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Making New Provinces in Pakistan: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

In July and August 2026, Pakistan's Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi stirred up old arguments about the country's constitution by saying that the system has "collapsed" and asking political parties to agree on the need to create new provinces and administrative divisions. The Inter-Services Public Relations department distanced the military from these remarks, while the Pakistan Peoples Party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, the Sindh provincial government, and many others responded critically. This article uses the 2026 controversy as a live case study through which to examine the recurring constitutional, political, and institutional challenges obstructing the formal creation of new provinces in Pakistan, and to assess what the episode reveals about future prospects for reform. Drawing on federalism theory, including Riker's bargaining model, Elazar's federal principle, Watts's comparative federal typology, and Adeney's account of ethnic federalism, alongside close analysis of Article 239 of the Constitution and the historical record of the Bahawalpur, Saraiki, and Hazara movements, the article argues that Pakistan's constitutional supermajority procedure, combined with the security establishment's studied ambivalence and the entrenched interests of dominant provincial elites, continues to make near-term implementation of new provinces unlikely despite renewed high-level political attention.

Keywords: new provinces, Pakistan, federalism, Article 239, Mohsin Naqvi, ISPR, governance reform & constitutional amendment.

Introduction:

On 30 July 2026, addressing the first Pakistan Economic Summit in Islamabad, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi declared that Pakistan's existing system of governance had "collapsed" and that the country's longstanding problems would remain unresolved without fundamental structural reform, including the creation of new provinces or administrative units (Dawn, 2026a; Business Recorder, 2026). "Whether you agree or not," Naqvi told the gathering, "the system we have been living under has collapsed," urging all political parties to "sit together" and "settle every issue of their country, including new units and provinces" (Dawn, 2026a). The remarks, coming from one of the most influential voices in the federal

cabinet, were bound to reignite the debate on provincial reorganisation, which has been periodically raised in Pakistan, notably, since the One Unit order was abolished in 1970, but always remained inconclusive (Latif, 2017; Hafeez, 2014).

The reaction to it was swift, revealing, and characteristic of Pakistan's political ethos. The next day, the Director General of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media wing of Pakistan's military, was asked directly about Naqvi's statement at a press briefing and distanced himself from the remark, saying that any decision on the creation of new provinces "rests solely with the people, their elected representatives, and the democratic process," and that Naqvi's remark was his "personal opinion" (Daily Pakistan, 2026a). Political reactions were no less colorful: the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Sindh provincial wing demanded his resignation as "his statements were against the Constitution" (Dawn, 2026c). The Sindh Chief Minister categorically opposed the idea (Dawn, 2026b). Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's Barrister Gohar Ali Khan accused him of "planning to malign his own party" (Business Recorder, 2026b). Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's political affairs adviser Rana Sanaullah said Naqvi's remarks "made no sense" (Geo News, 2026). This article will use the 2026 Naqvi-ISPR episode as a case study to illustrate the theoretical framework discussed in this article.

Research Question

In the wake of the 2026 tussle over Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's proposals for new provinces and ISPR's response to them, what obstacles remain to the formal creation of new provinces, and what do these dynamics reveal about Pakistan's near- and medium-term prospects for constitutional reform?

Theoretical Framework:

This article uses four different approaches to federalism in order to examine the issue of "restructuring" Pakistan. The first approach is represented by the bargaining model of federal formation proposed by William Riker in 1964. According to his theory, federal formations are the result of an agreement between unionized states, which each demand a bigger share of representation and resources. As applied to Pakistan, this theory helps explain why the most populous region of Punjab has been resisting any changes to the status quo, exemplified by the reaction of Punjab's politicians to Naqvi's remarks in 2026.

The second approach is based on Daniel Elazar's (1987) understanding of the federal principle, according to which, precisely, the specific mode of delimitation prescribed by the constitution is not a mere technicality but defines the responsiveness of the federation to the changing territorial needs of the subunits. This approach focuses on Article 239 of the Constitution of Pakistan discussed below, which is the final criterion of administrative division, hence Naqvi's "administrative units" would have to pass through before they could be formed.

