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**Occasional Paper Series**

**Number 64**

# Language, Nation and State in Federal Pakistan

**Asma Faiz**

The Forum of Federations, the global network on federalism and multilevel governance, supports better governance through learning among practitioners and experts. Active on six continents, it runs programs in over 20 countries including established federations, as well as countries transitioning to devolved and decentralized governance options. The Forum publishes a range of information and educational materials. It is supported by the following partner countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Ethiopia, Germany, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan and Switzerland.

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ISSN: 1922-558X (online ISSN 1922-5598)

Occasional Paper Series Number 64  
Language, Nation and State in Federal Pakistan  
By Asma Faiz

Project Manager: Leslie Seidle  
Editorial Team: Elisabeth Alber, Linda Cardinal and Asha Sarangi

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This project has been implemented with the support of the following institutions:



Forum of Federations  
75 Albert Street, Suite 411  
Ottawa, Ontario (Canada) K1P 5E7  
Tel: (613) 244-3360  
Fax: (613) 244-3372  
[forum@forumfed.org](mailto:forum@forumfed.org)



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Suggested citation for this publication:

**Asma Faiz, Language, Nation and State in Federal Pakistan (Forum of Federations, Occasional Paper Series, 2022).**

## **LANGUAGE POLICY IN FEDERAL AND DEVOLVED COUNTRIES**

### **Project Overview**

Language is a highly significant marker of individual and collective identities. It often provides an impulse for national or community affirmation and claims to self-government. Provisions to recognize and accommodate linguistic differences can be particularly salient in federations, many of which have highly diverse populations. Indeed, in quite a few cases linguistic diversity was one of the key reasons why federalism was central to a country's founding framework or the result of its constitutional evolution.

Several federal countries have designated more than one language as official (or national) languages in the federal constitution and/or legislation. In turn, the constituent units (states, provinces, etc.) may accord a similar status to one or more languages. The different designations are not merely symbolic: they usually require or lead to policies, programs and other measures to govern language use. In some nonfederal states where more than one language is spoken, a measure of authority over language policy has sometimes been devolved to regional governments (or the equivalent).

Language rules, including for service provision, are frequently an important dimension of policy sectors that are exclusively or largely the responsibility of constituent unit governments. One such sector is education. In various countries, there are calls for teaching to be given not only in officially recognized languages but also in others that are spoken by minorities that are fearful about the future of their language. Indigenous peoples in particular have concerns about the viability of their languages, many of which have a long history of suppression.

In some countries, language policies are well established and are largely uncontested. In others, the policies and/or their application are controversial – even divisive. This may be true not only in newer federations and devolved systems but also in those with a longer history. Because of their links to identity and culture (among other factors), languages can be – indeed, quite often are – a potent basis for political mobilization.

Even when political dynamics are not highly charged, pressures to change or reform language policies and programs are not uncommon. Some demands are fundamental (e.g. additional or stronger constitutional protection), while others are more administrative or technical. In light of their salience to citizens and their relevance in a range of sectors, it is not surprising that language policies are debated, reviewed and (at least in certain cases) modified.

Although there are a number of individual case studies, particularly covering countries where language has been a flash point for political division, there is a lack of comparative research. Moreover, existing comparative studies often focus on western Europe and North America. As more countries have adopted federal or devolved structures in recent decades, there is a need to expand the scope of research on language policies in plurilingual contexts.

The focus of this project is on language policy (broadly interpreted) in a range of countries that are federations or have a significantly devolved structure of government. It aims to take a holistic perspective on language policy and its place within governance arrangements. In addition to providing an overview of the country's demography, constitutional recognitions and protections, and language laws and policies, in order to encourage comparison authors were asked to address a common set of questions:

- A. What potential changes to the regulation of language – constitutional, legislative, administrative – have been proposed or are currently being debated?
- B. What are the pressures and who are the main actors behind the proposed changes?
- C. Which have received the most attention and/or seem the most feasible?

We hope that the authors' responses to these questions will inform public discussion and understanding in their own countries as well as in others where similar issues are on the agenda.

This project was developed following an initial discussion with Felix Knüpling, Vice-President (Programs) of the Forum of Federations. To provide expert advice, we created an editorial team comprised of the following: Elisabeth Alber (Institute for Comparative Federalism, Eurac Research), Linda Cardinal (Université de l'Ontario français) and Asha Sarangi (Jawaharlal Nehru University). The editorial team commented on the initial outline of the program and provided suggestions for potential authors. We were fortunate to attract leading scholars from a range of disciplines. At least one member of the editorial team reviewed and provided comments on the initial version of each paper.

