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Politics of Identity and Naming of New Province: Saraikistan, Bahawalpur and South Punjab in Party Competition

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the politics of naming on a long-existing demand of provincial reorganization in the southern part of Punjab, Pakistan has been analyzed. It maintains that competing denominations Saraikistan, Bahawalpur and South Punjab are not simply different names used to give the same territorial demand but differing political projects with history, identities, and electoral strategies. Saraikistan represents an ethnolinguistic identity that is based on Saraiki cultural, linguistic, and economic marginalization. Bahawalpur appeals to the revival of a historically recognizable political entity. South Punjab however, is an administrative and developmental term that is broader and help the mainstream political parties to organize a broader alliance without necessarily pledging to ethnic federalism. The study is a combination of both secondary and primary data as the methodological components include scholarly literature, political party manifestos, constitutional trends and political documents, and first-hand data were gathered with the use of semi-structured interviews involving the political parties' leaders and the regional political actors. These interviews would be informative on the strategy of presenting the province issue by the elites within the party, bargaining regional sensibilities, and changing the choice of naming to suit electoral demands. As demonstrated in the paper, the political parties in Pakistan have moved across these identities based on the constitutional restrictions, regional interests and vote maximizations. It argues that calling "names" is itself a kind of political rivalry: parties do not just promise a new province, but they also strive to establish which language is legitimate in which such a province can be visualized, rationalized as well as institutionalized. With the unification of discourse, party strategy and interview-based evidence, the study is able to identify how the symbolic recognition, territorial memory, and electoral pragmatism intersect in the modern Pakistani federal politics.



Introduction

The administrative reform, decentralization, and federal restructuring have generally been the arguments concerning the demand of a new province in the southern part of Punjab. However, it is no less than a language and identity battle with symbolic power. It is not only whether a new province should be formed or not, but what will it be named. Saraikistan, Bahawalpur, and South Punjab contain the codes of different bases around who is the relevant political community; who is the history of exclusion and what is the territorial map to represent. In this respect, the naming issue is not an incidental aspect of rhetoric, but it can be viewed as the constituent of the political struggle as such (Mughal, 2020; Fatima and Mirza, 2023). This question has taken a new dimension following the 18th Amendment period when devolution and federal balancing created new avenues in which claims related to provinces were rekindled. In May 2012, the Punjab Assembly used a unanimous vote in favor of the resolutions to restore Bahawalpur and give separate provincial status to the southern Punjab. The political manifestation of these resolutions was also quite eye-opening: it indicated that combined there was no single territorial imagination which would not be specified in the region. Instead, the various constituencies desired various types of participation under the auspices of the umbrella of new province politics (Dawn, 2012).

The issue has been strengthened by the institutional challenge. In accordance with Article 239 of the Constitution, a constitutional amendment which changes the boundaries of provinces must be passed by both houses of parliament by the two-thirds majority, but, most importantly, by the concerned provincial assembly by the two-thirds majority (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 2012, art. 239). Due to the high constitutional hurdles, parties are very much motivated to enlarge alliances and soothe conflict using labels that are both electorally convenient and administratively readable. It is one of the causes why parties usually found South Punjab more appealing than Saraikistan (Mushtaq & Shaheen, 2017).

In the argument presented in this paper, it is argued that politics of naming in southern Punjab is the manifestation of three overlapping and competing projects namely ethnolinguistic recognition through Saraikistan, historical restoration through Bahawalpur, and administrative-developmental restructuring through South Punjab. It also claims that the contest of the parties has turned them into political campaign tools. Parties have not merely received identity demands, instead the mainstream parties have remodeled them by introducing naming options aimed at gaining more support, containing regional competition, and circumventing constitutional limitations.

Literature Review

The academic research on the question appeared as a result of studies about language politics. Shackle (1977) demonstrated how Saraiki/Saraiki movement was not merely a dispute over terminology in the linguistic category, but an institutionalized effort to standardize the language and create a sense of nationalism around it. Similarly, Rahman (1995) placed the Saraiki movement in more generic identity formation processes of language in Pakistan where language emerged as an instrument of regional political mobilization. These researches are still fundamental since they provide the reasons why a territorial claim, like Saraikistan, cannot be comprehended without social production of a specific ethnolinguistic group (Rahman, 1995; Shackle, 1977).

