DIGITAL DEBATE

THE CASE FOR NEW PROVINCES IN PAKISTAN

Governance, Human Security and the Will of the People

The argument in one paragraph

Pakistan is administered through the largest sub-national units in the democratic world. A single province holds 52.9 per cent of the population; the least populous holds 6.2 per cent while occupying 44 per cent of the land. The fiscal machinery designed to correct this has been frozen since 2010, and the constitutional tier meant to bring government to the citizen has been allowed to wither. This brief argues that Pakistan should create new provinces — drawn on size, geography and population rather than ethnicity — and that the people themselves should be asked.

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Executive Summary

52.9%	60.4m	8.6x	16 yrs
of Pakistanis live in one province	average population per province	largest to smallest unit	since the last NFC award

Pakistan is a federation of 241.5 million people governed through four provinces. No other democracy attempts to administer a comparable population through so few sub-national units. The average Pakistani province contains 60.4 million people — more than Italy, more than South Africa, more than every country in the world but the largest twenty-odd. India, a country six times larger, governs through thirty-six units averaging 39.9 million. Indonesia manages 284 million people through thirty-eight provinces. Türkiye administers 85.7 million through eighty-one.1

The consequences are measurable, and they are not evenly distributed. Human development indices constructed from the 2023 census place Punjab at 0.550 and Balochistan at 0.312 — a gap wider than that between Egypt and Chad.2 Literacy runs from 66.3 per cent in Punjab to 42.0 per cent in Balochistan. School participation for children aged five to sixteen ranges from 73 per cent to 42 per cent. Nationally, 25.4 million children are out of school and more than 40 per cent of children under five are stunted.3

These are not merely social statistics. They are the visible output of an administrative geography in which the government responsible for a citizen's school, clinic and police station may sit nine hundred kilometres away, behind a bureaucratic tier that has no elected representative at all.

What this brief argues

1. Pakistan's federating units are too large to be governed well, and the evidence of that failure is now systematically documented in the 2023 census itself.

2. The corrective mechanisms have failed. The National Finance Commission has produced no new award since 2010, eleven years past its constitutional maximum interval. Local government, mandated by Article 140A, has been allowed to shrink from ten per cent of public spending in 2005 to 4.7 per cent in 2024.

3. New provinces should be constituted on size, geography and administrative coherence — not on ethnicity or language. Pakistan already possesses the necessary building blocks in its thirty-four divisions.

4. Climate and human security have made the status quo untenable. A country that put a third of its territory under water in 2022 cannot run disaster response, water management and resettlement through four provincial secretariats.

5. The question should be put to the people. Article 48(6) of the Constitution provides a route by which the Prime Minister, with the approval of a joint sitting of Parliament, may refer a matter of national importance to a referendum.

What this brief does not argue

This is not a case against the Eighteenth Amendment. Provincial autonomy is settled and should remain so. The argument here is for completing devolution, not reversing it.

It is not a case for redrawing Pakistan along ethnic or linguistic lines. That approach carries risks this brief takes seriously and rejects.

It is not a claim that smaller units are automatically better governed. The international evidence is mixed, and Section 7 examines the studies that find no significant effect alongside those that find large ones.

2 A Federation of Giants

The seventh Population and Housing Census, whose results the Council of Common Interests approved in August 2023, counted 241,499,431 people in Pakistan's four provinces and federal capital.45 The distribution of that population among the federating units is the single most important fact in Pakistani governance, and it is a fact that almost every other structural problem descends from.

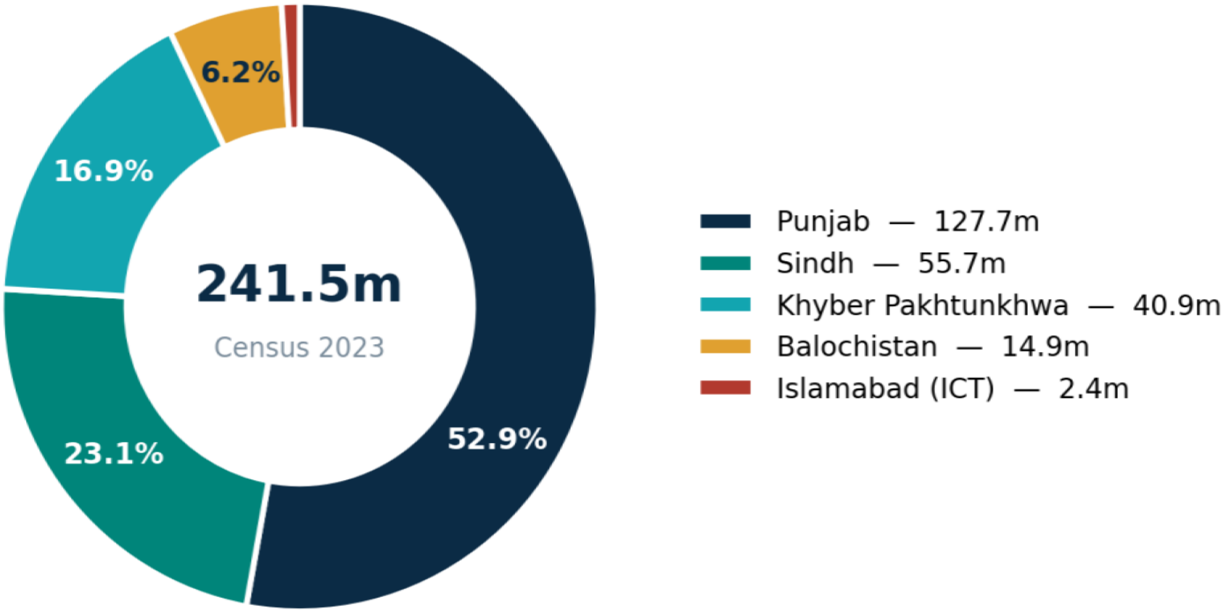

Figure 1 · Population by federating unit, Census 2023. Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.

Table 1 · The provincial profile

Federating unit	Population (2023)	Share of population	Area (sq km)	Share of land	Literacy (%)	HDI	Districts
Punjab	127,688,922	52.9%	205,345	26.1%	66.3	0.550	41
Sindh	55,696,147	23.1%	140,914	17.9%	57.5	0.505	31
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	40,856,097	16.9%	101,741	12.9%	51.0	0.442	40
Balochistan	14,894,402	6.2%	347,190	44.1%	42.0	0.312	42
Islamabad (ICT)	2,363,863	1.0%	906	0.1%	—	—	1
Pakistan	**241,499,431**	**100%**	**796,096**	**100%**	**61.0**	**—**	**155**

Sources: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Census 2023 (population, area, districts); Hafiz A. Pasha, Business Recorder, December 10, 2024 (literacy, HDI). District counts as of 2024–26.

Two asymmetries define the federation. The first is demographic: one unit contains a majority of the population, which means that no formula weighted by population — the National Finance Commission's divisible pool, National Assembly seat allocation, delimitation — can be settled without its consent. The second is territorial: the least populous province occupies 44.1 per cent of the national land mass with 6.2 per cent of the people, an administrative burden of distance and dispersion that no amount of fiscal transfer can dissolve.

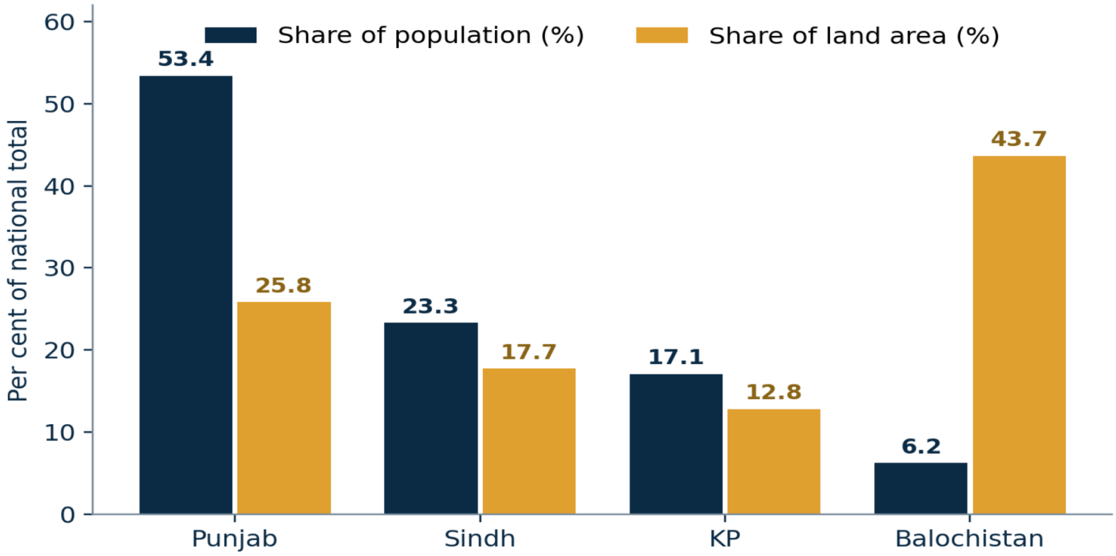

Figure 2 · Share of population against share of land area, four provinces.

