



RESEARCH PAPER

Governance at the Frontier: A Case Study of Strategic Leadership in Zhob Division, Balochistan (2017–2018)

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines strategic administrative interventions undertaken in Zhob Division, Balochistan, during 2017–2018 under the leadership of the Commissioner. Situated at a critical geopolitical junction and along the Western Route of CPEC, Zhob Division faced deep-rooted governance deficits manifested in weak infrastructure, fragile security, and underperforming social sectors. To address these challenges, a Forward Operating Governance model, complemented by a Field First approach, was implemented to reassert state authority through visible presence and service delivery rather than coercion. Key initiatives included the creation of Dukki as a separate district, establishment of a Master Planning Committee to regulate urban growth, and introduction of biometric-based domicile computerization to safeguard indigenous rights. Infrastructure development, notably ADB-funded national highways, was facilitated through negotiated tribal engagement using jirga mechanisms. Concurrent investments in education, healthcare, and recreational facilities underscored the role of soft infrastructure. The study concludes that integrating frontier regions into the national economic mainstream enables a transition from crisis management to sustainable institutional development.

KEYWORDS Strategic Governance, Security-Development Nexus, Zhob Division (Balochistan), CPEC Infrastructure (N-50 & N-70), Tribal Administration (Jirga), Institutional Reform, Frontier Crisis Management

Introduction

Zhob Division which lies on the north eastern fringe of Balochistan is a region of considerable historical, strategic and geo-political importance. The region is characterized by rugged topography marked by the Sulaiman Mountains, and the valley of the river Zhob; as such a crucial junction linking the province of Balochistan with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in the north and the province of Punjab to the east (Pakistan Almanac, n.d.). The area was known in the past as "Appozai" and it was given its later name "Fort Sandeman" during British Rule, in honor of a colonial administrator, Sir Robert Sandeman, who introduced the "Sandeman System" of tribal administration (Chisholm, 1911). The indigenous name "Zhob," which means "bubbling water" in Pashto was not restored until 30 July 1976 by the then Prime Minister of Pakistan (High Court of Balochistan, n.d.).

Geographically, the division covers a large area of mountainous territory and alluvial plains, where altitudes vary from 930 to 3,444 metres at the top of the Takht-e-Suleiman (Pakistan Almanac, n.d.). To the north this shares a porous and sensitive international border with Afghanistan and also with the South Waziristan district of the province of KP and therefore remains a frontline area in the context of national security. To the east it borders Dera Ghazi Khan, in Punjab, and Dera Ismail Khan, in KP, and serves as the main route for trade between the port of Gwadar, Quetta and up-country trading markets (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2017).

Administrative and Demographic Overview

During the period of 2017-2018, there was a great administrative transformation in the Zhob Division. The division consisted of six main districts namely Zhob, Sherani, Killa Saifullah, Loralai, Musa Khel, and Barkhan. Furthermore, that time was also the period when a Dukki, which was otherwise a tehsil of Loralai, was upgraded into the rank of a full-fledged district - a process of administration that we had the privilege to supervise (Daily Jang, 19 August 2017).

Demographically speaking, the region is largely inhabited by Pashtun tribes such as the Kakar, Mandokhail, Sherani, Nasir, Lun, and Musa Khel tribes (Joshua Project, n.d.). The social fabric is closely knit around the tribal code known as Pashtunwali which emphasizes on hospitality (melmastia), justice (nyaw), and council (jirga). According to the population and housing census of the year 2017, the population of the division has seen a significant increase. For example, while in Zhob District alone the population stood at around 310,544 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017) with a population growth rate of approximately 2.52% per year. The total population of the division surpassed one million, thus imposing immense pressure on the already existing, dilapidated infrastructure (City Population, 2023).

Strategic Importance and Development Deficit

The years 2017 and 2018 respectively were a pivotal time for the Zhob Division. The region was the core of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Western Route. The N-50 and the N-70 national highways passing through the division were identified as the critical arteries to provide connectivity (Government of Pakistan, 2018). The strategic importance of Zhob was underlined by the possibility of shortening the route for China's energy imports and providing an alternative to the alignment from the east (Wolf, 2018).

