DOI: 10.71317/jgst.2.9(s).2026.586

Journal of Global Social Transformation

Journal homepage: https://rjsaonline.org/index.php/JGST

# The New Province Proposal: Assessing the Future of Pakistani Federalism Under Mohsin Naqvi's Plan

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**ARTICLE INFO**

**Submission:** July 13, 2026

**Revised:** July 29, 2026

**Accepted:** August 31, 2026

**Available Online:** September 12, 2026

**Keywords:**
Critical discourse analysis; political legitimation; Pakistani federalism; new provinces; 28th Amendment; provincial autonomy; governance reform

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**ABSTRACT**

This brief examines Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's 2026 proposal to create new administrative provinces in Pakistan, situating it within the country's long, unresolved history of federal restructuring. Pakistani political elites have historically relied on strategic rhetorical framing during moments of institutional strain to build public consent for top-down reform, a pattern documented in critical discourse analysis research on Pakistani political communication. Drawing on this tradition, the study adopts a qualitative, document-based design that combines a discourse reading of Naqvi's public statements with a structured review of the constitutional, political and socio-economic evidence surrounding the proposal, including its link to a wider proposed 28th Constitutional Amendment. Primary material includes verified transcripts of ministerial speeches delivered between July and September 2026, provincial assembly resolutions, and statements from coalition and opposition leaders; secondary data are drawn from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the State Bank of Pakistan, and Transparency International. The analysis finds that Naqvi's language consistently reframes a federally initiated proposal as a citizen-driven consensus project, echoing the legitimation strategies identified in earlier studies of Pakistani political speech, even as the wider constitutional package reportedly under discussion would relocate the power to create provinces away from the provincial-consent requirement that framing implies. The proposal has produced sharply uneven reactions across the federation, from near-unanimous rejection in Sindh to conditional openness elsewhere. Set against a fragile but improving macroeconomic picture, the brief develops two evidence-based scenarios, with new provinces and without them, and concludes that neither path improves governance unless it is preceded by functioning local government under Article 140-A, verifiable anti-corruption mechanisms, and a broadened tax base. The findings are intended to inform policymakers and provincial stakeholders currently weighing the proposal, rather than to argue for a predetermined outcome.

## Introduction

Political discourse in Pakistan does more than announce policy. During moments of institutional strain, it performs the work of manufacturing consent, translating decisions taken in Islamabad's inner circles into language that ordinary citizens can accept as their own. Yasin, Mansoor and Thalho (2021), in their critical discourse analysis of Prime Minister Imran Khan's 2020 address on the COVID-19 pandemic, showed that Pakistani leaders deliberately reach for plain, colloquial language at moments of national crisis, shifting the grammatical transitivity of their speech to narrow the perceived distance between state and citizen and to recast directives issued from above as a shared national response. A similar rhetorical logic is visible, in a different register, in the debate that Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi opened in the summer of 2026 over the creation of new provinces.

Across a string of public appearances between July and September, Naqvi's specific choices of language, describing a federally initiated proposal as something that must rest with "the will of the people", framing a contested structural change as a "reset" rather than a rupture, and repeatedly deferring the final word to an unspecified national consensus, work to protect the federal government's position while appearing to defer to provincial sensitivity. As later sections show, this language sits alongside a broader constitutional package, publicly linked to the debate by government sources themselves, that would in fact remove the provincial-consent mechanism Naqvi's own framing invokes. This brief treats that language as data in its own right, alongside the constitutional, political and economic evidence surrounding the proposal, in assessing where Pakistani federalism is likely to go next.

## Literature Review

### Elite Political Discourse and Legitimation

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) treats language not as a neutral medium but as a site where power is exercised, contested and reproduced. Van Dijk (1993, 1998) argues that CDA is centrally concerned with how discourse structures enact, confirm or legitimate relations of power among elite groups and institutions, and that such elites hold privileged access to public discourse precisely because they are, in his words, "the ones who have most to say." Fairclough (1989, 1995) developed this into a three-dimensional framework, textual analysis, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice, aimed at uncovering connections between language and power that are not obvious to an ordinary audience.

