Center-Sindh Relations in Pakistan after the 18th Amendment: Anatomy of Executive Federalism Under the PTI Government 2018–2022

Asma Faiz | ORCID: 0000-0002-4849-5407
Lahore University of Management Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan
asma.faiz@lums.edu.pk

Received 5 July 2023 | Accepted 6 July 2023 | Published online 9 August 2023

Abstract

This article examines the practice of Center-Province interaction in Pakistan by analyzing intergovernmental relations (IGR) between the federal (i.e., Center) and Sindh provincial governments. It focuses on the period when the Pakistan Tehreek-I-Insaaf (PTI) was in power at the Center (i.e., 2018–2022). Analyzing executive federalism and provincial governments is an understudied area of research in Pakistan. I provide an overview of the emerging literature on IGR and map out the institutional architecture of federalism in Pakistan. I pay special attention to platforms for managing Center-Province conflict, especially the Council of Common Interests (CCI). I then trace the trajectory of provincial autonomy in Sindh in the context of Pakistan's centralized federation. My focus is on the impact of 2010 18th Amendment on regional power and the management of executive relations. I explore the critical issues of discord between the federal government of the PTI and the provincial one of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) in Sindh. My analysis reflects continuing dominance of the Center and its linkage with party politics in the framework of executive interactions between governments at the two levels, characterized by a significant differential in their authority. I argue that constitutional devolution needs to be cushioned by a corresponding decentralization of powers to provinces like Sindh in the administrative and financial sectors.
Keywords

Federalism – Intergovernmental Relations – Pakistan – Center – Sindh – Council of Common Interests

1 Introduction

Research on federalism in Pakistan generally focuses on its evolution, linkages with identity politics, and ethnic conflict and management. This research has a gap regarding inter-governmental relations (IGR) theory and practice. In Pakistan, what makes IGR fascinating is how power imbalances between the federal and provincial levels, via their executives, play out in managing contentious issues and policies. The present article addresses this research gap by examining the architecture of federalism in Pakistan and analyzing Center-Province government relations. Sindh’s provincial autonomy, the evolution of Pakistan’s federal structure, especially after the passage of the 18th Amendment in 2010, and mapping executive relations between Karachi and Islamabad during the Pakistan Tehreek-I-Insaaf (PTI) period (i.e., 2018 to 2022), are central to my analysis. It places Center-Sindh relations within broader debates about the mechanics and operationalization of executive federalism by focusing on IGR. After situating Sindh within the framework of Pakistan’s traditionally centralized federation, the article examines the impact of the 18th Amendment on the mechanics of Center-Province executive interactions. In this context, Sindh’s ethnic polarization, multipolar contentions over Karachi, and resistance to the federal government set the background for my study. In this article, I focus on a “war of attrition” between Sindh and the Center during the PTI’s 2018 to 2022 tenure in federal power.

2 Mapping Inter-Governmental Relations in a Federation

Pakistan inherited a centralized federal structure from British India. This centralized government was “one of the most powerful federal governments in the world.”1 Under Section 102 of the Government of India Act (adopted as the Interim Constitution of Pakistan), the federal government acquired powers to declare an emergency within provinces and dismiss governments. The Center controlled revenue generated by income and sales taxes in the

---

financial domain. Until 1951, sales taxes fell under provincial authority, but the federal government subsequently took their management over, citing extraordinary circumstances produced by the influx of millions of refugees. Using Section 92-A, the Center had the power to impose Governor’s rule in provinces and dismissed nine provincial governments in the first eleven years of independent Pakistan. A civilian bureaucracy controlled and managed by the Center furthered the federation’s intervention into domains of regional control.2

Research on the theory and practice of federalism in Pakistan traditionally revolves around themes such as federalism’s institutional design, ethnic conflict/management, the Center’s impact on democracy, and fiscal controls.3 This article departs from the mainstream literature on federalism by investigating Center-Province interactions in Pakistan through the functioning of IGR. IGR is an under-researched dimension of federal governance systems. It is “a complex and reciprocal relationship between political forces and institutional structures.”4 Political party competition is one aspect of federalism that impacts IRC. IGR in parliamentary systems is often assumed to be dominated by executives since political parties are frequently centralized in these systems. Australia and Canada often get cited as examples of such “executive federalism.”5 Like in many other federations, interactions between two executives controlled by different political parties often characterize Center-Province relations in Pakistan. As a result, political narratives and party positions often influence competition around policy matters. Beyond political actors, bureaucrats and technocrats are often central to Center-Province interactions in Pakistan. Hence, IGR in federal systems often results from interactions between politicians, bureaucrats, and technocrats.