Felix and I are indebted to Elisabeth, Linda and Asha for their excellent cooperation throughout the process. I would also like to express my appreciation to the authors of the country papers for agreeing to join the project and for their responsiveness to comments on their draft papers. We are grateful to Francesca Worrall for copy editing this paper. Finally, a big "thank you" to the Forum of Federations staff who administered the project and prepared the papers for publication: Olakunle Adeniran, John Light, Deanna Senko, George Stairs and Asma Zribi.

F. Leslie Seidle  
Senior Advisor  
Forum of Federations

# Language, Nation and State in Federal Pakistan

Asma Faiz



## Introduction

Language policy has long been an arena of contestation and conflict in Pakistan and an essential element of identity politics in the country. Language politics have been at the heart of several ethnic movements, state policies and even demands for territorial reorganization of the federation. At both the federal and provincial levels, language policies have been a source of contestation between state and ethno-linguistic activists. From the declaration of Urdu as the national language in 1948 to the imposition of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) in 2021, the language question has witnessed considerable evolution and contention.

In this article, I examine the linkages between language, nation and state in the centralized federation of Pakistan. During the first decade after partition in 1947, Pakistan saw the emergence of a Bengali language movement. It morphed into a struggle for autonomy and eventually led to the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The recognition of Siraiki as a language separate from Punjabi in the 1981 census was a milestone, and Siraiki language activists currently demand the creation of a separate province in the south and west of Punjab. Much like activists in the rest of the world, language activists in Pakistan have found novel means of communicating through new technologies and social media.

To help the understanding of contemporary debates on language in Pakistan that are still unsettled, I provide a brief overview of the state of affairs regarding the major languages. I then discuss key events that have shaped the language issue, including the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the constitution (adopted in 2010), the introduction of the SNC and the rise of movements where language is indirectly connected to broader demands such as the creation of new provinces. In the last section, I lay out current policy challenges in the light of these developments.

## Language Recognition, Protection and Service Provision

Much as it was in the early years of state formation in Europe, in Pakistan language recognition and policy are connected to the wider processes of nation and state formation. In the Weberian sense, developing a consensus on a "national language" is intrinsically connected with "state rationalization" (Laitin 1989, 416). In Europe, state elites imposed languages that were alien to large swathes of populations, but eventually they succeeded in establishing a widespread consensus on these officially sanctioned languages (Laitin 1989, 416-18). States in the global South have often experienced massive contestations over language that mirrored the experiences of European nation-states.<sup>1</sup> However, in Pakistan, there is continuing conflict between the state and minority group activists over language recognition and implementation.

Pakistan is a multilingual country with enormous linguistic and cultural diversity. According to one estimate, 73 languages are spoken (Parekh 2017). The 2017 Census described Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Siraiki, Urdu and Balochi as major languages of the country. In 2017 Pakistan's overall population was 207.7 million, of which Punjab's was 110 million, followed by Sindh (47.9 million), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) (30.5 million) and Balochistan (12.3 million) (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2017); see also table 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugen Weber's (1976) examination of language and nation-building in France captures the complexity of the process of national consolidation, which often relied upon the despotic power of the French state.



**Table 1: Speakers of major languages as a percentage of Pakistan's population**

| Language | Speakers of language |
|----------|----------------------|
| Urdu     | 7.1                  |
| Punjabi  | 38.8                 |
| Sindhi   | 14.6                 |
| Siraiki  | 12.2                 |
| Balochi  | 3.0                  |
| Pashto   | 18.2                 |
| Hindko   | 2.4                  |
| Brahvi   | 1.2                  |
| Others   | 2.2                  |

Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2017).

All the provinces of Pakistan have dominant languages associated with their majority communities. Thus, Punjabi is dominant in Punjab, Sindhi in Sindh, Pashto in KP, and Balochi in Balochistan. Pashto is also the second most widely spoken language in Balochistan. Over the past four decades, Siraiki, which was previously considered a dialect of Punjabi spoken by people from south Punjab, has acquired the status of a distinct language due to a sustained movement of Siraiki nationalists in the 1960s and 1970s. It is now the second most widely spoken language in Punjab. Pakistan is also home to dozens of minor languages.

