

INTER-PROVINCIAL WATER SHARING IN PAKISTAN IS DEPARTMENTAL OR POLITICAL ISSUE: AN EXPERT VIEW

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Abstract

The issue of inter-provincial water sharing in Pakistan, rooted in historical events dating back to the colonial era, revolves around the equitable distribution of the Indus River's water among its provinces. This complex challenge has evolved into a dynamic interplay of political, technical, and administrative dynamics. It traces its origins to 1921 when the British government's irrigation system redesign triggered protests and downstream grievances. Today, disputes persist between lower and upper riparian provinces, with Sindh accusing Punjab and KPK of unfair water diversion, while Punjab argues for efficient resource use. The contentious Kalabagh Dam further exacerbates tensions. Expert insights highlight the political dimension shaped by influential actors and technical remedies like telemetry systems for fair water distribution. Federal departments, particularly the Indus River System Authority (IRSA), and institutional capacity enhancement play pivotal roles. A comprehensive approach, bolstered by political support and the concept of hydro-solidarity, can foster collaboration among provinces. Transparent mechanisms for estimating water requirements are essential for informed decision-making. The multifaceted nature of this challenge demands a holistic strategy to promote cooperation and transparency.

Keywords: Water Sharing, Provinces, IRSA, Kalabagh Dams,

INTRODUCTION

The inter-provincial water sharing issue rises over the distribution of Indus River water among the provinces. Since colonial rule, the Indus River water has been used as a political weapon. This issue was traced back in 1921 when British government redesigned the irrigation system of this region by constructing new dams, canals and barrages. The issue of sharing water among the provinces in Pakistan centers around the distribution of the Indus River's water. Since the time of colonial rule, the utilization of Indus River water has been manipulated for political purposes (Ranjan,2012) . This problem dates back to 1921 when the British government restructured the irrigation system by constructing new dams, canals, and barrages. This led to protests from provinces downstream, as Punjab benefited disproportionately from the new system. To address this, various committees were established to resolve the dispute, often favoring Sindh over Punjab. Several committees were formed to manage the apportionment of Indus River water among the provinces (Khan & Majeed, 2020)

In Pakistan, the issue of interprovincial water sharing is rooted in the massive canal construction system initiated by the British from the mid-1800s. This situation prompted justified objections from Sindh about Punjab's excessive use of Indus water. The British unjustly allocated water tributaries to Punjab, making it the primary recipient and deepening the interprovincial water sharing problem that persists in present-day Pakistan. Various commissions like the Indian Irrigation Commission of 1901, the Cotton Committee, and the Ray Commission were instituted to address this issue and ensure a fair balance of water supply among provinces (Imran , 2021).



In April 1948, following the subcontinent's partition, India cut off Pakistan's water supply for five weeks. This issue was resolved through the Indus Waters Treaty in 1960. However, Sindh was dissatisfied with the treaty, viewing it as favoring Punjab. The present water sharing problem has evolved into a dispute between lower and upper riparian provinces. Sindh accuses KPK and Punjab of unfairly diverting water from the Indus Basin through various canals. Sindh also claims Punjab overuses water and violates international water regulations, opposing the construction of the Kalabagh Dam due to fears of water scarcity and its impact on local resources (Rajan, 2015, Khan & Awan, 2020).

On the other hand, Punjab argues that Sindh's lack of planning results in significant water wastage into the Arabian Sea, which could be used for socio-economic progress. Punjab also highlights water losses between Sukkur and Kotri Barrages. While Sindh accuses Punjab of misusing water through certain canals, Punjab relies heavily on the Indus Waters Treaty to utilize these canals. The controversy surrounding the Kalabagh Dam further divides the provinces, with concerns about its location, impact on local areas, and exacerbation of existing provincial tensions (Bhatti et al, 2014).

Balochistan also opposes the Kalabagh Dam, viewing it as a means for Punjab to exert control over other provinces. In summary, the water sharing issue among Pakistan's provinces has become highly complex, with no clear solution in sight. The Water Apportionment Accord of 1991 attempted to address the problem, but questions of legitimacy and stakeholder representation persist. Disagreements continue over the annual average water flow allocated under the accord and the rationale behind constructing the Kalabagh Dam. Despite the necessity for more dams, provincial conflicts have hindered their construction since 1947, exacerbating water scarcity issues (Akhtar et al, 2015, Tariq et al, 2020).

OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

The main objective of this study is to identify that is inter-provincial water sharing issue is departmental issue or a political. And how it can be resolved administratively and politically.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research is rooted in qualitative methodology. Within this qualitative framework, the approach involved employing open-ended structured interviews to accomplish the objectives of the study. A total of nine open-ended structured interviews were carried out with experts from Pakistan who specialize in hydro politics, water resource management, transboundary water governance, water policy matters, and the impacts of climate change on water resources. This selection encompassed both individuals with official positions and those without official designations. Among these interviews, four were conducted using online platforms such as Zoom or WhatsApp, while five were conducted in person.

The process of selecting interviewees employed purposive and snowball sampling methods, enabling contact with a diverse array of individuals possessing personal and professional insights into Pakistan's water challenges. These individuals were meticulously chosen based on their profound understanding of water management in Pakistan and its interconnectedness with the prevalent issues.

DISCUSSIONS

Participants opine that Inter-Provincial Water Sharing is a political issue and needs to be resolved politically first. Only technically sound and reasonable solution can't get traction unless it's backed by politically motivated hydro-solidarity perspective (A. Chaudhry, personal communication, August 2, 2021). Mainly, it is a departmental issue. Most of the time, problem lies with IRSA which comes under federal jurisdiction (R. Iqbal, personal communication, June 19, 2021). After WAA 1991, it is a departmental issue but unfortunately like many other issues, this has also become a political issue (A. Islam, personal communication, August 2, 2021).