The analysis has been broadened to political economy slightly more recently. Mughal (2020) suggests that Saraiki's identity has been associated with culture assertion as well as economic marginalization and inequitable development. In his findings, the province demand is a result of amalgamation of symbolic and material grievance. The ethno-national interpretation is confounded by Fatima and Mirza (2023), though, when they demonstrate that the sentiment among the masses

in South Punjab does not fall in a simple ethno-federal solution and that ethnic identity is not a clear-cut predictor of the desire to receive political autonomy. These papers collectively indicate that this demand is factual and politically appealing, though its desirable rhetorical presentation is still controversial (Fatima & Mirza, 2023; Mughal, 2020). One more literature is devoted to Bahawalpur. As Javaid (2009) shows, the claim by Bahawalpur is based on a recollection of the existence of the state before and on the grounds that the region has its own historical and geographical identity. This assertion is restorative as opposed to totally ethnolinguistic. It also cannot be reduced to the Seraiki movement even in those areas that intersect. This tension is verified by Mushtaq and Shaheen (2017), since they state that the Bahawalpur issue has constantly muddled the concept of the existence of a single Saraiki province and has led to discord even with regard to the name of the proposed unit itself.

Lastly, some recent political parties research has put the disconnect between rhetoric and institutional delivery into the limelight. Iqbal (2024) maintains that the issue of Saraiki, or South Punjab, was constantly trotted by big parties, in particular, PPP and PML-N, but they could not deliver on the promise of lasting constitutional delivery. The literature is particularly helpful in the current paper in that it changes the focus to the reality of party statements as opposed to how the party makes the statement strategically. The focal analytical input of this paper is to elaborate that naming itself has become the main battleground of party rivalry (Iqbal, 2024)

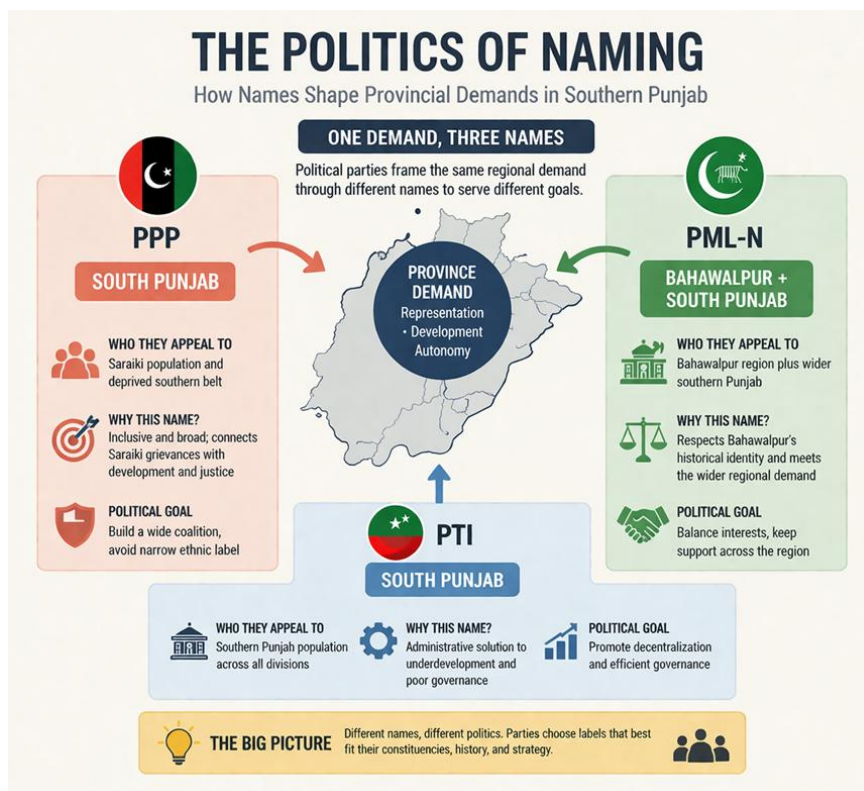
Theoretical Framework: Naming as Political Strategy

The study is based on constructivist approach to political identity and territory, which is supported by discourse/framing theory and symbolic politics. Constructivist view presupposes that, regional identity is not a given or natural phenomenon, but rather is a socially and politically constructed phenomenon, constituted by discourse, institutional practice and political struggle. The competing labels refer to SaraiKistan, Bahawalpur and South Punjab are explained using the framing theory which explains how the political meaning is organized through foregrounding various histories, constituencies and solutions. Symbolic politics also in part explains the political strength of naming: naming does not simply describe place, but also makes a recollection, reproach, sense of belonging, and legitimacy. Combining these concepts, the study will have an opportunity to discuss the concept of the naming as a political strategy in which parties bargain the issues of identity, territory and electoral contest.

