

Book Review

Shah, Ahmed Sikander. *Federalist Solutions to Pakistan's Political Crises*. 382pp. Bloomsbury Publishing 2024.

Dr Asad Sayeed¹

¹E-mail: asadsayeed@gmail.com

Published: February 2026

Pakistan's tryst with federalism has been tumultuous. The creation of One Unit in 1955 and then the de facto domination of the centre has always left a void between what functioning federalism should look like and what it is. The book under review addresses this issue and attempts to provide the structure for a stable and durable form of federalism in Pakistan.

The book hangs on two conceptual nodes. After a thorough and useful description of Pakistan's political and institutional history, the author employs the concept of 'consociationalism' to conceptualize the existing framework of federalism in Pakistan. His prescriptive analysis centres around the concept of 'centripetalism.' The author also devotes a chapter to the impact that CPEC – symptomatic of the neo-liberal economic model pursued by the country's elites – has had on creating fissures between the federating units but does not coherently integrate it into his analysis of a federalist solution for the country. The author goes on to emphatically argue that his centripetalist federal solution can only be delivered in Pakistan by Imran Khan and the PTI!

The author claims that the 1973 Constitution 'is based on a consociational system of government, based on ethnic federalism.' (p7) This, according to the author, has accentuated ethnic identities and religious differentiation in the country. He further goes on to assert that this system created an incentive structure where political parties – mainly the PML-N and the PPP – have ruled through propagating ethnic interests. The result is uneven socio-economic development and Punjabi domination and as a result the emergence of a dysfunctional form of federalism in the country.

This characterization of Pakistan's existing federal architecture as 'consociational' goes against the grain

of much of the literature on federalism in Pakistan. For instance, Katharine Adeney has done substantial work on the subject and her constant refrain is that Pakistan is not consociational enough.[1] According to her, a consociational federal framework would require essentially three elements; i) provinces based on ethnic identities, ii) provinces substantively represented in key areas of the federal state and iii) a high degree of financial and cultural powers residing with the federating units. Pakistan does not fit the first two criteria at all and only partially with the third. None of its four provinces are exclusively ethnic – in the sense that there are substantial ethnic minorities in each of the provinces. Representation in state institutions – particularly the military and the bureaucracy – is uneven and dominated by the Punjab. Although there has been some progress in financial and cultural empowerment for provinces as a result of the 7th National Finance Commission and the 18th Amendment, it is still considered inadequate. The consociational model, as outlined by Adeney, does imply that there is need for re-crafting provinces based on ethnic identities. This would mean creating newer provinces on ethnic grounds from all the existing provinces. The example of linguistically based states in India and models of 'ethno-pluri' federalism successfully working in countries as varied as Spain, Canada, Nigeria, Belgium, Ethiopia, Switzerland, Iraq and Bosnia-Herzegovina are cases in point.[2] As such, the straw man constructed by the author does not hold in the case of Pakistan.

Other than the issue of false categorization, the fact of the matter is that identity politics along ethnic lines is a reality in Pakistan. The existence of sub-nationalist movements throughout the country's history bears testimony to the persistence of this phenomenon. The Baloch insurgency for the last two decades and the recent mobilization on the canals issue in Sindh is ample evidence of the persistence

of ethnic contestation in Pakistan. To wish it away and to strive for 'identity moderation', as the author suggests, flies in the face of existing reality.

The centripetal model that the author prescribes provides for a bottom-up federalism framework and assumes that local governance units eliminate ethnic and communal divides. He goes as far as to say that panchayats and jirgas should be revived to provide communities 'the right to self-govern.' He does recognize that these traditional modes of self-governance might be discriminatory towards women and low caste communities but claims that those failings can be appropriately reformed.

At the top of the pyramid of centripetal federalism is a President who is elected nationally, thereby eliciting votes across all ethnic, sectarian and communal divides. The provinces that he considers as fomenters of ethnic fissures will be divided administratively so that ethnic domination at the provincial level is neutralized.

This model closely approximates the basic democracy and presidential system that the country experienced during Ayub Khan's martial law. Even if we are to adopt this 'back to the future' framework, sound scholarship requires that there is some analysis of why the Ayubian model was discarded and what has changed to make it work in today's Pakistan. The only explanation provided is that local governments and the presidential system have been discredited in the past because of their association with military rule. But if brought about by a popular leader like Imran Khan, it would attain legitimacy. He asserts that "Khan's ability to gain support across geographies and ethnicities could...indicate that Pakistan is ready to gravitate towards a localized centripetalism model with presidential undertones, away from its historical parliamentary and ethnic consociational model."

This giant leap in optimism is premised on overtly partisan and in many instances factually incorrect assertions. For instance, he mentions the Ehsaas Program, health insurance and Naya Pakistan schemes to demonstrate Khan's commitment to policies that promote social justice. As is well known, the Ehsaas program was essentially a re-branding of the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), the health insurance scheme was rolled out in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab by the PML-N government (2013-2018) and Naya Pakistan never took off during the tenure of the PTI government. Moreover, he goes on to wax eloquent on Khan's commitment to local government but does not mention that soon after coming into power, the PTI government dissolved local governments in Punjab and never held new elections there during its tenure.

To sum up, this book disappoints at many levels. Its identification of the problem with Pakistan's federalism

is based on false categorization and its proposed solution – of centripetalism – regurgitates a tried and tested and ultimately discarded model, for which there is no political appetite in the country. Also, his partisan ramblings that paint Imran Khan and the PTI as the messiah do not stand up to factual scrutiny. It is a lost opportunity to delve deep into the hurdles that confront extant federalism in Pakistan and to offer an analysis as to how they can be reduced.

Endnotes:

[1] Katharine Adeney (2009), 'The Limitations of Non-Consociational Federalism: The Example of Pakistan.' *EthnoPolitics*, Vol 8, No.1 , Katharine Adeney (2012), 'A Step Towards Inclusive Federalism in Pakistan? The Politics of the 18th Amendment.' *Publius: The Journal of Ethnic Federalism*, Vol 42, No. 4, Katharine Adeney and Fillippo Boni (2022), 'Federalism and Regime Change: De/centralization in Pakistan – 1956-2020, *Regional and Federal Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2022/125456>

[2] Adeney (2012), op.cit