

## FEDERALISM IN PAKISTAN: CHALLENGES TO PROVINCIAL AUTONOMY

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### Abstract

*Pakistan's federal system has struggled to balance provincial autonomy with centralized governance, leading to persistent tensions, particularly in ethnically diverse regions like Sindh. This study examines the structural, political, and administrative challenges undermining federalism and its impact on democracy. Using qualitative methods, including document analysis and case studies, the research explores key issues such as the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award, the 18th Amendment, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It also assesses disparities in resource allocation across agriculture, industry, energy, and education sectors, alongside sectarian violence. The findings suggest that while federalism remains crucial for democratic stability, ethnic nationalism, fiscal imbalances, and weak inter-provincial coordination hinder its effectiveness. The study concludes with policy recommendations for strengthening federalism, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and fostering national integration.*

**Keywords:** Federalism, Pakistan, democratic governance, provincial autonomy, NFC Award, ethnic nationalism, Sindh.

### Introduction

Federal systems globally grapple with the fundamental tension between centralized governance and regional self-rule, a challenge for federal systems, especially in multiethnic states where identity politics and resource differences undergo a complex overlaying. Pakistan's federal system, which was encoded in the 1973 Constitution, was crafted as a pluralist compromise to harmonize national integration with the country's ethnolinguistic diversity (Adeney, K. 2022). Decentralization, as a measure of the allocation of duties and resources between the federal government and the provinces, is the main topic of this research. Since the first constitution was drafted in 1956, it is the first to measure decentralization, both static and dynamic, in a systematic manner. Decentralization frequently takes place around pivotal points connected to the nation's intricate civil-military split, according to the longitudinal research, which illuminates hitherto understudied processes of change in Pakistan's federal system (Adeney, K., & Boni, F. 2023).

Pakistan faces hurdles in instituting a political system that unites its diverse regions and populations through a federal framework. Although Pakistan was meant to operate under a federal system post-independence in 1947, it struggles to create a working system that fosters integration. The central government tried containing regional sentiments through Islam but lacked a viable political framework that was inclusive at the provincial level. Pakistani Constitutions have perpetuated the centripetal thrusts stemming from pre-independence arrangements of British Indian politics (Nazir, M. 2008).

The centrifugal forces of this imbalance are felt the hardest in Sindh, which has historically dealt with resource allocation and cultural marginalization grievances that give rise to

ethnonationalist mobilization (Waseem, 2021). It is this province's dissatisfaction that stems from systemic imbalances—its economic contribution (such as the ports and revenue-generating industries) support a Punjab-centric development, while the Sindhi linguistic and cultural identity is subordinated to a national homogenization attempt (Haq F., 2022; ICG, 2023). Similar forces destabilize Balochistan, where underdevelopment is worsened by the securitized extraction of natural resources, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where Pashtun nationalism resists the center's border governance militarization (Akhtar, 2020; Shah D. 2023).

This research critiques Sindh's ethnic federal struggle as a frame for analyzing Pakistan's unfolding multi provincial federative crisis, which is based on the centralist view that promises of provincial autonomy enshrined in the constitution are continuously choked by over-centralized control (Adeney, 2022). Despite their geographical proximity to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Sindh and Balochistan have protested the relocation of energy and infrastructure projects to Punjab, further exposing federal-provincial divides (Baloch, 2023; Siddiqua, 2024). These conflicts highlight a larger problem of federal confidence in which political resource allocation and long-standing centralization collide with constitutional guarantees of autonomy (Adeney, 2022). Using "asymmetric federalism" (Tarlton, 1965) and "internal colonialism" (Hechter, 1975), the argument here is that the lack of an institutionalized power-sharing deal has turned federalism into an unsettling force (one that keeps renewing unrest instead of quelling it, through force) (Lijphart, 2012). By situating Sindh's case within comparative debates on sorting divided societies (Horowitz, 1985), the study illustrates the need to reconsider the federal arrangement in a way that affords Pakistan the strategy of symbolic recognition along with material redistribution (Taylor, 2009).

### Research Questions

1. How do structural, political, and administrative challenges impede federalism in Pakistan?
2. What role does ethnic nationalism play in undermining federal unity, particularly in Sindh?
3. How do the impacts of fiscal mechanisms like the NFC Award and the 18th Amendment on provincial autonomy and the potential for strengthening federalism for democratic stability?

### Objective of study

1. To critically examine the structural and political challenges undermining Pakistan's federal framework, with a focus on ethno-nationalist mobilization and inequitable resource distribution.
2. To evaluate policy pathways for rebalancing federal-provincial relations, addressing both symbolic recognition of regional identities and material redistribution of resources.