How Pakistan compares

The comparison that matters is not with Pakistan's own past but with how other large, populous, plural states organise themselves. Set against a comparator group of major federations and unitary states with elected sub-national government, Pakistan is an outlier by a wide margin.6

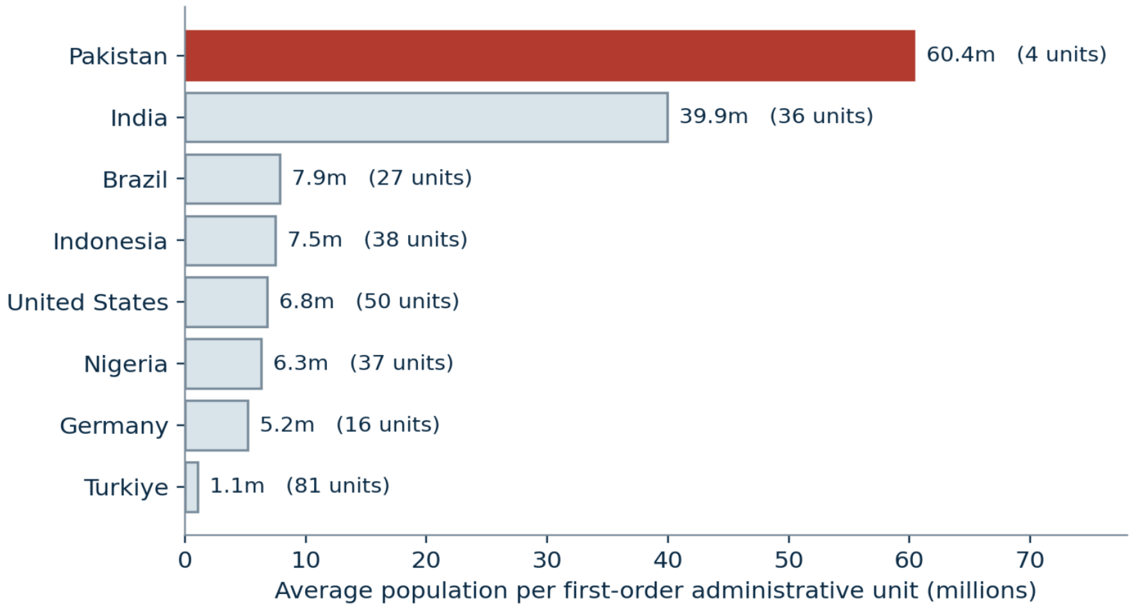

Figure 3 · Average population per first-order administrative unit. Sources: UN World Population Prospects 2024; national statistical offices; PBS Census 2023.

Pakistan's average unit is 5.7 times the average of the comparator group. It is 1.5 times India's, in a country with one-sixth of India's population. If Pakistan applied Indonesia's ratio of people to provinces it would have thirty-two units; on Türkiye's it would have well over two hundred. Nobody proposes either. But the gap indicates the scale of what is being asked of four provincial secretariats.

The point is sharpened by looking one tier down. Punjab is subdivided into ten divisions. Every single one of them has a larger population than Denmark, Norway, Finland, Ireland or New Zealand — each a sovereign state with a full national government, a treasury and a health ministry. Two of them, Lahore and Faisalabad, individually exceed the entire population of Balochistan.7

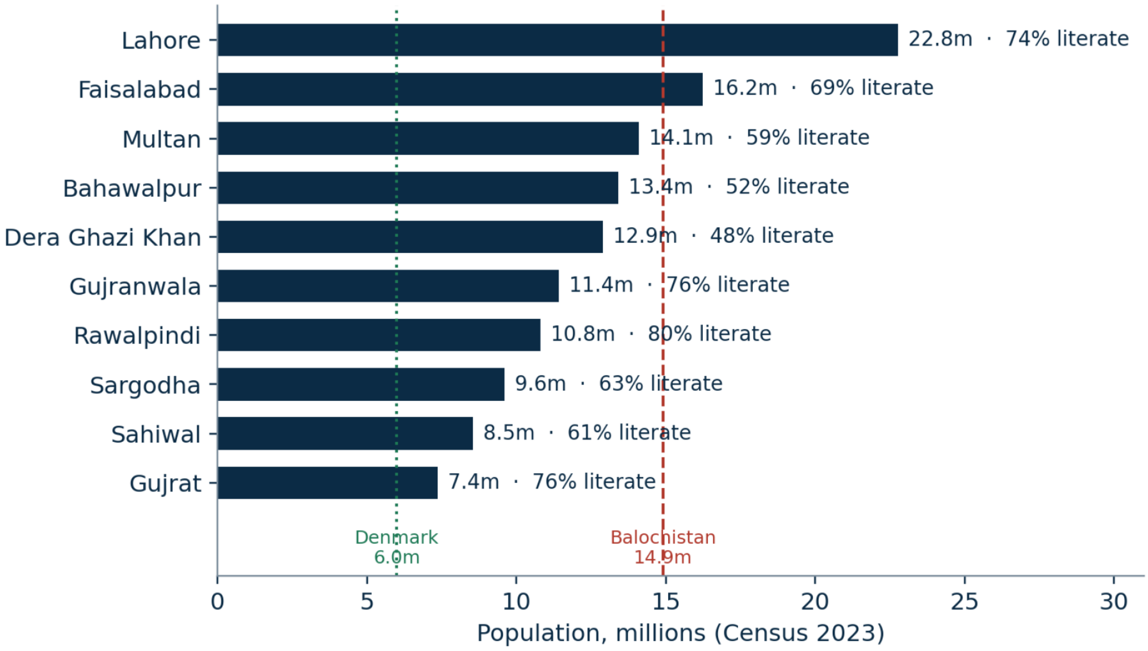

Figure 8 · Population of Punjab's ten divisions, Census 2023.

The unit of comparison

A division in Pakistan is not a government. It is an administrative convenience headed by a Commissioner — a civil servant, not an elected representative. Ten populations the size of European countries are supervised by officials whom nobody elects and whom no local assembly can remove.

3 The Human Development Deficit

Pakistan ranks 164th of 193 countries on the Human Development Index.8 That national figure conceals a divergence between provinces that has widened, not narrowed, over the past five years. Using census indicators and UNDP methodology, Hafiz Pasha has constructed provincial HDIs from the 2023 data.9

Table 2 · Human development by province, 2023

Province	Education index	Health index	Income index	Composite HDI	Category
Punjab	0.747	0.485	0.459	0.550	Medium
Sindh	0.487	0.481	0.549	0.505	Medium
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	0.556	0.510	0.305	0.442	Low
Balochistan	0.227	0.376	0.356	0.312	Low

Source: Hafiz A. Pasha, "Human development index of provinces," Business Recorder, December 10, 2024, constructed from Census 2023 indicators.

