

## CHANGING DYNAMICS OF CENTRE - PROVINCES RELATIONS

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### **Introduction**

It is important to acknowledge that Centre province relations are once again passing through a difficult period. While this is not entirely unusual, a new dynamic has entered the equation. Many of the disaffected groups in the smaller provinces are now resorting to terrorism. This is particularly visible in Baluchistan and the tribal areas but occasional violent acts in Sindh have also been seen. This factor complicates an already complex picture. Not only political issues have to be resolved with sagacity and determination but the factor of terrorism has also to be concurrently addressed.

Another aspect not entirely new has assumed greater significance in the recent past. This is the perception in the smaller provinces that Punjab and the Centre are different sides of the same coin. There always was a Punjab factor in centre province relations but with shortage of irrigation water becoming a major issue in Sindh and parts of Baluchistan, this aspect has assumed greater significance. Any resolution to the issues between the centre and provinces would have to include an arrangement that removes this feeling of Punjab domination.

There are some common issues common to all provinces and solutions have to be found that will impact everybody. Yet, there are some issues that are specific to a particular province and answers will have to be found that satisfy specific needs. It is with this in mind that problems in each province other than Punjab are discussed separately so that local issues are highlighted leading to a solution.

### **Baluchistan**

There is simmering unrest in Baluchistan with Baluch nationalist deeply suspicious of the Federal government. They believe that the centre is only interesting in exploiting the resources

of the province without giving anything substantial in return. There is also a fear that the centre is trying to change the demography of the province by bringing non Baluchis to Baluchistan in large numbers.

It is in this context that something seemingly good as the development of Gwadar is looked at with suspicion. In a newspaper interview the Baluch leader, Ataulah Mengal, has openly voiced the concern that development of Gwadar will lead to a large influx of non Baluchis which will change the demographic balance in the province. His main concern is political; that with the increase in non Baluch population the power balance in the province will change. He obviously has in mind the Sindh situation where the influx of immigrants from India changed the dynamics of political power in the province.

There is no obvious solution to this problem. If the province has to develop people will have to be brought in from outside. Once a certain person has started to live there, he or she cannot be denied civic or political rights. The concern of the Baluch nationalist leaders while not without foundation has no obvious solution.

The perception that Centre is exploiting natural resources of the province is focused on mineral resources, in particular mining of gas reserves. There is a feeling that the indigenous population has not been suitably compensated for something taken out from its area. This has led to acts of terrorism particularly in the Bugti area. While rocket attacks on gas installations around Sui are part of an elaborate blackmail attempt by a tribal leader to extort more money from the Federal government, it is not seen by Baluch nationalists in this light. They see it wrongly as some kind of armed struggle against exploitation of the province. So far this may be a fringe opinion of some extremists but the trend is disturbing and must be seen as a threat to the federation.

This perception can only be countered if sufficient funds are made available for development. So far some money has been handed over to the Sardars but this has obviously not filtered down to common people.

It is instructive that the centre's desire to build military cantonments in the province has evoked such an angry response. The nationalists see them, wrongly in my opinion, as part of plan to subjugate them. Whatever the truth, perceptions are more important than reality and there is much that the centre has to do change this perception in a positive direction.

### **Sindh**

The grievances in Sindh are largely political but now the shortage of irrigation water has created a tangible and potent cause of unrest. The political reasons are simple. The centre since the time of Zia has targeted the political leadership of Sindh and tried to eliminate it physically or politically. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the undisputed and wildly popular leader of Sindh was hanged, inflicting a deadly wound on the psyche of the people of Sindh. His daughter, Benazir Bhutto may have many faults but has been treated more harshly than others accused of similar complaints. Her husband has only now been bailed out after eight years in jail. Interestingly, he has already served whatever sentence would have been given to him if convicted of corruption.

There is heavy central interference in the politics of Sindh province. Again and again after elections PPP majorities in Sindh have been forcibly turned into minorities. The latest example being the 2002 election where the PPP once again emerged as single largest party in the country and yet was not only denied a role in the centre but was also forcibly kept out of the government in Sindh.