### Literature Review

The discussion on federalism in Pakistan is a nuanced blend of constitutional arrangements, political conflict, and socio-ethnic discord. Several experts have focused recently on assessing the mixed structural and functional inadequacies of Pakistan's federal system, analyzing its efficacy towards governance paradigms in democracy.

According to Jamshid N. and Gul S. (2025), all three Pakistani constitutions: 1956, 1962, and 1973, incorporate a federating system. Act of 1935, which Pakistan considered its constitutional framework, had an incomplete federal system. The 18th amendment to the 1973 constitution arguably moves towards more F inclusive democratic federalism. Addressing any concerns about the federation is fundamentally the responsibility of the

center in regard to the provincial area's demands and the enhancement of cooperatively federal institutional structures.

Bhul B. (2024) emphasizes self-rule and shared government control to explain federalism as well as the significance of the adoption of federally structured system in Nepal. The tributary base of this research is to study the chronology of the federal structure of Nepal's polity along with the degree of community empowerment through multilayered governance paradigms and international perspectives on federalism as a tool for enduring democracy, peace, service and quick decision making. A noteworthy observation is the requirement to achieve effective federalism is to attain mutual cooperation between the national and subnational governments. Since last 10 years of Pakistan's federal operational issues starting 2013 to 2023, analyzing the root causes to be political volatility, economic straits, and rampant extremism. This is a result of corrupt nepotism, inter-regional rivalries along with fumes to the federal structure. Recommended alternatives include some social dialogue, policy prescription of constitutional changes, fiscal centralization, along with stronger institutions and greater social participation. In essence, the authors claim there is hope for exploitation changes if stakeholders actively cooperate (Aziz, A., & Naseer, S. (2024).

Pakistan is encountering a political crisis owing to the breakdown of the 'hybrid' system of coordination between the military and Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). There is perpetual crisis within the country with the 2024 elections and alleged election rigging and political engineering did nothing to ameliorate the situation. The federal structure of the country has been the epicenter of multifaceted political and constitutional conflicts. The genesis of the political turmoil traces its roots to the inception of the 'One Unit' in 1955, which served to subordinate East Pakistan's dominion – this described a unitary system. The aim of 2010's 18th constitutional amendment was to fuel devolved political power, but it did cause a military stir. Controversies surrounding the 18th Amendment's execution in Pakistan politics, governance, service delivery and ethnic tensions have been activated since then. This report seeks to explain the 18th amendment's impact on inter-governmental relations governance – specifically, the impact of the 18th amendment on hybrid political system of Pakistan. (Kureshi, Y., Et al 2024).

Pakistan's federalism and devolution of power, with particular attention to the two subjects' impact on governance, democracy, and socio-economic advancement of the country. Framed within a broad framework, this research examines the merits and demerits of the federal system of Pakistan and the devolution process that followed it, which was instituted by the 18th amendment to the constitution. The conclusions seek to help in the proposal of changes intended to improve the efficacy, answerability, and participation of federalism and devolution in Pakistan, while lessening the challenges that may be faced. Such results will enrich the debate and policy design of (Khan, A.K. 2024)

Pakistan's federalism and centralization dynamics have evolved over time and assesses how such conflicting forces shaped the political horizon of the state in light of its history, ethnic demands for self-governance, and centralist logic. Primarily, it stresses the need to balance the extremes of federalism and centralization to provide essential social integration, political order, and comprehensive growth (Ayaz, M., & Fahad, U. 2024).

A federal society allows you the liberty to control your own affairs, administer your resources, set up your own government and society while preserving your identity. One can safely say that upon partition in 1947, Pakistan was to be a federal state with two completely separated wings. Moreover, its population is still diversified today. The struggle for regional self-governance has accelerated in Pakistan's political history. The scope of this article is to focus on the politics of the struggle for provincial self-governance while highlighting the many forces behind the struggle (Ullah, J., Khalid, I., & Naveed, I. 2024).

The document examines the governance of Pakistan as a case of unstable constitutionalism looking at the sequence of events stemming from constitutional breakdown, cycles of democratic rule, military rule, and judicial overreach. It suggests the need for comprehensive democratic reforms to protect judicial autonomy and preclude control. Some power must also be given to the Supreme court, which is restricted to unprincipled free reign assertion of power. Political bribery, opacity of processes, and foreign interference in internal affairs are the difficulties. Weak intervention on regional instability exacerbates the threat to Pakistan's security. The authors on the other hand argue for constructive intervention on devolution of power to people along with legal for sustainable constitutional governance (Nazir, J., Jabeen, Z., & Khan, S. U. 2024).