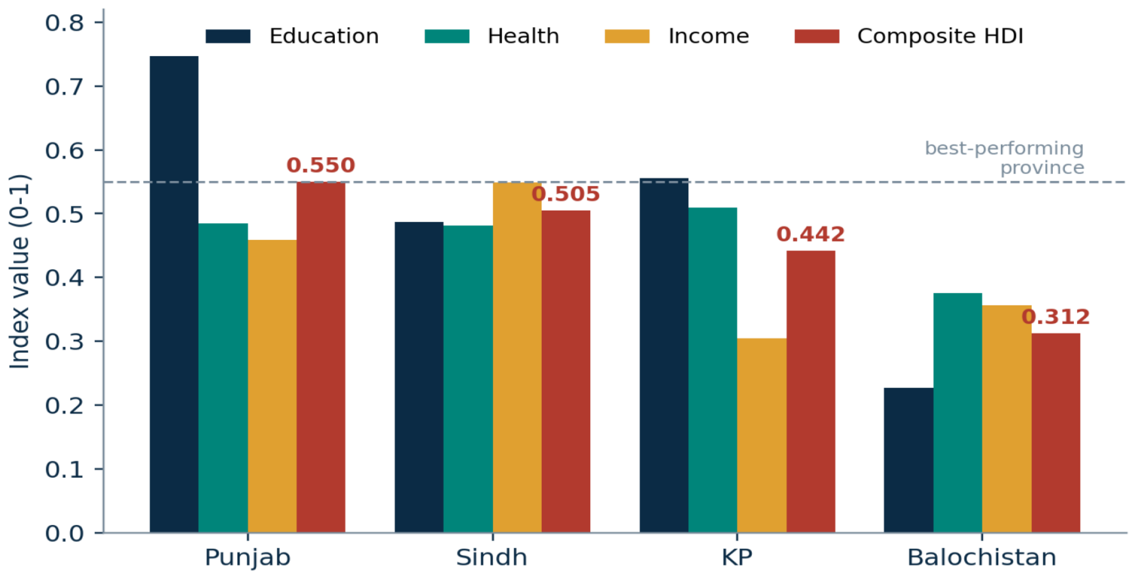

Figure 4 · HDI and its components, four provinces.

The composite spread of 0.238 between Punjab and Balochistan is not a rounding difference. It is the distance that separates one country from another. And the component breakdown shows that the deficits are not uniform: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa scores highest of all four on health but lowest on income; Sindh has the highest income index because of Karachi but ranks third on education. These are four different policy problems being managed by four secretariats, each of which is also responsible for territory whose needs differ from the provincial average as much as the provinces differ from one another.

Education

The 2023 census recorded national literacy at 61 per cent — a marginal improvement since 2019–20, achieved almost entirely in Punjab. Balochistan's literacy rate fell over the same period, from 46 to 42 per cent.10

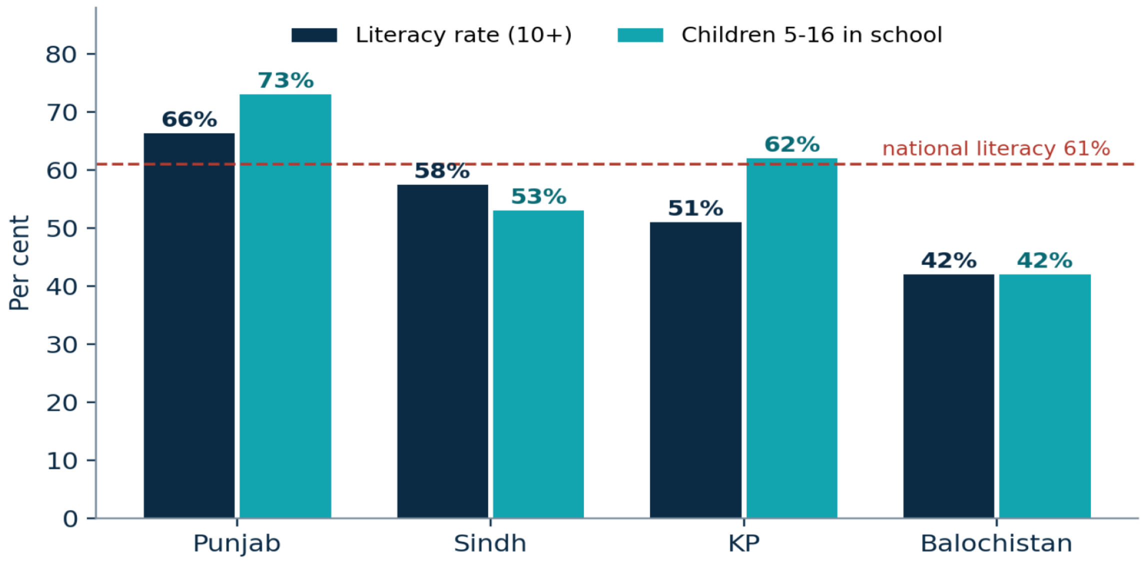

Figure 5 · Literacy and school participation by province.

The school participation figures are the more alarming of the two series. In Balochistan, 58 per cent of children aged five to sixteen are not in school. In Sindh — the province containing Pakistan's commercial capital and its highest provincial income index — the figure is 47 per cent.11 Nationally, UNICEF counts 25.37 million children aged five to sixteen outside the education system: 13.41 million girls and 11.96 million boys, more than one in three of the age cohort.12

Health and nutrition

More than 40 per cent of Pakistani children under five are stunted, and a further 17.7 per cent are wasted. Some 400,000 children receive no routine immunisation at all, and Pakistan remains one of only two countries in the world that has not eradicated polio.13

25.4m	**40%+**	**17.7%**	**164th**
children out of school	of under-fives stunted	of under-fives wasted	of 193 on the HDI

Education and health are, since 2010, provincial subjects. The failure to deliver them is therefore a provincial failure — but it is a failure of capacity as much as of will. A health department in Quetta is responsible for service delivery across 347,190 square kilometres of some of the most sparsely populated terrain in Asia. A school education department in Lahore administers a system serving a population larger than Japan's. Neither is a task that any secretariat, however competent, can perform from a single capital.

4 The Administrative Distance Problem

Governance is not only a question of institutional design. It is a question of physical geography — of how far a citizen must travel to reach the office that decides their case, and how far a decision must travel to reach the person it affects.

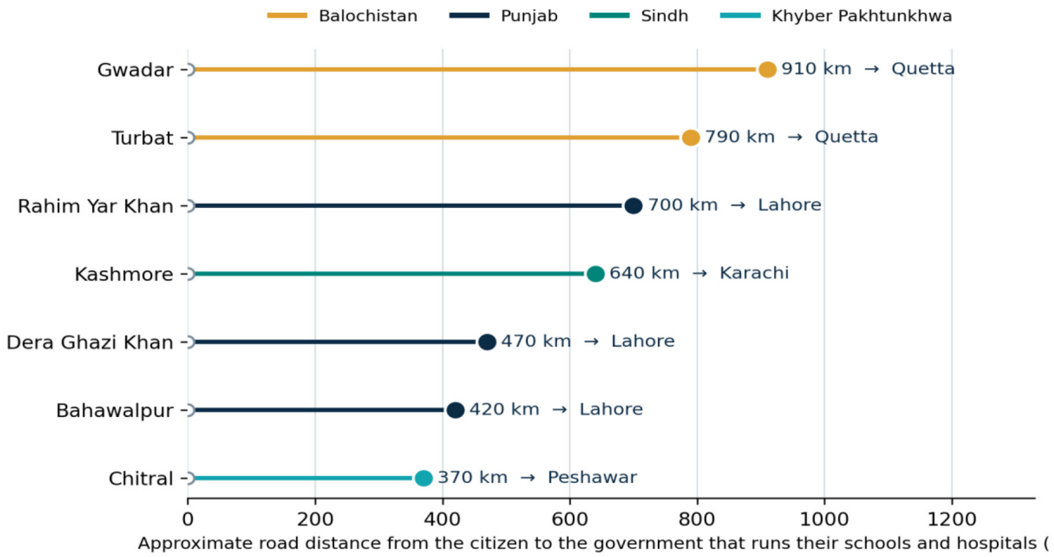

Figure 12 · Approximate road distance from selected district headquarters to their provincial capital.

A resident of Gwadar seeking a decision from the government responsible for their schools, hospitals and land records must reach Quetta — roughly 910 kilometres and eleven to thirteen hours of driving away.14 A resident of Rahim Yar Khan is some seven hundred kilometres from Lahore. Chitral is separated from Peshawar by a mountain pass. These are not remote outposts; they are ordinary districts containing millions of citizens.

The tier that does not exist

Between the provincial government and the district sits the division — thirty-four of them across the four provinces as of 2026.15 The division is the natural unit of administration in South Asia, inherited from Mughal and colonial practice and retained, abolished in 2001 and restored in 2008. It has commissioners, regional police officers and divisional offices of most line departments. What it does not have is an elected assembly, a budget it controls, or any political authority whatsoever.