While the institutional design and structures of federations differ, IGR generally reveals dominance by a federal government. The federal executive operates from a position of strength due to its control of financial resources and domination of the broader policymaking process. With power over tax

---

5 Ibid., 227.
revenue collection and a bureaucracy, federal executives generally negotiate with regional executives from a position of strength. In Pakistan, the Center often enjoyed extraordinary constitutional powers over the provinces, such as dismissing the latter’s executive and imposing states of “Emergency.” While regional governments vary in size and economic strength, Center-Province executive relations are often fraught with differences. Discord between the provincial governments also provides advantages to the Center due to fragmented opposition.6

The functioning of IGR depends on joint efforts by politicians and bureaucrats/technocrats. Due to the often highly technical and specialized nature of IGR debates, bureaucrats and technocrats commonly provide sought-after solutions for governance problems. But, under elected governments, the mechanics of IGR rely significantly upon politicians’ interventions. It is often a highly politicized domain. Party competition is a significant variable that shapes the dynamics of cooperation or conflict between the federal and regional governments in IGR. In theory, this variable should have a limited impact on the everyday dealings between federal and provincial executives. Still, friction between layers of a federation often gets rooted in bitter party competition. For example, in Pakistan, competition between parties frequently shapes the contours of IGR. Of course, it is relatively discord-free whenever the same party simultaneously holds power at both federal and regional levels. For instance, federal executives’ relations with Sindh and Punjab under Z.A. Bhutto were smooth because the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) ruled both provinces. In contrast, the federal government’s relations with the National Awami Party (NAP) provincial governments in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP, now known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or KP) and Balochistan were antagonistic. In other examples, this pattern of strained IGR between the federal and provincial executives has similar outcomes. After the return of democracy in 1988, stints in power by Benazir Bhutto (1988–1990, and 1993–1996) and Nawaz Sharif (1990–1993 and 1997–1999) produced strained relations between the federal and regional governments under the shadow of party rivalries.7

Pakistan is not an outlier regarding conflict-prone IGR between the federation and provincial levels when shaped by party competition. Federations in the Global North also display IGR breakdown in the face of party politics. “Breakdowns” even happen in “consensus democracies,” like Germany, with well-established joint decision-making structures at multiple government

---

6 Ibid., 228–230.

layers. Ultimately, IGR involves political bargaining as decision-making rests in the hands of the political executives of the two units. Riker’s study of American federalism shows that a decentralized party structure facilitates a pattern of decentralization in the federal-state IGRs. In his view, the magnitude of control by party leaders and the frequency of “capture” by political parties of federal and state governments are crucial points to consider.

The changing nature of Indian federalism also provides insights into the close linkages between IGR and the party system. The evolution of the party system in India from a Congress-dominated polity to a multi-party system that enhanced the significance of regional ethnic parties fundamentally transformed Indian federalism. A rise in “federal coalitions” in New Delhi brought together “territorially-based identities within a cohesive frame” but without shared ideologies. In Arora’s view, the rise of these ethnic parties as coalition partners in New Delhi carved out a de facto space for greater state-level (i.e., provincial) participation in the national policymaking processes. This era of coalition politics continued for two decades until the BJP established a federal government following the 2019 election. Before this election, the role of party politics in the wheelings and dealings of coalition-making created cooperation opportunities between the federal and state governments.

The Indian example highlights the centripetal or centrifugal roles political parties can play in a federation’s workings. In contrast, when a single party is in power at the federal and regional levels, the former’s interference in the latter’s affairs can increase without significant resistance from a provincial or state-level government. Regional autonomy consequently declines under the pressures of a dominant party in power at both ends of the executive. Conversely, by producing discord and conflict, the presence of two rival parties at the federal and regional levels broadens the canvas for IGR negotiations and increases provincial powers.

Academic research on the practices of executive federalism in the Global North also highlights several problematic aspects of these IGR models. For instance, academics and practitioners criticize executive federalism in Germany with its multiple and dual layers of decision-making. These webs of policymaking get blamed for “inefficient and opaque policymaking” and

---

economic stagnation. During the last two decades, Canada witnessed the emergence of a “collaborative federalism” that entails the “co-determination of broad national policies” by the federal and provincial governments. Even this brand of collaborative decision-making, between seemingly autonomous and equal executives, has received criticism: intergovernmental collaborations involving experts are assumed deficient in democratic credentials, as decisions often get made in institutions insulated from public opinion and pressure. Hence, in one sense or another, even the best practices of IGR are often less than ideal.