Within Pakistani political communication specifically, Yasin, Mansoor and Thalho (2021) applied a transitivity-based CDA to Prime Minister Imran Khan's COVID-19 address and found that the speech relied on simplified, everyday language to shorten the audience's sense of distance from the state, concluding that this linguistic choice functioned to present an executive decision as a shared undertaking. This literature supplies the theoretical lens applied in Section 4 of this brief to Naqvi's own public statements.

### Federalism, Provincial Size and the Demand for New Provinces

A separate but converging body of work addresses the structural side of the debate. Adeney (2007) argues that institutional design, rather than religion, is the strongest explanatory variable behind the differing intensity of ethnic conflict in India and Pakistan, and identifies the small number of Pakistani federating units, with one province holding more than half the national population, as a persistent source of federal strain. Ahmad, Aakuka and Tanveer (2023), in a qualitative-descriptive study focused specifically on the formation of new provinces in Pakistan, identify five recurring obstacles: the electoral self-interest of major parties, the fiscal cost of new administrative structures, competing ethnic and linguistic identity claims, the centralising instinct of the federal bureaucracy, and the resistance of established regional political blocs. They recommend a standing constitutional commission empowered to review the provincial map on a fixed cycle.

Zulfiqar (2012) reaches a similar conclusion from a different angle, arguing that new provinces cannot be created without genuine national consensus and constitutional legitimacy, and that using the issue for short-term electoral advantage tends to entrench opposition rather than resolve it. Ahmar (2013), examining the specific case of the proposed Hazara province, warns that administrative units created without securing the buy-in of every interested party carry a genuine risk of intergroup conflict, and separately (Ahmar, 2016) situates the broader provinces debate within Pakistan's internal-security calculus. Latif (2017) argues that any credible case for new provinces must rest on administrative rather than ethnic, linguistic or religious grounds, tied explicitly to a fairer distribution of development resources. Mushtaq (2009) documents how Pakistan's comparatively centralised federal structure has produced a persistent sense of marginalisation in its smaller provinces.

### The 18th Amendment and the Unfinished Local Government Question

A third strand of literature situates the new-provinces debate against Pakistan's unfinished experiment with devolution below the provincial level. Rana (2020) offers a critical examination of the 18th Amendment's implementation, showing that the transfer of authority to the provinces met sustained, and often covert, resistance from a federal bureaucracy structurally averse to relinquishing resources and control. Writing for the LSE's South Asia blog, Kakar (2017) documents how provincial governments across the political spectrum have been slow to establish the local government institutions required under Article 140-A, repeatedly delaying local body elections and withholding the funds and authority such institutions would need to function. Taken together, this literature suggests that the persistence of the new-provinces demand and the stalling of local government devolution are two expressions of the same underlying problem, a federal and provincial elite reluctant to let power move further down than it has to.

## Methodology

This brief adopts a qualitative, document-based research design consistent with the descriptive-analytical approach used in comparable studies of Pakistan's federal structure (Ahmad, Aakuka, & Tanveer, 2023). Primary material is the public record of Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's statements on new provinces, delivered between 30 July and 6 September 2026, as reported contemporaneously by Dawn, Geo News, Arab News, The Express Tribune, The Nation, ThePrint, Voicepk.net and Pakistan Today, read both for substantive policy content and for discursive strategies (framing, modality, appeals to consensus), following the transitivity-oriented approach used by Yasin, Mansoor and Thalho (2021). A second category is the recorded political response: provincial assembly resolutions, statements by coalition and opposition leaders, and the parallel reporting on the proposed 28th Constitutional Amendment, which government sources have themselves linked to the same debate.

These qualitative sources were triangulated against secondary quantitative data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the State Bank of Pakistan, Trading Economics and Transparency International. All academic citations in this brief were independently verified against publisher pages, DOIs or institutional repositories before inclusion; where an earlier draft of this citation list contained an inaccurate journal attribution, it has been corrected against the publisher's own record (see Rana, 2020, corrected below to Asian Journal of Management Cases). All monetary and demographic figures are attributed to their original source in-text and in the reference list.

### What Naqvi Actually Said

Mohsin Naqvi has served as federal Interior Minister since March 2024. On 30 July 2026, addressing the Pakistan Economic Summit in Islamabad, he opened with a blunt line about the state of the country's institutions:

"Whether you agree or not, the system we have been living under has collapsed."

