More provinces?

Calls to create more provinces are once again resonating across Pakistan as the elections draws closer. Beyond the election rhetoric, the objective of creating more provinces in the country should be carefully deliberated to ensure that this exercise strengthens the federation and democracy rather than stirring ethno-lingual factionism, which is detrimental to good governance.

As a starting point, it must be appreciated that a province/state – in other words a sub-national and, indeed, a federating unit – has a specific status and purpose in a federation. A federation (as opposed to a unitary or confederal style of political state) is characterised by a union of partially self-governing sub-national units under a central/federal government where power-sharing between the federal and the provincial governments is constitutionally entrenched. Pakistan is one of the 27 federations in the world where the power-sharing formula between its federal and provincial governments is stipulated in its constitution. Power-sharing was altered in favour of the provinces by the 18th Amendment and the 7th National Finance Commission Award less than a decade ago.

Federations can either be as large as Russia; Brazil; and the US or as small as Saint Kitts, Nevis and Micronesia. Regardless of their size, the federating units in all federations need to have an incentive to stay in a common economic union. Contrary to popular belief, the creation of more provinces on an ethno-lingual basis could end up strengthening the federation. Allowing people to own their identity helps them become part of the mainstream, and feel less dominated and, therefore, not alienated – attributes that
are vital to the viability of a federating country.

There is also a structural justification for increasing the number of provinces in our country. Pakistan has a unique situation as one of its provinces (Punjab) is larger than the sum of all others combined in terms of population size. There are difficulties inherent to the functioning of a federation when this is the case. However, we need to be mindful of the objective here. While increasing the number of provinces could potentially strengthen a multi-lingual/multi-ethnic federation, if apolitically and effectively managed, it cannot ensure improvement in the performance of governments until it is coupled with appropriate governance reforms and systemic safeguards against corruption.

To enhance the government’s performance and its capacity to govern, we must institutionalise checks and balances, and rule-based control on how the government functions and root out arbitrariness; politicisation; and bureaucratic political allegiances.

A culture of evidence-based decision-making; accountability; transparency; respect for merit; integrity; ethical conduct; and conflict of interest safeguards are critical to any meaningful attempt aimed at improving the performance of the government. The creation of more provinces will do little for the government’s effectiveness and its ability to deliver if these attributes aren’t well-institutionalised.

The creation of more provinces should also be viewed in the context of the federal-provincial relationships in the post-18th Amendment context. Eight years on, there are still countless unresolved matters; elements of mistrust; and tenuous relationships. This was also evidenced recently in the impasse during the meeting of the Council of Common Interests in relation to the federal-provincial differences over development budgets. With such unresolved matters and the lack of evidence to inform the next steps, culling out more
provinces is unlikely to be effective.

In terms of the way forward, it would be important to plan incrementally. First, there is need to draw on evidence to ascertain the impact of the 18th Amendment on provincial governance and federal-provincial interface-functioning. Problems highlighted through this exercise need to be resolved as a matter of priority. A plan for a prototype model of ideal provincial and district functioning can then be drawn up in an evidence-based manner. It is critical for such a model to be grounded in a rationalised approach to recurrent fiscal implications, with cost-effectiveness as its yardstick and capacity-building inherent to its framework. This would also be an opportunity to usher in a digital transformation of the government with appropriate incentives to reshape behaviour.

Such a plan can be implemented with multi-partisan and civil society oversight. A roadmap can be developed to launch a pilot and adapt learnings. Once it is known to be effective, it can be applied on a broader scale.

This process will, however, require careful consensus-building at the national level. The implications of more provinces on administrative and fiscal matters need to be thought through carefully. Other matters, such as provincial representation in the Senate, will need political consensus. But we need to be mindful that all this will be futile if not paralleled with tangible governance reform. Increasing the number of provinces is justifiable. But we need to be mindful of the objective. Rather than a means of politicking and whipping up ethno-linguual zeal as a short-term election objective, the focus should be on using this reform as a means of strengthening the federation and improving governance. In order to achieve this, careful planning; execution; and the right motivation are needed.

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