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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **The Dangers of Creating a ‘Separate Identity’: Pakistan on a Slippery Course**

By Sajjad Ashraf

### **Synopsis**

*Pakistan has embarked on a slippery course by proposing the division of southern Punjab into two provinces, on linguistic grounds. Similar separatist tendencies in other provinces could split the federation.*

### **Commentary**

Amidst the ongoing chaos and anarchy in Pakistan an important development, with far reaching consequences for the country, is going un-noticed. Early this month President Asif Ali Zardari sent a formal request to the speaker of the National Assembly to set up a commission to look into the legal, political and economic issues of creating two new provinces in southern Punjab. Multan and Bahawalpur provinces, where Saraiki is the main Punjabi dialect, are proposed to be carved out of the existing Punjab. The speaker was also to initiate the necessary constitutional amendment for the division.

The move seems timed to draw maximum benefit for the ruling Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) in the elections due early 2013. Earlier, the PPP led resolution in the National Assembly demanding separating South Punjab from the North was countered by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in Punjab Assembly, demanding that Punjab be split into three instead of two, Hazara be separated from the Pushtun dominated Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and FATA (tribal areas) be made into a province.

With nearly 60 per cent of Pakistan’s population of around 180 million Punjab qualifies to be the tenth biggest country in the world. It contains the key military recruiting districts and many of the senior bureaucracy hail from Punjab. Its size, resources and power are resented by the other constituent units in the federation.

### **Separatist alarm bells**

Any demand for dividing the provinces raises alarm bells in a country that came into being as West and East Pakistan after a bloody partition of the Indian Sub-continent in 1947. Then Pakistan itself split in a bloody civil war between the western and eastern wings leading to the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971. Deep down Pakistan lives under the fear of fragmentation when at different times of its 65 year history one or the other smaller provinces have expressed separatist tendencies. The current turmoil in Baluchistan also seems to be led by separatist forces.

The Muttihida Qaumi Movement (MQM) a coalition partner of the ruling PPP took the first formal step seeking

division of Punjab in January this year, by moving a constitutional amendment. The MQM, holding sway in Karachi, is often accused of harbouring ambitions of separating Karachi from Sindh and making it into a province for Urdu speakers. Their predecessors came to Pakistan in the wake of partition in 1947. While MQM denies these allegations maps of a Karachi province remain in circulation.

Pashtuns migrating into Karachi in droves have reduced the MQM's demographic edge; they would logically have a better chance of setting up a province now than years later when proportionately declining numbers will dilute its political clout further.

Supporters of Saraiki province claim that they are demanding a separate province to be in control of their resources, which are allegedly diverted to northern Punjab. For them if religious divisions creating Pakistan are fine, so are linguistic divisions in demand of their province.

### **Vote-catching gimmick?**

Opponents of PPP accuse it of mounting a platform of perceived 'discrimination' of a sub-region as a vote catcher; and that the real reason for championing a slogan like this one is the PPP's inability to break the PML-N's stranglehold over the most populous province. The party is headed by the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who is now increasingly at odds with Mr. Zardari.

PPP Minister Firdous Ashiq Awan's apparent slip that "a party that doesn't support the creation of South Punjab runs the risk of becoming politically irrelevant in one half of the province" reveals their real motives. It suits the Sindh-based PPP to pit the people of Punjab against each other.

Rumors also abound that the Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, a Saraiki speaker, recently convicted of contempt of court and refusing to go, has launched his sons into politics in the mode of hereditary political transition in South Asia; the separatist move is designed to secure the chief minister's position in a Saraiki province for one of his sons.

Gilani, in one of his usual barbs, claimed that "the chief minister of the Saraiki province will be the one hearing the grievances of the people of the region, and the courts in the region will give them quick justice," adding that a province will give people of the region "a separate identity".

Gilani obviously does not realise that the same argument of 'separate identity', and perceived injustice successfully used for the creation of Pakistan, came back to haunt the country in the shape of Bengali nationalism that deeply resented Punjabi domination of the state apparatus and economy. In the backdrop of similar Bengali claims leading to Bangladesh the narrow use of these arguments sounds like a dangerous course.

### **Dangerous fires of division**

Stoking the fires of division in Punjab on linguistic grounds is likely to have a groundswell effect, beginning with forces seeking the division of Sindh, which the Sindhi nationalist have vowed to fight. Supporters of Hazara province, many of whom died protesting on mere name change of Northwest Frontier Province are already agitating for separation from the KPK. Baluchistan remains on fire, drawing parallels with the 1971 breakup of Pakistan.

Given Pakistan's unending economic plight the country will be unable to support several more governors, chief ministers, ministers and brigade of new bureaucrats who will all expect extraordinary perks. The Pakistani politicians must understand that the notion of 'separate identity' has its limits and dangers. Everyone cannot be equal, and claim 'separate identity' under the natural scheme of things. Pushing the notion too far without any empirical basis is destructive.

Instead of improving governance as a panacea for many of the political and administrative ills, the ruling PPP's current leadership, by pursuing a narrow agenda, has chosen this highly risky and divisive course, which could seriously imperil the federation of Pakistan.

*Sajjad Ashraf was Pakistan's High Commissioner to Singapore 2004-2008. He now serves as an adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He contributed this article specially to RSIS Commentaries.*