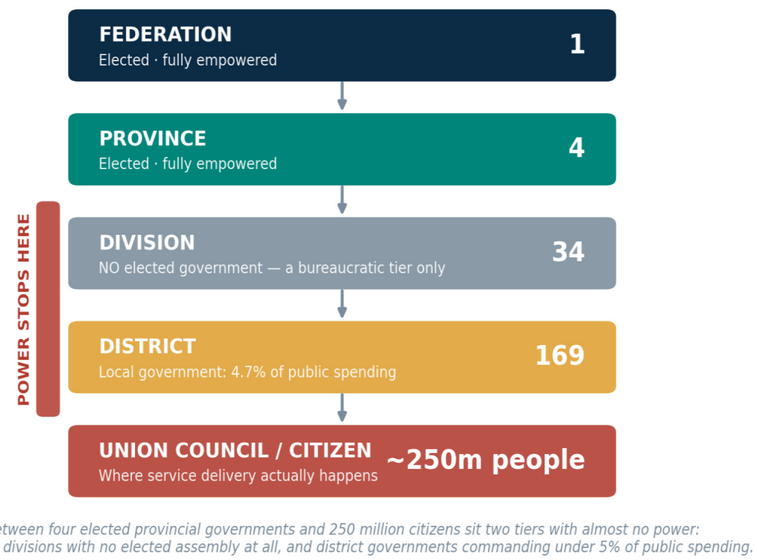

Figure 13 · The governance ladder and where authority stops.

This produces the structural condition at the heart of the argument: Pakistan has an administrative geography that already recognises units of the right size, and a political geography that refuses to give those units any power. The commissioner of Bahawalpur administers 13.4 million people. The commissioner of Multan administers 14.1 million. Neither answers to anyone in Bahawalpur or Multan.

Span of control

The Balochistan government supervises forty-two districts across 347,190 square kilometres. The Punjab government supervises forty-one districts containing 127.7 million people. In each case the ratio of political authority to administrative burden is extreme, and it is extreme in different directions — which is precisely why a single national remedy applied at the provincial level cannot fix both.

5 The Fiscal Machinery Has Seized

Pakistan has two constitutional mechanisms for correcting the imbalances described above without redrawing a single boundary. Both have failed. That failure is the strongest available argument that boundary reform can no longer be deferred.

The National Finance Commission

Article 160 of the Constitution requires that a National Finance Commission be constituted “at intervals not exceeding five years” to determine the distribution of revenues between the Federation and the provinces.16 The Seventh Award was signed on 30 December 2009 and given effect from 1 July 2010.17 It remains in force today.

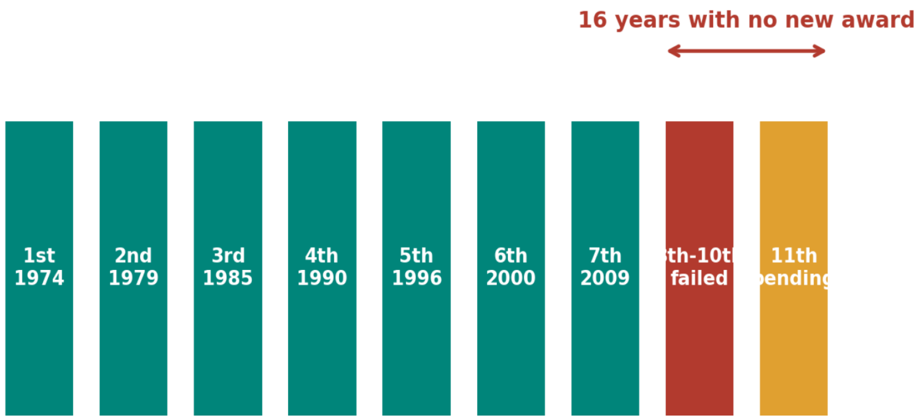

Figure 11 · NFC awards, 1974–2026. The Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Commissions all failed to reach consensus.

Three successive commissions have failed to produce an award.18 The reason is structural, not personal. The Eighteenth Amendment provided that no province’s share may fall below the share agreed in the previous award. Once the provincial share reached 57.5 per cent of the divisible pool, the Federation had nothing further to offer and the provinces had no incentive to reopen the settlement. The mechanism was designed to protect provincial autonomy; the effect has been to freeze fiscal federalism in the position it occupied in 2009.19

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has since absorbed the former tribal districts under the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, adding population, territory and constitutional responsibility, without any corresponding revision of its share. Its government has asked the Constitutional Court to interpret Article 160 in that light.20 The Eleventh Commission held its inaugural meeting in December 2025; at the time of writing no award has been agreed.

Sixteen years, one formula

The Seventh NFC Award has governed the distribution of federal revenue for sixteen years — eleven years beyond the maximum interval the Constitution permits. Over that period Pakistan’s population grew by more than fifty million people, twenty-five districts were created, seven tribal agencies were merged into a province, and a third of the country was flooded twice. The formula has not moved.

Local government: the unfinished tier

Article 140A obliges every province to “establish a local government system and devolve political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local governments.”21 A World Bank assessment published in 2026 found that local government in Pakistan remains “fiscally dependent, institutionally unstable, and effectively subordinate to provincial discretion,” with Provincial Finance Commission awards that are infrequent and non-binding and transfers that are ad hoc.22

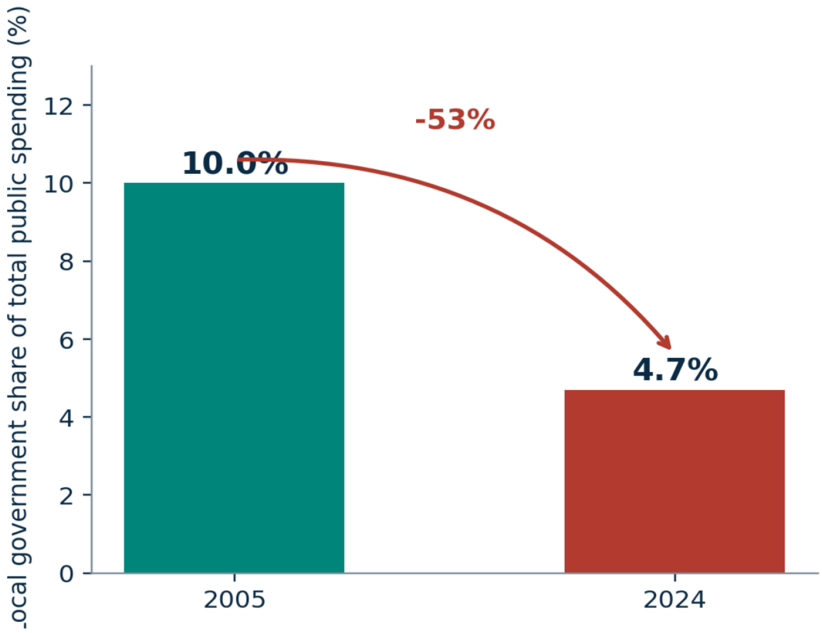

Figure 6 · Local government share of total public spending, 2005 and 2024.

Local governments accounted for roughly ten per cent of total public spending in 2005. By 2024 the figure had fallen below five per cent.23 The direction of travel is the opposite of what the Constitution requires. Meanwhile about eighty per cent of provincial expenditure goes to recurrent costs, with the largest share of incremental spending absorbed by general public services and administration rather than by schools or hospitals.24

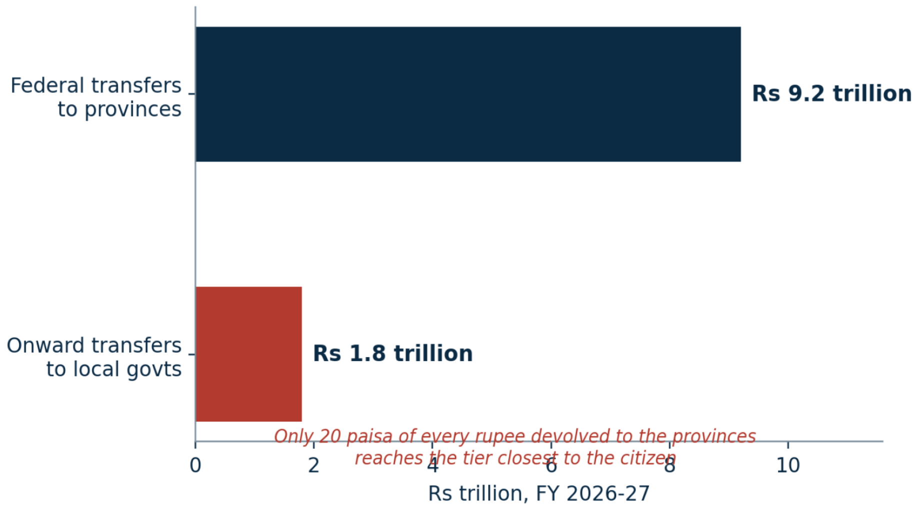

Figure 7 · Federal transfers to provinces against onward transfers to local government, FY 2026–27.