He argued that the four-province structure, inherited largely from colonial-era administrative boundaries, could no longer serve a population that has more than doubled since the 1980s, and linked the governance argument to a fiscal one: "When we make our budget, they make it in negative," he said. He called on all political parties to sit together and settle the question. Dawn's own reporting from mid-August 2026 records a government functionary describing the entire discussion as a likely precursor to a broader 28th Constitutional Amendment, under which options ranging from new provinces to strengthened, directly-funded local government were being weighed.

He returned to the theme on 22 August, and again on 5 and 6 September at a Lahore policy dialogue, sharpening the message: new units, he said, "will have to be created at any cost." Pressed on the sensitivity of the issue, he added a clarification since quoted almost as often as his original claim:

"Reset does not mean breaking down the system. Reset means making wrongs right."

Read against the literature surveyed in Section 2, this clarification performs a recognisable legitimation function: it reframes a structural change originating from a federal minister as an act of correction rather than disruption, and its repeated pairing with appeals to "the will of the people" shifts the source of authority for the decision away from the cabinet table and onto an unspecified, and as yet unconsulted, public. This is precisely why Section 5's account of the 28th Amendment matters for the discourse reading: the proposal reportedly includes vesting the power to create new provinces solely in federal parliament, which would make the "consent" Naqvi's language repeatedly promises a matter of political goodwill rather than constitutional guarantee.

### Background: Four Provinces, One Old Map

Pakistan has governed itself since independence through a small number of very large provinces. The 2023 Digital Census recorded a national population of 241.49 million, an increase of about 33.8 million over the 2017 count, with growth concentrated overwhelmingly in Punjab and Sindh.

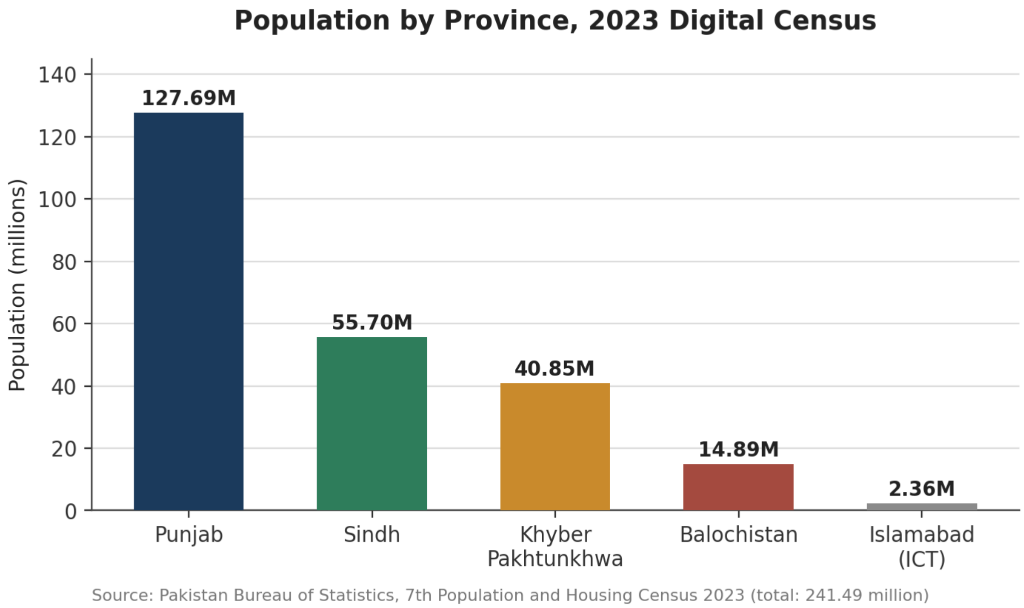


**Figure 1. Population by province, 2023 census. Punjab alone accounts for just under 53 percent of the national population. Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 7th Population and Housing Census 2023.**

This concentration is at the center of the administrative argument, and it is precisely the imbalance Adeney (2007) identifies as a structural source of federal strain.

