

51. Pak-Poli. 23.07.04.

Is Punjab too big for its own good?

TIME TO STIR UP THE POT. LET US PUT ON OUR thinking caps and challenge assumptions and the structures that rest on them. The central question to ponder is this. Is Punjab too big for its own — and Pakistan's — good? I will state at the outset that I am a true blue Punjabi, whatever that means.

According to the last population census, in 1998 there were 133 million Pakistanis of whom 74 million were Punjabis, 30 million Sindhis, 18 million Pathans (this includes Hindko speakers of the NWFP), 7 million Baluchis, 3 million FATA residents and about a million Islamabadies. In other words, one in two Pakistanis was a Punjabi. The numbers have increased somewhat since 1998, but the proportions are more or less the same.

Naturally, the Punjabi multitudes need resources, mainly water, and jobs. And because the government provides most of the jobs, the Punjabis have a large presence in the army and civil administration and, until recently in the nationalised banking sector. All this seems natural to a Punjabi.

Now look at it from the perspective of the smaller provinces. What do they see? They see Punjabis everywhere. The large share of the budget going to the army is seen as the great Punjab siphon. All bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, arrogance and high handedness seems Punjabi inefficiency, arrogance and corruption. Who messed up the banking sector whose foundations were laid by the Mohajirs of Karachi? The Punjabis did. Who can't live in peace with the neighbors? The Punjabis can't. By

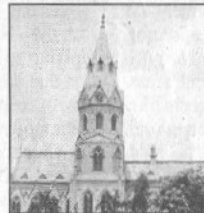
extension: who has brought the country to the economic and social dire straights? Punjabis, of course.

A Punjabi can go blue in the face arguing the statistics: that as a proportion, Punjabis dominate no more than others; that they also contribute the largest share of revenue to run the government; that Punjab has the largest number of educated, qualified people for the jobs, and so on. It just doesn't work. The logic of large numbers (or lack thereof) works against you.

And it has grave consequences. One is the inability to forge a consensus on managing water and the other is the non-stop bickering over the National Finance Award. Without an agreement on water, Pakistan's (and Punjab's) agriculture is threatened. And without the resolution of how national revenue is to be shared, the provinces' ability to deliver health care, education, law and order, drinking water and sanitation, all basic needs of the common citizen, is in jeopardy. Unattended, these festering issues threaten the federation.

The problem of Punjab's "dominance" in Pakistan has a parallel in SAARC. India is the only country in the region that has borders with all the others and therefore has many disputes (over land, water, human traffic, trade in goods etc). At the same time India is humongous — seven out of every ten South Asians are Indians. Result. India's neighbors in SAARC feel bullied by India in bilateral dealings, so they gang up on India in SAARC. India thus distrusts SAARC and would rather settle disputes bilaterally. SAARC, therefore, has failed to become a vibrant forum.

ECONOMY



RAVIAN

Fifteen provinces instead of the current four will strengthen the bargaining power of district Nazims, allow a sharper focus on the special urban needs of our four metropolises and will lead to rational management of water and revenue sharing

(To tell the truth, just about the only useful function SAARC performs is to provide India and Pakistan cover to meet on the "sidelines" and pull back from the brink to which they are propelled periodically by their juvenile and bellicose public posturing).

Pakistan, unlike SAARC, is a federation and not a co-op. We have to find a workable solution to our size problem. We can take several cuts at restructuring Punjab. One is to divide it into three provinces: the Potohar, Central Punjab and the Siraiki belt. But this division would make the Saraiki belt the poorest part of Pakistan lacking a growth engine to pull it out of poverty.

We could also think of an East-West longitudinal division. The Eastern part would comprise the old "Divisions" of Gujranwala, Lahore and parts of Multan, while the Western part would comprise Rawalpindi, Sargodha (including Faisalabad), the rest of Multan and Bahawalpur.

If Punjab is divided into two provinces, we will have three provinces in the Federation with a population of 30 million plus each. This will remove the Punjab "dominance" problem but will still not address the concerns of the much smaller provinces of Baluchistan and the NWFP. Also, the two Punjabs might still be seen to be ganging up on the other provinces at critical decision points.