However, this strategic potential was contrasted with some hard realities: a "governance deficit" characterized by deteriorating roads, underperforming social sectors and a fragile security situation. Economically the division depends a lot on agriculture (especially almond, apricot and pomegranates cultivated in Loralai and Zhob) and mining (mainly coal in Dukki and Chamalang). Despite this, lack of farm-to-market roads and cold storages led to a huge loss in value for farmers (Small & Medium Enterprise Development Authority [SMEDA], 2022). Moreover, the coal mines Dukki despite generating revenue in billions traded in an administrative vacuum with poor standards and lack of infrastructure safety (World Bank, 2019).

The 2017-2018 Tenure: A Vision for Transformation

When we assumed the charge of the Commissioner of the Zhob Division in July 2017 the mandate was explicit; reestablishing the writ of the state through not just force but efficient service delivery. The objective was to shift out of a "post-conflict management" mode in favour of a "sustainable development" paradigm. My administration took a multi-dimensional approach that focused on:

Visible Governance: Bringing the administration from a desk-bound to a field-oriented presence.

Infrastructure Overhaul: Signing up billion-rupee highway projects (N-50, N-70) with transparency.

Social Uplift: Bringing life back in educational and health institutes.

Soft Power: Bringing Sports and Cultural Projects to regain Public Spaces

This case study identifies and demarcates the administrative strategies used during this tenure and studies how the tribal landscape was navigated to ensure the "Right of Way" for developmental work and bolstering the Levies force, and establishing institutions capable to go beyond individual tenures.

Providing Leadership in District Level Governance

Governance in frontier areas like that of Zhob requires one to hang out in not so conventional bureaucratic systems. The prevailing "Camp Office" culture, whereby officials wielded power from a strategic distance only out of the safety of the headquarters, created a very strong disconnection between the State machinery and the citizenry. As a result, the administration promulgated a new paradigm of "Forward - Operating Governance."

The "Field-First" Policy

A strict protocol was laid down for administrative legitimacy to find its roots in physical presence. "Today is the time of machines, and there is no way to hide any shortcomings," was claimed during initial tours (Urdu Point, 02 October 2017). The policy required the Assistant Commissioners (ACs) and the Deputy Commissioners (DCs) to make direct field visits to monitor schools, hospitals, and development schemes (Picture 1).



Picture 1: Commissioner Zhob Division Dr Syed Saif ur Rehman visiting the development schemes in Musakhel

In Sherani District, which is arguably the most remote and neglected district bordering the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, surprise inspections of Basic Health Units (BHUs) and schools were conducted. During an August 2017 visit, large numbers of staff absenteeism were noted. Rather than the mere reprimands were given, disciplinary proceedings were initiated under PEEDA (Punjab Employees Efficiency Discipline and accountability) Act as modified for Balochistan. The administration explicitly linked the nation's future with the performance of the sectors of education and health, stating, "The future of the country is linked to the sectors of education and health" (Urdu Point, 22 August 2017). This hands-on approach had created a shockwave in the hitherto lethargic lower bureaucracy.

The Institutionalization of Dukki: The Birth of a District

One of the most complex administrative problems was to operationalize Dukki as a new district. Dukki, a coal mining centre, was hardly a district headquarters, but a chaotic settlement. Upon notification by the government on the status of the district of Dukki, an organic but uncontrolled expansion was considered unacceptable. A "Master Planning Committee," including the town planners and local stakeholders, was called for. A 2,000-acre area was spotted for the construction of the new District Complex on Ghorwas on the Nana Sahib Ziarat Road.

- 1,000 acres were allocated for the administrative zone (DC office, Police Lines, Judiciary).
- 1,000 acres set aside for a commercial zone and residential colonies.

This arrangement was an attempt to control Dukki's urban sprawl in the future. Engagement with the Marri, Lun, and Nasir tribal elders ensured that the acquisition of land would be without dispute and to present the status of the districts as a joint victory of the tribes (Daily Jang, 19 August 2017).

Digital Governance: The Loralai Domicile Project

In the border districts of Balochistan, 'Local/Domicile' certificate is a much-valued document and provides access to the quota of federal employment and scholarships. For years, non-locals, and even foreigners, had fabricated fake domiciles, disfranchising indigenous youth. In light of grievances raised against them by the Kakar Jamhoori Party and the civil society, the administration initiated the 'Computerization of Locals/Domicile' program at Loralai. Inaugurated in 19th April 2018, the project involved digitizing the legacy records and testing biometric verification of new applicants. This measure went beyond a simple upgrade in the IT; a political strategy to restore trust. By protecting origin people's identification rights, the administration garnered a great deal of goodwill, which played an important role in maintaining law and order (Urdu Point, 19 April 2018). The picture 2 showing Commissioner Zhob Division, Dr Syed Saif ur Rehman inaugurating the Computerization of Locals/Domicile at DC Loralai Office.