Despite being the mother tongue of only around three percent of the population at the time of partition, Urdu was declared the national language of Pakistan in 1948. This decision reflected the linguistic nationalism of the Muslim separatist movement in British India, spearheaded by the Urdu-speaking All-India Muslim League – the party that led the struggle for the creation of a new state for Muslims in the subcontinent. Urdu was adopted as Pakistan's national language because it was the language of the muhajirs (originally from north India) who dominated state institutions. Urdu thus became the cultural symbol of Muhajir hegemony in Pakistan. It reflected the broader sense of superiority displayed by the Muhajirs, which was deeply resented by other ethnolinguistic communities (Rahman, 2004, 3-4).

The designation of Urdu as Pakistan's national language prompted a strong reaction from East Bengal, which, according to the 1951 Census, had 54 percent of the overall population.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, Urdu remains the national language of the country, but Urdu-speakers comprise only 7.6 percent of Pakistan's population (post-Bangladesh). The bulk of them reside in urban Sindh, Punjab and the federal territory of Islamabad. In Sindh, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government struggled to introduce Sindhi as the official language of the province in 1972, as a symbolic reaction to the imposition of a minority language as the national language of the federation. This set the stage for resistance posed by the literati and intelligentsia from various linguistic groups. However, the status of Urdu is not currently a major issue of contention.

The new state of Pakistan faced the daunting task of building political unity and a new national identity, in the face of massive challenges. The initial governments consisted predominantly of muhajirs, who ruled over a federation composed of two wings that were geographically separated by over a thousand miles. The institutional design of the state reflects these realities, as Pakistan's federalism is shaped by

<sup>2</sup> Initially, East Pakistan represented 54 percent of the country's population. After the creation of Bangladesh, Punjab alone represented 58 percent of Pakistan's population.

a "one-province-dominates-all" paradigm (Waseem 2011, 217). Until 1971, when the break-up of Pakistan took place, East Pakistan's population outnumbered that of all the provinces of West Pakistan combined, a demographic imbalance that poses serious challenges for the functioning of Pakistan's political system. Having endured the collapse of the union in 1971, Pakistan moved toward the adoption of federalism in the 1973 Constitution. Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of the PPP, who was a Sindhi, led the efforts to codify the Constitution.

Article 251 of the Constitution designated Urdu as the national language of Pakistan, with the stated objective of making its usage more widespread within 15 years of the coming into force of the Constitution. The Constitution also included provisions for the use of various regional languages in teaching, administration and other domains of public life, in accordance with laws passed by the provincial legislatures. Now, nearly 50 years after the promulgation of the 1973 Constitution, only Sindh and KP have passed laws on the teaching and implementation of regional languages.

National language policies have always faced criticism and resistance from various ethnic groups. As discussed earlier, a major challenge to Urdu came from the majority Bengali community. The visit to Dhaka by Pakistan's governor general Mohammed Ali Jinnah in March 1948 was marred by protests from Bengali students campaigning for acceptance of Bengali as an official language. This reflected the broader discontent of the Bengali community. The pattern of the official reaction to Bengali resistance was set when the state elite and leading newspapers of West Pakistan described the linguistic activists as "Communists, Indian agents and political enemies of the Muslim League" (Rahman 1996, 88). By the time Bengali was granted official status in May 1954, Bengali alienation from the state in Pakistan had massively increased.

### **Current Debates and Pressures for Change**

In this section, I explore the current debates and pressures surrounding the major languages of Pakistan. From the outset, language was a national integration challenge for the state elite in Pakistan. In a country that was created in the name of religion, language demands were not acceptable to the ruling elites. As they saw it, languages as subnational source of identity would militate against the cause of national unity. In Pakistan, the territorial units were historically not organized on the basis of language. Islam and the Urdu language were hence the key instruments of an official nation-building project. Passage of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 2010 increased the power of provincial majorities, which mobilized and raised demands for the creation of separate territorial units. The state elites rejected any demands for linguistic reorganization of federating units as, from the outset, "religion was in and language was out" in Pakistan (Waseem 2011, 216)

Recently, linguistic discontent has been at the heart of two ethnic movements in Pakistan. Siraiki nationalists in south Punjab, and Hindko-speaking Hazara nationalists in parts of KP have raised demands for separate provinces. As the following brief survey of major languages shows, these movements demonstrated a pattern of struggle and contestation, led by the intelligentsia and civil society.