In this paper, naming is considered a political construction. There are three things that a territorial name does at least. To start with, it establishes the constituency under which a demand is promoted. Second, it triggers a certain recollection of unfairness or right. Third, it also indicates that the claim is mostly ethnic, historical or administrative. Saraikistan, Bahawalpur and South Punjab do not differ semantically but politically. Naming is a type of coalition management that is practiced in southern Punjab. The ethnolinguistic majority contemplated by Saraiki movement is privileged by Saraikistan. Bahawalpur specializes a historically delimited area, which is terrified of being integrated into a larger southern entity led by Multan. South Punjab gives the frame more specificity by silencing the clarity on identity lines and rendering the demand into the language of governance, employment, representation and development. The broader the party wants the coalition of interest to be, and institutionally viable, the higher the chances are that it will want the term South Punjab instead of Saraikistan, which has a greater degree of identity (Fatima and Mirza, 2023; Mushtaq and Shaheen, 2017).

Methodology

This paper uses both a qualitative and interpretative research design grounded on analysis of both academic literature, parliamentary developments, party documents, and news coverage on province related initiatives. It seeks to discuss the manner in which political actors feel the need to reorganize the provinces by competing titles like Saraikistan, Bahawalpur and even South Punjab. The article hence considers an identification of naming as a tactical discourse applied in the electoral competition, regional mobilization, and institutional bargain. Besides documentary data, primary data in the form of semi structured interviews with the political party leaders and key party representatives are also incorporated in the research. It is through these interviews that we can seek to learn about the symbolic, electoral, and constitutional connotations of various naming options, how party elites react to regional sensibilities and from what they make to explain their favored formulations as it relates to party strategy. Literature on the Saraiki movement and the Bahawalpur issue, the 2013 parliamentary commission report on new provinces in Punjab, the Article 239 of the Constitution, parliamentary debates and big news stories of constitutional and political matters are all covered in the documentary material. Besides, the manifestos of the 3 major political parties; Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) are also reviewed so as to compare the way each of the parties is analyzing the problem of provincial re-organization and regional identity and administrative reform. Such a synthesis of documentary interpretation and primary data, based on interviews, allows the study to relate symbolic politics to the strategy of parties, as well as the electoral battle and constitutional procedure.



Developed by Researcher

Historical Background: From Saraiki Cultural Assertion to the Competing Territorial Projects of Saraikistan, Bahawalpur, and South Punjab

The reasons of the recent new province argument in southern Punjab lie in the fact that a cultural-linguistic demand was gradually turned in to a territorial and political one. The area that is the present-day south Punjab, Bahawalpur, and Saraikistan was never inherently a political entity regularly, as the term suggests. Instead, it was a patchwork of overlapping historical areas with Multan, Bahawalpur or Dera Ghazi Khan in the center of its own patterns of administration, elite formation and regional memory. What subsequently emerged as South Punjab was then not a region which had already formed and which was waiting to be recognized, it had to be visualized and fashioned into political existence. This is the reason why the issue of naming had become so critical. Linguistic standardization and literary renewal in the creation of a new regional consciousness were focal, as the establishment of the fundamental scholarship on the Saraiki movement had established, and, more recent scholarship has demonstrated, it was reworked subsequently through the assertion of deprivation, identity and political underrepresentation (Shackle, 1977; Rahman, 1995; Mughal, 2020).