Picture 2: Commissioner Zhob Division Dr Syed Saif ur Rehman inaugurating the Computerization of Locals/Domicile at DC Loralai Office.

Monitoring Law and Order & Effective Security Coordination

Security inside the Zhob division is a multidimensional phenomenon involving the elements of border security and highway security as well as the settlement of tribal disputes. The period of my administrative experience coincided with a time when the process of militancy was supposedly suppressed, but latent forms continued to manifest.

“Peace as the Prerequisite”

My philosophy of governance rested on the belief that there cannot be development without security. "The imposition of law and order in all districts is the top priority," we stated at my first press briefing (Daily Jang, 19 August 2017). Consequently, a Divisional Security Coordination Committee was implemented which would meet on a monthly basis. The committee incorporated the Sector Commanders of the Frontier Corps (FC), the Deputy

Inspector General of Police for the Zhob Range and the Commandants of the Levies Force and thus broke down the operational silos between paramilitary and civil security agencies.

Strengthening the Levies Force

The Levies Force is the root of rural security of Balochistan. Unlike the traditional form of police, its members are recruited from local tribes and have entrenched local intelligence networks. Nevertheless, they used to have inadequate modern training.

Training: The Levies Training Center, Loralai, was revamped to include modules on counter-terrorism, bomb disposal and quick response training, and adopted the same curriculum as the elite police units.

Equipment: Action was taken to strengthen Levies check points located on the N - 50 and N - 70 highways with sophisticated communications equipment to protect construction teams.

Civil-Military Liaison

I maintained an extremely visible liaison with the security establishment so as to project a unifying "One State" narrative. Frequent joint inspections accompanied by the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Mr. Abdullah Khan, in the Zhob Range, police stations, and joint check-posts. This unity was crucial during those times of increased threat, such as Muharram. By personally walking procession routes with the Deputy Inspector General and FC Commanders, we sent out a message to possible spoilers that civil and military leadership worked in concert (Picture 3).



Picture 3: Commissioner Zhob Division Dr Syed Saif ur Rehman along with DIG Abdullah Khan, Commandant Frontier Core Aamir Mukhtar and Staff Officers at DC Loralai Office.

Infrastructure Development: Billion Rupee Portfolio

The period of 2017-2018 was the time of extensive infrastructural expansion. Rather than just dealing with the repairing of potholes, the initiatives were focused on building the main economic arteries of the province.

The National Highway Network Development (N-50 and N-70)

I was in charge of the implementation of the National Highway Network Development in Balochistan Project, a mega-project under the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Loan 3134 - PAK) and The United Kingdom's Department for International

Development (DFID) (Grant 0451 - PAK). The total investment amounted to more than Rs. 19 billion (around \$195 million) (Associated Press of Pakistan, 15 March 2018).

N-50: Section Zhob-Mughal Kot (81 km)

This corridor links Quetta with Dera Ismail Khan and Islamabad. The project encompassed:

- **Widening:** Increasing the width of the carriageway from 3.65m to 7.30m with 2.50m shoulders.
- **Realignment:** Refining the geometry inside the treacherous Dhana Sar mountains an area which was known historically for high vehicular fatalities.

My Role: The principal challenge was land acquisition and resettlement (LARP). Although the ADB policy (SPS 2009) advanced the objective of avoiding displacement, this widening necessitated the removal of encroachments. we applied the Jirga mechanism by way of negotiations with the Sherani tribes, which would guarantee equitable compensation and the legal clarification of the "Right of Way" without violence. This allowed the contractor (Maqbool-Zarghoon JV) to operate unhindered (ADB, 2023).

N-70: Qila Saifullah - Loralai - Waghun Rud Section (120 km)

This route serves as the lifeblood of Loralai's agrarian economy and its connectivity to Multan.

• **Impact:** A rehabilitation led to a reduction of travel time of more than 50 per cent from Quetta to Multan (from 28 hours to about 12 hours).

• **Grievance Redressal:** A grievance was lodged against by the landowners in Mouza Chapli, Loralai pertaining to measurement of land. In the capacity of Commissioner, we ordered re-verification of the cadastral maps by the Revenue Department. The investigation revealed that the National Highway Authority's (NHA) claim at a right of way of 110 ft was in dispute. we helped bring dialogue between the NHA and the landowners and ensured that the ADB's "**Grievance Redressal Mechanism**" (GRM) functioned effectively and that litigation was prevented from delaying the project (ADB, 2018).