Sindhi is considered a relatively developed regional language. After taking over Sindh in 1843, the British made it the language of administration in the region. This official endorsement from the colonial

state spurred the process of development of Sindhi print capitalism<sup>3</sup> and increased the publication of Sindhi writings. Language discontent was at the heart of the nationalist movement that erupted in Sindh in the 1950s, in response to the declaration of Urdu as the language of education and employment in the province. The issue was deeply intertwined with other encroachments on Sindh's autonomy by the central government such as its designation of Karachi, formerly the capital of Sindh, as Pakistan's capital, essentially separating it from Sindh. This pushed the Sindhi elite to a new provincial capital, Hyderabad. Other issues that heightened Sindhi alienation from the federation included the massive settlement of muhajirs in Sindh; the exodus of the province's pre-partition Hindu middle class to India; and Sindh's forced integration into One Unit, the mega province that amalgamated all the provinces and princely states of West Pakistan to create parity with East Pakistan. The loss of Sindh's provincial status further eroded the growth of the Sindhi language (Faiz 2021, 39-45).

Sindh's demography drastically changed after the migration of Sindhi Hindus to India and the muhajir take-over of Karachi, which led to the de-Sindhization of urban Sindh. Public records and road signs were changed from Sindhi to Urdu. A new university was set up in Karachi, and Sindh University was relocated to Hyderabad. Sindhi publications were denied official advertisements. Later, the Karachi station of Pakistan television (PTV) allocated only one hour per week to Sindhi language transmission and programs (Faiz 2021, 58-59).

This situation changed somewhat after the election of the PPP national government led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in 1971. The Bhutto government fulfilled its promise of declaring Sindhi the official language of the province, but this prompted explosive resistance from the Muhajir intelligentsia. Nevertheless, the *Sindhi Language Act* was adopted in 1972. Through this law, Sindhi became a compulsory subject for students from classes 4 to 12 across the province. The Urdu newspapers wrote angry editorials against this decision, going to the extent of describing Sindhi language supporters as Indian agents. In July 1972 the language conflict spilled into the streets of Karachi as ethnic riots erupted (Kennedy 1991, 944).

Since the passage of the *Sindhi Language Act*, both Sindhi and Urdu are being taught in educational institutions in the province. In terms of the quantity of textbooks and teaching materials, Sindhi outshines any other regional language of Pakistan. The Sindh University started its master's program in Sindhi in the early 1950s. Over time, it evolved into a doctoral program offered at both Sindh University Jamshoro and Karachi University. The Sindhi intelligentsia has continued its efforts to increase teaching and publishing in Sindhi. Groups such as the Sind Graduates Association and *Sindhi Boli Sath* have persistently supported the growth of the Sindhi language (Rahman 1995, 1016). With the rise of Sindhi private television channels and social media, exposure to Sindhi language discourse has increased. There are currently five Sindhi language television channels and newspapers.

The Punjabi language, spoken by the largest ethnic community of Pakistan, presents a dismal picture by contrast. According to 2017 Census Punjab comprises more than half of Pakistan's population (110 million), and more than two-thirds of its population speaks Punjabi (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2017). Yet, despite broad popular usage in everyday interactions, the Punjabi language remains distant from the corridors of power and the administration at both the provincial and national levels (Kalra and Butt 2013, 539). This official disregard for Punjabi goes back to the British period. The colonial state introduced indigenous languages for education and administration in Sindh, but not in Punjab. Various

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow this term from Benedict Anderson's work on language, literacy and the rise of national consciousness. Anderson's term "print capitalism" refers to the publication of literary texts that were perceived to relate to the emergence of national awakening in several parts of the world (Anderson 1991).

reasons have been given for the British preference for Urdu as the language of education and administration in Punjab: the significance of the Punjabi language to the past Sikh rulers of Punjab;<sup>4</sup> the fact that the dominant Sikhs were a minority; and the Muslim majority's positive attitude toward Delhi, the seat of the former Moghal empire and Urdu-based royal culture. British aloofness from the Punjabi language was also ostensibly related to the sacred nature of Punjabi for the Sikhs, and the need to prevent them from re-emerging as a political force after the British annexed Punjab. The British were thus playing it safe when they used Urdu for administration in Punjab.

After partition, while East Punjab embraced Punjabi, West Punjab continued the use of Urdu at the school and college levels. The provincial government's neglect of the Punjabi language figures prominently in the emerging narrative of the contemporary Punjabi revivalist movement.