The initial stages of this history can be most regarded as the battlefield of the linguistic and culture, as opposed to a direct requirement of a provincial constituency. According to the classical work by Christopher Shackle, Saraiki movement took shape as an effort to create Saraiki as a language of the middle Indus region as opposed to the dialect of Punjabi. This was important by the fact that in Pakistan language has always been associated with access, prestige, and the symbolic ranks of different groups of people. To have a separate language was however to have a separate cultural history, a separate literary pedigree, and ultimately a separate political object. Tariq Rahman also described the fact that the Saraiki movement should be framed in the context of broader language politics in Pakistan which is where linguistic identities are frequently used as means of regional political mobilization. During this developing period, the core issue of the movement was not yet the works of constitutional engineering but the creation of visible community of culture through print, literature, conferences and open discussions. Nevertheless, this culture piece preconditioned further territorial politics: once a separate linguistic community was united in the discourse, it became even easier to say it also supposed a separate institutional coverage in the form of a province (Rahman, 1995; Shackle, 1977).

However, creating a Saraiki political identity did not happen in a vacuum. It grew in a Pakistani state formation that already experienced heightened provincial disequilibrium as well as the political preeminence of central and northern Punjab. (Nawaz, 2021) According to recent scholarship by Mughal, Saraiki identity may not be perceived as being purely organized in terms of cultural revival, but it is also the result of marginalization, most notably the feeling that the southern parts of the Punjab were relatively underdeveloped in terms of development, infrastructure, investment in education, and political power. In this respect, the identity and material grievance were integrated into each other. The Saraiki belt was recounted as culturally autonomous as well as as systematically figured out in a Lahore-oriented provincial order. The work by Mughal comes in particularly handy since it demonstrates how ethnic identity can be socially constructed on the basis of political economy: it is not underdevelopment that generates the sense of separatism, but it can combine with the ready language of localism and make strong demands of independence. This picture is somewhat obscured by more recent survey-based research by Fatima and Mirza which demonstrates that popular support in the region cannot be easily transformed into an entirely ethno-nationalist project. Their results indicate that individuals can be in favour of more autonomy or a separate province without necessarily believing in a radical appeal of the federation in terms of ethnic reorganization. This is historically used to

understand why the term Saraikistan was symbolically strong, although South Punjab became later more electoral (Mughal, 2020; Fatima and Mirza, 2023).

One parallel (and somewhat parallel) historical trajectory has to do with Bahawalpur, making it more difficult to construct a linear account of Saraiki territorial nationalism. Bahawalpur was by no means merely a district of an already created south Punjab area, but it had a history of its own in terms of the princely and subsequently provincial history led by the Abbasi Nawal as the part of Pakistan. The article on the Bahawalpur movement by Umbreen Javaid however is the focal point of the fact that Bahawalpur restorationist politics was founded on the memory of a former political position and not actual linguistic nationalism. The dissatisfaction in Bahawalpur is thus chronologically different. It is grounded in the allegation that a political unit that was previously identified as a political unit was deprived of its independence according to the One Unit scheme, and this was never regained back. This is another type of historical argument compared to the one of the Saraiki ethnolinguistic activists. Where Saraikistan claims to represent a culture-linguistic population, Bahawalpur claims the reinstatement of an already existing political order. This difference was central since it would subsequently influence the strategy of the parties and naming politics: most of the players in Bahawalpur feared that one more Saraiki or South Punjab province would merely recreate old internal dominances, especially the superiority of Multan instead of righting old wrongs (Javaid, 2009).

It was as a result of the One Unit policy and the aftermath that was to follow, that determined the politics of regional issue. With the reorganization of West Pakistan, into One Unit, in 1955, which meant that Bahawalpur did not receive its separate status, One Unit, in its turn, was also abolished in 1970, but still, no separate status of Bahawalpur as province was given. Rather it was turned into a wing of Punjab. Subsequent regional scholarship and retrospective histories focus more on this, citing that this became an enduring feeling of betrayal in the region. The 2023 article by Rathore and Ghani is beneficial in this context since it critically differentiates the Bahawalpur restoration movement with the Saraiki province movement as well as demonstrates how the two got confounded in the process over time, even though this study was written in a regional journal and not in an international one. Their report documents that they had protests and political mobilization when the non-restoration of Bahawalpur in 1970 occurred and the restoration problem had not been forgotten despite being subdued in other national crises of greater magnitude. In history, therefore, the demand of Bahawalpur did not emerge as such of a branch of the Saraiki movement; the two movements took two parallel paths of development though not the identical ones. This is one of the reasons to guess why further efforts of unifying the region under the same tag faced opposition several times by actors in Bahawalpur (Rathore & Ghani, 2023; Javaid, 2009).

