplomat Vivek Katju, who has dealt with Pakistan and Afghanistan, told The Indian Express.

In effect, Pakistan has never tried to make Gilgit-Baltistan a full province — and give its residents full citizen rights — as it still demands a plebiscite in what was the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. After India repealed Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019, there were talks of a tit-for-tat move by Pakistan in Gilgit-Baltistan, but that did not progress. The China-led China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passes through this region, which India has always opposed.

“Islamabad has had quite a colonial attitude to Gilgit Baltistan. Unlike PoK, not a lot of mainland Pakistanis have come to settle in this region. Gilgit Baltistan is isolated, even from the Pakistani mainstream, doesn’t get much attention, and is very under-reported on,” said Bhattacharjee.

The elections held recently have also faced allegations of rigging and interference from the federal government.

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