The third strand draws on Ronald Watts's (2008) comparative typology of federal systems, which situates Pakistan among federations characterized by a single, demographically dominant constituent unit whose preferences disproportionately shape federal-level outcomes, including decisions over the federation's own internal boundaries. The fourth strand draws on Kathleen Adeney's (2007) account of ethnic federalism in India and Pakistan, which frames new-province demands as claims for the accommodation of sub-national linguistic and ethnic identity within an existing federal architecture. Taken together, these frameworks generate a specific expectation tested against the 2026 controversy: that high-profile political endorsement of new-province creation, however prominent the source, will encounter both a structural constitutional obstacle in Article 239 and a set of institutional

actors—dominant provincial establishments and, this article suggests, the security establishment itself—with limited incentive to see that obstacle overcome quickly.

Methodology:

This article employs a qualitative, document-based methodology combining constitutional-textual analysis, historical-institutional analysis, and a structured review of contemporaneous news reporting on the 2026 controversy. The core constitutional primary source is Article 239 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973, as amended, together with the 2013 Report of the Parliamentary Commission on the Creation of a New Province in Southern Punjab (Government of Pakistan, 2013). In order to document the 2026 episode under investigation, the current analysis employs reports published by Dawn, Business Recorder, Arab News Pakistan, Geo News, Pakistan Today, and Daily Pakistan, during the week following the initial comments by Naqvi on 30 July 2026. These reports are considered together with contemporaneous journalistic coverage and interpreted as a composite documentary source on the emerging political controversy rather than an end in itself. The current analysis further draws upon secondary sources, including the academic literature on Pakistan's new-provinces question (Latif, 2017; Ahmar, 2013; Javaid, 2018; Mushtaq, 2016; Hafeez, 2014; Siddiqi & Mirza, 2022), and writings on federalism (Riker, 1964; Elazar, 1987; Watts, 2008; Adeney, 2007). In conceptual terms, the current research aims to contribute towards understanding of Pakistan's new-provinces question as a federal policy issue. However, as the 2026 episode was at the time of writing still unfolding, the current analysis has to be seen as a commentary on an ongoing political controversy rather than a conclusion-driven assessment of a completed historical event, as will be further elaborated below.

Historical Background of New Provinces Movements

The Bahawalpur Province Movement:

The basis of the demand for the restoration of Bahawalpur as a separate province is mainly on the fact that it was an acceding princely state and not an annex by Pakistan at the time of partition in 1947. Nawab Sir Sadiq Muhammad Khan Abbasi V signed the accession covenant for Bahawalpur with Pakistan in October 1947, and it was officially notified as a province of Pakistan in 1952 and merged with the One Unit scheme in 1955 (Javaid, 2018; Hafeez, 2014; Hamza, 2025). Restorationists' current demands are based on the fact that Bahawalpur was a princely state that acceded to Pakistan, not on the grounds of a new province. It is argued that since the terms of accession, explicitly or implicitly recognized the rights of the ruler and people of Bahawalpur to the status of a separate province within Pakistan, in technical terms, the demands are different from those of the Saraiki nationalists who base their demands on linguistic and developmental grounds, but both the Saraiki restorationists and Bahawalpur restorationists are operating from approximately the same geographic region (Javaid, 2018; Hafeez, 2014; Hamza, 2025).

Therefore, the overlap has resulted in deep internal divisions within the larger South Punjab restoration movement; the activists demanding separate Bahawalpur province and those demanding a larger South Punjab or Saraiki province comprising Bahawalpur plus other divisions such as Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, etc., have been vying with each other for the leadership of the restoration movement, resulting in weakening the movement as a whole according to its critics (Javaid, 2018; Mushtaq, 2016; Hamza, 2025).