Historically, power-sharing between the Center and federating units has remained contentious in Pakistan. Pakistan’s constitutions borrowed the federal formula from the Government of India Act 1935, with variations in the de jure distribution of power and domains. Both the 1935 Government of India Act and the 1956 Constitution demarcate three lists for organizing the jurisdiction of the federal and provincial governments: Federal, Provincial, and Concurrent. Ayub Khan’s 1962 Constitution removed domains of regional control by removing the Provincial List. The 1973 Constitution devised a two-lists mechanism (i.e., the Federal and Concurrent Lists). In it, the Center used the Concurrent List to intervene in provincial affairs. This situation persisted until the administrative and fiscal autonomy of the provinces increased under the 2010 18th Amendment, which abolished the Concurrent List and transferred 40 of 47 subjects to the provincial domain. Despite this shift, the federation still plays a crucial role in regional policymaking by appointing governors, high court judges, and higher bureaucracy officers.

The 1973 Constitution established a bicameral legislature in Pakistan. The upper chamber, or Senate, provided equal representation to all the provinces to reduce the demographic superiority of Punjab. Nonetheless, it had diluted power due to its limited scope to shape policy and, until the 18th Amendment, enjoyed few significant powers: for example, the lower house, or National Assembly, could pass annual budgets without passing through the Senate. However, the 18th Amendment did reinvigorate the Senate as a federal institution. The critical government department tasked with managing IGR since the 18th Amendment is the Ministry for Inter-Provincial Coordination. Until 2021,

---

14 Ibid., 66.
this Ministry also served as the temporary Secretariat of the Council of Common Interests (CCI). The Ministry’s website provides valuable information about its mission and work. This website provides a record of all meetings of the CCI held during the previous year. Interestingly, for the parliamentary year 2020–2021 and according to a Ministry report, the federal government submitted 16 agenda items. In contrast, the provinces took five issues to the CCI, with Sindh leading by proposing three agenda items. These numbers reflect the domination of the federal executive in shaping the agenda of Center-Province dialogues in Pakistan.

Central to IGR in Pakistan is the CCI. This institution was conceived as a dispute-resolution mechanism for settling Center-Province and inter-provincial issues, as listed in Article 153 of the 1973 Constitution. The CCI is a "quasi-executive" body because its membership includes the Prime Minister and the Provinces’ Chief Ministers (like the Council of States in India and the Council of Ministers in Ethiopia). In addition to the chief executives of federal and provincial governments, the Constitution authorizes the Center to nominate three additional members to the CCI. In collaborative federal models, like Canada, IGR platforms are co-chaired by the Prime Minister and provincial chief executives. But in Pakistan, only the Prime Minister chairs CCI meetings, reflecting unequal power sharing between the federal and provincial executives. The workings of CCI thus symbolize the federation's control over IGR. Despite great potential, the CCI generally fails to be a conflict resolution platform. From 1973 to 2010, only 11 meetings of the CCI were held, reflecting an inability to settle Center-Province disputes. The first three meetings occurred during the Z.A. Bhutto period before the government fully formulated its rules. In 1991, the Nawaz Sharif government reinvigorated the CCI by making it mandatory to meet once yearly. During the 1990s, the CCI held three meetings in each tenure of the Nawaz Sharif government, and it assisted the Nawaz Sharif government in negotiating and finalizing the Water Accord and establishing the Indus River System Authority (IRSA).

Establishing a permanent Secretariat was crucial in making the CCI a critical institution for IGR management in Pakistan. It took nine years to develop the CCI secretariat. With enhanced importance after the 18th Amendment, it emerged as equivalent to the Cabinet Division, a reflection of federal

---

17 For details, see Ministry of Interprovincial Coordination, Year Book 2020–21 (https://www.ipc.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/Year%20Books/Year%20Book%202020-21%23IPC.pdf [accessed September 12, 2022]).
government power. Since the 18th Amendment, several contentious issues have come before the CCI, some of which remain unsettled. These include reservations about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and demands by the provinces to include subjects within their domain left unchanged by the 18th Amendment. Beyond the institution of the CCI, the federal government also established institutions to deal with specific Center-Province issues, such as National Economic Council (NEC) and the Indus River System Authority (IRSA). The NEC was established under Article 156(2) of the Constitution and comprised provincial chief executives, federal ministers connected with various aspects of economic policymaking, and the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission. A combination of institutions, including the Senate, CCI, and NEC, thus now manage the Center-Province IGR in Pakistan.