**The proposed 28th Amendment and the shape of a possible map**

Dawn's reporting of 15 August 2026 quotes a government functionary describing the new-provinces debate as “under serious consideration” and as a likely precursor to a proposed 28th Constitutional Amendment. Specific options under discussion reportedly include placing Karachi and Gwadar under direct federal administrative control while the remainder of Sindh stays a single province, dividing Balochistan into two provinces, dividing Punjab into three, and splitting Khyber Pakhtunkhwa into Pakhtun and Hazara regions; an alternative option would instead strengthen the existing local government tier, with funds routed directly from the federal government rather than through provincial secretariats. Separately reported elements of the wider 28th Amendment package would, according to investigative reporting cited on Pakistan's own constitutional-reference sources, move the power to create new provinces under Article 1 so that it rests solely with federal parliament, a change from the current requirement that the affected provincial assembly itself approve any boundary change by a two-thirds majority. The same reported package would also make provincial fund transfers to local government constitutionally binding, addressing directly the Article 140-A gap discussed above, while making the provinces' guaranteed floor share of the NFC Award more flexible, a change several provincial politicians have read as a reduction in fiscal autonomy rather than an enhancement of it.

Pakistan's legal community has itself split over the proposal in a way that illustrates the wider divide. The Supreme Court Bar Association endorsed the idea of new provinces on governance and development grounds, while the Pakistan Bar Council insisted that any change must proceed strictly within the existing constitutional framework and through national consensus. Among coalition partners, MQM-P's Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui has argued that implementing Article 239's provision for new provinces and local government is a constitutional requirement whose neglect amounts to “betrayal,” while MQM founder Altaf Hussain, addressing supporters from London, said the 28th Amendment deliberations “should never be taken lightly” and accused the PPP of inflaming tensions in Sindh. On the other side, PML-N's Riaz Hussain Pirzada told The Nation there was no immediate prospect of a referendum but a real chance the 28th Amendment could pass within months, cautioning that cross-party consensus does not yet exist.

**The unfinished business of the 18th Amendment**

The 2010 passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment is usually described as the high point of fiscal federalism in Pakistan's history. It abolished the Concurrent Legislative List, transferred ministries such as health and education to the provinces, and gave constitutional weight to the National Finance Commission Award. Article 140-A requires each province to establish local government and devolve authority to elected representatives, yet local body elections have been repeatedly delayed, diluted or left to lapse in every province over the past decade and a half, a pattern Rana (2020) and Kakar (2017) both attribute to bureaucratic and political self-interest rather than technical difficulty.

**The constitutional route**

As matters currently stand, Article 239 of the Constitution requires any change to provincial boundaries to pass with a two-thirds majority in both the National Assembly and the assembly of the affected province, in addition to Senate approval. This is a high bar by design, and it is the main reason why demands for new provinces, including the long-standing case for a separate Hazara province (passed as a resolution by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly on four separate occasions) or for a South Punjab or Bahawalpur province, have never converted into actual boundary changes despite decades of advocacy (Ahmad, Aakuka, & Tanveer, 2023; Zulfiqar, 2012). Whether that bar remains in place depends on the outcome of the 28th Amendment discussion described above.

**The Case Being Made for New Units**

Setting aside the current political noise, the substantive argument for smaller administrative units rests on a few recurring claims.

- Proximity: government offices, courts and development spending sit closer to the people they serve, cutting the time and cost of routine administrative interactions.
- Focus: large provinces concentrate development spending around a single dominant hub, leaving secondary regions comparatively starved of investment (Latif, 2017).
- Accountability: smaller units are, in principle, easier for voters to monitor and for auditors to examine.
- Competitive federalism: multiple provincial governments competing for investment can, in theory, produce faster reform than a handful of large bureaucracies (Ahmad, Aakuka, & Tanveer, 2023).