The Saraiki Province Movement:

The demand for a Saraiki/South Punjab province emanates both from linguistic/identity-based arguments and socioeconomic ones. Saraiki is a language predominantly spoken in the south Punjab, which was recognized as an official language by the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq, while at the same time trying to suppress the regionalist sentiments in the area (Langah, 2011; Hamza, 2025). The proponents of South Punjab province argue that the southern districts are relatively less developed compared to the central and northern ones, and they are being disadvantaged in terms of education, federal jobs, and federal resources because of their regional location and representation (Latif, 2017; Hafeez, 2014; Hamza, 2025).

The movement's most prominent activity to date was in 2012, when the National Assembly unanimously endorsed a resolution on the need to form a new southern Punjab province and set up a parliamentary committee, chaired by Senator Farhatullah Babar, tasked with the responsibility of ironing out the provincial formation details (it submitted its report to the National Assembly on 28 January 2013). However, the new province was not formed (not even close to its formation) since the resolution did not secure the consensus of the Punjab Assembly, tasked by the Article 239 with considering provincial division proposals – ultimately, the idea was shelved in the Parliament (Latif, 2017; Government of Pakistan, 2013; Hamza, 2025). Since then, the successive governments of Pakistan, including the current Tehreek-e-Insaf one, which established the South Punjab Secretariat in 2020 to give the region a limited autonomy it requested, periodically raise the issue of South Punjab in the Parliament (but without any follow-up constitutional amendment under Article 239), which many analysts argue is the result of political parties' horse-race politics around the Saraiki-speaking electorate (Mushtaq, 2016; Chaudhry, 2012; Hamza, 2025).

The Hazara Province Movement:

The demand for a separate Hazara province, which includes the Hazara division of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa speaking Hindko language, has existed long before the Eighteenth Amendment of the Constitution in 2010, which officially changed the name of the North-West Frontier Province to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The renaming of the province occurred as a recognition of the dominance of the Pashtun ethnic group in the region, but it was perceived by the considerable non-Pashtun speaking Hazara division as an attempt to impose an alien ethnic label on a region with a different linguistic and possibly cultural heritage (Mushtaq, 2016; Ahmar, 2013; Hamza, 2025). The renaming of the province caused enough of a stir that in March 2014, the Hazara movement was able to secure a significant if non-binding political victory when the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly, controlled by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, passed a resolution approving the creation of a separate Hazara province and calling on the federal government to initiate the necessary legislation in the National Assembly (Latif, 2017; Hamza, 2025).

In a similar vein to the Saraiki movement, the Hazara movement is built both on ethnic-neighbourhood grievances and resource-related argumentation, with the Hazara province proponents pointing to the wealth of natural resources in the region and the division between revenues at the provincial and the division level as another reason why Hazara deserves to be a separate province (Latif, 2017; Ahmar, 2013; Hamza, 2025). Ahmar's (2013) article discusses the Hazara issue as part of a larger potential problem with ethnic tensions erupting in various provincial divisions across Pakistan, where ethnic and territorial disputes in the wake of the Hazara movement could lead to increased political instability if the central government and KP authorities fail to act accordingly.

The Karachi/Mohajir Urdu-Speaking Province Movement:

A further, and politically distinct, new-province demand comes from the Urdu-speaking, and predominantly Mohajir, population of Karachi and other urban centers of Sindh, who have been historically represented by the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). Unlike the Bahawalpur, Saraiki, and Hazara provinces' movements, which to a large extent rely on the argument of regional and ethnic specificity in contrast to a more dominant provincial capital's hinterland, the Mohajirs' claim is further complicated by the fact that they are an urban group, and any division of the existing Sindh would take place on the Sindhi–Mohajir axis, which is actively opposed by most of the Sindhi nationalist political parties and the Sindh Provincial Assembly (Latif, 2017; Siddiqi and Mirza, 2022; Hamza, 2025). According to the survey research conducted by Siddiqi and Mirza (2022), the level of support for new-province proposals in general, including pro-Karachi ones, differed “significantly” across ethnic groups and places of residence, being generally lower in Sindhi than in urban Mohajir respondents, who were to a large extent associated with the initiation of the demand, which illustrates the degree to which the new-province issue in Sindh is intertwined with intercommunal tensions in contrast to the Saraiki and Hazara regions' movements, which to a large extent revolve around more benign mother tongue issues.

