

Democracy, Legitimacy, and Mega-Project Politics: The Evolution of Lahore's First BRT Corridor

Fizzah Sajjad

*Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science,
London, UK;
f.sajjad@lse.ac.uk*

Umair Javed

*School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Lahore,
Pakistan;
umair.javed@lums.edu.pk*

Abstract: This paper studies the politics surrounding the implementation of Pakistan's first mass transit project, the Lahore Bus Rapid Transit corridor completed in 2013, to interrogate the role that infrastructure mega-projects hold in highly factional and democratising polities of the global South. Drawing on the Lahore BRT as a case study, this paper posits that infrastructure development is increasingly interwoven with conceptions of political legitimacy and "modernising" governance, especially under conditions of nascent democratic competition. We argue that democratisation-led transformations in the political-institutional context of state power has helped fashion new roles for mega-projects, which partly explains why state power is mobilised for projects that had been ignored for several decades. Finally, this paper cautions that this new role for infrastructure, while marking a departure from previous patterns, can simultaneously constrain the possibilities for sustainable interventions going forward.

Keywords: mega-projects, infrastructure, Lahore, BRT

Introduction

In February 2013, three months before a general election, the Chief Minister of the Punjab, Shahbaz Sharif, and Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister, Bekir Bozdog, inaugurated Pakistan's first Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor in the provincial capital and the country's second largest city, Lahore. Completed in less than a year, the project's execution was extremely quick; its scale was one of the largest for an urban infrastructure project ever seen in the country; and its aesthetic was purposefully designed to invoke images of global cities like Dubai and Istanbul.

Lahore BRT's conception and completion also marked a significant departure from the state's usual policy of leaving urban public transport provision to the private sector—it was the first large-scale urban project developed by the state for the sake of public transport provision and the scale of the investment involved in

it was unprecedented. The cost of building a dedicated corridor was more than four times the traditionally allocated annual public transport development budget for the entire province. During the course of heated electoral competition, and prior to its inauguration, the project thus became a key signifier in political discourse. The opposition led by anti-corruption crusader and cricketer-turned-politician, Imran Khan, pointed to its scale as wasteful and its design as ill-thought-out. The Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PMLN), a mainstream centre-right political party with a largely urban support base in Pakistan's largest province, Punjab, publicised its eventual completion and launch as a way of demonstrating its "able hand in government" and its commitment to infrastructure-led development.

The project was operational for just under three months before the country went to bitterly contested polls in May 2013 for its tenth general election since 1970, the second since its return to democracy after a decade of military rule in 2008, and the first after the completion of a civilian government's full five-year term in power. The results saw PMLN gain a parliamentary majority to form a government at the national tier. The party also retained its government in Punjab, with Shahbaz Sharif returning as a triumphant Chief Minister, through an enhanced supermajority in the provincial legislature. In the city of Lahore, the home base of both Sharif's PMLN and their rival, Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and the site of the much-contested and much-publicised BRT project, PMLN won 12 out of 13 national and 23 out of 25 provincial legislature seats.

Shortly after its electoral humbling in the May 2013 elections, a PTI-led coalition government in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province initiated work on a BRT system in the city of Peshawar, despite its earlier, highly vocalised opposition to the Lahore BRT. Its promise was that it would deliver a far more sophisticated, financially sustainable, and better-integrated BRT system in Peshawar compared to the single-corridor in Lahore. Overall, alongside the aforementioned two billion dollar metro-train project in Lahore, between 2013 and 2018, work on five more BRT projects in three different provinces, including in the province of Sindh governed by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), a major centre-left party in the country, was initiated.

The imagery of a completed BRT corridor in Lahore, which featured prominently in the 2013 general election campaign, and the rapid initiation and publicisation of similar projects by subnational governments controlled by each of Pakistan's three national parties point to an increasingly salient, and, as this paper will argue, increasingly differential role for infrastructure mega-projects in Pakistan's political sphere.

On its own, the importance of mega-projects in the dynamics of authoritarian state-building and the aspiring (albeit often failed) consecration of hegemonic and autocratic state authority in Pakistan has been well established (Akhter 2015; Daechsel 2011). Pakistan's first military regime, in the 1960s, engaged in the undertaking of large-scale infrastructure projects such as the construction of massive townships, large hydroelectric power projects, and an entirely new capital city, Islamabad, as a way of demonstrating sovereign power, disciplining

populations, and projecting centralising nationalist imaginaries to combat centripetal regionalist tendencies. Seen in that light, the proliferation of mega-projects in contemporary urban Pakistan seems to suggest a belated continuity rather than a transformation of any kind, inasmuch as infrastructure remains in service of political ends.