Table 1 sets out this argument in a more structured form, alongside its principal risks.

| Dimension | Case for new units | Risk or counter-argument |
|---|---|---|
| Administrative reach | Shorter distances to courts, land offices and basic services. | New secretariats and bureaucracies must be built from scratch, at real fiscal cost. |
| Fiscal accountability | Smaller budgets are easier for a legislature and public to scrutinise. | Local elites and patronage networks already dominate development-fund politics. |
| Political inclusion | New units create fresh entry points into formal politics. | Boundary-drawing can become the next battleground for ethnic or linguistic rivalry (Ahmar, 2013). |
| Provincial autonomy | Consent-based settlement could reduce resentment over neglect. | A federally driven push, especially without provincial consent, is read as an attack on the 18th Amendment. |

**Table 1. The administrative case for new provinces or units, weighed against its principal risks.**

**The Political Fault Lines, August-September 2026**

The immediate political reaction to Naqvi's remarks has been sharp, and it has not divided neatly along the government-versus-opposition line that usually structures Pakistani politics.

**Sindh: near-total rejection**

The strongest resistance has come from Sindh, governed by the Pakistan Peoples Party. The Sindh Assembly passed a resolution on 3 September 2026 rejecting any plan to alter the province's boundaries, invoking Article 239(4) directly and describing Sindh as a “historic, civilizational and constitutional” entity that was British India's first provincial legislature to back the creation of Pakistan. The resolution's concluding line was uncompromising:

“Sindh is one, shall remain one.”

PPP Sindh's leadership called federal ministers' statements “unconstitutional interference.” K-P Chief Minister Sohail Afridi of PTI, despite his own party governing a province with its own new-province movement (Hazara), told a Karachi lawyers' convention, “I stand with the people of Sindh against this division,” a stance that drew criticism from Sindh's own PPP ministers for what they called an ambiguous position elsewhere.

**A divided coalition**

Within the ruling coalition, the response has been uneven. MQM-P has pushed the issue explicitly through the lens of Article 239 and the proposed 28th Amendment, while PML-N, the lead coalition party, initially stayed largely silent even as its own interior minister kept raising the issue. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif called the devolution of power “inevitable” while accusing an allied party of holding a contradictory position. PTI's national leadership, through chairman Barrister Gohar, warned that any “hasty decision” risked weakening the federation.

**Where there is more openness**

The reaction has not been uniformly negative. The Supreme Court Bar Association formally endorsed the proposal on governance and development grounds. Senior journalist Hamid Mir agreed Pakistan does need new provinces in principle, while insisting the deeper fix is enforcing the Constitution as written. He noted the demand did not originate with Naqvi: minister Ahsan Iqbal had raised it in June 2026, and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly has separately passed resolutions favouring a Hazara province four times (Ahmar, 2013).

**What the Public Is Saying**

Two distinct public reactions ran alongside the political one. The first was informational and, in the end, misleading: within days of Naqvi's July remarks, a map began circulating on social media showing Pakistan redrawn into eighteen administrative units. The map was not issued or endorsed by any government office, and no official plan of that kind has been published; its spread nonetheless fed exactly the kind of premature speculation Naqvi himself later said he wanted to avoid.

The second reaction was a genuine and, in Sindh especially, intense wave of public pushback. Local coverage described a surge of videos and posts opposing the idea, arguing that dividing provinces would not by itself fix weak local administration and could open new ethnic and political disputes. One review of the online debate concluded plainly that “most observers are not taking the idea quietly.” The Pakistan Bar Council, at its 250th meeting, added its own institutional voice for a strictly constitutional process, a position the Supreme Court Bar Association did not share. At the Sindh Assembly session on 3 September, the chief minister's office circulated an image of a banner reading “Sindh Ji Dharti Munhinji Maa”, Sindhi for “The land of Sindh is my mother.” What can be said with confidence is that the issue moved quickly from ministerial speeches to public conversation across the country within weeks, and that Sindh's response was measurably louder and more organised than any other province's.

**The Economic Backdrop**

Naqvi's argument has always been partly a fiscal one. Pakistan spent 2022 and 2023 in the middle of one of the sharpest economic crises in its history. Reserves fell below three billion dollars in January 2023, and inflation peaked at 37.97 percent in May of that year. The State Bank held its policy rate at 22 percent for an extended period.

The picture two and a half years later is markedly better, though not fully resolved. Reserves stood at 18.4 billion dollars at the end of June 2026, with the State Bank projecting a further rise to 20.2 billion dollars by December 2026. The government posted a primary surplus described by its own finance ministry as historic, and the debt-to-GDP ratio has eased to around 68 to 70 percent. Growth for FY2025-26 came in at 3.70 percent, the fastest pace in four years.