The arithmetic is stark. Provinces are projected to receive Rs 9.2 trillion in federal transfers in FY 2026–27. Of that, Rs 1.8 trillion is passed on to local governments — roughly twenty paisa in the rupee.25 Punjab, the province containing more than half the country's population, has not held local government elections since 2015.26 The Supreme Court has had to direct a provincial government to comply with Article 140A.27

The revenue side

Nor have the provinces used the fiscal powers they gained. Provincial own-source tax revenue stood at roughly 0.7 per cent of GDP in fiscal year 2024. Urban immovable property tax — levied on one of the most visible and least mobile assets in the economy — produced about 0.13 per cent of GDP.28 Fifteen years after gaining the authority to tax, the provinces still finance themselves overwhelmingly from Islamabad, and still transfer almost nothing downwards.

6 Human Security and the Climate Emergency

The case for administrative reform was arguable while Pakistan's challenges were chronic. It became urgent when they turned acute. Human security — the security of a person against hunger, disease, displacement and disaster, as distinct from the security of a state against armies — is now the binding constraint on Pakistani governance, and it is administered by institutions designed for a country of eighty million.

The 2022 floods and what followed

Between June and October 2022, monsoon rainfall several times the seasonal average, amplified by accelerated glacial melt, put roughly one-third of Pakistan under water. More than 1,700 people were killed. Some 33 million were affected and about eight million displaced. Over two million homes were damaged or destroyed and around ten per cent of the country's health facilities were put out of service.29 Damage and economic losses were assessed at over US$30 billion.30

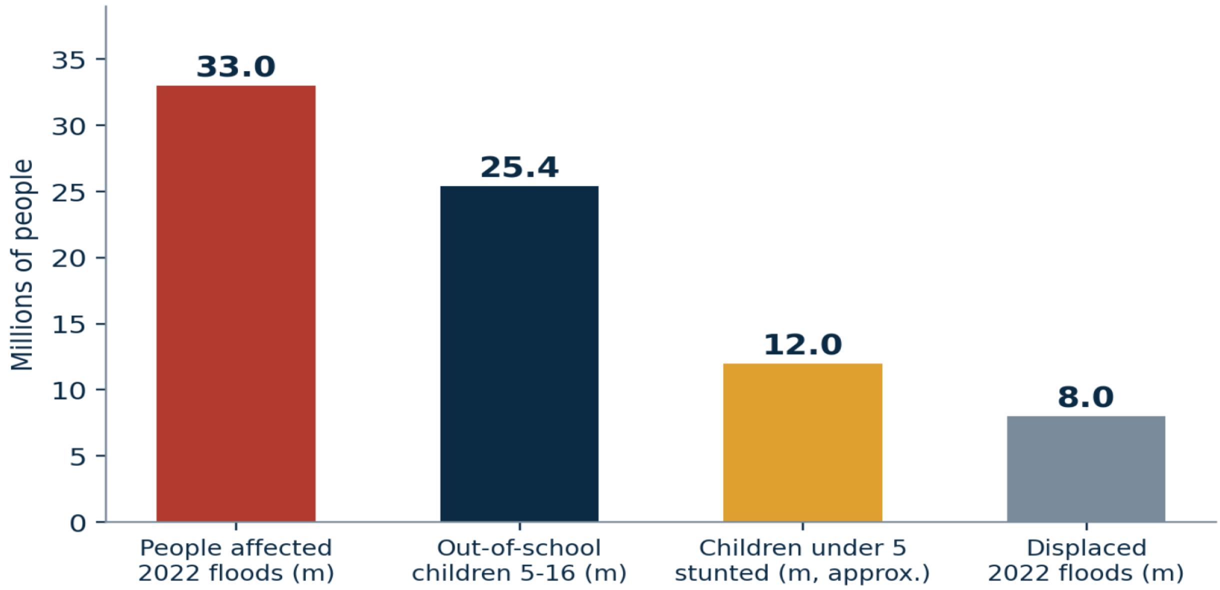

Figure 10 · Populations exposed. Each category exceeds the total population of most countries.

In 2025 the monsoon returned and killed more than a thousand people.31 Pakistan ranks eighth among all countries for cumulative harm from extreme weather events between 2000 and 2019,32 and the World Bank estimates a requirement of about US$348 billion by 2030 to meet its adaptation, resilience and mitigation needs.33

Why this is an administrative question

Disaster response is a logistics problem, and logistics is a function of distance and decision rights. In August 2022, the flooding in Balochistan was concentrated in Kalat, Naseerabad and the Makran belt — several hundred kilometres from Quetta, across terrain where 177 check dams failed and dam failures alone accounted for the large majority of the province's losses. The provincial disaster authority sat in one city; the emergency was distributed across an area larger than Germany and Italy combined.

The five converging pressures

Climate. Recurrent flooding, glacial melt from more than 7,200 glaciers, and heat extremes concentrated in exactly the districts furthest from provincial capitals.

Population. Fifty million people added between 2017 and 2023 alone, at 2.55 per cent annual growth — the fastest of any large economy in Asia.

Education. 25.4 million children outside school, a cohort that will reach working age within a decade and a half.

Health. Stunting above 40 per cent, endemic polio, and a health system that lost a tenth of its facilities in a single monsoon season.

Administration. Four provincial governments, a frozen fiscal formula, and a local tier commanding under five per cent of public spending.

Each of these pressures is individually manageable. Taken together, over a decade, through four secretariats and a revenue formula written in 2009, they are not. The status quo is not a stable equilibrium that Pakistan can choose to maintain; it is a trajectory.
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7 What the Comparative Evidence Shows

Advocates of new provinces frequently assert that smaller units govern better. Opponents assert that they simply multiply bureaucracies. The honest position is that the international evidence is genuinely mixed, that it depends heavily on design, and that the strongest results come from reorganisations that transferred real fiscal authority rather than merely drawing new lines.

Table 3 · International reorganisation experience

Case	What was done	Outcome	Lesson for Pakistan
India, 2000 Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand	Three states carved from Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh after decades of agitation	All three grew faster in per capita terms than their parent states over 25 years; Uttarakhand shows statistically significant out-of-trend growth. Jharkhand remains a laggard in absolute terms	Reorganisation helps most where the new unit is small relative to the parent and where local policy needs genuinely differ
India, 2014 Telangana	Carved from Andhra Pradesh, a unit that had peaked above 84 million	Both successor states have sustained above-average growth; the split was administratively orderly	Even very large, ethnically contested divisions can be executed without violence given a clear legal process
Nigeria, 1967–1996	Progressive expansion from three regions to thirty-six states plus a federal capital territory	Reduced the capacity of any single region to dominate the federation; also multiplied administrative cost and rent-seeking	Breaking up a dominant unit works politically; without fiscal discipline it becomes expensive
Indonesia, post-1999	Big-bang decentralisation and the creation of new provinces and districts	Substantial improvement in service delivery access; wide variation in quality across units	Devolving money and functions matters more than the number of units
Türkiye	Eighty-one provinces for 85.7 million people	Dense administrative coverage; provinces are administrative rather than autonomous	Small units are compatible with a strong centre — size and autonomy are separable questions
Germany	Sixteen Länder for 83.5 million, several created post-1945 on functional rather than historic grounds	Stable, high-capacity federalism with equalisation transfers	Units drawn for administrative coherence rather than ethnic identity can acquire legitimacy over time

Sources: Bhattacharya et al., Indian Economic Review 58 (2023); Frontline, December 11, 2025; NITI Aayog, National MPI Progress Review 2023; national statistical sources.

The Indian case, examined honestly

India's 2000 reorganisation is the closest available analogue: three large, poorly governed states in a South Asian parliamentary federation, split after sustained regional agitation, with the new units built from existing districts. Twenty-five years on, all three new states have grown richer than their parent states in per capita terms. Chhattisgarh, poorer than Madhya Pradesh in 2000–01, has overtaken it. Uttarakhand, once carrying the BIMARU tag, has converged on the national average.34 Multidimensional poverty in 2023 stood at 9.7 per cent in Uttarakhand and 16.7 per cent in Chhattisgarh, against 28.8 per cent in Jharkhand.35

The counter-evidence, stated fairly

A synthetic-control study of the same reorganisation reaches a more guarded conclusion. Constructing counterfactuals for all six affected states, the authors find statistically significant out-of-trend growth only for Uttarakhand. Bihar and Chhattisgarh outperformed their counterfactuals but not significantly; Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh show no significant change. Their conclusion is that creating smaller states "may not be a panacea" for economic problems.36 Any honest case for new provinces has to sit with this finding rather than around it. What it establishes is that reorganisation is a necessary condition for better governance in over-large units, not a sufficient one. The design of what follows the boundary determines whether the gain is realised.