3 Situating Sindh in Pakistan’s Centralized Federation

Since Partition, the quest for provincial autonomy, in the face of massive centralization pursued by the state in Pakistan, forms the core of politics in Sindh. The PPP and Sindhi nationalists have historically championed resistance against an interventionist Center. Various administrative, economic, and political factors led to the emergence of a strong sense of injustice and grievance among Sindhis. State policies fueled nationalist sentiments, oscillating between the struggle for a separate Sindhudesh and the participation of Sindhi ethnic parties in the electoral process. Sindh’s quest for autonomy can be traced to the late colonial period when its intelligentsia and elite successfully pursued separation from the Bombay Presidency. This struggle resulted in the creation of a separate Sindh province in 1937. However, after Partition, the Center severely curtailed Sindh’s autonomy through its administrative, legal, and financial policies. In reaction to the Center’s encroachment and top-down decision-making came nationalist resistance that defined the metaphor for politics in Sindh, ranging from provincial government’s decisions to popular

street resistance by political parties. All parties on Sindh’s political landscape (including the PPP and various nationalist groups) have long advocated for provincial autonomy. During its regional stints in power, the PPP positioned itself as a defender of greater independence for Sindh and resisted the Center’s hegemony when controlled by a different party.

Key measures by the federal government that legally, administratively, and politically impacted Sindh include: the settlement of Muhajirs in urban Sindh after Partition, converting Karachi into the national capital (1947), and integrating Sindh into the One Unit (1955). From the outset of the Muslim League leadership taking power in Pakistan, it preferred a unitary-style centralized state. This preference reflected Muslim League anxieties that it did not enjoy full support from all the Muslim-majority areas now comprising Pakistan. Post-Partition, Muslim League leadership shared a view with the civil bureaucracy and military elites that supported establishing a robust Center in Pakistan at the provinces’ expense. Ethnic parties and leaders considered this attitude a “betrayal” of their interests. In Sindh, the idea of a decentralized federation was fundamental to Pakistan. Even today, the Sindhi leaders provide an alternative interpretation of the March 1940 Lahore Resolution. In their view, the idea of Pakistan was rooted in a promise of creating “autonomous” self-governing territorial units. Nationalist leaders like G.M. Syed resisted top-down hegemonic views of government. Unsurprisingly, the Center later identified Syed with “forces of revolt and disintegration.”

An early irritant in Center-Sindh igr was the settlement of Muslim refugees from India following Partition. Sindh’s demography drastically changed following the arrival of Muhajirs, who primarily settled in urban Sindh. An exodus of Sindhi Hindus accompanied the influx of Muhajirs. As a result, a Muhajir elite overtook Sindh’s cities. At the forefront of the independence movement, this elite occupied key governing positions in various institutions of the newly established Pakistan. In this environment, if Sindh’s Prime Ministers (Chief Ministers were at the time known as Prime Ministers) resisted the Center’s intervention, they faced potential dismissal. A legal instrument

---

25 Muhajirs are Urdu-speaking migrants who constitute roughly one-third of all migrants from India.
frequently employed by the central government to do this was the Public and Representative Office (Disqualification) Act (PRODA). Center repeatedly used it to disqualify Sindhi leaders if they resisted its policies, sometimes on ridiculous charges such as the “alleged theft of a linotype machine.”

A significant and early Center-Province dispute was the separation of Karachi from Sindh. In the “Battle for Karachi,” the Center unilaterally made Karachi the federal capital and shifted Sindh’s provincial administration to Hyderabad. Within a few months, 55 percent of the city’s population consisted of Muhajirs. Parties and leaders in Sindh, including the Sindh Provincial Muslim League, G.M. Syed, and other Sindhi nationalists, universally rejected the federal takeover of Karachi. Anger in Sindh with the Center’s forced measures got expressed in the Sindh Assembly on February 22, 1948, when it passed a bill that described the province as “being robbed and beheaded.” The legislator, Hashim Gazdar, described the federal government’s decision as “an attempt by Punjabis to dominate Sindh.” Ayub Khuhro declared it a “hasty and ill-conceived decision” that could jeopardize the entire existence of Sindh. In a compromise, the government of Sindh requested joint Center-Province control of the city. The federal government denied the request because it was “incompatible with the Center’s dignity.” The May 1948 takeover of Karachi by the Center set the tone of the federal government’s interference in Sindh, which remained the predominant pattern in their igr for decades.

