

## CPEC and federalism

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THE conflict over the geographic distribution of projects being implemented under CPEC is neither unexpected nor completely unwarranted. Out of all principle fractures dotting Pakistan's political history, centre-province relations, and the debate on centralised bureaucratic structures controlling administration and policy, are second only to a basic civil-military conflict. In fact, it can be plausibly argued that the latter is in no small part responsible for the former.

Distilling public statements, speeches, and posturing of various political actors, the Cliffs Notes of this conflict are as follows — out of the agreements signed between the two governments, a disproportionate percentage of the financing is devoted to projects located in the six divisions of north and central Punjab, with Lahore receiving special attention.

This holds for both the main highway projects, as well as for the various power projects planned (or under construction). Other areas, like Fata, the provinces of KP and Balochistan, and Azad Kashmir, will see a smaller portion of the investment. This is said to be particularly salient in the case of the 'western' route, which is being pushed off to a lower priority.

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In case it wasn't clear, this is a rudimentary summary of the position held by those opposing the government's current utilisation of CPEC agreements. It is not, and I should make this abundantly clear, an actual analysis of project distribution or per-area expenditure. That analysis needs to be done separately and needs to be made public as soon as possible.

Nonetheless, the starting point here is inter-provincial mistrust, and frayed relations between provincial actors and the central government. The history behind this is fairly simple: The composition of the civil and military bureaucracy, their colluding political clients, as well as the geographic and political weight of Punjab, makes the centre seem as partial to one province over the others.

The roots of this lie in colonial times and in Partition, where provincial elites were suddenly made subordinate to a newly formed centre, which then proceeded to centralise power in the hands of largely unaccountable elites.

That pattern remained in place through various military and civil regimes till the passage of the 18th Amendment, which subsequently enshrined substantive provincial autonomy in the Constitution. By and large, the same centre-province debate has also been about greater control for elected representatives versus civil and military bureaucrats.

The second point worth stating here is that ethnic discord and centre-province conflict are a fight between different tiers of political elites. Apart from the MQM in Karachi, there is currently no mass, 'common

citizenry' movement with ethnic under or overtones. The PPP, ANP and the PkMAP mobilise voters on ethnic lines, but their leadership consists largely of elites from within their ethnic group. This leads sceptics to suggest that the 'ethnic card' is used as a cynical ploy by one set of elites to fight another.

While this may be true for some (or maybe even for most), this scepticism does nothing to diminish the existence of inter-provincial conflict. The feelings of deprivation amongst citizens are real, regardless of whether they're super-imposed, brainwashed, or a product of false consciousness. In fact, repeated patronising suggestions that 'you people are being misled' probably exacerbate the trust deficit.

Thirdly, in any state with low levels of national integration and high levels of inter-ethnic or inter-provincial conflict, slogans of 'development in the national interest' are often digested as efforts to further enshrine status quo imbalances. Given that many segments of Pakistan's population ascribe to other identities — as opposed to the vague Muslim/Islamic nationalism peddled by the central government — there is and can be no genuine 'national interest' without political consensus.

Technocrats may come up with the most socially optimal way to spend CPEC money, devise policy that may help the smaller provinces even more in the long run, but this 'rational/dispassionate' thrust has to pass through the muck of actual politics. On its own, it is useless, and when a particular government tries to bludgeon it into implementation, it creates greater conflict.

Which leads us to the fourth point — actual politics, ie give-and-take between different political elites — is how most civilised states go about their business. Whether it's over federal funding for different projects in the US, or the introduction of a reformed general sales tax in India, communication between different tiers of political elites, and the development of consensus (even if it is 'objectively' sub-optimal) creates a stable system of government. This is something Pakistan has very little experience of, despite claiming to be a federal republic for the better part of its history.

Many otherwise educated observers ascribe to the bludgeoning strategy of development, ie come up with the best technocratic solution and get a 'strong' leader to push it through. Unfortunately, we've been dealing with the fallout of strong, centralising leaders for most of this country's existence. It hasn't worked in the past, and there isn't much to suggest it will work in the future.

Luckily, all is not lost yet. There are several avenues for realisation of the federal government's CPEC ambitions, without any accompanying acrimony. Instead of convening APCs, it needs to take the debate to parliament. Complementing that should be a detailed expenditure analysis of where the money is going, and what benefits will be received by which sub-national entity.

Its tone even towards new converts to provincial autonomy discourse — such as the PTI — has to be conciliatory. Finally, opposition parties will have to meet the government if not halfway then at least a quarter of the way. They need to acknowledge that blanket opposition is useless, and will jeopardise their own political stake in the long run.

Federalism of this kind may seem cumbersome to an impatient polity, but rest assured it remains the only way forward.

**Source:** <http://www.dawn.com/news/1233635/cpec-and-federalism>