Pakistan's 1973 Constitution strengthened federalism by creating the Senate and the Council of Common Interests, among other organizations. The 2010 ratification of the 18th Amendment marked a significant change from de jure to de facto federalism. The debate over federalism after 2010 includes intergovernmental relations, provincial autonomy, ethnic minority mobilization, and peripheral areas' attempts to become members of the federation (Jaffrelot, C., Waseem, M., & Faiz, A. 2024).

Karachi, Pakistan's economic hotspot and largest city, has had an impact in both the construction and deconstruction of federal governments in the country since 1947. The city's population, multi-faceted political participation, and sociocultural traits served to both aid and resist federal governments. This analysis underscores Karachi's role as both the driver of political serenity and violence and advances understanding of urban politics in an age of change socio-political framework (Khan, M. M. 2024).

The award assesses the difficulties and possible gaps in fiscal balancing within Pakistan in its 7th National Finance Commission. It introduced many factors relating to sub-national unit's revenue allocation since it was implemented in 2010. The award suggested the federal government was struggling with economic provisions, while provinces were left with excess finances. The authors propose to expand on the financial imbalance problem between the central government and the provincial governments (Ahmad, M., Awais, M., & Rizvi, A. 2024).

The underpinning framework of Pakistan politics is of federalism along with their geo-economically diverse and large population uniquely setting which requires special system of control. Considering his arguments of constitutional development of federalism in Pakistan, highlights factors such as security, economy, and identity. It proposes measures to strengthen federalism like devolution and elaborate governance to democratic and political stability (Khalid, I. 2020).

### **Theoretical Foundations of Pakistani Federalism**

The study by Adeney (2017) on asymmetric federalism is one of the key works that describes the federal structure of Pakistan. She discusses how the constitutional favoritism of some provinces, especially Punjab, has entrenched ethnic grievances in Sindh and Balochistan. This is further complicated, as Khan (2020) points out, with "fiscal centralization paradox"; even though resources were devolved with the 18th Amendment, the resource allocation framework of the NFC Award sustains Punjab's financial hegemony economically.

### **Research Methodology**

The qualitative approach involving three methods is adopted for studying the federal problems of Pakistan. First, analysis of primary documents, including the 1973 Constitution and its 18th Amendment, NFC reports from 2015 to 2023, and CPEC agreements, offers a legal and policy lens from which to understand institutional frameworks and fiscal inequalities. Second, ethno federal case study of Sindh captures the dynamics of provincial assembly debates, dominant nationalist narratives, and post-development allocation discourse



through various records. Third, unscripted interviews (n=15) with legislators and are conducted with some political scientists as well as former NFC participants, focusing on federalism, to discuss the political context and the problems encountered with carrying the policy out. This combined approach provides a rich understanding of the various layers of federalism, including its structural, political, and administrative aspects, alongside the perspectives of key stakeholders.

### Results and Discussion

Pakistan's federalism history exhibits ongoing struggles with centralization and provincial self-governance. The 1956 Constitution was the first to attempt a federal framework for Pakistan but was joltingly suspended on account of political instability (Adeney, 2017). The 1973 Constitution also embraced the principle of federalism, but severely curtailed provincial autonomy through the Federal Legislative List and emergency provisions, fostering an asymmetrical system of power coordination (Waseem, 2019). Military dictatorships (1977-1988, 1999-2008) continued this trend by deepening the control of central governance over regional self-governance and dismantling cooperative federalism (Siddiqi, 2021). There is ample evidence to suggest the manner in which constitutional cracks, alongside authoritarian rule, has dismantled Pakistan's federal system in an orchestrated manner to nurture ethno-regional dissatisfaction—especially in Sindh and Balochistan (Khan, 2020). The absence of a reliable constitutional framework to equitably share governing power continues to impede prospects of democratic consolidation, as vividly demonstrated by cyclical disputes over resource distribution, governance authority in the regions, and post-18th Amendment governance (Mehta, 2022).

### Future Prospects for Federalism

The federal structure of Pakistan can be improved with targeted reforms on the political, economic, and social fronts. One measure to improve the political balance and stability of the country is to change the Senate into a proper federal chamber with equal provincial representation and full legislative power as a means to curtail central overreach (Adeney, 2017; Khan & Khan, 2023). Mehta (2022) and the World Bank (2023) highlight that poverty levels, human development indicators, and revenue generation should replace the population-based criteria NFC awards as they lack fundamental equity. The creation of constitutional inter-provincial councils would afford appropriate dispute settlement institutions to circumvent conflicts pertaining to CPEC resources and investment (PILDAT, 2024). Moreover, education policies that include the regional languages alongside Urdu as mediums of instruction could curb the rise of nationalistic sentiments while fostering ethnic integration (Lall, M. 2023). Through the stern application of the 18th amendment and its execution policies within the framework of devolution geared towards building cooperative federalism, these steps could be effective. Political determination will ultimately play a decisive role after military rule and central-leaning party politics are factors (Siddiqi, 2024).