8 Design Principles: Size, Geography, Population — Not Ethnicity

Almost every proposal for new provinces in Pakistan has been framed ethnically or linguistically: a Saraiki province, a Hazara province, a Mohajir province. This brief argues that the ethnic frame is both the principal reason no province has ever been created and the principal reason one should not be created that way.

Why the ethnic frame fails

• It makes every proposal zero-sum. An ethnic province requires a determination of whose province it is, which immediately creates a minority within it and a grievance outside it.

• It supplies the strongest possible argument to opponents — that redrawing the map on identity lines is the first step toward fragmentation. In a country that lost half its territory in 1971, this argument is not rhetorical.

• It cannot be applied consistently. Pakistan's ethnic geography is interleaved, not blocked. Saraiki majority districts sit in three provinces; Hindko, Brahvi, Balochi, Pashto and Sindhi speakers are distributed across boundaries that no line can cleanly follow.

• It is not how successful federations are built. The fifty American states, the sixteen German Länder and half of India's states are administrative rather than ethnic constructs, and they are the more durable for it.

The alternative: upgrade the divisions

Pakistan already possesses a tier of administrative units of roughly the right scale, with established headquarters, existing line-department offices, functioning revenue and police hierarchies, and boundaries that nobody disputes because nobody has ever had a political reason to contest them. There are thirty-four divisions across the four provinces.37 Building provinces from divisions — singly or in contiguous clusters — requires no new line to be drawn anywhere.38

Four criteria for drawing a new province

1. Population. Target a range within which a single secretariat can plausibly deliver services — broadly 10 to 25 million, comparable to a mid-sized European state.

2. Geography and contiguity. Units should be contiguous, share a river system, road corridor or agro-ecological zone, and place the capital within reasonable travel time of the periphery.

3. Administrative inheritance. Build from existing divisional boundaries and headquarters so that the transition cost is measured in signage and staffing rather than in surveys and litigation.

4. Fiscal viability. Each unit must have an identifiable revenue base and a defined share under a reconstituted NFC formula agreed before, not after, the boundaries are notified.

An illustrative model

What follows is a design illustration, not a proposal for specific boundaries. Its purpose is to demonstrate that a defensible reorganisation can be constructed entirely from existing administrative geography. The Punjab figures are exact divisional totals from the 2023 census; groupings in the other three provinces use rounded divisional aggregates and are indicative.39

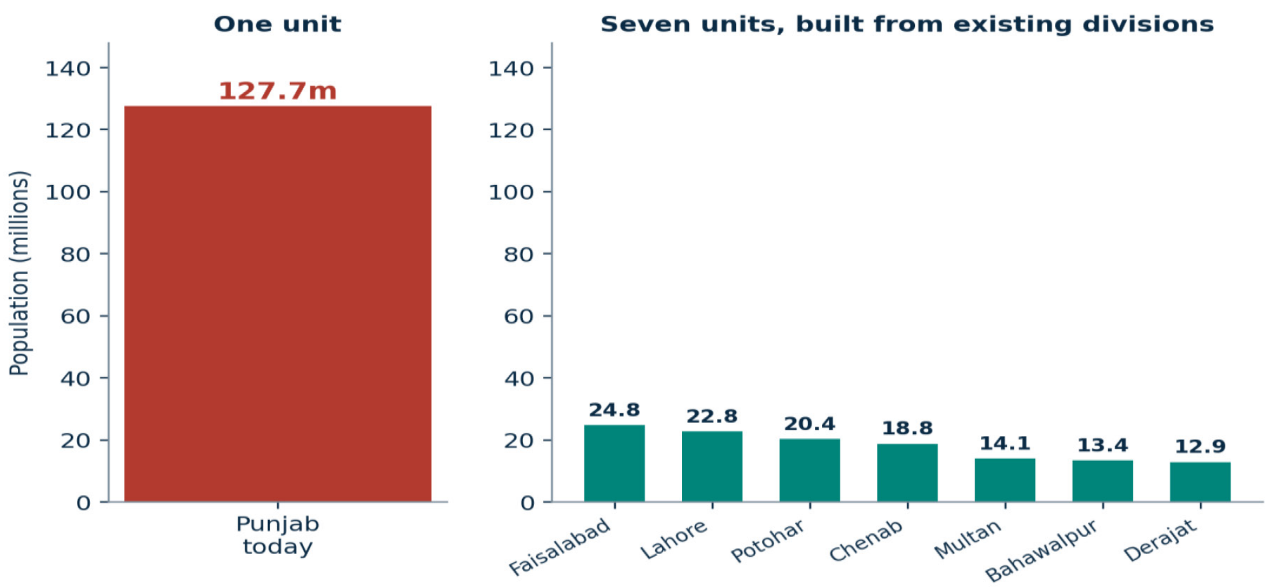

Figure 9 · Illustrative reorganisation of Punjab built entirely from existing divisions.

Table 4 · An illustrative fifteen-unit federation

Parent province	Proposed unit	Built from	Population
Punjab	Faisalabad	Faisalabad + Sahiwal divisions	24.8m
Punjab	Lahore	Lahore division	22.8m
Punjab	Potohar	Rawalpindi + Sargodha divisions	20.4m
Punjab	Chenab	Gujranwala + Gujrat divisions	18.8m
Punjab	Multan	Multan division	14.1m
Punjab	Bahawalpur	Bahawalpur division	13.4m
Punjab	Derajat	Dera Ghazi Khan division	12.9m
Sindh	Southern Sindh	Hyderabad + Mirpur Khas + Shaheed Benazirabad	21.5m
Sindh	Karachi	Karachi division	20.4m
Sindh	Northern Sindh	Sukkur + Larkana divisions	13.8m
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Peshawar	Peshawar + Mardan + Kohat divisions	20.5m
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Southern KP	Bannu + D.I. Khan + Malakand divisions	14.1m
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Hazara	Hazara division	6.2m
Balochistan	Northern Balochistan	Quetta + Pishin + Zhob + Loralai + Sibi	7.9m
Balochistan	Makran–Kalat	Makran + Khuzdar + Rakhshan + Lasbela + Naseerabad	7.0m

15	15.9m	4.0x	–74%
units instead of four	mean population per unit	largest to smallest, from 8.6x	reduction in mean unit size

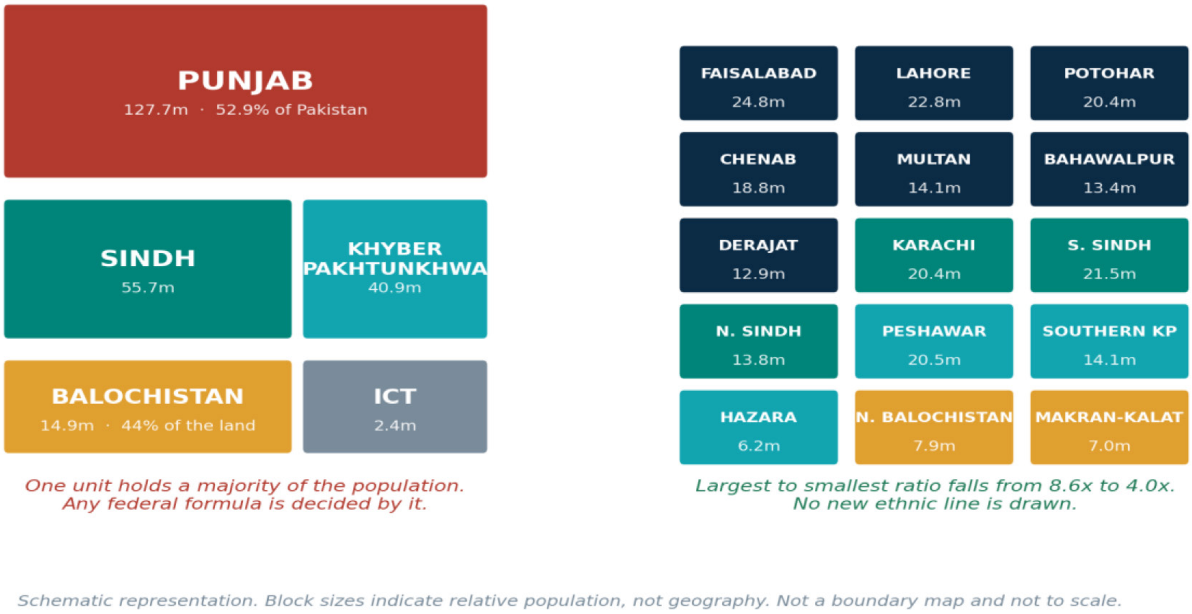

Figure 14 · Schematic comparison. Block sizes indicate relative population, not geography. Not a boundary map.