This official neglect of Punjabi has percolated down to public attitudes. Until recently, the language had failed to win mass support from vast sections of society. Despite Punjab's power within the country, the Punjabi elite never endorsed the official use of its language for teaching and administration. For Ayres, this relates to the lack of instrumental power of the Punjabi language. In other words, in contrast to other regional languages, the Punjabi language does not serve as a proxy for broader material grievances owing to the established Punjabi hegemony in Pakistan (Ayres 2012, 101-102). Rahman links the Punjabi public's attitude toward the Punjabi language as "one of culture shame" (Rahman 2017, 79). Many Punjabis seem to have adopted Urdu in professional domains such as administration and teaching. During the British period, the teaching and writing of Urdu thrived in Punjab. Since 1973, Punjabi remains an optional subject at various levels of education in the province. A master's degree in Punjabi was introduced at the Punjab University, Lahore in 1970, predating the promulgation of article 251 of the 1973 Constitution.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in addition to cultural shame, official neglect has also prevented Punjabis from owning their language. According to one estimate, only two percent of Punjabis can write in their own language (Abbas, Jalil and Rehman 2019, 255). Another indicator of Punjabi disregard for their language is that the Punjab Assembly is the only provincial legislature in Pakistan whose members do not take an oath in the regional language (Kalra and Butt 2013: 540). In August 2016, Beaconhouse, a private school, made national headlines when it banned teaching of Punjabi owing to its allegedly foul nature. After strong reactions from Punjabi activists, the school withdrew the policy.<sup>6</sup>

Incidents like these have invigorated a new generation of Punjabi activists. In January 2011, leading Punjabi language movement leader Nazeer Kahut demanded that Punjabi be declared the "sole official and judicial language" of the province. He went to the extent of demanding the printing of National Identity Cards (NICs) in Punjabi in the province. The movement further demanded establishment of more TV and radio channels for greater popular understanding and embracing of the language. The Punjabi language movement is still active on the literary and cultural scene of Punjab as it continues to strive to acquire official sanction and support from the provincial government.

South Punjab is home to Siraiki, the province's second most widely spoken language. The Siraikis are primarily situated in 11 districts in the Bahawalpur, Multan, and Dera Ghazi Khan divisions. The Siraiki

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<sup>4</sup> The Punjabi language is culturally and religiously significant for Sikhs. Before the arrival of the British in Punjab, the region was governed by Sikh rulers (1801-1849). Hence, the British were skeptical of promoting the Punjabi language due to its deep association with the Sikh community.

<sup>5</sup> Punjab University Lahore started the first department for teaching and research in Punjabi.

<sup>6</sup> For details see "Beaconhouse [sic] Clarifies 'Punjab Language Ban' Circular" (2016).

language movement has in some ways been quite successful. Starting from very basic efforts to develop a dictionary and print capitalism for the language in the 1960s, Siraiki achieved the feat of being recognized as a distinct language by the state of Pakistan in the 1981 Census. Following this recognition, the movement turned into a quest for the creation of a separate province in the southern and western districts of Punjab. Since 2010, this movement has picked up momentum. Successive censuses of Pakistan have shown an incremental rise in the number of Siraiki speakers in Punjab. According to the 2017 Census, 21 percent of the province's population were Siraiki speakers, a sharp increase from 17 percent in the 1998 Census (Mehdi 2021). Mehdi considers this a sign of growing confidence as more members of the Siraiki community declare Siraiki as their mother tongue (Mehdi 2021).

The Siraiki language's distinct status is questioned by Punjabi nationalists, who consider it a dialect of Punjabi (Hussain and Farooq 2015, 289). This is strongly repudiated by Siraiki linguists and activists, who instead emphasize the closeness of Siraiki to the Sindhi language. In their view, central Punjab and its language were historically connected with north India and therefore completely different from the people and languages of south Punjab (Alvi 2017, 197). Siraiki activists also refer to the British period's *The Linguistic Survey of India*, compiled by George Grierson, which observed differences between the languages spoken in north-central and south Punjab (Grierson 1919). The Siraiki intelligentsia perceive this denial of Siraiki's claim to distinct-language status as a reflection of Punjabis' prejudice against them, pointing to the absence of Siraiki prose and poetry from Punjabi textbooks. They believe this is less about the deficiency of printed books or incompatibility between the two languages and more about the Punjabi reluctance to accept Siraiki language per se (Mughal 2020, 301-2).