To promote true competitive behaviour that encourages rational, cooperative solutions to water and revenue sharing, and expenditure priorities, we may need more provinces, say 15, each with a population of around ten

Punjab too big for its own good?

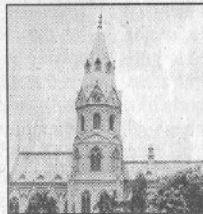
nsion: who has brought the country to the economic social dire straights? Punjabis, of course.

A Punjabi can go blue in the face arguing the statistics: as a proportion, Punjabis dominate no more than others; they also contribute the largest share of revenue to run the government; that Punjab has the largest number of educated, skilled people for the jobs, and so on. It just doesn't work. The logic of large numbers (or lack thereof) works against you.

And it has grave consequences. One is the inability to forge a consensus on managing water and the other is non-stop bickering over the National Finance Award. Without an agreement on water, Pakistan's (and Punjab's) agriculture is threatened. And without the resolution of how national revenue is to be shared, the provinces' ability to deliver health care, education, law and order, drinking water and sanitation, all basic needs of the common citizen, is in jeopardy. Unattended, these emerging issues threaten the federation.

The problem of Punjab's "dominance" in Pakistan has a parallel in SAARC. India is the only country in the region that has borders with all the others and therefore has many routes (over land, water, human traffic, trade in goods). At the same time India is humongous — seven out of every ten South Asians are Indians. Result. India's neighbours in SAARC feel bullied by India in bilateral dealings, they gang up on India in SAARC. India thus distrusts SAARC and would rather settle disputes bilaterally. SAARC, therefore, has failed to become a vibrant forum.

ECONOMY



RAVIAN

Fifteen provinces instead of the current four will strengthen the bargaining power of district Nazims, allow a sharper focus on the special urban needs of our four metropolises and will lead to rational management of water and revenue sharing

(To tell the truth, just about the only useful function SAARC performs is to provide India and Pakistan cover to meet on the "sidelines" and pull back from the brink to which they are propelled periodically by their juvenile and bellicose public posturing).

Pakistan, unlike SAARC, is a federation and not a cop. We have to find a workable solution to our size problem. We can take several cuts at restructuring Punjab. One is to divide it into three provinces: the Potohar, Central Punjab and the Siraiki belt. But this division would make the Siraiki belt the poorest part of Pakistan lacking a growth engine to pull it out of poverty.

We could also think of an East-West longitudinal division. The Eastern part would comprise the old "Divisions" of Gujranwala, Lahore and parts of Multan, while the Western part would comprise Rawalpindi, Sargodha (including Faisalabad), the rest of Multan and Bahawalpur.

If Punjab is divided into two provinces, we will have three provinces in the Federation with a population of 30 million plus each. This will remove the Punjab "dominance" problem but will still not address the concerns of the much smaller provinces of Baluchistan and the NWFP. Also, the two Punjabs might still be seen to be ganging up on the other provinces at critical decision points.

To promote true competitive behaviour that encourages rational, cooperative solutions to water and revenue sharing, and expenditure priorities, we may need more provinces, say 15, each with a population of around ten

million. This will take us back to the old (recently made defunct) "Divisions". They make a lot of sense in terms of geography and linguistic and administrative contiguity. Each such province will have a governor, and a chief minister accountable to an elected provincial assembly. In other words, second tier governance will be delivered among units with population of 10 million each rather than the current lopsided structure of units ranging in population from 80 million to 10 million.

The proposed restructuring would have another advantage. It would address the concentration of power and economic largess that currently resides in Lahore, Peshawar, Karachi and Quetta and works against the elected district Nazims. The proposed smaller provinces, with 8 to 10 districts each will elevate the status and the bargaining power of the Nazim vis-à-vis the provinces and will facilitate the devolution of financial and administrative resources.

