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Governance and Militancy in Pakistan's Southern Punjab Region¹

S.R. Mehboob

Introduction

Southern Punjab is a loosely defined region in Punjab Province that includes Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, and the Bahawalpur Civil Divisions. This includes 10 districts: Vehari, Multan, Layyah, Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar, Rahim Yar Khan, Rajanpur, Muzaffar Garh, Khanewal, and D.G. Khan. These districts account for 43 of the 131 subdistrict administrative units (tehsils) of Punjab Province, and 978 of its 3,464 union councils, the lowest administrative unit. These regions take up 48.5 percent of Punjab's territory. Southern Punjab has a population of 29 million, while Punjab's total population is 91 million; 45 out of 148 national assembly seats and 92 out of 297 provincial assembly seats belong to Southern Punjab.²

Compared to other parts of the province, Southern Punjab has underdeveloped communication networks, poor infrastructure (roads, bridges, etc.), weak social services institutions (primary and secondary education, preventive and curative health services, etc.), inadequate agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers, agriculture extension services, veterinary and livestock services, etc.), and large gaps in municipal services (water supply, sanitation, etc.). Exclusion and social marginalization are widespread due to discrimination on the basis of caste, class, ethnicity, gender, and land ownership. Poverty is characterized by low income levels, a weak asset base, and barriers against efforts to reduce discrimination. Of 40 million people living below the poverty line in Pakistan, an estimated 10 million are in Southern Punjab, with poverty levels between 48 and 64 percent in the poorest four districts, far above the average for Northern or Western Punjab.

The politics of Southern Punjab have historically been determined by the political agendas of large national parties, to the virtual exclusion of any localized priorities. The changing regimes of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) or the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) rarely dealt with specific issues and demands of districts in Southern Punjab in any organized manner. A similar pattern also emerged during the rule of President Pervez Musharraf. The only occasion when some of the local issues received prominence was during the local bodies' elections of 2001 and 2005, when local politicians highlighted the grievances of Southern Punjab and brought them to attention at the provincial level. As soon as elected governments took over at the provincial and national level during 2008, even this window of demand articulation was closed as different local government tiers were made dysfunctional.³

However, in recent years Southern Punjab's local agenda has been recognized, at least in word, by some mainstream political parties, including both the "N" and "Q" factions of the Pakistan Muslim League. Some parties highlighted underdevelopment, inequality, and other grievances as part of the parties' campaign platforms. For example, PML(Q) proposed that Southern Punjab be granted the status of an independent province, although this and other proposals did not move forward after the election campaigns ended.

Recent development activities and governance reform initiatives have been implemented across a wide range of sectors, focusing on education, health, water supply, sanitation, agriculture, livestock, irrigation, infrastructure, rule of law, devolution of authority, social services delivery, income generation, rural support, and employment promotion, among others. Still, Southern Punjab received only \$2.27 million out of a total provincial allocation of \$15.66 million for the Annual Development Program (ADP) in 2003–2004 and 2010–2011, less than one-seventh of the total, despite

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² Information in this and the following paragraph are from Planning and Development Department of Lahore, Pakistan, author interviews, 2010–2011.

³ The analysis of the politics of Southern Punjab in this paper is based on the author's direct experiences and informal conversations over the past decade.

the region's size.⁴ Most of these programs were implemented by provincial departments, but various tiers of local governments (specifically district governments or tehsil municipal administrations) were also assigned substantial implementation responsibilities. But local governments do not generally have the fiscal resources or fiscal autonomy to provide essential services and must depend instead on federal or provincial governments. In some cases, development initiatives have been implemented directly by the federal government as standalone vertical programs. In many cases, this has resulted in duplication of effort and some waste.

Informal Governance and Nonstate Service Delivery

A number of customary and nonstate institutions operate in Southern Punjab. Political, social, or economic elites enjoy varying degrees of influence in service delivery and public decisionmaking. Many large landholders have family members who hold political office and monitor or protect their families' private interests. Some chambers of commerce and trade organizations have engaged in philanthropic or charitable activities and political activism. Religious leaders and madrassas (religious schools) play a pivotal role in social life, have a degree of influence in politics and public opinion, and sometimes act as first responders in moments of crisis or disaster, including the floods that affected the region in 2010 and 2011.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Southern Punjab have entered many areas of governance, but they have been most successful at service delivery (especially at the municipal level) and advocacy. The Local Support Organizations (LSOs) were stood up under the Punjab Rural Support Program (PRSP) and the National Rural Support Program (NRSP), and the PRSP and NRSP have promoted initiatives related to community infrastructure development, micro-insurance, microcredit, gender empowerment, sustainable livelihoods, rural water supply and sanitation, agricultural extension, and self-employment. The Lodhran Sanitation Model and Rahim Yar Khan Basic Health Service Delivery Model encouraged community participation to revive and improve service delivery in underperforming public-sector organizations. In both cases, these models have been replicated and scaled up across the province with remarkable success. The Rahim Yar Khan Model encouraged local groups of concerned citizens to organize to support and monitor the performance of service delivery institutions, held public consultations for feedback to promote ownership, disseminated successful results, and was replicated in other areas.⁵