Since 1970s, the Saraiki movement as such has become more political. The earlier activism in the linguistics and the literature world gave rise slowly to demands of institutional recognition and, finally to a province. The shift into the mode of fundamentalism, is tracked by the development of literary conferences, regional movements. The change is substantial since it is the time when a cultural group began acquiring the status of a geographical endeavor. Later in the twentieth century, Saraiki cultural mobilization spread out of literature to assertions related to representation, development and the federalism set-up. It was also during this time that the political usage of the word Saraiki province was becoming more prominent and related to language more than the language movement before the emergence of this word. In a larger scale, this process corresponds to the trend about the progression of ethnonational movements in Pakistan; ethnic movements tend to oscillate between the culture assertion, the disengagement demands and the negotiations with the state on the institutional matter. The Saraiki case shifted to the autonomy-seeking stage, rather

than the identity-formation one, in that wider Pakistani setting, yet in a manner that was not as separatist as other ethnonational movements (Khan, 2022; Rathore and Ghani, 2023).

The second significant change, the one that occurred in the 2000s and the period of the 2010s in particular, is that the province demand started spreading more commonly as the term South Punjab. This change cannot be interpreted out of the background of constitutional and political atmosphere following the 18th Amendment which restored some old argument on devolution, provincial independence and restructuring the federation. The new province debate has vigorously been observed to increase following the amendment due to the fact that sub-provincial groups started anticipating that autonomy should not end at the provincial level where provincial units comprised marginalized peripheries. It is in this context that South Punjab came out a more administratively recognizable and politically commercial variant as opposed to Saraikistan. On the one hand, Rathore and Ghani point out explicitly that movement became more pronounced in the sphere of the national politics after 18th Amendment whereas on the other hand, Fatima and Mirza demonstrate that despite Saraikis as the majority in certain areas, the sentiment in the people does not coincide with the ethnic-federalist requests. This historical significance of the transition is that the elder ethnolinguistic claim was not sold out; on the contrary, it was to some extent translated into a more wide-range of developmental language. South Punjab was a vector of compromise, in that way; It could invoke deprivation, strangeness to Lahore, as well as administrative responsiveness without binding any of its adherents to an ethnonational outlook (Fatima & Mirza, 2023; Rathore and Ghani, 2023).

The handling of the dispute in the years 2012 to 2013 was a water shed in institutionalizing the dispute. On May 2012, the Punjab Assembly passed two resolutions unanimously, one resolution was calling on the restoration of Bahawalpur and another one calling on the separate province of South Punjab. This two-fold resolution was historically significant as it made official formation of the fact that there was no common attained territorial imagination in southern Punjab. In place of fixing the situation, the assembly acknowledged two competing logics simultaneously, that is, restoration and reorganization. The following year, parliamentary commission on new provinces tried to solve this contradiction and proposed a compound formula that is so popularly quoted as Bahawalpur Janoobi Punjab. In the recommendations contained in the commission report, the proposed province would consist of the Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan divisions; Mianwali and Bhakkar and would need the constitutionally high constitutional test contained in Article 239. As with any history, this episode is the one at the heart of the story since the state attempts to resolve an issue of naming by identifying with a middle-ground. It, however, demonstrated the constraints of compromise: not even a Bahawalpur-based restorationist movement could override the strains between a Bahawalpur-based environmentalism and general southern or Saraiki territorial ambitions. (Dawn, 2013)

This tendency of the administrative reframing was magnified during the post-2018 period. The promises about a South Punjab province contributed to the rise of PTI in southern Punjab, though the party presented the problem above all otherwise on an administrative rather than on an ethnolinguistic basis. Instead, having institutionalized Saraikistan, PTI shifted to the establishment of South Punjab Secretariat, which was technically in force in October 2020 following the modifications in the rules of business in Punjab. This development is both history-wise and politically important. It demonstrated that, the demand of regional autonomy might be partially answered by state decentralization of bureaucracy without necessarily establishing a new province. South Punjab government documents also present the secretariat as the reaction to the ancient ignorance in the field of service delivery, in particular, in the areas like health. Historically speaking, the shift depicts how the province demand has been shifting towards being more and

more translated to a government issue instead of remaining being simply an identity assertion. Concurrently, it failed to terminate the dispute on naming. To further give the state-friendly and party friendly name a fiber-strengthening effect, it retained the symbolic attraction of Saraikistan and the historicity of Bahawalpur intact (Dawn, 2020)