In the 1950s, the One Unit scheme was the most significant setback to Sindh’s autonomy. The ruling elite in West Pakistan envisioned the One Unit as a solution to the demographic majority of East Pakistan. (As a dis-contiguous territory, Pakistan struggled with legitimacy following Partition). Despite protests by ethnic leaders like G.M. Syed of Sindh and Ghaffar Khan of KP,

27  Faiz, In Search of Lost Glory, 55.
28  The term “Battle for Karachi” was first used by the British diplomats serving in Pakistan (United Kingdom High Commission, Opdom No. 16, January 12–22, 1948 [British National Archives, File No. DDO 142/423]).
30  United Kingdom High Commission, Opdom No. 42, May 20–26, 1948 (British National Archives, File No. DDO 142/423).
31  United Kingdom High Commission, Opdom No. 14, February 12–18, 1948 (British National Archives, File No. DDO 142/423).
32  For details, see Proceedings of Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, Official Report, Volume III (May 22, 1948), 92–95.
33  National Documentation Center, NDC Files 384/CF/48.
34  Waseem, Political Conflict, 303.
West Pakistan unified into a single “province” to create parity between the country’s two wings. Sindh became a hotbed of resistance to the One Unit. The Punjab and KP provincial assemblies were coerced into passing unanimous resolutions in favor of One Unit. However, Sindhi politicians refused to provide such a blank cheque to the federal government. The Sindh Assembly, led by Chief Minister Abdul Sattar Pirzada, opposed Sindh’s integration into the One Unit. The Center retaliated by dismissing Pirzada and appointing Ayub Khuhro as Chief Minister. This appointment was another example of the Center’s heavy-handed interventions in Sindh. In the past, Khuhro was removed twice by the federal government over various questionable charges. But he did manage to secure the Sindh Assembly’s support for One Unit. The loss of almost two decades of being a well-defined province generated opposition in Sindh. The creation of the One Unit also furthered the Center’s efforts to build a “Homo Pakistanus” by eroding regional cultural and linguistic diversity. In Sindh, this process included the forced imposition of Urdu as an official language. In the absence of working relations at an official level, the administrative, economic, and cultural marginalization of Sindh set the tone for Center-Province relations for future decades.

The hierarchical character of Center-Province relations has consistently produced resistance from smaller provinces and ethnic communities in Pakistan. Pakistan’s multiple ethnic parties, which demand provincial empowerment and equitable resource-sharing, are signs of this resistance. In Sindh, G.M. Syed, Ibrahim Joyo, and other Sindhi nationalists actively struggled against the One Unit. These nationalists also supported a broader resistance to Ayub Khan’s martial law regime with their backing for the National Awami Party (NAP). During the 1960s, opposition to the Center expressed itself through cultural activities and narratives. Sindh’s cultural matrix was celebrated through Sufi gatherings, and nationalists, like G.M. Syed, led the commemoration of saints from Sindh. While culture and Sufism characterized G.M. Syed’s politics, the PPP focused on elections, “electables,” votes, and policy. Since its inception in 1967, the PPP has mixed ideology, patronage, and charisma to rally support. Since Z.A. Bhutto’s 1970 election campaign, Sindhi marginalization at the hands of the “all-powerful” Muhajirs remains a potent public mobilization tool for the PPP.

35 United Kingdom High Commission, Pakistan, Fortnightly Report (British National Archives, File No. DO 35/5406).
36 Jaffrelot, 97.
Following the 1971 Pakistan-India War, federalism again became important in Pakistan’s legal-constitutional imagination. A new Constitution laid down principles for Center-Province power sharing. However, party politics greatly impacted executive bargaining between the federal and provincial governments. In line with the academic literature on IGR and centralized federations, comparatively smooth ties are expected when the same party (or its allies) is in power at the federal and provincial levels. Since 1973, party competition, bitterness, and near zero tolerance have profoundly impacted Center-Province relations. The Center often found ways to intervene in provincial affairs and influence the exercise of power when exercised by an opposition party. For instance, the Center used its control over bureaucracy through appointment, transfer, and promotion mechanisms to create problems for rival parties in the provinces. When the PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) ruled Islamabad in the 1990s, they shuffled provincial bureaucracies to appoint officers who could do their bidding in the provinces. The earlier pattern of direct intervention in provincial affairs through the dismissal of regional assemblies and the imposition of Governor’s Rule was also repeated in the 1990s.