There is a widespread perception in rural Sindh that the centre in cahoots with an ethnic party has decided to permanently deny a place at the top to its real leadership. This perception started in the later seventies and has strengthened over a period of time. We are now hearing reports that some kind of dialogue is taking place between the government and the PPP. Let us hope it leads to a positive conclusion.

The country has been in the grip of drought for the last many years. This has meant that there is an overall shortage of water. This

requires careful water management and the shortage has to be shared equally by everyone. Yet the people of Sindh believe that their share of the water has been given by the centre to Punjab. This is factually wrong but it is a perception that exists widely. The political grievance of Sindh has now been given a tangible substance in the shape of this problem. For the first time ever, we have heard of some attempts at blowing electricity pylons etc in rural Sindh. This is not a major problem as yet but one can only hope that it is not a precursor of things to come.

A great deal needs to be done to clarify this erroneous perception. No real attempt has been made to reach out to the people in Sindh and tell them the real story. People and resources must be committed to this task.

### **NWFP**

The NWFP considers itself a senior partner in the management of the Federation, so its grievances are limited yet on the jobs issue and certainly on the matter of Kalabagh dam, there is a deep suspicion of the Federal government. There is also a feeling among some elements that the centre is always keen to suppress genuine Pakhtun identity. In this context the issue of renaming NWFP keeps cropping up again and again. It is rightly said that if other provinces can have names suggesting linguistic or ethnic identity why shouldn't the frontier. There is no reason for the Centre to be difficult on this issue and an alternate name should be considered.

The fighting currently going on the tribal areas of the frontier is not essentially an issue of centre province relations because the people being targeted are terrorists. Yet, this issue has the potential of destabilising the entire province. Already we are starting to see some incidents of terrorism in places outside the tribal areas, such as Hangu, and this may spread to other places.

There is also the danger that as the casualties among the local people mounts, it has the potential to become a centre/ tribal area issue and by extension a centre Pakhtun issue. The battle

against foreign extremists using our territory for their purposes and their local partners must be fought but force has to be matched with political action. The casualties to our armed forces are mounting by the day. We must find a way to isolate the locals from the foreign extremists and bring this matter to a swift conclusion.

The issue of Kalabagh Dam has simmered for a long time. With water scarcity a genuine and frightening prospect, the necessity for new water reservoirs has assumed greater significance. The easiest to start is the Kalabagh dam, because a fair amount of preparatory work has already been done. However it is going to lead to a very negative reaction in NWFP and Sindh. One way out is to find other places to create water reservoirs. Some options in this connection have been mentioned and need to be explored. In any case, Kalabagh Dam has become such a politically sensitive issue that its negatives far outweigh the positives.

I am not going to refer to problems in Northern Areas and Azad Kashmir because this would be beyond the scope of this paper but it must be kept in mind that all is not well there either. Particularly the people in the Northern areas feel disenfranchised and something must be done to bring them into the mainstream of the country.

### **Common Issues**

I have described the factual position of the situation on the ground. Some of these issues are a problem of perception. Others are political. Some people will argue that problems are also created by a faulty constitutional arrangement governing the relations between the centre and the provinces. Leaders of an organization called PONM have called for a new constitution because they don't accept the quantum of provincial autonomy in the current one. Do we need a new constitutional arrangement to govern the relationship between the centre and the provinces?

### **Constitutional Issues**

In my opinion the quantum of provincial autonomy envisaged in the 1973 constitution is adequate. We have seen in the past that when there have been governments of different parties in the centre and the province, provincial governments were able to resist central encroachment and bullying. An example would be Nawaz Sharif government in the Punjab and PPP in the centre during the period 1988 to 1990. Same was the situation in Baluchistan where Akbar Bugti's government was able to resist the centre.

In one respect changes can be made to make the provinces feel more secure. The 1973 constitution provides for a Federal list, a concurrent list and the residue left to the provinces. It is about time that the concurrent list was done away with. There are 59 items in part one of the federal list and eight more in part two of the federal list. This is and should be enough.

