



THE SIRAIKI PROVINCE IMBROGLIO: TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

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The Siraiki nationalist demand for a new province in south Punjab has been part of Punjab's political landscape since the early 1980s. This movement is part of a larger political campaign demanding territorial reorganisation of Pakistan. These claims picked up steam especially in the aftermath of the passage of the 18th Amendment in 2010. This amendment had empowered the provincial majorities by transforming 57.9% of the divisible pool to provinces, as per the 7th NFC Award, subsequently generating a reaction amongst provincial minorities. The result was the galvanisation of demand for the creation of new provinces, led by the Siraiki nationalists in south Punjab, Hindko-speaking Hazara activists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Muhajirs in urban Sindh. Despite an almost three-decades long existence of the claim for a separate Siraiki province, this issue was hardly visible during the 2024 elections. Where does the movement for a separate Siraiki province stand at present? Why have the mainstream political parties seemingly distanced themselves from this issue? Is it a consequence of the administrative decentralisation underway in south Punjab since 2018?

The demand for the creation of a new province in south Punjab is a long-running objective of the Siraiki nationalist movement. This movement, like other ethno-nationalist movements in Pakistan, is primarily a middle-class phenomenon. The quest for a new province is rooted in the perception of cultural, material and political marginalisation of the Siraikis at the hands of a purportedly Punjabi-dominated state of Pakistan. Political aspirations of the Siraiki movement have been expressed by groups such as the Siraiki Suba Mahaz (Siraiki Province Front) and Taj Langah's Pakistan Siraiki Party (PSP), amongst others.

The quest for a separate Siraiki province started with the recognition of Siraiki as an official language in the 1981 Census of Pakistan. At the start of the movement, the biggest grievance pertained to the non-recognition of Siraiki as a distinct language. Conventionally, the Punjabi intelligentsia described Siraiki as a mere dialect of the Punjabi language - a claim still repeated by the Punjabi nationalists. This claim was vociferously rejected by the Siraiki literati who referred to Lord Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India as a proof of the historically

distinct existence of their language. Once the struggle of the Siraiki intelligentsia succeeded in 1981 in this regard, the inevitable transition from language to territory took place in the case of Siraiki movement. This language-land spillover is very similar to the trajectory of language movements across the border in India where the linguistic question was couched in broader material anxieties that subsequently acquired a territorial dimension. In the case of the Siraiki province movement, the issue is complicated by the presence of a rival ethnic movement in Bahawalpur. The Bahawalpur nationalist movement has advocated for the creation of a separate Bahawalpur province in an attempt to revive the erstwhile princely state of Bahawalpur. This movement hit its peak in 1970 at the end of One Unit but was subsequently overtaken by the more vibrant Siraiki province movement with its epicenter in Multan.

The Siraiki nationalist movement has marched ahead with the demand for 'right-sizing' the province of Punjab despite the absence of a broad-based electorally viable Siraiki political party. Pakistan's political landscape has historically witnessed public mobilisation by ethnic parties such as the Awami League (AL), National Awami Party (NAP), Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and various Sindhi, Pakhtun and Baloch nationalist parties. Unlike these parties, the 'sons of the soil' parties are either non-existent or are still at an infancy stage of operationalisation in South Punjab. Since the passage of the 18th Amendment, the demand for the Siraiki province became visible after it was endorsed by the Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N), the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI). In 2012, when the PPP was in power at the federal level, it established a commission to evaluate the prospects of territorial reorganisation of the federation of Pakistan. This development was followed by two resolutions passed by the Punjab Assembly endorsing the creation of two provinces in Punjab, i.e. south Punjab and the Bahawalpur provinces. Thus, the demand for a new province in Punjab received official endorsement at both national and provincial levels.

Creation of a separate province in south Punjab was a major electoral slogan for the PPP in the 2013 elections campaign. It was matched by the PML-N which went one step further and championed the creation of two new provinces based in Multan and Bahawalpur respectively. However, the PPP failed to reap electoral dividends on the issue of the new province. In 2018, the demand for a new province once again came to the forefront of the election campaign when several prominent politicians from the PML-N broke away from the party for its alleged failure to deliver on the demand for a new province. These disgruntled electables, led by Khushro Bakhtiar, formed the South Punjab Province Front that eventually merged into Imran Khan's PTI. The issue of south Punjab was once again set ablaze by slogans of creation of a new province during the 2018 election campaign. Unlike the PPP in 2013, the PTI made impressive electoral gains as it won 25 out of 49 seats from south Punjab.

During the tenure of Imran Khan (2018-2022), a process of administrative decentralisation ensued. The PTI government announced the establishment of two Secretariats in Multan and Bahawalpur to respond to complaints of centralisation of power coming from the residents of south Punjab. In this way, the seat of power, the takht-e-Lahore (Lahore throne), was finally going to have a presence in the Siraiki waseb. The planning for a separate South Punjab Secretariat to be established in Multan and Bahawalpur started in 2019. Initially 18 departments were to be operationalised in these secretariats with the proposed creation of 385 new posts. Whilst the developments on this front have been slow, partially impacted by the fall of the PTI government in April 2022 as a result of no-confidence motion, the administrative decentralisation process continued under both the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government and the Shahbaz Sharif-led government that came into power after the 2024 elections.

The issue of a new province did not figure prominently during the 2024 elections. Amongst the mainstream parties, only the PPP raised slogans about the creation of a new province in south Punjab. Neither the PML-N nor the PTI campaigned on the need for division of a Punjab province. What explains this perceived apathy towards the issue of a new province? The 2024 elections witnessed a populist surge in Pakistan when the PTI-backed independent candidates made impressive gains in the elections. Was the demand for a new province lost in the mist of populist euphoria? Did the administrative decentralization—underway in south Punjab since 2018—answer the grievances of the people of south Punjab thereby taking the wind out of the nationalist movement? Are the administrative measures adopted since 2018 enough to answer the long-running sense of marginalisation felt by residents of south Punjab? Will this administrative decentralisation be sufficient for the leaders and intelligentsia of a movement that is looking for an identity-based province?

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