



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Beyond New Provinces: Rethinking Pakistan's Governance Crisis

Khalid Rahman¹ · Arif Jamshed²

Pakistan's governance debate has once again focused on whether the administrative structure is equipped to serve the country's increasingly complex needs. Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi recently described the existing system as having "collapsed" and called for structural reforms, including the creation of new administrative units or provinces. He also urged political parties to evolve a consensus on the issue.

The proposal has revived a familiar debate about the size and number of Pakistan's provinces. Yet the real question extends well beyond administrative boundaries. Creating new provinces may improve administration in some parts of the country, but it will not by itself resolve Pakistan's governance crisis.

The country already possesses a comprehensive constitutional framework. The Constitution establishes Pakistan as a federal, democratic and Islamic state, defines the powers of the legislature, executive and judiciary, and provides for representative government at every level. The persistent failure has been one of implementation rather than constitutional design.

The governance deficit is rooted in several interrelated issues: the ideological direction of the state, the balance of power among institutions, the quality of democratic representation, the weakness of devolution,

and disparities within the provinces themselves. These problems reinforce one another. Addressing only one while leaving the others untouched is unlikely to produce lasting reform.

Governance Begins with Four Questions

The international role of a reserve currency
Any serious discussion of governance must begin with four questions. Who actually exercises power? How are decisions made? Who participates in those decisions? And by what mechanisms are decision-makers held accountable?

These questions expose the limits of the current debate. New administrative units may bring government physically closer to citizens, but they do not automatically produce more representative institutions, more transparent decision-making or stronger accountability. Unless those issues are addressed, administrative restructuring alone will have only a limited impact.

Pakistan's governance problems have accumulated over decades through constitutional interruptions, institutional distortions and political choices. They cannot be corrected through a single administrative measure. What is needed is a coherent reform agenda backed by political consensus and sustained commitment.

¹ Chairman IPS

² Senior Editor IPS

**The discourse has substantially drawn on the experts' analyses and specialized input put forward during various interactive sessions at the Institute of Policy Studies.*

The Missing Tier: Local Government

One of the weakest links in Pakistan's governance structure remains local government. Although the Constitution provides for elected local bodies, they have rarely been allowed to function as an effective and permanent tier of government. Even when they exist, they often lack the authority, financial resources and administrative autonomy needed to perform their assigned functions.

The result is predictable. Responsibilities that should be discharged at the district or tehsil level are pushed upwards to provincial governments, increasing their workload while distancing public administration from ordinary citizens.

The sheer size of Pakistan's provinces further aggravates the problem. Provinces with populations running into tens of millions cannot be governed effectively from a single provincial capital. The issue is even more pronounced where vast geographical distances separate communities from provincial centers.

This is where the debate on new provinces acquires genuine significance. Revisiting the size and structure of federating units may well be justified in the interests of administrative efficiency, national integration and more balanced development. But such restructuring should complement, not substitute for, effective devolution. Districts and tehsils must become meaningful centers of governance. Otherwise, new provinces may simply recreate existing administrative weaknesses on a smaller scale.

Representation Matters

Pakistan's electoral system also deserves careful reconsideration. Under the first-past-the-post system, candidates frequently enter the legislature without securing the support of a majority of voters in their constituencies. The composition of Parliament, therefore, does not always reflect the distribution of political opinion across the country.

This has helped sustain politics dominated by influential families, local patronage networks and narrow constituency interests. National policy and long-term governance often take second place to local calculations.

A proportional representation system deserves serious consideration. By allocating seats broadly in proportion to each party's share of the vote, it could produce legislatures that more accurately reflect public opinion, encourage program-based politics and broaden opportunities for professionals and middle-class leadership.

Electoral reform, however, cannot stop there. Political parties themselves need to become more democratic through genuine intra-party elections and systematic political training. Student unions, labor organizations, professional bodies, and empowered local governments can all serve as training grounds for future political leadership.

Institutions and the Balance of Power

No discussion of governance in Pakistan can ignore the question of institutional balance. Repeated constitutional disruptions and prolonged periods of military rule have blurred the distinction between formal authority and actual power. Even under elected governments, the resulting hybrid arrangements have weakened civilian institutions and complicated the process of democratic consolidation.

The civil administration has suffered accordingly. Many capable officials have become increasingly reluctant to exercise initiative, while others have found convenient excuses for avoiding responsibility.

Restoring constitutional government requires greater clarity in institutional roles, an end to overlapping spheres of authority and a clear commitment to civilian supremacy within the constitutional framework. It also requires an impartial judiciary, a professional bureaucracy and politically neutral law-enforcement agencies. Institutions ultimately perform only as well as the people entrusted with running them.

Parliament and the Rule of Law

Parliament must remain the principal forum for governance reform. A representative legislature should not merely enact laws but also scrutinize executive performance, shape public policy and provide a forum for national debate.

Good governance also depends on the less visible architecture of the state. Constitutional principles must be translated into effective legislation, sound rules of business and functioning administrative procedures. Without them, constitutional guarantees remain largely aspirational.

Beyond Administrative Reform

Pakistan's governance crisis demands that Parliament must be strengthened,

the electoral system reviewed, political parties democratized, local governments empowered and institutional accountability reinforced. Technology and e-governance can support these objectives, but they cannot replace political reform.

Ultimately, governance is not determined solely by constitutions or administrative maps. It depends on the quality of institutions and, above all, on the integrity, competence and sense of public responsibility of those who exercise power.

New provinces may have a place in Pakistan's future administrative structure. But unless they are accompanied by meaningful devolution, stronger representative institutions and faithful implementation of the Constitution, they are unlikely to produce the transformation that the country needs.