Gilgit-Baltistan and the FATA Merger: Contrasting Cases:

Two more cases can be used to demonstrate the issues raised in this article with regard to the constitutional and political processes in Pakistan. Despite having been under Pakistan's control since 1947 and receiving a certain level of autonomy on the basis of the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order of 2009, the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan is not considered a province of Pakistan. The reason for this situation lays in the status of the region as a part of the disputed territory of Kashmir, as well as Pakistan's fears of the impact on its claims to Jammu and Kashmir in case this region is granted full provincial status, which repeatedly vetoed the attempts to change the status quo (Zaheer, 2018; Hamza, 2025). Thus, it can be seen that in the case of Gilgit-Baltistan, the obstacle to its immediate incorporation as a province was related to the Kashmir issue, which does not seem to exist in the cases of Bahawalpur, Saraiki, Hazara, or Mohajir. In fact, Pakistan participates in the dispute with India over the Kashmir region, and this situation complicates Pakistan's domestic politics and its ability to address the issue of dividing this region between itself, India, and China, which controls part of the region.

In turn, the merger of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which was facilitated by the Twenty-Fifth Amendment to the Constitution in 2018, is the only other case of Pakistan adjusting its system of territorial administration in the last half-decade. However, while all the other cases of failed provincialization refer to the creation of new provinces, merging FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has been the only case when Pakistan had to merge one administrative division with another, specifically the autonomous tribal areas with a province (Malik, 2017; Hamza, 2025). For the case of FATA, this distinction was significant, as it could have led to the immediate dissolution of the assembly representing the interests of FATA if the merger was opposed, which never happened. In fact, the merger did not produce any zero-sum gains for any of the actors involved, in contrast to the cases of Bahawalpur, Saraiki, Hazara, etc., as it added to the authority and jurisdiction of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, rather than created a new authority.

Constitutional Background: Article 239 and the Historical Record

The current procedure for the formation of a new province in Pakistan is stipulated by the Constitution of 1973, specifically its Article 239. This amendment act requires a bill passed by a two-thirds majority of both the National Assembly and the Senate and, in the case of dividing an existing province, a two-thirds majority in the assembly of the province being split as well (Hafeez, 2014; Latif, 2017). The last effort to adopt such a bill, which was supported by both the 2012 resolution of the National Assembly and the 2013 report of the Parliamentary Commission led by Senator Farhatullah Babar, failed to gain the required majority in the Punjab Assembly, thus remaining unrealized (Latif, 2017; Government of Pakistan, 2013). The same outcome was recorded in 2014 when the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly passed a similar resolution with regards to the Hazara province (Latif, 2017). Therefore, the failed attempt to divide the Punjab into smaller provinces by the Pakistan government of 2016 may be preceded by a number of previous unrealized efforts at provincial reforms.

The 2026 Controversy: A Case Study in Real Time

Naqvi's Intervention:

Unlike other new-province advocates, who mostly represented either regional nationalist parties or junior lawmakers, Naqvi was a sitting federal minister. More importantly, at the time of the statement, he was considered by many Pakistani observers to be one of the most powerful men in the federal government (Pakistan Today, 2026b). When talking about the need for more provinces, Naqvi did not mean only the Saraiki or Hazara regions but rather the whole federation, claiming that Pakistan's administrative system "should not require people to travel long distances to reach courthouses and government departments" and that "administrative units, provinces, whatever you call them, it will have to be taken to the level of people" (Arab News Pakistan, 2026). However, he did not indicate whether it would be smaller provinces, more autonomy for existing ones, or a different administrative division altogether. "A system with fewer but bigger provinces, more autonomous smaller provinces, or a combination of the two," he said, "is something that the political parties will have to agree upon" (Geo News, 2026).