A community-led Alternative Dispute Resolution program called Gender Justice through Musalihat Anjuman was established to facilitate amicable settlements of community disputes, working within the framework of the formal justice sector with support from local governments and a UN Development Program (UNDP)–funded project.

Formal Governance

Policies and Institutions

In 2001, the national government passed the Local Governance Ordinance (LGO), setting a framework for administrative restructuring at the district level across Pakistan by placing key public-sector departments under the administrative and financial control of elected local government representatives. The LGO 2001 replaced the system of district administration with a decentralized system of District Governments (called City District Governments in large cities), and created two administrative tiers beneath them: Tehsils Municipal Administrations (TMAs) and Union Administrations (UA).⁶ Financial decentralization was introduced through the Provincial Finance Commission (PFC), which provided for one-line transfers of provincial resources for devolved portfolios to all District Governments and TMAs in accordance with a specified distribution formula.

Three kinds of government entities exist at the district level in Southern Punjab:

- Federal organizations for public utilities, such as the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA), Sui Southern Gas Company, NADRA (national registration authority), etc. In these organizations, employees are appointed and transferred by the federal government.

⁴ Annual Development Program of Punjab, 2004 and 2011.

⁵ Syed Mohammad Ali, "Assessing Best Practices in Devolution: Efforts to Improve Sanitation Services: Lodhran District," CIDA Devolution Support Project, no date, <http://www.policy.hu/ali/Lodhran%20case%20study.pdf>; and Sania Nishtar, "Basic Considerations," *The News International* (Karachi), August 6, 2006.

⁶ In City Districts, TMAs were called Town and Municipal Administrations.

- Provincial government departments. Directly managed by the provincial government, these include organizations for irrigation, highways, natural resources, higher education, tertiary healthcare, hospitals, and others. Officials in these organizations are managed by the provincial government.
- Government offices of the local government tiers including District Governments, TMAs, and Union Administrations. (With the exception of some tribal areas in Dera Ghazi Khan District, districts in Southern Punjab are “settled” districts, meaning they all have standard legal and constitutional entitlements, unlike Pakistan’s tribal areas.)

The formal justice sector has courts for criminal and civil suits. The district judiciary is headed by a senior judicial officer, the district and sessions judge, and includes varying numbers of additional judges, civil judges, and magistrates of different categories. The district-level judiciary functions under the supervision and control of their respective High Courts, which exercise administrative and appellate jurisdictions over the district judiciary.

District and subdistrict education is divided into primary and secondary level. Under the LGO 2001, education was made one of the devolved portfolios, meaning management responsibilities were assigned to the District Government.⁷ Within the districts, school education departments are controlled by an executive district officer (EDO). District and deputy district officers (under the EDO) are assigned to tehsils within a district. Education for boys and girls has separate supervisory officers.

Health service delivery was also devolved to district governments in 2001, under the supervision of the executive district officer for health. Similar to education, the EDO is assisted by district and deputy district officers for health. Three levels of health facilities were created at the local level:

- Basic Health Units (BHUs), which are primary healthcare units at the Union Council level.
- Rural Health Centres (RHCs), which cover three to four BHUs.
- Tehsil and district headquarter hospitals.

Devolved medical facilities provide primary and secondary health services in preventive, promotive, and curative health care. Tertiary-level health care was not devolved and is managed by the provincial government. Medical officers and paramedical staff are appointed and administered by the provincial health department, while day-to-day supervision falls under district governments. The provincial health department also reviews health regulation, service delivery bench marking, and private-sector interaction.

Government employees from a wide range of institutions have been placed in local government tiers as a consequence of the LGO 2001. These include provincial government functionaries (temporarily placed within local governments), local council employees, and officials directly hired by local governments. Recruitment into provincial government organizations is done mostly by Public Service Commissions (PSC). However, a large number of appointments and recruitments are also made directly by the relevant departments or agencies.