The Siraiki intelligentsia have been actively promoting their language, and Siraiki print capitalism has expanded since recognition of the language by the state in 1981. Starting with publications in the Siraiki language on cultural platforms such as *Bazm-e-Saqafat* and Siraiki Academy, with the granting of a distinct language status, Siraiki civil society went on to campaign for teaching of the language in schools and colleges. In public schools, teachers use regional languages as a medium of explanation, whereas those in private schools mostly rely on English and Urdu for classroom discussions and teaching. The Siraiki intelligentsia is thus seeking widespread use of its language in schools in south Punjab. However, there is still some way to go in developing school textbooks in Siraiki language at the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels (Mughal 2020, 301). In 2012, the PPP government established the first Siraiki Area Study Centre. Based at the Bahauddin Zakaria University (BZU) Multan, this centre offers masters and M.Phil. classes in Siraiki. It is safe to assume that the Siraiki imagination is kept alive through active engagement with social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

The Siraiki demand for a new province in south Punjab is shaped by glaring inequality in the political economy of the region compared with that of the western part of the province. The new province movement has won support from all the major political parties of Pakistan, including the PPP, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Tehreek-I- Insaaf (PTI). The PTI government (2018-2022) responded to this demand by creating a parallel bureaucracy in south Punjab to somewhat appease the movement and justified these actions as steps toward "administrative decentralization" (Faiz 2021, 96).

The Pashto language in KP is an interesting example of late awakening of a language movement. According to the 2017 Census, 77.9 percent of KP's population spoke Pashto (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2017). Pashtun nationalism has a long history of active mobilization in Pakistan. However, unlike Sindhi nationalism, the Pashto language question has not been at the heart of Pashtun nationalism (Torwali 2020). In 1849, the British introduced Urdu as a language of administration in the

region. While colonial administrators learned Pashto to fine-tune their control of the local society, they shied away from making it an official language. It is important to remember that this region was deemed sensitive because of its borders with Afghanistan, as the British were pursuing a rivalry with Tsarist Russia. The colonial army also needed Pashtun recruits (Rahman, 1996, 135-136). Pashto's journey towards print capitalism goes back to the nationalist leader Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, who advocated for the language in the 1920s. He set up schools in which Pashto was taught at the basic level. (Saleem and Khalil 2014, 44-45). After partition, the new state was wary of cultivating the Pashto language, because of the nationalist movement's links to the irredentist claims of Afghanistan. Hence, historically meaningful support and patronage was denied to the Pashto language. Owing to official skepticism of Pashtun nationalism, the first Pashto Academy, with a mission to promote the language, was only established in 1955.

The National Awami Party (NAP), which was known for its ethno-nationalist politics (in power in Peshawar over 1972-73), adopted Urdu as the official language in KP in 1972. Rahman (1996, 146) links this decision with its quest to "prove their loyalty to Pakistan and to avoid confrontation with Hindko speakers" in order to stay in power. During the Zia period in the 1980s, the association of the Pashto language with Pashtun identity and the anti-martial law struggle again made it unpopular among the ruling elites of Pakistan, at least initially during the Zia regime. Throughout the period, the Pashtun intelligentsia demanded official support for the language.<sup>7</sup> Gradually, Pashtun nationalists softened their agenda from outright irredentism to demands for the name of the province to be changed in line with the province's ethnic identity. This goal was achieved in 2010 through the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment.<sup>8</sup> The Amendment also precipitated another change: in 2012 the Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) passed the *Regional Language Authority Act*, which laid the ground for the teaching of Pashto, Hindko, Siraiki, Khowar and Kohistani in the province (Torwali 2020). This was a landmark step in the linguistic history of the province, as the provincial government moved away from its long-time policy of using Urdu for teaching in public schools. It was hailed as a measure that would enable the "empowerment" of people of KP (Ahmed and Khan 2017, 250).

The fulfilment of Pashtun demands has generated a reaction from the Hindko-speaking minority. Since 2010, the demand for the creation of a Hazara province in KP has become vocal. This movement is centred in the Hindko-majority districts of the province, especially in Abbottabad and Haripur, where protests erupted following the change in the name of the province. Since then, the Hindko literati have complained about the delay in implementation of steps for promotion of the Hindko language by the provincial government, which they allege is due to its bias against their language (Ahmed 2015).