The ISPR Response:

The reaction of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Directorate, which came out the next day in the form of a press conference, holds considerable analytical interest. By responding to Naqvi's remarks at all, the director general (DG) of ISPR, the public relations arm for Pakistan's military, suggested that his predecessor's statement had gone beyond an expression of personal opinion. Yet by choosing to carefully qualify his response, the DG signaled that the military was not ready to endorse the idea formally. "The federal interior minister," he remarked in response to the specific question about Naqvi's remarks, had "voiced his personal opinion" and that "the question of new provinces would be decided by the people, their representatives, and democracy" (Daily Pakistan, 2026a). In doing so, however, he did not entirely dismiss the logic behind Naqvi's argument, noting subsequently that "governance cannot remain static" and that current "technological development, demographic changes, and shifting statecraft doctrines" required "administrative reforms" (Daily Pakistan, 2026a). A reaction along these lines was precisely what one would expect from Pakistan's military given its presumed interest in careful "gradualism" in all matters of constitutional change. The DG's response struck exactly this note: the military's public relations machinery acknowledged the need for change but stopped short of endorsing any specific remedy, including the creation of new provinces.

Political and Legal Reaction:

The reaction of Pakistan's political parties was, as expected, mixed, although it was more emphatic than usual. Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), which promoted the idea of South Punjab province and rejected the same for Sindh, made contradictory statements. While the party's central leadership spokesperson, Nayyar Bokhari, argued that any proposal for new provinces must be discussed in Parliament and not announced publicly (Pakistan Today, 2026a), Sindh chapter chairman Nisar Ahmed Khuhro was calling for Naqvi's resignation and claimed that he promotes a "hybrid system," incompatible with the Constitution (Dawn, 2026c). Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah outright rejected the idea, saying that it was not acceptable for the people of his province (Dawn, 2026b). Meanwhile, Sindhi nationalists and Lahore lawyers' community declared the proposal unconstitutional (Dawn, 2026b). Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's barrister Gohar Ali Khan accused the government of using the new-provinces agenda to split the opposition's vote, rather than pursue it in earnest (Business Recorder, 2026b). Even Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's adviser on political affairs said that Naqvi's remarks "make no sense," while Defence Minister Khawaja Asif noted that he "is very independent in his functioning" and that he "never attends cabinet meetings" (Geo News, 2026).

Recurring Challenges to New-Province Creation:

The 2026 episode is, then, a condensed and concentrated reiteration of the barriers to any new-province project identified in the secondary literature: first, the constitutional threshold, since regardless of the political clout of Naqvi's remarks, any proposal would have to overcome the hurdle of Article 239's double-majority test not cleared by any province since 1973 (Hafeez, 2014; Latif, 2017). Secondly, the challenge of provincial political establishment pull, evidenced by the fact that even a party voicing support for one new province (the PPP's South Punjab), reserved its ideological opposition to the same being created in its home region Sindh (Pakistan Today, 2026a). Thirdly, the instrumentalization of the issue and the transactional nature of new-province pledges in Pakistan's politics, which PTI's 2026 response and the secondary literature (Business Recorder, 2026b; Mushtaq, 2016) demonstrate, which sees any proposal made by one party to be a ploy by another to split its competitor's parliamentary coalition. And finally, a fourth barrier to the creation of new provinces emerges, one linked to the theoretical considerations laid out earlier in this paper: transactional politics and strategic ambiguity on the part of Pakistan's security establishment. By the DG ISPR concurrently recognizing the need for administrative restructuring while refusing to endorse it as a solution, the military has managed to ensure that the new-province debate continues to be politicized without voting its proposals through Parliament (Daily Pakistan, 2026a; Pakistan Today, 2026b).