Under this model the ratio between the largest and smallest unit falls from 8.6 to 1 to roughly 4 to 1 — close to the ratio in India and Indonesia — and no unit holds anything approaching a majority of the national population. Critically, not a single new line is drawn on the map. Every boundary in the model is an existing divisional boundary already administered by the state.

The precedent already exists

Pakistan has already conceded the principle in practice. A separate civil secretariat for South Punjab was established in 2020, and in January 2022 the Senate accepted a bill seeking the creation of a South Punjab province.40 The secretariats at Bahawalpur and Multan have been criticised precisely because they lack budgetary autonomy — files still travel to Lahore for approval.41 That criticism is well founded, and it is an argument for finishing the job rather than for abandoning it.

9 The Constitutional Pathway

Creating a province in Pakistan is legally difficult by design. Understanding exactly how difficult, and where the discretion lies, is essential to any serious proposal.

Table 5 · Constitutional articles engaged

Article	Subject	Effect on the creation of a new province
1(2)	Territories of Pakistan	Amendment required to name any new province
51	National Assembly composition	Seats must be reapportioned among the new units
59	Senate composition	Each new province requires equal Senate representation
106	Provincial assemblies	A new assembly must be constituted for each unit
140A	Local government	Obliges each province to devolve to elected local governments
154–155	Council of Common Interests	CCI membership expands with each new unit
160	National Finance Commission	The divisible pool formula must be recalculated
175	High Courts	A High Court is required for each province
239(4)	Alteration of provincial boundaries	Two-thirds of the affected provincial assembly, then two-thirds of both federal houses
239(5)	Bar on judicial review	As substituted by the 27th Amendment, no court may question a constitutional amendment
48(6)	Referendum	PM refers to a joint sitting; if approved, the question goes to the electorate as “Yes” or “No”

Source: Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973, as amended to the Twenty-Seventh Amendment (2025). Legal opinion places the number of articles requiring amendment at approximately twelve.

The Article 239 threshold

Article 239(4) provides that a constitutional amendment which alters the limits of a province shall not be presented to the President for assent unless it has first been passed by the provincial assembly concerned by a two-thirds majority.42 Creating a new province necessarily alters the boundaries of an existing one. The practical requirement is therefore a two-thirds majority in the affected provincial assembly and two-thirds majorities in both the National Assembly and the Senate.43

It is worth stating plainly what this means. The provincial assembly of the province being divided holds an effective veto over its own division. The members of that assembly are the individuals whose constituencies, party structures and access to patronage would be most directly rearranged by the change. The Constitution asks the people least likely to benefit from reorganisation to authorise it by a supermajority.

Article 48(6): the referendum route

Article 48(6), in the form given to it by the Eighteenth Amendment, provides:

If at any time the Prime Minister considers it necessary to hold a referendum on any matter of national importance, he may refer the matter to a joint sitting of the Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament) and if it is approved in a joint sitting, the Prime Minister may cause such matter to be referred to a referendum in the form of a question that is capable of being answered by either “Yes” or “No”.

— Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, Article 48(6)44

The clause is deliberately constrained. The parliamentary approval requirement was inserted in 2010 precisely to prevent a referendum being used as a plebiscitary substitute for constitutional process — a safeguard written with the referenda of 1984 and 2002 firmly in mind.45 Constitutional practitioners are clear that a referendum cannot by itself create a province: the Article 239 route remains mandatory.46

What a referendum can and cannot do

It cannot create a province. Only a constitutional amendment under Article 239, with the provincial assembly's two-thirds consent, can do that.

It can establish, on the public record and by universal franchise, whether the people of Pakistan want new provinces — and, if the question is framed by region, whether the people of a particular area want to be governed from a nearer capital.

It can confer moral authority that a two-thirds vote in an assembly cannot. As one constitutional lawyer has put it, "the people's will provides moral authority."

It changes the political arithmetic. An assembly may vote against a proposal in the abstract. It is materially harder to vote against a proposal that the electorate of that province has already endorsed at the ballot box.

The sequencing this brief recommends is therefore: consultation, then referendum, then amendment. The referendum is not a shortcut around Article 239. It is the instrument that makes an Article 239 vote politically possible.

The current moment

This is not an abstract debate. A Twenty-Eighth Constitutional Amendment is under active consideration, with proposals reported to include splitting Punjab into three units and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa into two, and bringing Karachi and Gwadar under federal control.47 Legal experts estimate that some twelve articles would require amendment.48 The Interior Minister has stated that new administrative units would only be formed if the people voiced their support, a formulation widely read as pointing to a referendum.49

A necessary caution on legitimacy

Serious voices warn that a referendum conducted through contested institutions could deepen rather than resolve the crisis. Former senator Mustafa Nawaz Khokhar has argued that Pakistan's history of "farcical referenda" under General Zia and General Musharraf means a repetition risks escalating an existential crisis, and that the issue should be deferred to assemblies elected in free and fair elections.50 This brief takes that objection seriously. A referendum is worth holding only if it is transparent, free and fair, conducted by an Election Commission with visible independence, and preceded by genuine public deliberation rather than a compressed campaign. A rushed plebiscite would discredit the idea for a generation.

10 The Incentive Problem: Why It Has Never Happened

Pakistan has debated new provinces for fifty years without creating one. The demands are longstanding, cross-party and geographically dispersed: South Punjab, Bahawalpur, Hazara, a separate Karachi. Resolutions have passed. Secretariats have been built. Bills have been accepted by the Senate. Nothing has been notified.51 A question worth asking is not why the idea is hard, but why it has failed so consistently despite such broad nominal support.

Follow the incentives, not the arguments

The published arguments against reorganisation — administrative cost, the risk of ethnic mobilisation, the sufficiency of local government — are serious and are addressed in the next section. But they do not on their own explain the pattern. Governments have adopted the proposal in opposition and quietly shelved it in office, across parties and across decades. That is the signature of a structural incentive rather than a policy judgement.

Consider what a new province does to the people who must authorise it under Article 239(4).

• It multiplies the number of chief ministers, cabinets and provincial party organisations — and therefore divides authority that is currently concentrated in a small number of provincial leaderships.

• It replaces a single provincial patronage network, controlled from one capital, with several — each with its own base, its own budget and its own leadership pipeline that need not run through the existing centre.

• It creates new political entry points at a tier where candidates can build a following on local delivery rather than on endorsement from above. This is the same reason Article 140A has gone unimplemented for two decades: an empowered mayor is a rival, not a subordinate.

• It redistributes the value of a legislative seat. A seat in an assembly of 371 members representing 127.7 million people carries a different weight from one in an assembly of 100 representing 20 million — and the recalculation is not obviously in the incumbent's favour.

None of this requires bad faith on anyone's part. It requires only that political actors respond to incentives, which they reliably do. But it does explain why the tier of government closest to the citizen has been starved by every provincial government of every party — why local government's share of public spending halved between 2005 and 2024,52 why Punjab has held no local elections in eleven years,53 why Provincial Finance Commission awards remain "infrequent and non-binding,"54 and why the Supreme Court has had to order a provincial government to obey Article 140A.55

The pattern in one sentence

For sixteen years the Federation has declined to revise the formula that constrains it, the provinces have declined to devolve the authority the Constitution obliges them to devolve, and both have declined to create the units that would dilute their own. Grassroots empowerment has not failed in Pakistan for want of a constitutional provision. It has failed because no one holding power has had a reason to want it.

Why this is the argument for a referendum

If the obstacle were technical, the remedy would be technical: better formulas, clearer schedules, stronger commissions. Pakistan has tried all three. If the obstacle is that the actors empowered to decide are the actors with most to lose, then the remedy has to introduce a source of authority that sits outside that circle.

That is precisely what Article 48(6) provides. A referendum does not bypass Parliament — it requires a joint sitting to approve the question. What it does is establish a fact that assemblies find difficult to ignore: whether the governed actually want to be governed this way. The case for putting the question to the people is strongest precisely because the people are the only constituency in this debate with an unambiguous interest in the answer.