In the province of Balochistan, the Balochi, Brahvi and Pashto languages are the major languages. Unlike the Sindhi-Urdu divide in Sindh and Punjabi-Siraiki tensions in Punjab, in this province the historical contestations over language seem to be resolved. Now, in fact, the Baloch and Brahvi intelligentsia emphasize the common origins of Balochi and Brahvi and downplay their differences (Rahman 1996, 157-58). The Baloch nationalist movement has primarily focused on political, economic and security grievances, and language discontent is marginal in Baloch identity politics. The Balochi and Brahvi intelligentsia cooperate with each other and support cultural and literary initiatives.

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of the history and progression of Pashto language movement, see Rahman (1996, 145-54).

<sup>8</sup> Instead of changing the name of North West Frontier Province to Pakhtunkhwa, the PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif (in opposition at the time) would agree only if "Khyber" were added to the name -- hence Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This was an effort on part of the government to keep the province's Hindko-speaking minority on board.

Ironically, the Baloch language mobilization started in Lyari, the Baloch neighbourhood of Karachi – the capital of the province of Sindh and then Pakistan’s capital – in the early years after Partition. Lyari was home to some of the earliest Balochi publications. As military rebellion increased in Balochistan in late 1950s, the federal government granted concessions on the language issue. These included the establishment of Balochi Academy (1961) and Brahvi Academy (1966) in Quetta. The use of Urdu for teaching and administration in Balochistan was a legacy of the British period, and it continued after Partition. It was only in 1990 that the Balochistan government announced introduction of Balochi, Brahvi and Pashto as mediums of instruction at the primary school level. The decision was partially overturned in 1992, but this generated strong resistance from the nascent Balochi literati (Rahman, 1996, 160-170).

Following passage of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, in 2014 the Balochistan government adopted a law that once again made teaching in the mother tongue compulsory at the primary level. Language activists in Balochistan have campaigned for extending mother-tongue instruction to high school (Shahid 2020), and some other provincial governments have supported these efforts. However, language appears to be a slow-burner issue, whereby Baloch intellectuals request support from the federal and provincial governments to increase reading, writing and teaching in local languages in the province. Unlike elsewhere in Pakistan, the rise of private television channels and social media has not provided a major boost to languages in Balochistan, in part because of the abject socio-economic conditions in the province.

Another language issue in Pakistan is the predatory impact of English on the country’s national and regional languages. The social hierarchy of the country is thus reflected in linguistic stratification in the private and public domains, with English used by the elite, Urdu by the middle class, and regional languages by the working class. There is upward movement among vernacular speakers to opt for Urdu, and among Urdu speakers to opt for English. The quest for upward class mobility is clearly at the expense of regional languages and, to some extent, Urdu.

### **Potential Improvements and Reforms**

From the early days of state formation, the federal government in Pakistan forcefully supported the Urdu language, while continuing the use of English as the main language of administration and governance. Following the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh, the 1973 Constitution passed the buck to provincial governments to extend recognition to regional languages. However, as discussed earlier, only the Sindh government recognized Sindhi as the official language of the province. The last half century has witnessed the struggle by the Siraiki language activists, who succeeded in having Siraiki recognized in the 1981 Census of Pakistan.

The territorial units in Pakistan’s federation are also home to dozens of minority languages. Since 2016, these languages have been celebrated through the platform of the Pakistan Mother Language Literature Festival in Islamabad ("Festival to Celebrate" 2016). This festival brings together civil society organizations and artists representing various linguistic communities. Organized by Lok Virsa, the Pakistan National Council of Arts (PNCA) and the Indus Cultural Forum, this annual event highlights the progress and challenges facing Pakistan’s indigenous languages.

The place of mother tongues in the 2021 SNC is still contested. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment clearly defined education as a provincial subject under Pakistan’s federal constitution. The SNC has been very controversial in this respect because it infringes upon this constitutionally sanctioned domain of the

provinces. However, the federal government has justified the imposition of the SNC with reference to article 25-A of the Constitution, which stipulates that the provision of education to Pakistan's children aged 5 to 16 is a state responsibility (interpreted as a federal government responsibility). Hence, the federal government has described the SNC as an effort to protect fundamental rights as enshrined in Pakistan's Constitution. This view has been challenged by legal and education experts as the trampling of provincial government responsibility in the name of fundamental rights.