The exact relationships among government employees at the district or subdistrict level are not clearly defined. When officials from provincial government departments are temporarily placed in local governments, they tend to retain their loyalties to their original departments. Their interest in the affairs of local people varies according to the individual disposition of officials. However, it is not uncommon to see government functionaries taking care of their own interests rather than local populations for the simple reason that they have no stake in the locality. Similarly, it is also not uncommon to see these officials enter into alliances with local political elites for a mutually beneficial relationship. Some officials are more neutral, less inclined to take sides in local politics and issues, and perform their duties more efficiently.

Professionalization of the civil service at the district level was supposed to take care of some of these issues. Historically one of the main grievances in Southern Punjab has been that many government functionaries were not doing their jobs effectively. When the LGO 2001 was designed, the provincial government was supposed to develop and train a “district cadre” of qualified and dedicated civil servants with long-term commitments to serve the area. Even since the expiry of the constitutional protection period assigned to LGO 2001 after 2009, the idea of a district cadre is nowhere to be found.

⁷ Initially, higher education was also decentralized but reverted back to the provincial government.

Security and Justice

Access to justice at the local level is provided by the district judiciary and local police. Judicial officers are supported by prosecutors, pleaders, attorneys, and prison authorities. The district judiciary operates at the district and subdistrict (tehsil) levels. An important component of the district judiciary is the bar councils or associations, which include all practicing lawyers at the district or tehsil levels. Civil jurisdictions include any civil suit or petition made by an individual. In criminal cases, the state acts as prosecutor, and the police play a role in reporting, registering, and investigating any offense that leads to the submission of a *challan* (report by investigators) in a court. District, session, and high court judges manage some direct criminal complaints.

A number of challenges hamper the effectiveness of justice services in Southern Punjab:

- high caseloads relative to the number of judicial officers available, especially in subdistrict courts;
- inadequate technology and procedures for case-flow management;
- poor training, capacity building, and continuing legal education facilities for judicial officers;
- lack of facilities for litigants;
- aggressive and nonprofessional attitudes of many bar members; and
- weak inspection and monitoring systems in lower courts.

Some efforts have been made to address these challenges. The Access to Justice Program (AJP) was the largest justice-sector reform program in Pakistan, with \$350 million in loans and \$20 million in technical assistance from the Asian Development Bank between 2002 and 2008. The program was designed to improve access to justice service delivery by increasing the provision of speedy and inexpensive justice in accordance with Article 37 of the Constitution. It was implemented at the federal and provincial levels by the Supreme Court, all High Courts, the Law and Justice Commission, the Ministries of Interior and Law, and provincial-level police and Home Departments. An estimated 600 development schemes at the provincial level and around two dozen development schemes at the federal level were implemented through AJP loan proceeds. These initiatives covered missing facilities, improved processes, capacity building, automation, and new court complexes for the justice and police sectors.

Some AJP interventions focused on specific districts in Southern Punjab. Two districts, Multan and Bahawalpur, were declared “AJP Model Districts” after reducing court delays and backlogged cases. AJP resources were also used to establish a new court complex with modern litigant facilities, bar rooms, residential complexes for judges, and the provision of information technology (IT) equipment for facilitating court automation in these model districts. While AJP has faced criticism, it was successfully implemented in Southern Punjab. Planning under AJP was delegated to the provinces and sector leaders in judiciary and police—unlike many vertical programs where all planning and prioritization takes place at the federal level—and so the implementation and execution was effective and timely.

Education and Health

The provincial government funds school education departments as a line budget item to district governments. The district budget is then allocated to tehsils within each district on the basis of number of schools, enrollment, and other factors. The development budget is used by the district education officer in line with approved projects and plans of the district government. The provincial government also implements direct vertical development projects through Project Management Units at the provincial headquarters. It is also responsible for hiring and recruiting teaching staff in schools, examinations, syllabi, teacher training, laboratory and computer equipment, and text books. Thus, while school education is a devolved department, the provincial government still has considerable influence.

Education service delivery faces several challenges:

- too few school teachers relative to the number of children, especially in remote areas and in girls’ schools;
- high absenteeism among staff in schools;
- weak internal monitoring and supervisory capabilities in district education hierarchies;
- lack of standards for education syllabi;
- politically motivated promotion of students;
- cheating in examination systems;
- understaffed and underresourced science laboratories; and
- social constraints hampering universal enrollment, especially for girl’s education.