A particularly significant dysfunction episode regarding IGR and Sindh happened in the second term of Nawaz Sharif as Prime Minister (1997–1999). In 1998, after the assassination of Hakim Muhammad Saeed, the federal government under the PML-N imposed Governor’s rule in Sindh. PML-N accused the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), part of a ruling coalition in Sindh, of complicity in the assassination. After the PML-N levied the accusation, the MQM left its provincial alliance. This departure set the stage for Nawaz Sharif to dismiss the Sindh executive and hand over power to the Governor. However, the still-functioning Sindh Assembly attempted to elect a new provincial executive. In response, the PML-N government suspended the ability of the Sindh Assembly Speaker to call a session and prevented the members from entering the Assembly. To further centralize powers, the PML-N appointed Ghous Ali Shah, its party leader in the province, as the prime minister’s Sindh advisor and gave him Chief Minister-like powers. The latter established a council of advisors, which acted as a de facto cabinet. Through this “extraordinary arrangement,” the PML-N took over the provincial government without any


majority in the Assembly.40 This episode captures a pattern of Center-Province relations in which the ruling party at the federal level pursues confrontation with a provincial executive when it is in the hands of an opposition party. Yet other examples are Balochistan and KP, which faced similar fates when the PPP, in federal power, dismissed the NAP’s provincial governments.41

Through the 1990s, the exercise of “emergency” powers (i.e., the dismissal of a provincial executive in the name of security and stability) remained part of the Center’s political playbook. For example, breakdowns of the rule of law, violence, and targeted killings marred Karachi in the 1990s. This situation led to a perceived dysfunctionality that provided a rationale for the Center to launch military operations. The PML-N, in power in the federal government, launched Operation Blue Fox in 1992 to bring law and order. The leading parties in Karachi and Sindh (i.e., the PPP and the MQM) challenged the decision to launch the operation. However, despite provincial-level protests, the federal government continued Operation Blue Fox.42 In another example of state machinery, especially the police, getting used for partisan political purposes, the Center used its influence during the 1990 elections to prevent the PPP from winning power in Sindh. Such examples reflect a broader current in Pakistan, where the Center regularly ventures into provincial domains under different pretexts. This pattern was also visible in Center-Sindh IGR under the post-18th Amendment rule of the PTI rule at the Center between 2018 and 2022.

4 IGR in Practice: Turbulent Center-Sindh Relations under the PTI Government

The 18th Amendment broadened the horizon of provincial powers. It transformed federalism in Pakistan from an integrative to a dualist model: the Center and provinces shared jurisdictions over several critical policy areas. It withdrew the Concurrent List so provinces could enjoy autonomy in education, health, and labor. However, executive relations between the federal and provincial governments suffered due to the strains of party politics. Such politics continued to shape Center-Province dynamics in the post-18th Amendment

period. However, these dynamics fell short of the complete breakdowns resulting from the dismissal of provincial governments in the past.

The period of the PTI at the Center produced a significant deterioration in federal-provincial IGR. It saw a lack of coordination and contentious wrangling between the federal and provincial executives over several issues. Sindh’s Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah viewed the PTI as “never interested in establishing a working relationship” with Sindh.\textsuperscript{43} The ethnopolitics of Karachi weakened the Sindh government’s position during this period too. The MQM, in opposition in Sindh, was a coalition partner of the PTI government in Islamabad. Sindh’s provincial government faced domestic contention from within the province from the MQM, which played the Center’s trojan horse. Another critical factor in Karachi’s political landscape was the unprecedented success of the PTI in Karachi during the 2018 elections. It benefited from the decline and fragmentation of the MQM. It was the first election in three decades in which the MQM did not dominate Karachi’s politics. Post-elections, it allied with the PTI. The MQM’s 21 seats and PTI’s 30 seats created a solid opposition to the PPP in Sindh Assembly. This alliance allowed a non-PPP ruling party at the Center to emerge as a strong player in Karachi, which was well-represented in the PTI cabinet of Imran Khan.\textsuperscript{44} Also crucial was that the 2018 elections reduced the power of PPP to Sindh and gave it limited representation outside the province. These political dynamics impacted the practice of Sindh-Center IGR, with the PPP caught between opposition from the Center and its provincial opposition.

Water is historically an essential and contentious agenda item in Sindh’s relations with the Center and other provinces, especially Punjab. The common claim “Sindh’s politics is water politics” is a measure of the significance of water in the region.\textsuperscript{45} The 1991 Indus Water Accord first settled questions of water-sharing in Pakistan. Signed by Nawaz Sharif, this agreement survived the test of time. However, since 2019, Sindh’s executive and civil society have increasingly protested perceived injustices meted out to Sindh by the Center and Punjab. When in provincial power, they demanded a re-negotiation of the water accord.\textsuperscript{46} Following severe water scarcity in Sindh, which forced the farmers to pursue a long march to Karachi in the summer of 2019, the PPP declared the Indus Water Accord as “unviable.” It demanded a new water-sharing

\textsuperscript{45} Fazlullah Qureshi, interview, August 17, 2015.
\textsuperscript{46} This demand got made by PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto Zardari.
formula based on “justice and equality.” It has also accused Punjab, the largest unit within the federation, of stealing Sindh’s share of water. Low levels of trust between Punjab and all the other federation units have not helped. One of Sindh’s major complaints remains the federal government’s plans to build dams that severely reduce water to provinces like Sindh. Sindh’s complaints received a strong rebuttal from Punjab, which accused it of misquoting the data about water.