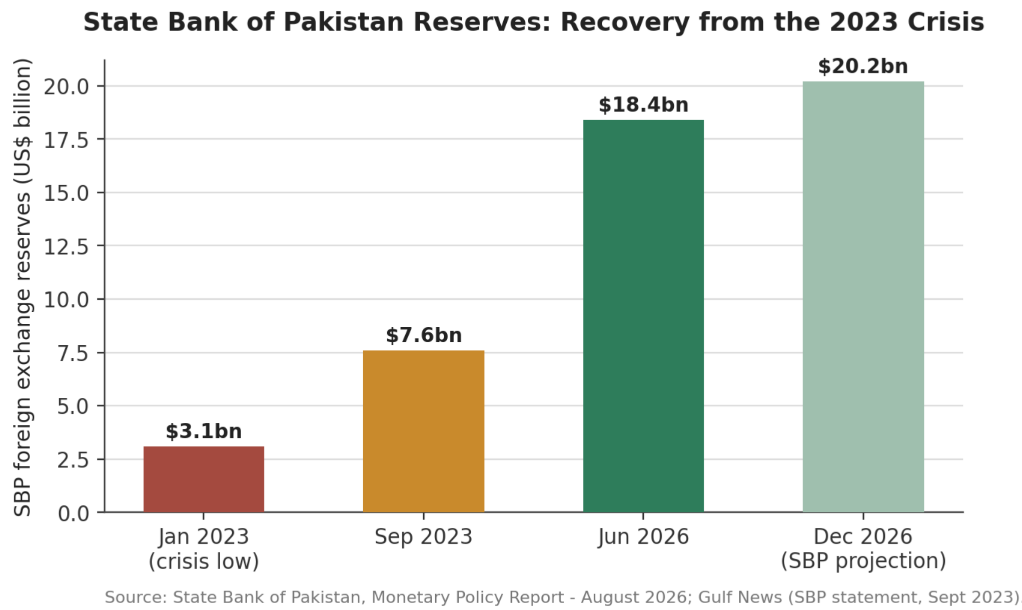


**Figure 2. State Bank of Pakistan foreign exchange reserves, selected dates. December 2026 figure is the SBP's own projection. Source: SBP Monetary Policy Report, August 2026.**

Inflation, however, has not settled into the single digits for good. A fresh shock from Middle East-linked energy prices pushed headline inflation back into double digits by May 2026, and further to a reported 11.15 percent in August, ending Pakistan's single-digit inflation streak.

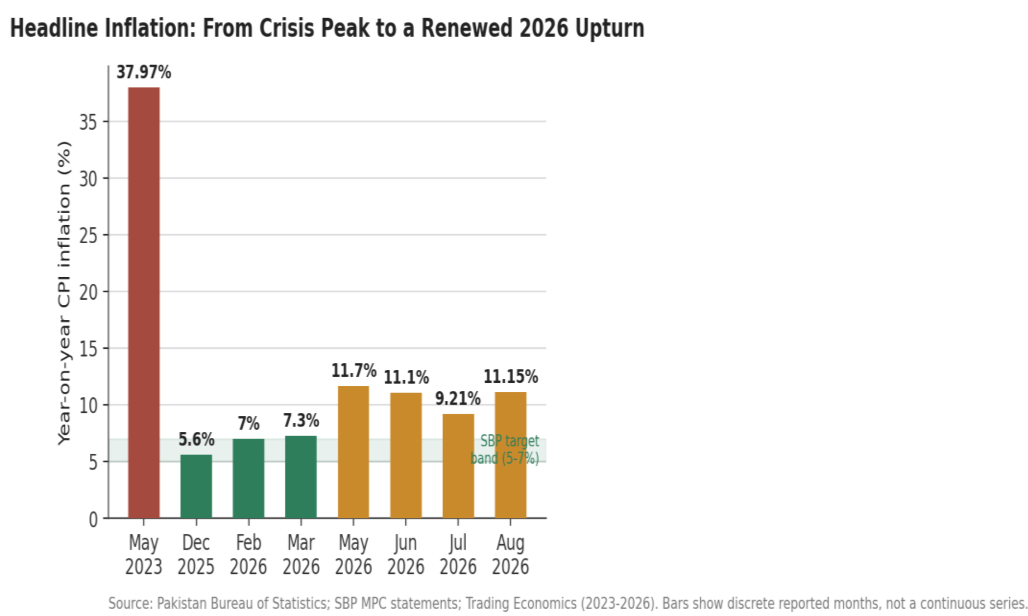


**Figure 3. Selected monthly CPI inflation readings, 2023-2026. Bars mark discrete reported months. Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics; SBP; Trading Economics.**