It has become a political issue fueled by the incapacity of the institutions. Canal water theft is very common in Sindh, land reforms are needed to resolve such issues. The problem however is that, the real issue is never breached. Moreover, departments need to develop smart telemetry systems and outsource its operation to private sector. In this scenario, these systems will function fool proof and more jobs will be created in the water sector. Building the capacity of the existing civil engineers on advanced telemetry systems is waste of resources and time. It will fuel more conflicts (B. Fatima, personal communication, August 7, 2021).

It is basically a technical issue, which has been politicized and to some extent even departmentalized over the time (I, Official, personal communication, August 10, 2021). It should be a departmental issue but as the departments are influenced by the political governments so somehow it becomes political as well (M, Irshad, personal communication, August 12, 2021).

It is obvious that sharing of water among provinces is slightly dependent on political pressure as well. Feudal lords in the Punjab and Sindh regions of Pakistan often influence the sharing of water among provinces just to irrigate their own plains. Despite this harsh reality, inter-provincial water sharing is majorly controlled by the departments led by federal and provincial governments. Technical and administrative breaches in the departments often provide these feudal lords an opportunity to influence the system. Conclusively, it can be stated that water sharing among provinces is solely a departmental issue but deficiencies in the relevant departments must be addressed to overcome the challenges (W, Sikandar, personal communication, May 4, 2021). It is a mix of departmental and political issue, dating back to pre-partition (subcontinent) (G. Official, personal communication, May 4, 2021).

But some believe in that it needs to be addressed at both levels. Actual water requirements for various sectors must be estimated and a water distribution mechanism must be developed, that must be further briefed to political leaders to make them understand actual scenarios with facts and figures (I. Ahmad, personal communication, August 10, 2021).

RESULTS

The expert interviews provided highlight a complex and multi-faceted perspective on the issue of inter-provincial water sharing in Pakistan. The analysis of these statements reveals varying viewpoints on whether the issue is primarily political, technical, or a combination of both, and how different factors contribute to its complexity.

1. **Political Nature of the Issue:** A significant portion of the statements emphasize the political nature of inter-provincial water sharing. Participants believe that political considerations play a vital role in the allocation and distribution of water resources among provinces. Influential actors, such as feudal lords and political governments, are seen as having an impact on decision-making. These actors may prioritize their own interests, leading to conflicts and water imbalances.
2. **Technical Aspects:** On the other hand, some participants argue that the issue is fundamentally technical in nature. They suggest that a comprehensive and technically sound solution is required to ensure equitable water distribution. These individuals highlight the need for advanced telemetry systems to monitor water usage, mitigate water theft, and optimize allocation. The involvement of technical experts is seen as crucial to resolving the issue effectively.
3. **Departmental Involvement:** Another point raised is the involvement of departments, particularly the Indus River System Authority (IRSA), which falls under federal jurisdiction. The statements indicate that the functioning of these departments can have a direct impact on the water-sharing arrangements. Weaknesses in departmental operations can provide opportunities for political or vested interests to manipulate the system.
4. **Hydro-Solidarity and Political Backing:** Some participants suggest that while a technically sound solution is important, it might not gain traction without political backing. They emphasize the need for a perspective of hydro-solidarity, where provinces collaborate based on mutual benefits. Political leaders are expected to play a role in promoting such cooperation.



5. **Role of Institutions and Capacity Building:** Several statements point out the importance of addressing institutional deficiencies. These deficiencies can lead to conflicts and inefficiencies in water distribution. Capacity building within the relevant departments and improving institutional effectiveness are seen as essential steps to overcome challenges.

6. **Need for Data-Driven Decision Making:** An important theme is the role of accurate data and analysis in decision-making. Some participants emphasize the need for a transparent mechanism that estimates water requirements across various sectors. Facts and figures should be presented to political leaders to help them understand the ground realities and make informed decisions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the issue of inter-provincial water sharing in Pakistan is undeniably complex and multifaceted. It is clear from the discussions that there is no unanimous consensus on whether this issue is primarily a political one, a technical one, or a combination of both. Instead, it appears to be a hybrid problem influenced by political, technical, and departmental factors. On one hand, there is a strong argument that politics and political considerations play a pivotal role in the allocation and distribution of water resources among provinces. The influence of powerful actors, including feudal lords and political governments, can lead to conflicts and imbalances in water sharing. Therefore, addressing the political dimension of this issue is crucial for finding a sustainable solution.

On the other hand, technical aspects are also critical. The implementation of advanced telemetry systems, along with the involvement of technical experts, is seen as essential for achieving equitable water distribution and preventing water theft. Furthermore, the functionality and efficiency of departments like the Indus River System Authority (IRSA) have a direct impact on water-sharing arrangements, making departmental reform an important consideration. Hydro-solidarity, backed by political support, emerges as a potential path towards resolution. Collaboration among provinces based on mutual benefits can help alleviate the issue's complexities. Additionally, addressing institutional deficiencies and capacity building within relevant departments are fundamental steps to overcome challenges.

Ultimately, data-driven decision-making, with transparent mechanisms estimating water requirements across various sectors, is imperative. Providing political leaders with facts and figures to help them understand the ground realities can pave the way for informed decisions. In essence, resolving the inter-provincial water sharing issue in Pakistan requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account the political, technical, and departmental dimensions while promoting cooperation and transparency.

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