A further recurring theme, raised by more than one commentator in the 2026 episode, concerns the implications of Pakistan's centralized system of intergovernmental fiscal transfers via the National Finance Commission award for provincial finances. Critics of Naqvi's reform option, including the economist Nadeem ul Haque, contended that without changes to Pakistan's revenue-sharing rules, new provinces created under his proposal would only add to the country's fiscal woes since they would be "as dependent on federal transfers as the provinces from which they have emerged" (Daily Pakistan, 2026b). The same argument was advanced in the scholarly literature on Pakistan's new provinces (Khan et al., 2019; Chandio, 2015) and appears to apply to all options for amending the constitution, including the hypothetical one envisaged in Article 239. Thus, even if the proposed

amendment is adopted, it would still leave the country with a host of second-order fiscal and administrative questions that may require further debate and deliberation.

Prospects for Reform:

Although the reaction to Naqvi's remarks was predominantly negative or even hostile, certain aspects of the episode appear to highlight conditions conducive to change. Firstly, the fact that the issue has attracted the attention of the Interior Minister and has since been openly discussed, rather than being confined to the periphery of political discourse as it had been during the 2012-2013 Public Accounts Committee hearings or the tenure of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry, signals at least a superficial willingness on the part of the ruling elite to engage with the new-provinces agenda (Dawn, 2026a; Government of Pakistan, 2013). Secondly, while the ISPR (Inter-Services Public Relations), the state's official mouthpiece, stopped short at actually endorsing new provinces, its response did not entirely dismiss the reform agenda and appeared to accept the premise that Pakistan's governance system and administrative structure require revision, even if the specific design of new provinces was not embraced (Daily Pakistan, 2026a).

Third, the continued existence of sub-constitutional administrative concessions such as the South Punjab secretariat created in 2020 provides a plausible mechanism through which many of the grievances fueling new-province agitation may be partially addressed, though likely to the satisfaction of few outside of Bahawalpur, southern Punjab, and Hazara (Mushtaq, 2016). Fourth, the extent to which the 2026 imbroglio dominated cabinet discussions, involved ISPR, triggered demands for resignation, and catalyzed extensive media coverage over multiple days suggests that the new-provinces issue retains enough latent political capital to potentially resurface as a legislative priority in the future, if not in 2026, under different patronage or incentive structures (Dawn, 2026b; Pakistan Today, 2026b).

Analysis:

The evidence presented in this article bears directly on the research question under investigation. The 2026 Naqvi-ISPR episode is a condensed, real-time replay of the structural impediments to new-province creation in Pakistan since 1970: a high-profile tussle among Pakistan's political centers of gravity provokes an oversized media and political reaction, provokes both intra- and inter-party discord, draws a careful, nuanced response from Pakistan's security institutions that leaves the reform's fate to future tussles among political elites, and, explicitly or implicitly, encounters the same basic institutional roadblock to change - the near-insuperable hurdles of a supermajority requirement under article 239 - that has defeated every other new-province initiative to date. Read through Riker's (1964) bargaining framework, the sharply differentiated reactions of the PPP's Sindh chapter, which opposed any reorganization of its own province while nominally supporting a South Punjab province, exemplify precisely the kind of self-interested constituent-unit bargaining behavior Riker's model predicts: political actors readily endorse new-province creation elsewhere while resisting any application of the same logic to territory over which they exercise their own political control.