11 Counterarguments and Risks

A brief that does not state the strongest objections to its own position is advocacy, not analysis. Four objections deserve direct answers.

1. “Devolution, not division — fix local government instead.”

This is the most substantial objection, and it is correct on the facts. Pakistan already has a constitutional three-tier structure that has never been allowed to work; creating more provinces without implementing Article 140A would reproduce the same failure at a smaller scale.56 If the provinces will not devolve, why assume fifteen provinces would?

The answer is that the two reforms are complements, not substitutes, and that neither succeeds alone. Local government has failed for twenty years under four provincial governments; there is no evidence that a twenty-first year will differ. Smaller provinces change the political economy of devolution: a chief minister of a 14-million-person province governing from a capital two hours from its furthest district has neither the same capacity nor the same need to hoard authority as one governing 127.7 million from Lahore. The recommendation in Section 12 is therefore for both, sequenced together and constitutionally locked — not for one instead of the other.

2. “New provinces cost money Pakistan does not have.”

Each new province requires an assembly, a secretariat, a High Court and a public service commission. This is a real cost. Three considerations bear on it. First, the divisional administrative apparatus — commissioners, regional police offices, divisional line departments — already exists and is already funded; the incremental cost is the political tier, not the whole machine. Second, about eighty per cent of provincial expenditure is already recurrent and administrative,57 which suggests the binding constraint is expenditure efficiency rather than the number of secretariats. Third, the cost must be set against the counterfactual: US$30 billion in flood losses in a single season, and 25.4 million children who will enter the labour market without schooling.

3. “It will unleash ethnic mobilisation and fragment the federation.”

This risk is real, and it is the reason this brief argues for units drawn on size and geography rather than identity. An administrative reorganisation built from existing divisional boundaries makes no claim about whose land anything is, creates no titular nationality and confers no ethnic ownership. India’s reorganisations, including the contested division of Andhra Pradesh in 2014, were executed within the constitutional order without secession. The greater risk to the federation is the status quo: a periphery that concludes, over decades, that the centre of its own province is indifferent to it.

4. “The evidence that smaller units govern better is weak.”

As Section 7 sets out, the strongest econometric treatment of the Indian case finds a significant effect for only one of three new states.58 This brief accepts that finding. But note what the question is. Pakistan is not choosing between a well-governed large unit and a speculative small one. It is asking whether a unit of 127.7 million people, or one of 347,190 square kilometres, can deliver schooling to a child in Rajanpur or a clinic to a family in Awaran. On the evidence in Sections 3 to 6, it currently does not. The burden of proof does not rest only on those proposing change.

12 Recommendations

Digital Debate recommends a sequenced, five-year programme. The sequence matters as much as the content: attempting the constitutional amendment first, without prior settlement of the fiscal formula or a demonstrated public mandate, is the approach that has failed repeatedly since 2010.

Phase 1 · Establish the evidence and the formula (0–12 months)

Constitute an independent Provincial Reorganisation Commission with representation from all four provinces, reporting publicly, mandated to assess divisional-level viability on population, geography, fiscal base and administrative capacity.

Conclude the Eleventh NFC Award before any boundary question is put. A reorganisation negotiated without a settled revenue formula will collapse into a dispute about money. Legislate a default mechanism so that failure to agree cannot again freeze the formula for sixteen years.

Publish a full costing of the transition — assemblies, secretariats, High Courts, public service commissions — against a baseline of current divisional administration expenditure.

Phase 2 · Implement the tier that already exists (6–18 months)

Hold local government elections in every province, including Punjab, where none have been held since 2015.

Make Provincial Finance Commission awards binding and formula-based, with a constitutionally protected minimum share of provincial revenue transferred to local government — mirroring the protection that Article 160(3A) gives the provinces against the Federation.

Devolve, in law and in cash, the functions Article 140A requires: primary health, primary and secondary education, water and sanitation, and municipal services.

Phase 3 · Consult and ascertain the public will (12–24 months)

Conduct structured public consultation at divisional level — hearings, submissions and published deliberation — so that the referendum question follows public debate rather than substituting for it.

Refer the question to a joint sitting of Parliament under Article 48(6), framed neutrally and capable of a "Yes" or "No" answer, with a regional component so that the preference of each affected area is separately recorded.

Hold the referendum under Election Commission supervision with full domestic and international observation. If it cannot be held to that standard, it should not be held at all.

Phase 4 · Legislate (24–60 months)

Move the constitutional amendment under Article 239, with the affected provincial assemblies voting first, presenting the referendum result as the mandate.

Legislate a transition of no less than thirty-six months covering asset and liability division, civil service cadre allocation, High Court establishment and delimitation.

Entrench the local government guarantee in the same amendment, so that the new provinces are constitutionally bound to devolve from the day they are created and the failure of 2010 is not repeated.

The core recommendation

Pakistan should create new provinces built from its existing divisions on criteria of population, geography and administrative coherence rather than ethnicity; it should complete the devolution to local government that the Constitution has required since 2003; it should settle the fiscal formula before it moves the boundaries; and it should ask its people, through the mechanism Article 48(6) already provides, whether this is the country they wish to be governed in.

13 Conclusion

Pakistan's administrative map was drawn for a country of thirty-three million people. It now serves 241.5 million, with a climate that floods a third of the territory, a fiscal formula frozen since 2010, a local tier commanding less than five per cent of public spending, and 25.4 million children outside a classroom.

The argument of this brief is not that new provinces would solve these problems. It is that the current structure cannot, and that the mechanisms designed to compensate for it have demonstrably failed — not once, but consistently, across sixteen years and every governing party. The National Finance Commission has produced no award in three attempts. Article 140A has gone substantially unimplemented since 2003. The trajectory of local government spending has been downwards throughout the period in which devolution was supposedly deepening.

What is proposed here is deliberately unromantic: not a new national idea, but a redrawing of administrative lines along boundaries the state already administers, on criteria — size, geography, population — that no community need feel excluded by. It asks for no territory to be claimed by any language group and creates no minority anywhere. Its case rests on distance, capacity and arithmetic.

And it should be decided by the people it affects. Article 48(6) exists for questions of national importance. It is difficult to imagine one more important than how, and from how far away, 241.5 million citizens are to be governed. The assemblies that must ultimately vote on this are, by the design of Article 239(4), the bodies with the most to lose from it. That is exactly the circumstance in which a democracy should ask its citizens directly.

The divisions already exist. The census data already exists. The constitutional route already exists. What has been missing is a reason for those who hold power to use them — and that reason can only come from the people.

Annex A · Method, Sources and Data

Data vintage

All population, area and district figures are the final results of the Seventh Population and Housing Census (2023), approved by the Council of Common Interests on 5 August 2023. The national total of 241,499,431 covers the four provinces and the Islamabad Capital Territory. Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan are excluded because their census results have not been approved by the Council; including them gives 247,541,947.

Human development index

Provincial HDI values are those constructed by Hafiz A. Pasha from 2023 census indicators using UNDP methodology, published in Business Recorder on 10 December 2024. They are not official UNDP figures and are not strictly comparable with the UNDP's own 2018–19 provincial estimates, which drew on the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey. Both series place the provinces in the same rank order on all components except education.

International comparison

The comparator group in Figure 3 comprises large, populous states with an elected or administratively substantive first-order sub-national tier. Unit counts include federal capital territories where these constitute first-order units. Population figures are UN World Population Prospects 2024 estimates for 2024–25. The group is illustrative rather than exhaustive; a wider comparator set would not change the relative position of Pakistan, which is an outlier against every major democracy.

The illustrative reorganisation model

Punjab figures in Table 4 and Figure 9 are exact divisional totals from Census 2023, Table 12. Divisional totals sum to 127.09 million against a provincial total of 127.69 million; the residual reflects boundary revisions notified after enumeration. Groupings in Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan use rounded divisional aggregates and are indicative. The model is a design illustration intended to demonstrate feasibility, not a recommendation of specific boundaries.

Road distances

Distances in Figure 12 are approximate road distances drawn from public routing data and rounded to the nearest ten kilometres. They are indicative of travel burden rather than exact surveyed distances.

The editable data annex

Every figure and table in this brief is reproduced in the accompanying Microsoft Excel workbook, Digital_Debate_Issue_Brief_Data_Annex.xlsx. Each sheet contains the source data and a native Excel chart bound to those cells: editing a value redraws the chart. Blue figures are hard-coded source data and may be overwritten; black figures are formulas and should not be. Charts may be copied from the workbook and pasted into this document to replace the static images.

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About Digital Debate

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