Two structural weaknesses sit underneath these headline numbers. The tax-to-GDP ratio still sits near 10 to 11 percent, well short of the roughly 15 percent economists consider adequate. The energy sector's circular debt reached roughly 5.29 trillion rupees across gas and power by June 2026. Both are administrative failures as much as financial ones, and neither is solved by redrawing provincial boundaries; a new province would simply inherit smaller versions of the same problem.

**Two Paths Forward: What Happens If New Provinces Are Created, and What Happens If They Are Not**

What follows is a grounded, evidence-based reading of the two broad paths open to the country, drawing on the literature reviewed in Section 2 and the empirical picture assembled above.

**Scenario A: If new provinces are created**

Plausible gains include faster local decision-making, a more even distribution of development spending if new provincial capitals begin competing for investment, better political representation for regions that feel administratively remote, and a one-time opportunity to design modern institutions. Plausible costs are equally concrete: a heavy one-time fiscal price for new secretariats and courts; a real risk that boundary-drawing itself becomes the most destabilizing part of the exercise, particularly in Sindh and Baluchistan (Ahmar, 2013); no guarantee that smaller units are less prone to elite capture; and, crucially, a legitimacy cost if the reported 28th Amendment provision removing provincial-assembly consent is enacted, since a province created without the affected assembly's agreement would lack precisely the consent Naqvi's own language promises. That gap between the discourse of consent and a constitutional mechanism that could bypass it is, on the evidence gathered here, the single largest risk to the proposal's legitimacy.

**Scenario B: If the status quo continues**

If the current four-province structure remains unchanged, local government under Article 140-A will likely remain, in Rana's (2020) and Kakar's (2017) terms, a constitutional obligation honoured mainly in its breach. Development spending will likely stay concentrated around existing provincial hubs, leaving southern Punjab, interior Sindh, Hazara and other peripheral regions structurally marginalised (Mushtaq, 2009). The demand for new provinces will not disappear; on the evidence of the Hazara and Seraiki-belt movements, it will resurface periodically without ever converting into a constitutional amendment, since Article 239's current threshold in a resistant provincial assembly is unlikely to be met absent genuine consensus. On the economic side, the tax base, the circular debt and the corruption indicators discussed in Section 11 are not tied to the number of provinces and will continue to constrain governance quality regardless of which path is taken.

The comparison points to a conditional rather than a triumphant conclusion. New provinces could plausibly improve service delivery and regional balance, but only if genuine provincial consent is preserved rather than legislated away, if anti-corruption and civil-service reforms precede rather than follow any redrawing, and if the fiscal cost of new administrative infrastructure is planned for explicitly. Absent these conditions, the status quo and a poorly sequenced restructuring converge on the same outcome: continued weak governance, at a higher administrative cost in the second case than in the first.

## Recommendations: What Would Have to Change First

Corruption, not the number of provinces, is the variable most consistently linked in Pakistan's own recent history to poor governance outcomes. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index has kept Pakistan in a narrow, weak band for years: a score of 28 out of 100 in 2025, up only marginally from 27 in 2024, and still below the 33 the country recorded in 2018. Pakistan currently ranks 136th out of 182 countries assessed.