The ISPR's response is theoretically significant in a further respect. Consistent with this article's extension of Elazar's (1987) and Watts's (2008) frameworks to Pakistan's security establishment as a further institutional actor with a stake in constitutional stability, the DG ISPR's studied neutrality affirming the abstract principle of governance reform while explicitly declining to endorse new provinces as its mechanism suggests an institution positioned to benefit from continued debate over administrative reform without bearing responsibility for

the specific, politically costly choice of provincial boundaries. This posture is consistent with, though not directly predicted by, the theoretical framework's core claim that the ultimate fate of new-province proposals depends less on the intensity of high-level political attention than on the willingness of institutional actors possessing effective veto power to expend their own political capital in overcoming Article 239's supermajority threshold, a willingness the 2026 episode, on the evidence available at the time of writing, does not appear to have been forthcoming from any of the key institutional actors examined above.

Taken together, the 2026 controversy therefore reinforces rather than overturns this article's central argument: Pakistan's new-provinces debate is characterized by a persistent asymmetry between the ease with which the issue can be raised to prominent political attention and the extraordinary institutional difficulty of translating that attention into constitutional change. Whether the heightened salience the 2026 episode generated proves a genuine inflection point or, as with the 2012–2013 Parliamentary Commission process, another instance of substantial rhetorical mobilization without legislative follow-through, remains, as of this writing, an open empirical question that only subsequent political developments can resolve.

Way Forward:

While addressing Pakistan's new-provinces impasse, it is essential to recognize that the range of constitutional and institutional barriers posed by the issues listed above should not be viewed as separate items but rather as an inseparable system, the modification of which requires a comprehensive approach. Simplifying, the problem is that highlighting the issue of new provinces as a popular political demand, as the 2026 Naqvi-ISPR episode demonstrated, is relatively easy, while developing a feasible solution that takes into account the reinforcing nature of the supermajority requirement and the pro-reform bias among political elites remains a formidable task (Hafeez, 2014; Latif, 2017). Therefore, a combination of procedural, strategic, fiscal, and institutional measures aimed at gradually dismantling the status quo while ensuring the coordination of all involved actors' actions is required to overcome the deadlock.

First of all, Pakistan's federal authorities should develop a permanent, specialized, and professional boundary and administrative-reorganization commission that would be empowered to propose recommendations on new provinces and intergovernmental relations in place of ad-hoc parliamentary commissions traditionally utilized in Pakistan, as the failed 2013 Farhatullah Babar episode and the subsequent naqvi-ISPR confrontation demonstrate (Government of Pakistan, 2013; Latif, 2017). Ideally, such a commission would be patterned after Elazar's (1987) federal principle, and its recommendations, particularly in the form of a time-limited requirement for provincial assemblies to approve resolutions on new provinces, would have a binding force upon the Parliament. This approach would simultaneously address the first and the second issue on the list, namely, the need to devise a fair and flexible procedure for new provinces and the necessity to overcome institutional and political inertia. While requiring the assemblies to formally vote on a resolution submitted to them would prevent referendums from being utilized as an instrument of pressure, it would also ensure that the supermajority requirement would be converted into a tool to advance a popular consensus.

Another critical step would be to develop a strategic approach to sequencing, namely, to prioritize the provinces that are supported by a majority of constituents and provincial administrators while deferring the consideration of the disputed new provinces to subsequent

stages. As this article has demonstrated, while the creation of a Hazara province and a South Punjab province seems to have broad-based support among Pakistanis, the exact borders of the latter, with the choice between the Bahawalpur and Saraiki options, remain divisive, as do the details of the administrative reorganization in South Punjab (Mushtaq, 2016). Therefore, it would be reasonable to adopt a gradual approach, build domestic support for the creation of new provinces using relatively uncontroversial cases as pilot projects, and simultaneously utilize the example of the South Punjab Secretariat of 2020 to develop institutional solutions for more complex scenarios.