In terms of public health services, Southern Punjab accounts for nearly one-third of provincial facilities. Out of a total of 326 hospitals in the province, 96 (29 percent) are in Southern Punjab. Out of 334 RHCs, 103 are in Southern Punjab, while out of 2,535 BHUs, 781 are in Southern Punjab.⁸ These health statistics indicate that districts in South Punjab enjoy a proportionate share of health facilities when compared to other regions in the province. Gaps exist in the delivery of services and in the human resources placed in these facilities. As in educational service delivery, the health sector also has a number of programs implemented through federal and provincial governments. The provincial government also undertakes budgetary support for health sector reform programs in collaboration with international development partners.

Health service delivery in Southern Punjab faces the following challenges:

- undefined minimum standards for health service delivery;
- missing facilities in BHUs and RHCs;
- understaffing of medical officers and paramedic staff, especially female staff;
- minimal capacity building and training opportunities for medical professionals;
- shortage of medicines and the sale of counterfeit drugs;
- weak enforcement mechanisms for curbing unethical medical practices;
- nonregulation of private health practices; and
- inadequate reproductive and mother-child health facilities.

Militancy in Southern Punjab

There has been a growing concern that militant organizations such as Jaish-e-Muhammad, Sipah-i-Sahaba, and Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), might have a strong presence in parts of Southern Punjab or a broad base of sympathizers in the population. A prevalent impression is that the increase in militancy country-wide might be correlated with a growing number of religious seminaries in Southern Punjab. It is a complicated issue to analyze, and little systematic research has been done, but the presence of madrassas cannot fully explain the militant presence in Southern Punjab. Prior to the partition of Pakistan and India in 1947, Bahawalpur State (now in Southern Punjab) had a proportionately higher number of madrassas than it does today, and until quite recently the number children enrolled in school in Southern and Western Punjab had been much lower compared to other regions of the province.⁹

While sectarian violence has declined across Punjab in the recent past, religious militancy and suicide bombings saw an upward trend between 2007 and 2009. From 105 sectarian incidents between 1998 and 2004, there were only 7 during between 2005 and 2009. Between 2007 and 2009, there were a total of 27 suicide bombings. Of these 27 incidents, only 4 took place in Southern Punjab. Still, religious militancy is growing, and a number of factors might be contributing to its growth. In exchange for support, some religious militants have been offering families cash transfers or guarantees of free education for their children, including free boarding and lodging. There is a high degree of disenchantment with the state's shortcomings in the delivery of basic services. There might be some elements of sectarian or interfaith hatred and intolerance as well. Perceptions that counterterrorist activities by Pakistani and U.S. government officials have led to wrongful treatment of Pakistanis might be fueling a sense of alienation and anti-U.S. sentiment. And activists from some militant groups have been engaging in political and social activism, and some have attempted to provide services to communities. It is not clear which of these factors has contributed most to the rise of militancy in Southern Punjab, but the remainder of this section considers the contribution that service provision and political action might have made.

While in rare cases activists from militant groups such as JuD have managed to participate in low-level political representation forums, these groups usually exercise their influence as outside pressure groups. It is not uncommon for them to support or facilitate individual political leaders rather than political parties. That helps them preserve their identity while staying clear of extended political liabilities. Such an arrangement also suits mainstream political parties who can at times take advantage of short-term political support without becoming associated with militants. A similar relationship has existed between these organizations and some public functionaries who have cooperated with them to preserve stability in their area of governance. In this way, militant organizations have influenced political or subnational governance systems without becoming a clear part of them.

⁸ "Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2007–08," Planning and Development Department, Government of Punjab.

⁹ Author interviews with district and police officials, Bahawalpur, various dates.

In Southern Punjab, militant organizations have provided some services, most notably in emergency situations. However, unlike in Swat during 2009, instances of provision of justice services or of establishing parallel structures are rare.¹⁰ During crisis or emergency situations, such groups or organizations have provided immediate relief and rehabilitation, taking advantage of their capacity for rapid mobilization, low overhead costs, and local contacts. But they have been unable to translate those activities into long-term strategic gain. To date, militants in Southern Punjab have not generally resorted to extortion to raise money, but they have managed to receive charitable donations on festive or religious occasions (including Eid celebrations or Ramadan).

Conclusions

There are some potential areas of promise in Southern Punjab. First, is the successful experience of local governments between 2001 and 2007. With enabling provisions for comprehensive political representation at the local level, the LGO 2001 provided unprecedented opportunities to broaden the base of participation and representation. The financial autonomy, though limited, gave local governments a degree of planning and development autonomy. This provides the groundwork for greater devolution as outlined under the 18th Amendment.