Collectively, this history demonstrates that the present-day conflict on naming is a culmination of a number of stratified paths, not just the movement. The first one is the linguistic and cultural formation of Saraiki identity which gave the symbolic and discursive background of a province demand. The second is that of the restorationist memory of Bahawalpur which asserts that the state of reorganization of the south cannot dispense in disregarding the already existing political history. The third one is a South Punjab simply emerging as an administrative-developmental paradigm, which mainstream parties find appealing with the objective of gaining wide coalitions and constitutional plausibility. This stratified meaning is given overwhelmingly in the recent literature. Mughal illustrates how identity and marginalization had been intertwined in the case of Saraiki, Fatima and Mirza explain why the administrative framing can be more successful than the ethnic one, and the broader scope of the case is given by Khan as he describes ethnonational movements in Pakistan as emerging and sliding between the claims of cultural assertion and autonomy. It is not the politics of naming that were introduced into the history of the region so late. It is the way this history was made and is being made, periodically renegotiated since it had its linguistic movement to the present day (Khan, 2022).

Party Competition and Strategic Labeling

The party competition trend proves that names are selected strategically. (Qasmi, 2023) The PPP has frequently attempted to stand on the side of southern Punjab in order to favor a somewhat generally territorial reference. In 2019, the party introduced a constitutional amendment bill in the Senate of a South Punjab province, and suggested in its 2024 manifesto that it would resume its fight against the denial of South Punjab. It means that it is desirable to follow the label that can take up identity claims and still adjust to the discourse on national parliaments (Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians, 2024).

The same was done by the PTI, only using more specifically administrative language. In 2018 the party said it had planning to create national agreement to form South Punjab province on administrative basis when that proposal is connected to the decrease of poverty and balancing between federal territories. This framing is quite illuminating: instead of supporting an ethnic project, PTI turned the matter into the language of governance. Its subsequent formation of the South Punjab Secretariat, inaugurated in October 2020 following the amendment of rules of business and the appointment of several secretaries, was a partial achievement of that promise, which did not answer the constitutional question beneath it of provincial status (Dawn, 2018)

The stance of PML-N has been more of a two-way approach. In 2019, members of the party tabled a bill of constitutional amendment to propose the formation of new provinces of two; South Punjab's and Bahawalpur. This action is important since it demonstrates the party trying to close the gap between two conflicted regional consciences instead of trying to subsume them under a single identity venture. Allowing the Bahawalpur and South Punjab provinces to exist independently, PML-N implicitly admitted that the claim of Bahawalpur could not be unilaterally abolished and dissolved under one Seraiki or southern unit (Hussain, 2019).

Such party positions indicate that South Punjab has turned into the most malleable label in terms of election. It is wide enough to be agreeable to the development minded voters and vague enough to accommodate internal party differences and it is constitutionally safer than the more controversial

word Saraikistan. Compensating, Saraikistan is able to mobilize identity-focused electorates at the expense of expanding coalitions. Bahawalpur has good regional appeal, but cannot be easily integrated into the demand of southern Punjab. Party competition consequently forces actors to take either label to maximize the electoral reach and minimize the political risk (Fatima & Mirza, 2023; Iqbal, 2024).

The 2012–2013 Turning Point

Specifically, the politics of naming can be followed in 2012 and 2013. The Bahawalpur and separate southern province were institutionalized as resolutions of the Punjab Assembly in 2012 in support of both territorial logics, which were competing with each other. In 2013, the parliamentary commission tried to resolve this inconsistency with a formula that was suggested to consist of a composite formula and was widely reported as Bahawalpur Janoobi Punjab. This combination of names was itself a version of compromise: it was aimed at being the union of historical restoration and the greater representation of the south in one constitutional fantasy (Dawn.com, 2012; Agencies, 2013).