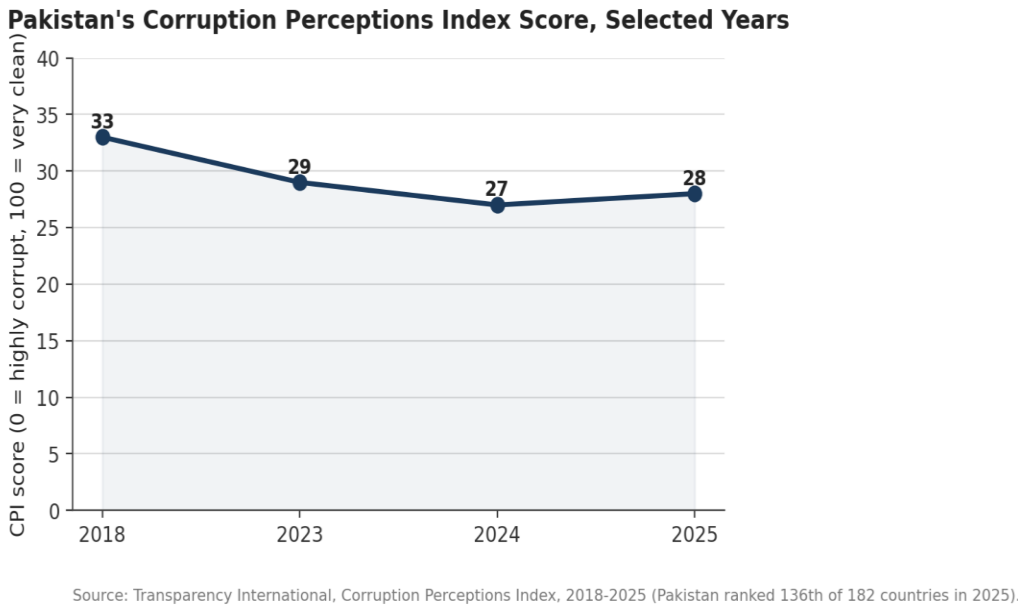


**Figure 4. Pakistan's Corruption Perceptions Index score, selected years. Source: Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2018-2025.**

**Sequencing and process**

- Preserve genuine provincial consent in any 28th Amendment text; removing Article 239's provincial-assembly requirement would resolve the discursive tension identified in Section 4 in the wrong direction.
- Finish the unfinished business of the 18th Amendment first: enforce Article 140-A and hold regular, empowered local government elections before adding another administrative tier (Rana, 2020; Kakar, 2017).
- Establish a standing constitutional commission, as proposed by Ahmad, Aakuka and Tanveer (2023), to review the provincial map on a fixed cycle.
- Pilot before scaling: a single, clearly justified case, such as Islamabad's own status, would test the mechanics before any nationwide redrawing.

**Anti-corruption measures**

- Mandate public, verifiable asset declarations for elected officials and senior civil servants, with real penalties for false declarations.
- Extend e-procurement and digital land-record systems to every district.
- Give the National Accountability Bureau and provincial anti-corruption bodies genuine operational independence from the executive branches they investigate.
- Publish development-fund spending down to the union council or tehsil level on an open online portal.

**Economic groundwork**

- Broaden the tax net rather than raising rates on an already-taxed minority.
- Resolve the energy sector's circular debt through distribution-company restructuring and tariff rationalization.
- Protect the FY26 primary fiscal surplus by budgeting explicitly for any administrative reorganization rather than financing it through fresh borrowing.

None of this depends on how many provinces Pakistan eventually has. A country that fixes tax collection, closes the circular debt, empowers local government as the Constitution already requires, and keeps the consent mechanism in Article 239 intact would see real improvement in governance whether it keeps four provinces or moves to eight.

## Conclusion

Mohsin Naqvi has reopened a debate that has surfaced repeatedly since 1947. Read through the lens of critical discourse analysis, his repeated pairing of a federally driven proposal with appeals to "the will of the people" performs a recognizable legitimation function, consistent with the pattern Yasin, Mansoor and Thalho (2021) documented in earlier Pakistani political communication. That this language runs alongside a reported constitutional package that would remove the very consent mechanism it invokes is the central tension this brief identifies, and the one Pakistani policymaker most need to resolve before any map is redrawn.

The economic case for administrative reform is real: Pakistan has pulled back from the edge of the 2023 crisis but still carries a narrow tax base, a large circular debt, and a corruption score that has barely moved in years. Whether the answer is a new map or a fully implemented old one is the question the country still has to settle. On the evidence gathered here, the institutions, and the consent on which they rest, come first.

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