District Connectivity: Pathankot Bridge, Barkhan Roads

In addition to the highways, a focus was also paid to critical connectors.

- **Pathankot Bridge:** In Loralai, Pathankot area was often cut off during floods in the monsoon season. The construction of this bridge was prioritized. we had followed the piling works and installation of storm water drains personally, so as to be resilient to flash floods.
- **Barkhan Road Upgrades:** Barkhan is the gateway towards D.G. Khan of Punjab. The Rakhni-Barkhan road network was revised for passing heavy coal trucks and thus generated large revenue for the province through toll charges.

Water Supply Initiatives

In the case of water scarcity, the issue is an existential threat in the case of Zhob.

- **Killa Saifullah:** we launched a scheme of Clean Drinking Water Supply to the general public, rehabilitating a derelict network of tube wells (Picture 4).



Picture 4: Commissioner Zhob Division, Dr Syed Saif ur Rehman, Inaugurated Clean Drinking Water Supply Scheme for general public of District Killa Saifullah

- **Model Irrigation Pond:** At the Commissioner's Office in Loralai, a model "Water Pond" was built for drip irrigation, which is used as a demonstration site for the local farmers to implement water saving technologies (Picture 5).



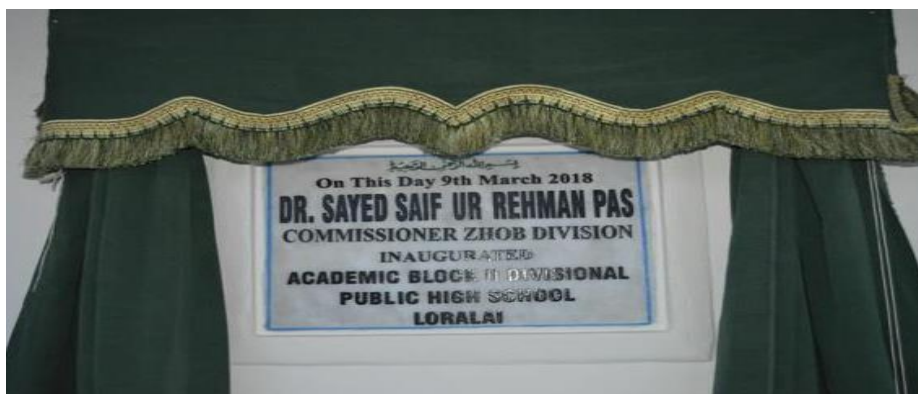
Picture 5: Commissioner Zhob Division Dr Syed Saif Rehman inaugurated newly constructed water pond for irrigation purpose at Commissioner Office

Education, Health, and Social Development

Physical infrastructure i.e. roads and other infrastructure needs to be complemented by investments in human capital. The administration declared an Education Emergency in order to cope with these interdependencies.

Education: Capacity Building

- **Divisional Public School (DPS) Loralai:** Due to growing student body, the existing facility was not adequate. In March 2018, a new Academic Block 2 was opened that increased classroom capacity significantly. A merit-based recruitment policy for teachers was also implemented (Picture 6).



Picture 6: Inauguration of the Academic Block II of Divisional Public High School Loralai in March, 2018

- **Loralai Public Library:** Recognizing the competitiveness of the youth of Loralai in CSS/PCS examinations, the extension of the Public Library was led frontally. The project included a new reading hall, air conditioning and a replenished collection of modern affairs literature. Inaugurated in April, 2018, the library now functions as a special scholarly setting for serious students (Picture 7).



Picture 7: Inaugural Ceremony of Extension of Loralai Public Library in April, 2018

Healthcare: Specialist Services

The District Headquarters (DHQ) Hospital in Loralai was just a referral clinic. Efforts to upgrade it to a full-fledged Teaching Hospital affiliated with Loralai Medical College were made.

- **Children's Ward:** Children's Ward and Trauma Center inaugurated. Prior to this, transport was needed to reach Quetta, four hours away, often causing fatalities due to this. The new facility makes critical care accessible to the community at the doorstep (Picture 8).