Freeing up Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta from the metropolitan power play as administrative centers of much larger provinces will allow the big cities to focus their energies on solving the increasingly critical problems of urban infrastructure and social service delivery and law and order. If the chief minister of the much smaller Lahore province wishes to define development as building more underpasses on Lahore's canal road, let him do so with the resources of Lahore province (that might benefit from the underpasses) and not at the expense of a school or a hospital in Muzaffargarh! ■

An amendment we must do without

IN moving a bill in the National Assembly for the amendment of the existing law governing political parties, the ruling Pakistan Muslim League has taken a regressive step. In its present form, the Political Parties Order, 2002, forbids a person holding a government office from being an office-bearer of a political party. On the face of it, the law is to be amended for the benefit of Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, who, despite being the Muslim League chief, has been made prime minister as a stop-gap arrangement. An essential feature of parliamentary democracy is to keep the party separate from the government — and for good reason. As the people's representatives, parties serve the interests of the nation by suggesting policies and action to the government according to the promises made to the electorate. As the state's executive arm, the prime minister and his cabinet enforce these policies and try to uphold the mandate given to them. However, every government has to act within certain economic and political limits which may not always make a faithful implementation of party policies possible. Besides, once in power, a government may tend to forget about promises made to the electorate and pursue policies according to its expedient needs. It is then that the party in power's role as a watchdog comes critically into play, for it is the party's job to keep the government in line. If the prime minister does not listen, the party has the power to throw him out of office and bring in someone else.

In Pakistan, this tradition has not been consistently followed. The Muslim League

often had the prime minister as party chief. This enabled the PM to control the party for his benefit. Consequently, the Muslim League, which started with the advantage of being the party that created Pakistan, weakened to a point of becoming the prime minister's handmaiden. It thus failed to perform its key role — that of serving as a check on the abuse of powers by the government. Another abominable feature of the parties has been the absence of an elected structure. Most political parties are run by people nominated by party chiefs, who themselves happen to be there without an election. One obvious result of the weakening of the political parties was the deterioration of the political system itself. This not only enabled the Bonapartists to seize power from time to time; they later usurped the Muslim League either directly or through their cronies.

The PPO, 2002, is a fine law and needs no amendment of the kind proposed in the bill. Looking at the situation a couple of months from now, will Mr Shaukat Aziz also be the PML chief? Hardly cut out for a party role, Mr Aziz would do well not to assume that role. Let Chaudhry Shujaat run the party. In that case, why change a sensible law for transient reasons? Let Chaudhry Shujaat hand over the prime minister's office to Mr Aziz after the by-election is over but retain his party post. Maybe, in that case he could be of some use to the country. It is ironic, however, that the bill moved in the National Assembly on Friday seeks to amend the PPO because its article 9 is "creating a problem and complications ... in strengthening the democratic process".

Banning parties

IS THIS talk of banning the Jamaat-i-Islami part of a propaganda war between that party and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, locked in a struggle for political domination in Karachi, or is there something more serious behind it? On May 13, the Jamaat had made a demand for a ban on the Muttahida and promptly on May 15, the call came from the latter for a ban on the Jamaat, both accusing each other of involvement in "terrorist" activities. For the past couple of days running, Governor Ishratul Ibad has made vague statements about the possibility of a ban on the JI being examined. To be fair to him, his remarks came in reply to questions from reporters and he did not make the suggestion on his own. On Friday, according to a news agency report, he said all aspects were being looked into and a decision would be taken in the light of past experience. If experience is any guide, the banning of political parties has always been counter-productive — in Pakistan as in other countries where it has been tried. The outlawing of the National Awami Party by Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto must rank as one of his bigger political follies. In

the past couple of years, a number of sectarian and militant organizations have been banned, but for reasons that do not apply to accredited political parties. In any case, some of the militant outfits, which were promoting and were engaged in sectarian extremism, reemerged under different names. They were banned again, but the militant tendency remains entrenched and flourishes in different garbs.

The federal government has said nothing on the exchange of invective between the MQM and the Jamaat. The Sindh government has also been silent. Dr Ishratul Ibad too, as governor, should resist the temptation of sounding partisan. The MQM itself has been a victim of state repression in the past, and should be the last to suggest punitive action against any organization. Political parties have only one option — and that is to counter each other politically through informed debate and gain acceptance for their views from the general public and the electorate. Any other course will amount to embarking on the path of mutually assured destruction and provide comfort to non-political actors.