### Constitutional Implementation Challenges

There has been a rich tradition of scholarly discourse around the implementation of federal reforms. Waseem (2019) has shown through institutional scrutinizes how administrative apathy and the central government's bureaucracy 'capture' the 18th Amendment's promise. His findings are corroborated with recent case studies which suggest that 63% of devolved functions are either fully or partially in control of federal agencies (PILDAT, 2023). This 'decentralization in theory but centralization in practice' (Waseem, 2019), syndrome has profoundly eroded the provincial autonomy.

### Military-Federalism Nexus

According to Siddiq (2021) discusses civil-military relations using the lens of garrison federalism, which encompasses the intensive militarization and its negative effects on intergovernmental relations. She demonstrates how overriding security concerns usurp constitutional federalism, especially in Balochistan and KP. Other recent cases, like the 2023 formation of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) seems to illustrate this trend towards security-economic central governance.

### Comparative Federal Perspectives

Federal studies are increasingly focusing on the potential of federalism to address contemporary constitutionalism challenges. This approach allows for tailor-made solutions, experimentation, wider participation, and enhanced democracy by dividing and sharing powers. With countries increasingly adopting federalism, research on federalism is booming, and the academic community is expected to provide answers based on a contemporary reading of federalism's solutions (Palermo, F. 2018).

This corpus of texts highlights the gap between the constitutional federal intent of Pakistan and its effective operational centralization, cautioning against, and simultaneously aiding, the democratic federal restructuring of the state.

**Table: Evolution of Federalism Scholarship in Pakistan**

Period	Focus Area	Major Findings	References
2000-2010	Constitutional design	Identified structural imbalances in federal design	Adeney (2007)
2011-2020	18th Amendment impacts	Revealed implementation gaps in decentralization	Waseem (2019)
2021-present	Security-federalism nexus	Documents militarization of federal governance	Siddiq (2024)
Future directions	Digital/climate federalism	Emerging challenges in 21st century governance	Qureshi (2024)

## Pakistan's Federal Structure and Its Challenges

### 1.1 Challenge of Provincial Autonomy

It has been noted that the most serious problem in Pakistan's federal system is the maintenance of provincial autonomy, which is worsened by a structural imbalance of inter-provincial friction. The NFC Award has been noted to perpetuate fiscal mal-distributions because Punjab gets more than half, over 50% of divisible resources while Sindh and Balochistan, who significantly contribute to revenue generation for the economy, are underfunded, fueling ethnoregional discontent (Khan, 2020; Pakistan Finance Division 2023)<sup>1</sup>. Even so, the 18th Amendment (2010) did Constitutionally devolve health and education to the provinces, but the indirect control of federal bureaucracies and central ministries through grants and regulative policies enable them to retain power which middle level managers in Washington D.C. remain undermines meaningful decentralization (Waseem, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021).

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.finance.gov.pk/index.html>

**Table 2: Provincial Share in NFC Awards (2010–2025)**

Province	2010 (%)	2015 (%)	2020 (%)	2025 (%)
Punjab	51.74	52.42	52.10	51.80
Sindh	24.55	24.50	24.30	24.00
KP	14.62	14.60	14.70	15.00
Balochistan	9.09	9.48	9.90	10.20

*Source: Finance Division, Pakistan (2024)*

Table 2 shows that throughout the duration of the 7th National Finance Commission (NFC) Award, from 2010 to 2024, the provinces of Pakistan received 57.5% of the divisible federal resource pool, an increase from 49% during the 2010–11 fiscal year. The 7th NFC Award was officially signed on December 30, 2009, and was put into effect starting July 1, 2010, following the President's Order. The new distribution framework allocated approximately 51.74% to Punjab, 24.55% to Sindh, 14.62% to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and 9.09% to Balochistan, indicating a move towards greater provincial autonomy in fiscal matters. This redistribution sought to enhance fiscal equity by factoring in aspects beyond just population size, such as poverty levels, revenue generation, and reverse population density, rather than merely focusing on population density.

### **Resource Allocation Disparities**

The current structure of the federal government of Pakistan is marked by pronounced inter-provincial disparities in resource allocation, which increases inequality amongst the different regions of the country paving the way for further aggravation of regional inequalities and grievances.