Picture 8: Children Ward, Teaching Hospital, Loralai

- **Polio Eradication:** At the risk of sounding self-serving, a medical background and previous experience as Provincial Polio Coordinator provides impetus for a commitment; polio eradication has been pursued as a personal mission. Zhob was declared a High-Risk Zone because of migration from Afghanistan. Grand Jirgas with the participation of the Ulema in Killa Saifullah and Zhob were held to counter narratives of vaccination refusal. The initiative led to an increased rate of coverage during 2017 to 2018 campaigns (Picture 9).



Picture 9: Commissioner Zhob Division, Dr. Syed Saif ur Rehman emphasizing on the eradication of Polio in High Risk Zhob Division

Community and Recreational Infrastructure (Soft Power)

Within the middle of a region where it has undergone prolonged conflict, recreational activities are not just chosen; they are therapeutic intervention. Accordingly, the administration devoted significant resources to the development of public infrastructure.

Dr. Saif Cricket Stadium Loralai

The local youth of Loralai have shown a keen interest in cricket; but in the past their involvement was limited due to the poor condition of the available playing fields. In order to overcome this limitation, the Divisional Development Funds were used to build a modern cricket stadium.

Features: A wicket of green grass, a pavilion and spectator stand.

Inauguration: The stadium was officially opened on 25th April, 2018. In an attempt to break the hierarchical difference between governance and the governed, the commissioner himself took the initiative of opening the match. The ensuing footage quickly spread throughout social media as a symbolic example of how society has normalized itself (Picture 10).



Picture 10: Plate of Dr. Saif Cricket Stadium inaugurated on 25th April, 2018

Beautification and Urban Order

Vegetable & Fruit Mandi: Before the intervention the streets of Loralai were full of cash out street vendors. The creation of the Vegetable & Fruit Mandi, a separate facility devoted to this activity, redistributed this activity into an organized marketplace, thus addressing the problem of street obstructions and giving the city a more orderly character (Picture 11).



Picture 11: Commissioner Zhob Division & Adviser to Chief Minister Mr. Babat lala at Inauguration of Vegetable & Fruit Mandi in Loralai.

Commissioner's Park: Lawns around the Commissioner's Office were refurbished and thus opened to the public for designated events. This transformation transformed a colonial symbol of isolation into a space of communal gathering.

Analytical Framework: The Security-Development Nexus

To examine the effectiveness of the 2017-2018 tenure, we use the Security Development Nexus framework, which assumes that security and development mutually reinforce and benefit each other (Stern & Ojendal, 2010).

In the Zhob Division, a tri-phase strategy of invalidating the conflict trap was used:

Securitization of Development: Using the mobilization of levies, federal forces were charged with securing the N-50/N-70 road crews, and in turn enabled hard infrastructure development needed to free up.

Developmentization of Security: Economic incentives were offered to local tribes by development of roads and Dukki district complex. Tribes that are paid by royalty from coal extraction, the highway industry and the toll industry show less enthusiasm for insurgent activities.

Rebuilding State Legitimacy: Soft infrastructure was strengthened through building of libraries, sporting arenas and digitizing the domicile records to indicate a commitment to the state to the long-term rights of the state's citizens rather than just contain them. This communication alleviated the alienation that drives enlistment to anti-state actors.

The Field First policy is consistent with New Public Management theory, which emphasizes monitoring, outcomes and accountability over bureaucratic procedure. The inherent principle agent problem of remote bureaucratic control was resolved through on-site visits to schools in Sherani and bridge inspections in Musa Khel, thus decreasing the probability of subsequently shirking responsibilities assigned by the principal state.

Conclusion

The period in 2017-2018 in the Zhob Division can be characterized as an urgent endeavor to provide the infrastructural conditions necessary for a modern frontier. It was because of the successful implementation of highway projects whose total value was about Rs. 19 billion rupees. Zhob was incorporated physically into the country's infrastructure. The establishment of the District Dukki was the establishment of a formal institutional structure within which the mineral resources of the region will be managed. Additionally, the building of the Loralai Library and Cricket Stadium were strategic investments to facilitate the better development of the intellectual and physical growth of the local youth. In my capacity as Commissioner, we acted not only as an administrator, but as a "Development Broker" to facilitate the effort of coordination between the donor agencies (notably the Asian Development Bank), security authorities, tribal leaders and the general populace. The impact of this tenure is not just seen in the physical structures of N-50/ N-70 or the structural elements of the Dukki Complex, but this tenure represents an empowered confidence in the state's ability to deliver services, provide security, and maintain dignity to its citizens.

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