In addition, it is essential to recognize that new provinces' fiscal framework and the reform of the National Finance Commission award must be pursued concurrently with other constitutional changes, as illustrated by Nadeem ul Haque's criticism of the 2026 proposal as a means of perpetuating the system in which new provinces serve as appendices to existing ones (Daily Pakistan, 2026b). The reason for this challenge's existence is that the reform of the NFC terms and the revision of the revenue distribution formula among provinces is a precondition for financial autonomy, which none of Pakistan's provinces currently enjoys (Chandio, 2015; Khan et al., 2019). Therefore, designing a separate but equally binding reform package that would establish a symmetrical fiscal relationship between existing and former divisions is required to ensure the success of the experiment.

Finally, it is crucial to understand that Pakistan's civilian authorities must develop more efficient institutional mechanisms for communicating with Pakistan's national security bureaucracy to clarify its position on the new provinces and, ideally, prevent the emergence of additional controversies, as the naqvi-ISPR episode demonstrated. DG ISPR, as Watts's (2008) and Adeney's (2007) research on Pakistan's national security complex shows, represents a semi-autonomous actor with transaction costs that must be taken into consideration by civilians when introducing any far-reaching federal reforms, including the introduction of new provinces (Daily Pakistan, 2026a). Therefore, Pakistan's federal political leadership should establish direct permanent communication with ISPR to openly discuss its concerns with any proposed constitutional amendments, including those related to new provinces, instead of relying on the press briefings delivered in response to Naqvi's 2026 interview. In addition to reducing the likelihood of future confrontations, such an approach would increase the transparency of Pakistan's decision-making process in this area, an essential condition for its success. Furthermore, to ensure the support of Pakistan's population for the reform and mitigate the risks associated with the concentration of power among technocrats, it may be necessary to resort to the convocation of a plebiscite or a regional referendum in the areas where new provinces are contemplated, which would make the reorganization more legitimate in the eyes of the public, overcoming the opposition predicted by Riker's (1964) model of sequential decision-making.

Conclusion:

The feud between Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and the Inter-Services Public Relations over Naqvi's calls for new provinces, and the latter agency's careful response to it, is a textbook example, if an unusually high-profile one, of the challenges that have consistently undermined Pakistan's efforts to create new provinces since long before the 2026 fracas. Naqvi's proposals, for all their notoriety, faced and failed to overcome the same obstacles to their implementation that previous, less prominent would-be reformers had encountered and failed to overcome in their turn. These include the near-impossibility of securing the supermajority needed under Article 239 of the Constitution, provincial political

elites' disinclination to embrace the idea of their own province being split up, suspicion among members of political parties of the electoral gains to be made by opponents' provinces being created, and the security establishment's ambiguity as to whether it would support any specific method of dividing the country proposed, however theoretically preferable it might be. Whether Naqvi's outsize notoriety will lead to him securing the sustained political capital needed to push his proposals through to the level of a formal Article 239 amendment or he has simply joined the long queue of officials whose rhetoric briefly drew national attention to the issue only to fizzle out like the 2012-13 Parliamentary Commission on Provinces or the lone Hazara Assembly member who managed to get a resolution passed in 2014 remains an open question. What the episode makes clear, this article has argued, is that meaningful progress on Pakistan's new-provinces question will continue to depend less on the seniority or sincerity of any individual political voice raising the issue than on a fundamental reconsideration of the constitutional procedure, and the underlying distribution of institutional incentives, that has kept Pakistan's provincial map unchanged since 1970.

Pakistan is now facing a choice, the pith of which is best expressed in the simplest possible terms. It is a choice between changing the map or the system. It does not matter if four provinces are changed into twenty-two or twenty-two into four, the average Pakistani will get precisely the same Pakistan, with precisely the same government that keeps control firmly in its own hands. The only change would be the size of the doorway the Pakistani must pass through to enter the secretariat. Pakistan's core issue has never been its division into provinces, but rather the weakness and inefficiency of its governance. Addressing the country's challenges won't come from creating additional provinces, no matter how many are suggested, but from steadily and thoughtfully building capable local governments well-resourced, empowered, and trusted to effectively manage affairs at the grassroots level.

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