The second area of promise pertains to the vibrant civil society efforts for poverty alleviation and improved social service delivery. Pioneering work for improved sanitation in Lodhran District and the successful models of BHU-based health service delivery in Rahim Yar Khan provide the basis for replicable models built on community organization and social mobilization. Similarly, the successful implementation of microcredit, micro-insurance, and poverty reduction programs through different Rural Support Programs and Local Support Organizations have highlighted the immense potential of local communities.

Third, the transformation at the district level of the justice sector shows great promise. Several districts of South Punjab performed well during implementation of the \$350 million Access to Justice reform program. Several districts in South Punjab made impressive progress in a wide range of judicial, legal, and police reforms under the program. The district judiciary successfully implemented a wide range of infrastructure development and facilities improvement programs. Successful implementation of AJP in South Punjab has already laid the foundations for strengthening rule of law reforms. Initiatives for the future could usefully focus on police oversight mechanisms, gender justice, improved prosecution services, prison reforms, bar council reforms, and free legal aid. In most of these cases, infrastructure and hardware facilities are already present due to the AJP. However, capacity building and procedural improvements within the identified priority areas need significant work.

Fourth, the cultural leanings of most people in Southern Punjab can provide a counterweight to militancy. A tolerant and respectful Sufism in the region is an outcome of centuries-old traditions of peaceful coexistence. Although sectarian and other forms of violence have seriously dented these positive aspects of society, their presence is still significant and an important resource for challenging militancy.

Despite these promising aspects, few efforts have been made to sustain and build upon the successes. To that end, the following recommendations are offered.

- *Hold local elections.* The 18th Amendment required local elections, but they have yet to take place in Punjab. One of the primary factors leading to a sense of alienation and frustration in Southern Punjab relates to federal and provincial policies that do not account for local interests. Holding local elections would be an important first step toward giving citizens a greater sense of voice in the system.
- *Calculate the provincial finance commission award based on need.* It is critical that provinces receive resources commensurate with the challenges they face and adequate to perform their newly devolved functions. This would give Punjab greater access to the resources it needs for the development of its least well-off regions, including Southern Punjab.
- *Build on hardware and infrastructure improvements in the police and justice sectors.* Real opportunities are present to strengthen the justice service delivery mechanisms in Southern Punjab. The AJP provided important hardware and infrastructure improvements. This laid the ground for “software reforms”: building

¹⁰ See Justine Fleischner, “Governance and Militancy in Pakistan’s Swat Valley,” CSIS, October 2011, http://csis.org/files/publication/111014_Fleischner_SwatValley_0.pdf/.

the capacity of judicial officers and staff, bar council reforms, free legal aid, gender justice, training of police, and legal rights awareness programs.

- *Invest in higher education.* Large investments have already been made in improving access and quality of basic school education. However, a matching focus on higher education has been generally missing in Southern Punjab. A well-designed strategy for promoting standards of higher education along with systems of placement, counseling, or career guidance can help give educated youth more job opportunities (while giving militants less opportunity for recruitment). Partnerships should be built among provincial college education programs, literacy and social welfare organizations, and local media and civil society organizations.
- *Invest in social mobilization.* Excellent work has been done by NGOs, the rural support programs, and Local Support Organizations in Southern Punjab to improve service delivery, employment generation, microcredit, and poverty reduction. Provincial and local governments and social welfare departments should collaborate with rural support programs and other local and national NGOs to strengthen their capacity for social mobilization in the region. These nongovernment entities could operate specific, results-oriented programs to meet local needs.
- *Establish local counter-extremist programs.* There are many factors that are believed to contribute to militancy: unemployment, poverty, frustration with state structures, minimal public service delivery, and ideological or political lobbying by militant groups. A comprehensive counter-militancy program should be established to counter some of these dynamics. In addition to the steps recommended in the previous paragraphs, initiatives could include police training to sensitize them to social challenges, curbs on hate literature, constructive engagement with the traditional madrasa system, and social or cultural programming building on local Sufi and spiritual traditions. As a matter of strategy, these initiatives should be implemented through existing local institutions rather than national or “purpose built” units that might not communicate well with local communities. Schools and colleges, community development and culture departments of government, and local media are best suited for leading the design and implementation of these initiatives, in the same way civic education is undertaken in the West.

S.R. Mehboob is a governance reform expert who has worked extensively for international development agencies and public-sector organizations in Pakistan. He was a core member of the team associated with the Asian Development Bank-funded Access to Justice Program. He was coordinator of the UN Development Program’s Gender Support Program. And he worked on the Special Policy Initiative team of the prime minister’s Secretariat. He regularly contributes to Pakistan’s leading national newspapers on topics related to public policy, local governance, and the environment.

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