Furthermore, the federal government has bypassed provincial education departments and textbook boards tasked with important aspects of education planning and textbook preparation (Ali 2021). Nevertheless, despite resistance from civil society, the PTI-controlled provinces of Punjab and KP accepted the SNC in 2021. Sindh was the most vocal province in challenging implementation of the SNC. Language activists in other provinces have voiced concerns about the medium of instruction under the SNC. In KP and Punjab the federal government initially announced that the medium of instruction for SNC will be Urdu, while in Sindh it will be partially taught in Sindhi.<sup>9</sup> On the medium of instruction, there was resistance from KP, where the provincial government was working on developing textbooks in four of the five regional languages recognized under the *KP Regional Languages Act* (Torwali 2020).

According to one estimate, up to 27 languages in Pakistan are endangered (Dawn 2016). Several of them are spoken in northern areas (Hunarmal 2021). Language activists blame state policies dating back to the British period for this abysmal situation. Colonial and post-colonial state authorities' use of Urdu and English for teaching and administration accelerated the decay of these languages. In addition, Pakistan's elites appear to be anglophones in linguistic terms. Proficiency in English is considered a prerequisite for entry into privileged positions, so class mobility ambitions have further prompted people to move toward English and Urdu, thereby reducing the number of declared mother-tongue speakers (Siddiqui 2019). Language advocates demand greater state intervention to prevent these languages from extinction. Greater support from the provincial and federal governments for language advocacy groups would be a step in this direction.

As I have outlined in this article, language movements in Pakistan generally reflect the socio-economic anxieties of their communities. These movements are situated at the heart of ethnonationalist politics. Demands for the creation of new provinces in Punjab and KP gained momentum following passage of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The Siraikis in south Punjab and Hindko-speakers in northeastern KP employed language, along with other markers of identity, as their repertoire for grassroots mobilization.

The ethnolinguistic demands in Punjab and KP for the creation of new provinces would be extremely difficult to achieve. The broader political realities of the country, as well as constitutional limitations, make any territorial reorganization of Pakistan a Herculean task. However, in Punjab, administrative reforms seem to be well underway, with the planned creation of new secretariats in Multan and Bahawalpur deep inside the Siraiki belt. These secretariats would handle governance issues that can be addressed locally. In other words, the federation appears committed to administrative decentralization, instead of accepting language itself as a source of identity. While Siraiki nationalism has taken visible strides forward, the Hazara movement remains a peripheral phenomenon. Looking ahead, the empowerment of provinces should also address fears of marginalization among regional minorities.

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<sup>9</sup> The federal education minister, Shafqat Mahmood, made this statement in a television interview on September 6, 2020. He was immediately criticized in print and social media by various language activists (Torwali 2020).



As for future research, I suggest three questions:

- How will the administrative division of Punjab affect Siraiki ethnonationalism?
- What will be the impact of this administrative division on the emerging Punjabi movement?
- Will the changing demographic situation in Balochistan and Sindh; for example, the growing number of Pashtuns in Quetta and Karachi, lead to the emergence of new ethnolinguistic movements?

## **Conclusion**

The official response to linguistic diversity in Pakistan remains far from ideal. As this paper shows, the federal government only agreed to fundamental changes in the former East Pakistan and later in Sindh after contentious mobilization by ethnic activists. The official and unofficial status of the various languages is tied to the power of elites, which jealously guard their powerful economic and social positions.

It will be interesting to observe the impact of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment (2010) in the context of recently mobilized minority communities, some of which call for the creation of new provinces where their language would be the most widely spoken. In Punjab, the proposed administrative decentralization in the south of the province may allow the Siraiki-speaking community a greater say in local governance. The application of local languages in education has been complicated by the introduction of the SNC. With the ouster of the PTI from power in April 2022, the future of the SNC is uncertain. All in all, Pakistan presents a complex case of federalism in a diverse and heterogeneous society that is marked by layers of inequality. In this context, language questions will remain an active arena of debate and contestation.

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**Author**

**Asma Faiz** is Assistant Professor of political science in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), Pakistan. Her research interests include nationalist movements, ethnic politics, federalism and populism. Her latest book is *In Search of Lost Glory: Sindhi Nationalism in Pakistan* (2021).

Cover design by Olakunle Adeniran

ISSN: 1922-558X (online ISSN 1922-5598)

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The Occasional Paper Series is financed in part by the following countries: Brazil, Canada, Ethiopia, Germany, India, and Switzerland