**[Backdoor delimitation](https://www.dawn.com/news/1786318/backdoor-delimitation)**

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GENERAL election 2013 was held in constituencies demarcated in 2002. For the 2018 elections, boundaries were defined afresh on the basis of Census 2017’s provisional results. With a new census in 2023, the ECP is again redrawing constituencies for the 2024 polls. So we will have three consecutive general elections held in three differently demarcated constituencies.

This frequent moving of goal posts is problematic. Combine it with the delimitation methodology binding constituency limits with district boundaries and it becomes a board game where a right move can checkmate your opponent way before Election Day. The move is called the creation of a new district.

Lasbela district, Balochistan, illustrates how this works. Lasbela has had two provincial seats since 1977 and one national shared at times with Awaran and at others with Gwadar. The area is a stronghold of the Jam family, which has won one national and one provincial seat from here many times. But its other provincial constituency that is adjacent to Karachi and includes the rich industrial areas of Hub, Gaddani and Sonmiani is the Bhootani family’s formidable fort. Saleh Bhootani won here in all elections held from 1977 to 2018, except 2002 and 2008 when his brother won.

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Jam Kamal had won the Lasbela national seat in 2013 and also challenged the Bhootanis in their provincial constituency but failed. Jam served as federal minister in the 2013-18 PML-N government. The 2018 delimitations divided the district into two provincial constituencies again but moved Sonmiani tehsil from the Bhootani constituency (PB 49) to the Jam constituency (PB 50).

The Bhootanis didn’t like this and retorted in 2018 by not only retaining their traditional seat but also defeating the Jams on the national seat for the first time. Jam Kamal was reduced to his old provincial constituency, but being head of the Balochistan Awami Party, he became chief minister.

The Bhootanis waited, and as soon as the Jam government fell, they played the time-tested card of new district formation. Lasbela gave birth to the Hub district in September 2022 with the entire Sonmiani tehsil made part of it. In the 2023 delimitations, the new district of Hub has been given one seat in the Balochistan Assembly against its share of 1.31. So, thanks to the creation of new district, Sonmiani is back in the Bhootani constituency!

Balochistan has created 15 new districts in the last two decades, taking the total to 36. It only takes an executive order to form a new district. There are no laws or rules set for the purpose.

They are generally created to meet ‘the long-standing popular demand of bringing governance closer to the people’s doorsteps’. But the argument holds no water as it is applied selectively. Murree tehsil of Rawalpindi district has been recently made a district, but Gujjar Khan tehsil has not, though both are almost equidistant from the district headquarters and the population of the latter is double that of the former.

The politics of creating a new district is not always as straight as in Lasbela’s case. In many instances, it sets in motion such a complex chain of changes in constituencies that it becomes difficult to ascertain the exact intention behind the move. Muzaffargarh district had 12 seats in the Punjab Assembly before Kot Addu was separated from it, just months ahead of the current delimitation. The two districts have been awarded eight and three seats (total 11) after the rounding off of their respective shares of 8.21 and 3.46.

Had they stayed together their combined share of 11.67 would have been rounded off to 12 again. The splitting of Muzaffargarh’s fractional share has made it possible to round off Kasur’s share of 9.50 upwards to 10 seats. If Kot Addu wasn’t separated, Kasur would not have got another seat. So, one seat from south Punjab has moved right next door to (takht-i-) Lahore.

The bifurcation of KP districts looks like the butterfly effect as a change in one district has triggered changes in others. Chitral district had two seats in the KP Assembly in 2002, but its share of 1.45 was rounded off to one in 2018 delimitations.

Its share in 2023 was 1.45 again, but was divided into Upper and Lower Chitral districts before the current delimitations which split its share at 0.55 and 0.9. As both fractions rounded off to one, the two new districts have got one seat each. So, Chitral has got back its second seat through bifurcation.

Hangu, however, lacked this foresight. It had two seats in the 2002 and 2018 delimitations but its current share of 1.49 is rounded off to one. If Chitral was not bifurcated, Hangu could have retained its two seats. Let us see when Hangu starts demanding bifurcation.

South Waziristan’s share of 2.50 could have won it three seats. But the possibility vanished when it was bifurcated into Upper and Lower districts months before delimitation; the shares of the new districts at 1.37 and 1.13, can only be rounded off to one. So what was a boon for Chitral became a bane for South Waziristan. The PTI and JUI-F have been the main contestants in Chitral, Hangu and South Waziristan districts in 2018.

The end beneficiary of this complex interplay, however, is Shangla whose share of 2.51 has won it another seat, raising its tally to three. Redrawing Shangla into three constituencies will upset past political equations. In 2018, the PML-N lost Shangla-1 to PTI by just 1,706 votes and ANP edged out PTI on the second seat by just 365, while PML-N had stood third by polling 76 less votes. However, the PML-N had defeated PTI by a thin margin of 1,528 on the district’s national seat.

Creating new districts may not be a bad idea from the governance angle, but in practice, these decisions are dictated solely by political interests. This makes a case for a legal framework for the creation of new districts and bringing in executive authority in this matter under elected Houses.

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