As regards the concurrent list, there are 47 items in it and there is no reason why they should remain with the federation. For example what business is it of the federation to legislate on mechanically propelled vehicles or welfare of labour or trade unions? Provinces are fully competent to handle this and all other matters mentioned in this list.

Shared responsibility in these matters can lead to unnecessary bickering. The council of common interest envisaged under article 153 of the constitution to mediate disputes has failed to perform its function basically because the federal executive authorities have never considered it necessary to invoke this council. Therefore the only solution is to do away with concurrent jurisdiction. I may add that this was also envisaged by the original framers of the constitution.

### **Revenue Sharing**

Another matter that has created a bad blood between the Centre and the provinces and also between the provinces is the

question of sharing revenues. The agency envisaged in the constitution to be a problem solver on this matter has become a problem. The national finance commission created under article 160 of the constitution has not been able to adequately address the needs of the provinces.

The 1990 NFC award envisaged a distribution of net proceeds of income and sales tax plus some other duties according to a formula of 20 percent for the federation and the remaining 80 percent to be distributed between the provinces on a population basis. This distribution formula was changed in the 1996 award by adding some more taxes. Now the federation keeps 62.5 percent and the remaining 37.5 is distributed to the provinces. According to one estimate this has deprived the provinces of at least 50 billion annually in revenue.

The latest National Finance Commission has been meeting for over a year now and has not been able to come up with a satisfactory award, despite the fact that the centre is in a position to force its will. There are such intractable issues involved that the matter keeps getting postponed.

There are some other revenue and planning matters in which the federation acts to restrict provincial autonomy envisaged in the constitution. Additional taxation measures are often called surcharges to deny provincial share. This is obviously resented by the provinces. Provincial projects of 100 million and above are also subject to federal approval. These are surreptitious violations of the constitution on the part of the centre.

The point being made above is that the quantum of provincial autonomy envisaged in the 1973 constitution is adequate with some modifications. It is the practice that has militated against the spirit of the constitution and hurt the feelings of the provinces.

### **Share in Services**

Similar is the story regarding share in the services. Although a provincial quota has existed for a long time, Baluchistan

particularly and to some extent rural Sindh has always complained of lower representation. Obviously this is an issue or a perception that has to be aggressively countered. If indeed there are certain shortages of some provinces in federal services, they need to be made up. If everyone quota has already been met, then this message has to be effectively delivered through the media.

### **Water Issues**

The issue of new dams must be brought before the council of common interest. There is little doubt that we are facing a huge water crisis in the years to come. Unless new reservoirs are made, agriculture in the country potentially faces irreversible damage. This must be resolved in such a way that everybody is reasonably satisfied. Let me say again. Kalabagh or other dams are not a Punjab issue but a national issue. Blaming Punjab for it may serve political interests but is factually wrong.

### **Problems between Punjab and Smaller Provinces**

One reason Punjab gets so much flak is because Army has ruled the country for so long. Army rule in the eyes of the people of smaller provinces translates into Punjabi rule because our armed forces are overwhelmingly Punjabi. This has created a great deal of hatred against Punjab. The only solution of course is that army should not intervene and take over the country. But, this is easier said than done.

Now I come to a slightly tricky matter. Since Punjab is considered by other provinces to be overbearing and domineering, it has been proposed that some new provinces must be carved out of it. This proposal has been around for a long time but has always been shelved because fears of political backlash. It is time that this should be revisited.

It is easy to divide Punjab into three provinces on linguistic basis. Saraiki speaking areas in southern Punjab can be one province, central Punjab the second and Northern Punjab or potohar



the third. If this is done, in one go, many of the perceptual problems of smaller problems against Punjab can be done away with.

### **Conclusion**

Centre province issue is *the* most important domestic issue facing the country. There are some genuine grievances of the provinces and others that relate to negative perception. It is fundamentally important to tackle both issues on a priority basis. These issues must be accorded the right kind of attention. Their neglect has led the situation go from bad to worse. This paradigm has to be changed if we have to go forward as a nation.

### **Author**

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