The relevant conflict-management IGR platform is the Indus River System Authority (IRSA). The IGR tensions found their way into IRSA when, in May 2021, Sindh’s representative walked out and complained of insulting behavior from the head of the authority. In June 2021, IRSA abruptly sent a team of experts to monitor the water flow at the Guddu barrage in Sindh. The Sindh government, in retaliation, refused entry to the experts. The federal response was that Sindh was politicizing a technical issue. This Center-Province water dispute paralyzed the workings of IRSA when the province asked for the removal of its chairman because he was perceived to be a party to the conflict rather than an honest judge. Such is the significance of water in Sindh that the party loyalties became secondary to Center-Sindh positioning on the issue. The federal Minister for Inter-provincial Coordination, Dr. Fehmeeda Mirza, an ethnic Sindh, departed from the Center’s position in a heated National Assembly session to support Sindh’s claims. Similarly, a resolution condemning perceived injustices to Sindh over water rights got backing from the MQM and the PTI in the Sindh Assembly. Water remains crucial to the Center’s relations with

---

48 “Pakistan’s Punjab Province Accuses Sindh of Massively Under-Reporting Water Inflows,” ANI News (https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/pakistan-punjab-province-accuses-sindh-of-massively-under-reporting-water-inflows20220126225857/ [accessed September 2, 2022]). The Kalabagh Dam project has become a symbol of the wider ethnic divide in Pakistan. Vehemently supported by Islamabad and Lahore, various federal governments sought to build this project only to back down in the face of strong resistance from smaller provinces, especially Sindh. Dams and the broader water dispute have become symbols of nationalist aspirations. Sindh’s long-running opposition to the Kalabagh Dam project is an example. Sindh’s complaints have received a strong rebuttal from Punjab, which accused it of misquoting the data about water.
Sindh. Until today, the conflict remains unresolved, with both IRSA and the CCI unable to create a consensus formula for water-sharing between Sindh and other provinces.

The federal government’s attempt to control Bundal and Buddu, two islands off the Karachi coast, reflects its penetration into a provincial domain. Like the water dispute, this island episode is part of the Center’s long history of expansionism. During the Musharraf period, the Center twice attempted to construct projects on these islands. Subsequently, in 2013, the PPP brought the real estate giant Malik Riaz to develop the islands. Later, in 2020, the PTI got involved with the islands. It bypassed parliament’s approval through a presidential ordinance and established the Pakistan Islands Development Authority (PIDA). Following the notification of the ordinance, the islands fell under the Center’s jurisdiction. Beyond procedural violations, the ordinance left no room for provincial control – only a senior bureaucrat or military officer could lead PIDA. The official justification for PIDA was that the federal government should bring development projects to the Karachi coastline. The massive unilateralism of the federal government alienated the provincial government and civil society in Sindh. Sindh’s civil society comprehensively rejected PIDA’s proposed development plan as “an attack on Sindhis, an attack on the livelihood of the fisherfolk.”52 The PTI government replied by releasing communications that reflected prior consultation between Center-Province executives about PIDA. But the Sindh government denied any prior knowledge or support.53 Intense anger against the Center by Sindhi nationalists and the ruling PPP was expected, considering such a blatant takeover of land belonging to Sindh. The Sindh government threatened to break all communication with the Center until it reversed its “unconstitutional” decision. The PPP also tabled a resolution against the Center that the Sindh Assembly unanimously passed.54 The conflict between Center and Sindh ultimately ended due to several developments, including the federal government’s failure to ratify the ordinance through parliament. None of the parties invoked the usual platforms for IGR dispute management. Instead, the Sindh government took the matter to the Sindh High Court. The Center then took a step back, and the ordinance expired due to a lack of support in the federal parliament. In 2022, the Center and Sindh again locked horns when the former linked Bundal and

Buddu islands to the Port Qasim Authority, a federal body. The Sindh government, in response, declared the islands “protected forests” due to the presence of mangrove trees. The islands are now under the control of the Sindh government. Regarding Center-Province conflict management mechanisms, the regular consultation platforms were ineffective since the sides resorted to different policy instruments to claim the islands. In Sindh, the federal government’s actions also strengthened nationalist narratives of resistance by rekindling memories of Karachi’s takeover by the Center in 1948.

