

The Penchant for Provinces

Dr. Sania Nishtar

Calls to create more provinces in Pakistan have intensified ever since NWFP was renamed Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. People of district Hazara are out on the streets with their demand for Hazara province. A motion was moved in the Senate during the 18th Amendment session with the suggestion that district Bahawalpur be given a provincial status and pictures of students carrying placards of 'Sariaki province' have been featured in newspapers ever since.

While the renaming of NWFP is symbolic and recent attention to this subject motivated by ethno-lingual fervor, it is important to pay heed to these calls in view of Pakistan's past, vis-à-vis the events of 1971 and recent notions mooted by Baloch separatists. This comment is an attempt to draw attention to three questions in this regard.

The first question relates to the fundamental validity and justification for such calls. Contrary to popular belief, the demand for more provinces is not necessarily analogous to an anti-state and/or separatists' connivance. In fact, increasing the number of sub-national governments—in other words provinces—can strengthen a multilingual, multiethnic federation and can be a useful way of garnering support and ensuring that federating factions have a vested interest in strengthening the federation. Allowing people to own their identity makes them feel part of the mainstream, less dominated and therefore, not alienated. These attributes are vital to the viability of a federating system.

Observations from many other developing countries and economies in transition—differences in geographic and population characteristics notwithstanding—also provide a justification for increasing the number of provinces. It has frequently been cited that many countries in our immediate neighborhood and others with comparable population size have a far greater number of provinces. All of these countries are thriving federations, which goes to show that the number of sub-national governments does not appear to undermine the viability of a federating system.

Furthermore, Pakistan has an additional structural justification for revisiting and increasing the number of its provinces. One of its provinces is larger than the sum of all the others combined in terms of population size—Punjab represents 58% of the total population of the country. There are difficulties inherent to the functioning of a federation when that is the case. This is evident in the relationship of Punjab vis-à-vis the federal government and other provinces at the political and economic level, the details of which, the word count limit on this comment does not permit me to delve into.

Whilst dilating upon the justification, it must also be brought to bear that while the subject appears to be under the lens subsequent to renaming NWFP, this is by no means the first instance. Many recommendations and notions to this effect have been mooted previously. An unpublished viewpoint has called for the subdivision of each province into three parts, resulting in the creation of 12 provinces. Another publication in the public domain has made a case for adding more provinces on ethno-lingual basis, alluding to the possibility that Khohar, Kalasha, Kohistani, Seraiiki, Potohari, etc. provinces can be created. Other less pragmatic ideas have also been flagged recommending that each district be granted a provincial status. Moreover, the creation of Gilgit-Baltistan province, though in a different context than the one under discussion, is nevertheless an indication that such drastic changes in the architecture of sub-national government are now acceptable.

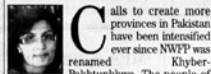
The second question: Will the creation of more provinces, per se, improve state governance and ensure that state mandated services—law and order, justice, health, education—are better served? The answer to this is clearly, no. Breaking the country into more provinces is not

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Governance

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The second question: will the creation of more provinces, per se, improve state governance and ensure that state mandated services—law and order, justice, health, education—are better served? The answer to this is clearly, no. Breaking the country into more provinces is not an end in itself. It can, however, be a means to a desirable outcome if creating more provinces is coupled with the grant of meaningful provincial autonomy in ways that incentivise performance enhancement and institutionalise overall checks and balances. This can have a knock on effect on sub-national governance with benefits accruing to populations beyond the process outcome of redrawing provincial boundaries.

The third question relates to the feasibility and appropriateness of opening up this Pandora's box in the country at this point in time in view of the current circumstances. The timing is, unfortunately, not as well placed to make structural changes as is their justification. There are too many things currently in the pipeline, which can impact provincial governance—things that haven't yet come to fruition.

Provinces are halfway in getting some control over their resources through the National Finance Commission Award. The 18th Amendment's stipulation with regard to the abolition of the Concurrent List has created a set of imperatives for transferring authority with a range of transformations in relation to a number of subjects previously under the Concurrent List. This has political, administrative and fiscal implications. An additional complexity relates to lack of clarity about the local government system, which impacts many attributes of local governance, from its working to the development of grass roots democracy, the functioning of judicial magistracy and citizen's empowerment.

With provincial mandates in a flux and the local government system undergoing a

transition, opening another major chapter by calling for more provinces will add another level of complexity and doesn't appear prudent while the state is grappling with many internal security and macroeconomic challenges.

It must also be recognised that creating more provinces will have major fiscal implications. With the balance sheet in a perpetual dire strait, and the country in the International Monetary Fund's fold, plans for resource-intensive elective state restructuring are unlikely to have appeal for the factions that hold the purse strings. There are many competing priorities for investments, for example energy and targets set for cutting down establishment costs, which are additional reasons why support for this idea might not meet approval.

Even if that barrier is overcome, capacity constraints will have to be addressed. Federating units have to have the capacity and infrastructure to mobilise revenues, manage their own natural resources and trade in a very complex global environment in order to be effectively autonomous. Recent experiences with regarding the NPF Award demonstrate weaknesses in the edifice of existing provinces in many of these aspects. Carving out more provinces will entail the development of these capacities from scratch, which would be an extremely complicated task.

It may be feasible to use the one-year transition period stipulated under the 18th Amendment with regard to transfer of responsibilities to the provinces to develop a model of effective provincial and district functioning before putting the idea of 'more sub-national units' on the table. This process will require careful consensus-building at the national level. The time can also be used to think through the implications of more provinces on issues such as provincial representation in the Senate.

In sum, therefore, increasing the number of provinces can be justifiable on many grounds. The approach can also be in synergy with the ongoing efforts to grant provinces more autonomy. However, there are major constraints in embarking upon the highly charged political process with the country engaged on so many fronts and whilst evidence of the effectiveness of recent initiatives to grant provinces more autonomy is not available to inform the next steps.

The implications of whipping up ethno-lingual zeal in support of more sub-national units and the chain reaction that it can lead to must be clearly thought through. What is important is to be clear about the underlying motive. The latter should be to improve governance and improve service delivery and not to carve out agendas for political forces that operate on the periphery.

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