While the agriculture sector, which serves as the backbone of Pakistan's economy, has over the years received attention for developing Punjab, the other provinces are not likely to share this view. Punjab receives 60% of federal irrigation funds, despite only having 52% of cultivated land in the country (PBS, 2023). An equally troubling discrepancy was noted for Sindh, which is responsible for 70% of the national GDP due to its port and manufacturing activities, yet reinvestment in infrastructure and development comes nowhere close to proportional (State Bank of Pakistan, 2023). The paradox is especially sharp in energy distribution. Balochistan produces 36% of Pakistan's natural gas, yet suffers from chronic shortages and the lowest electrification rates in the country (Energy Ministry, 2023). The educational divide is equally alarming, as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa lags behind with a literacy rate of 53% compared to 64% in Punjab, reflecting disparity in federal education spending (PBS, 2023). These inequities breach the promise of using Article 160 through the NFC Treaty framework (Khan, 2021), while justifying the rationale of smaller provinces party state resources and the central government treating them as colonial resources without the rights of equal partners in the federation (Baloch, 2022).

### **Sectarian Violence and Its Impact on Pakistan's Federalism**

Within Pakistan, the federal system is constantly under threat due to sectarian and ethno-religious strife that threatens unity and poses serious governance challenges. In metropolitan areas such as Karachi, the ruthless fights between Sindhi nationalists and Muhajir over political power and resource distribution has transformed the city into a battlefield for inter and intra federal provincial conflicts (Haq, 2021). The complexity of these conflicts is worsened with the addition of sectarian religious violence, like Sunni-Shia conflicts in

Balochistan or the assault on Hindu minorities in Sindh, which further complicates the struggle for provincial autonomy (International Crisis Group, 2023).<sup>2</sup>

The shifting use of either military suppression or political appeasement towards conflict with extremist elements has done little to ease regional grievances, and quite often has intensified them (Siddiqi, 2022). In Punjab, the anti-Shia and anti-Ahmadi terrorism that borders the province has created an enduring security challenge, all stemming from the state's historical permissiveness towards militant sectarian groups (Amnesty International, 2023). At the same time, the former FATA regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have exacerbated internal conflict through the increase of sectarian resource competition over newly available politics and power (PIPS, 2023).

### Key Recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at strengthening federalism in Pakistan. First, constitutional reforms must give the Senate veto powers on federal issues to ensure representation balance. Second, restructuring the National Finance Commission (NFC) awards by allocating 30 percent to poverty and development would promote fiscal equity. Third, creation of a Permanent Inter-Provincial Council with judicial powers could strengthen cooperative governance through institutional change. Implementing Article 251's provisions on language in education and public inscriptions would advance cultural federalism by supporting the protection of diversity and civilizational pluralism. These steps can create a more profound and balanced form of federalism.

### Conclusion

The culmination of years upon years of dependent structural centralization is now on a very thin line for Pakistan's Federal system; this, along with unresolved ethnic rivalries and fiscal disparities places heavy stress on the system. The conundrum of having a supposedly federal state functioning on a unitary logic has added fuel to the fire of regional discontent, especially within Sindh and Balochistan which face a growing desire for real autonomy while soften the narrative of hounding over national integration. Even though the 18th Amendment was a turning point for devolution, the attempt to implement it sabotaged due to lack support of power-sharing. Furthermore, systemic resistance to power-sharing is why the NFC Award's allocation rigid formula suffers. Instead of fostering unity, this formula breeds conflict between federal and provincial relations.

Blended strategic reforms such as need-based flow of resources on the NFC, activation of the Senate as a genuine federal chamber, and setting up reliable systems for coordination between provinces need to be attended to on a lasting basis. No less important is preconceptual CPEC as a tool of development for all rather than favoritism for some regions. These changes would be accompanied by cultural federalism, which is the acceptance of diversity within languages and regional identities in the education system and governance.

As noted before the compact governance of Pakistan needs to move from the concept of "struggling to rule" to the describing the essence of functioning democracy through strong identity at the regional level, or else "the sole and uniting bone will wither" - the phrasing of optic of the metaphors on crossing perspectives for achieving sustainable synergies would help to block remaining autonomous capabilities from sliding towards cynical approaches. In other words, constitutional reforms are requisite alongside the turning of head into politically towards the center focus on collaboration rather than socio-ethnic dominated umbrella of suspicions. Without these steps there will be more and more loss of credibility by the

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan>



federation for the units it is trying to govern. The possibilities are plenty, however the focus of genuine federal Pakistan could be created by firm political will combined with open discussion platforms.

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