Yet another example of Center-Sindh friction was the federal government’s planned implementation of Article 149 in Karachi. This clause of the Constitution authorizes the Center to “give directions” to the provincial executive to prevent any harm to the federation and assist in exercising executive authority. The PTI government deemed poor governance in Karachi as a justification for its potential administrative takeover of the city. In this case, the PPP was again sandwiched between an aggressive Center and provincial rivals in the form of the MQM and PTI. The MQM and PTI most typically supported the Center’s proposed plans for its direct administrative control of Karachi. As reflected through the broader academic literature on IGR and executive federalism, contentions over Article 149 got colored by party rivalries. However, like with Bundal and Buddu islands, strong resistance from Sindhi political parties, media, and civil society organizations forced Imran Khan’s PTI government to drop ideas of imposing Article 149 on Karachi.

Lastly, the 2017 Census produced another Center-Province conflict. However, in this case, the provincial government contested the census results of the federal government by taking the dispute to the CCI. In Sindh, questions about the Census have been crucial due to long-running “numerical anxieties.” From the arrival of settlers connected to the hydraulic projects of the British to the monumental demographic changes after Partition, a fear of “Indianization” has loomed large in Sindhis’ imagination. The PTI government inherited census matters from its predecessor, the PML-N government

led by Shahid Khaqan Abbasi. When the Center released results in 2020, its official calculation was that Sindh's population was 47.8 million. All the major political parties in Sindh rejected this figure. The PPP and the MQM had a rare consensus when both parties argued that Sindh got under-counted. Because under-counting deprived Sindh of necessary financial resources, its provincial government declared the Census a “big manipulation.” The MQM, an ally of the PTI at the Center, publicly questioned census results and submitted a dissenting note. The population figures of Karachi were of particular concern. According to the Census, the population of the metropolis was 16 million. All political parties in Sindh unanimously rejected the figure, which estimated the city's population close to 30 million. The provincial government repeatedly linked under-counting of Sindh's population to broader questions of resource sharing. Even the pro-Center Pak Sazameen Party (PSP) declared the 2017 census a “backstabbing” of the people of Karachi. Demographic anxieties about the Census brought all major political forces in Sindh together to reject the 2017 Census. Parties who rarely saw eye-to-eye (e.g., the PPP, Sindhi nationalists, the MQM, and the Jamaat-i-Islami [JI]) united against the Census.

In December 2019, the Sindh Assembly unanimously called for an independent third-party audit of five percent of the census blocks across the country. The provincial government also resorted to institutional mechanisms to resist the Census's approval. It repeatedly discussed the Census at the CCI and demanded a special joint session of the parliament. The PTI federal government rejected Sindh's objections. But it did, initially, consider Sindh's complaints because the MQM was its coalition partner. It agreed to a recount of 5 percent blocks. However, in April 2021, the CCI approved the results of the 2017 census despite Sindh's objections. A supposed compromise between the Center and Sindh led to the announcement of a new census by the end of 2021. In this case, the CCI emerged as the crucial institutional platform for IGR between Sindh and the federal government.
confined to an institutional arena, it failed to fully address the grievances of Sindh because the federal government received support from three other provinces: the PTI-led coalitions of Punjab and KP and the parties allied with government in Balochistan. Again, such support highlights the significance of party politics in managing IGR.

5 Conclusion

In this article I examined executive federalism in Pakistan through Center-Province relations involving Sindh. It focused on interactions between the federation (i.e., Center) and its federating units (i.e., provinces). The overall architecture of federalism in Pakistan involves a dominant Center that often intervenes in provincial domains of authority. After historically highlighting key IGR management actors and institutions, I analyzed Center-Sindh interactions during the tenure of the PTI government from 2018 to 2022. During this period, contentious issues strained relations and reflected broader patterns of inter-party rivalry. In this sense, IGR practices in Pakistan appear consistent with more general academic research on the dynamics of executive interactions in the federal systems. Despite constitutional changes in the form of the 18th Amendment, this consistency appears to be holding.

However, Pakistan is not a stagnant conglomeration of institutions. Its administration is full of “lively” interactions between federal and provincial executives. Despite its often overwhelming influence, the Center has generally refrained from the outright dismissal of provincial governments following the passage of the 18th Amendment. This restraint does mark a significant departure from the past when the Center regularly dismissed provincial governments dominated by opposition parties. All this points to an increased vibrancy of conflict management institutions in Pakistan, particularly the CCI. While Center-Provence conflicts remain a significant feature of Pakistan’s federation, institutions like the CCI have become relatively more active in IGR management. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that there is a long way to go before Pakistan achieves full maturation of such institutions.