What that formula did not manage to yield is educative. There would be some time before conflict would be avoided through composite naming, but not diverting aspirations on the ground. To certain actors there was a united label which was the uniqueness of Bahawalpur and a viable province-size one. To another group of people, it revealed the underlying issue, namely, no single name could quite redeem ethnolinguistic identity and historical reinstatement as well as administrative rationalization. The episode shows in turn that naming is not just the ornament of the institutional design that falls on the roof, it is one of the main locations when the rival projects of region hood clash against each other (Mushtaq and Shaheen, 2017).

Interview Findings: Elite Perceptions of Naming and Provincial Reorganization

According to the semi-structured interviews with the leaders of political parties and representatives of these parties, the problem of provincial reorganization of southern Punjab is perceived by elites as an administrative problem not only, but a politically sensitive issue of identity, historical account, and electoral policy. In the interviews, the respondents (PPP interviewee 1 & PML-N Interviewee 2) tended to agree that the need to seek a new province is justified by the ancient grievances in the region such as poor development, poor representation and unfair access to state resources. Concurrently, the interviews indicated that a single name to apply on the proposed province has no consensus. Instead, naming has become a tactical and disputable part of party rhetoric, whereby various names would be employed to refer to also various constituencies and a political calculus. In this regard, the interviews confirm the main thesis of this paper which states that naming is not just descriptive, but a type of political positioning and negation symbols.

The interviews with the respondents who are members of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) showed that the position of the party is strongly correlated with the complaints of the Saraiki speaking people, although the label of the South Punjab is preferred to be South Saraikistan. According to the respondents, this option is an indication of an attempt to expand the scope of the appeal of the province demand beyond a purely ethnolinguistic concept. It is not possible to say that PPP interviewees rejected the symbolic significance of Saraiki identity, however, it can be stated that such label as South Punjab was perceived by them as a more inclusive and politically more powerful term to be used in the context of deprivation, development, and justice, not to reduce the issue to a single ethnic frame. The interviews thus indicate that the naming strategy of PPP is trying to strategize the creation of symbolic awareness of Saraiki interests and balanced territorial and developmental discourse.

A slightly different reason was highlighted by the respondents who belonged to the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). They remarked more on the historical and political uniqueness of Bahawalpur, and a number of the respondents presented the problem through lenses of accommodating the restorationist claim of Bahawalpur (PML-N Interviewee 3) and the wider one that was coming into view by the Punjab south. This is one of the reasons why the party had favored the formula Bahawalpur plus South Punjab. According to the interviewees, one province with one name may not be sufficient to reflect internal diversity of the region, may cause fears of domination of one center over another, especially Multan. The interviews can therefore be interpreted to mean that PML-N embraces a dual nomination policy to safeguard the separate identity of Bahawalpur whilst being able to maintain to broader demands to reorganize the region.

The interviews with the representatives of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) were more oriented to an administrative conception of the problem. These interviewees broadly explained South Punjab as a question of governance and decentralization (PTI Interviewee 1 & 2) as opposed to an ethnolinguistic or restorationist one. The desired name in their narrations was associated with the language of administrative effectiveness, provision of state services, and more responsive government agencies. It implies that the naming plan of PTI is aimed at de-ethnicization of the demand side and portrayal of the province problem within the framework of a larger-scale agenda of institutional change. On the whole, the results obtained during the interviews of the three parties indicate that despite the fact that all the parties recognize the political importance of the southern Punjab, they disagree on the names they do promote since each party associates the naming with various conglomeration of constituency-building, historical memory, and strategic thinking.

Discussion

Pakistan People's Party (PPP)

The position of the PPP is most lucid and coherent to the term South Punjab. The party, in its 2024 manifesto, states that it has always fought to abolish the deprivation of South Punjab and specifically the party makes it clear that they intend to seek the establishment of a separate South Punjab province as provided by the previous constitutional amendment bill. It means that PPP favors an administrative-developmental naming approach to the more ethnically charged Saraikistan, or the restorationist manner of Bahawalpur. This politically enables PPP to recognize regional deprivation and demands to have autonomy but still make the issue broad enough in attracting multiple constituencies in the southern belt.

Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N)

The naming policy of PML-N has broadly contrasted with that of PPP in that it promotes a dual formula used by naming the area as Bahawalpur and South Punjab. The National Assembly of January 2019 had an express proposal to establish two provinces one to be named Bahawalpur and one to be South Punjab, and the division of Bahawalpur separated from the Multan and Dera Ghazi Khan divisions. The latter is indicative of the idea that PML-N has made efforts to identify the historical peculiarity of Bahawalpur as well as address the needs of the broader southern Punjab ethnicity, rather than supporting one province under the ethnolinguistic name of Saraikistan. Analytically, this is a balancing tactic, whereby this does not precipitate Bahawalpur into a Multan-centered politics of the imagination.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)

The position of PTI is the most similar to an administrative decentralization model. According to the 2024 manifesto of PTI, the establishment of new provinces out of each of the existing ones is

supported and, furthermore, smaller provinces are associated with decentralization, resource decentralization, and regional sub-secretariats. As part of the party manifesto in office earlier, the leaders of PTI also stated the creation of a South Punjab province and have submitted a constitutional amendment bill in 2022. Combined, these findings indicate that PTI has even tended to use the name South Punjab or the larger tongue of minor provinces as its primary external frame.

The politics of naming of southern Punjab indicates a greater trend in federal politics of Pakistan. The regional grievances can only be electorally significant in cases where they are put into discernible political terms. However, they are remodeled by party contests once translated. But the ethnolinguistic mobilization of Saraiki protagonists has not been extinguished in this situation; only it has been rearticulated selectively under the umbrella and more manageable term of South Punjab. That is why mainstream parties keep supporting South Punjab when other activists keep referring to Saraikistan or they demand Bahawalpur.

Table: Comparative Party Positions on the Naming, Constituency Base, and Political Rationale of Provincial Reorganization in Southern Punjab

Party	Main population/constituency addressed	Name used by the party	Why this name / political logic
	Saraiki/Saraiki-speaking population and broader deprived southern belt	South Punjab	PPP uses South Punjab as an inclusive label, but politically it speaks to the grievances of the Saraiki population. This helps the party connect ethnolinguistic deprivation with a broader province demand without locking itself into a narrower ethnonational label like Seraikistan.
	Bahawalpur region plus the wider southern Punjab belt	Bahawalpur + South Punjab	PML-N uses a dual formula to accommodate two different regional claims at once: Bahawalpur's historical-restoration claim and the broader demand for South Punjab. This helps it avoid subsuming Bahawalpur under a Multan-centered southern unit.
	Wider southern Punjab population across Bahawalpur, Multan, and D.G. Khan divisions	South Punjab	PTI explicitly frames the issue in administrative rather than linguistic terms. It uses South Punjab because the party presents the province as a solution to governance failure, underdevelopment, and deprivation, not as an ethnic-linguistic project.

The results reveal that the three key parties are not only arguing whether a new province has to be created, but why, who it benefits and what is its name. PPP politically works with Saraiki speaking population, but officially it would prefer the name South Punjab. PML-N uses dual naming policy with combining Bahawalpur and South Punjab to accept the historical and regional claims. PTI, in its turn, constructs South Punjab, above all, on the basis of administration, making the province

appear as both a solution to governance and development, instead of a manifestation of ethnolinguistic pressure.

This is not to say that identity has been replaced by administration. Rather, the management of identity is via administrative language. The reason why South Punjab works is the ability by which it can identify deprivation without necessarily supporting ethnic federalism. The reason Bahawalpur remains is the inability of historical memory to be expended within a frame of development. Saraikistan is politically powerful due to its ability to maintain the best symbolic expression of Saraiki recognition. The presence of all the three names demonstrates that at the provincial level, politics in the area are determined not by the regional consensus, but by the overlay of identities.

Conclusion

This paper has presented that the Saraikistan, Bahawalpur and South Punjab dispute is more of a politics of naming as part of the party competition. All these labels denote another political topic, another recollection of injustice and a different approach to coalition. Saraikistan has an ethnolinguistic demand. Bahawalpur makes a restorationist argument based on historical uniqueness. South Punjab is a compromise in administrative-development that is highly appealing with mainstream parties. The main conclusion here is that the competition between parties is not about the idea of existence of a new province, but about the language where the existence of a new province is possible. These naming are hence a political strategy in southern Punjab. It cross-defines identity and institution, symbolic recognition and constitutional viability as well as the memory of the region and electoral computation. For that reason, any serious analysis of the new-province question in Pakistan must treat naming not as a peripheral rhetorical issue, but as one of the principal mechanisms through which territorial politics is organized and contested.

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