However, this paper suggests that transformations in the structural and institutional context of urban Pakistan since the early 2000s have helped fashion new and urgent roles for urban mega-projects. Chief among these transformations on the structural side is rapid neoliberal urbanisation and the attendant aspirational “world class” qualities projected onto the built fabric of urban centres in the country. Concurrently, among the institutional drivers that help realise these aspirations is the growth and entrenchment of urban party competition, and the gradual opening up of channels for political participation and contestation through recurring elections. We argue that such institutional changes, undergirded by deeper structural transformation, have contributed to a shift in the state’s deployment and vernacularisation of mega-projects towards ideational concerns of “world class” city living, efficient governmental “performance”, and political legitimacy borne out of a performative attentiveness to service delivery.

Following Flores-Dewey and Davis (2013:546) we define legitimacy as “the degree to which a certain government intervention evokes actual acceptance among the citizens and their organisations”. Additionally, we build upon recent debates that see infrastructure not simply for its “physical form but also as a site of aspirations and desire”, a symbol of “material progress” (Anwar 2015:14, 7), often commandeered through top-down efforts by political elites.¹ While such efforts may be contested by some groups around resource allocations or planning preferences, they remain fully capable of serving both elite imaginaries of city-making, and the daily needs of some low- to middle-income groups at the same time, creating legitimacy for such interventions.

Scholars have argued that explorations of the “promise of infrastructure”—its functions and lives—offer insights into the everyday politics and negotiations between state entities and local populations (Anand et al. 2018). Likewise, through the conceptualisation of infrastructural citizenship, Lemanski (2020:115) has brought to light the interlinkages between citizenship and infrastructure, suggesting that citizens relate to the state through everyday access to public infrastructure, while the state too “imagines and plans” for citizens through infrastructure. This paper both draws on these themes but also builds on the extant literature in two ways. From a methodological perspective, it melds structural and institutional accounts to highlight the way deeper developmental processes interact with shifts in political and ideational parameters to open up (or constrain) new infrastructural possibilities. Substantively, it also shows how these processes work in settings historically conditioned by military-led autocratic governance, undergoing nascent organisational “opening up” through political parties and electoral competition.

To illustrate the argument, this paper draws on as its central case the conceptualisation, implementation, and political legacy of the Lahore BRT project, initiated in 2012 and completed just ahead of the 2013 general elections. The Lahore BRT

project serves as an important case precisely because of its status as the first infrastructure project of its kind in the country, its prominence in the PMLN's election campaign in the midst of growing political competition, and the role that its legacy continues to play in shaping political discourse around mega-infrastructure. The case is also of interest to us from an equity standpoint as it is primarily lower-middle- and low-income groups who suffer from the deterioration of public transport partially caused by the state's withdrawal from public transport provision.² What type of provision decision-makers opt for and what drives such shifts are important aspects that this paper helps understand. As Anand (2006:3426) notes, in many cities, roads serve the needs of car users, and automobiles signify "class and upward mobility". Likewise, as Bassett and Marpillero-Colomina (2013:138) indicate, car users view public transport as "synonymous with chaos and poverty". In Lahore, the BRT corridor has, however, managed to attract riders from a wide variety of lower- and middle-income backgrounds, including those who previously relied on private modes of transport such as rickshaws and motorbikes (Majid et al. 2018). Nevertheless, in a reversion of sorts, eight years after the construction of the BRT corridor, the new PTI-led government in power has placed signage in compartments reminding users of the subsidies required to run the buses—a message that car users of signal free corridors and highways do not have to be reminded of on a daily basis.

Additionally, the interplay between infrastructure development and politics, documented through the case of the Lahore BRT, speaks to other contributions in this issue that capture substantive variations in the state's relationship with infrastructure and populations across different "core" and "peripheral" geographies. Specifically, an analysis of public safety infrastructure as technocratic service in the "core" province of Punjab (Hong 2022), and the documentation of road and connectivity projects contributing to securitisation of Pakistan's northern "peripheral" regions (Karrar 2022), point to how different populations are differentially envisioned and governed. This paper and the case it covers sheds light on the state's infrastructure outlook in the "core", i.e. one that is interwoven with a politics of service delivery and legitimacy, as opposed to militarisation and securitisation.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section details the research methods used for this study. We then review the literature on BRT systems, their particular evolution across the global South, and their place within politics around mega-projects. The following sections outline transformations in Pakistan's urban landscape, with a focus on Lahore, and describe institutional changes at the national level between 2007 and 2013 that are critical to understand the adoption of the Lahore BRT project in 2012. The penultimate section analyses the politics of mass transit development in Lahore, focusing on infrastructure's legitimising tendencies, and we conclude by pointing out the limits that this new politics of infrastructure in urban Pakistan places on the possibilities for both processes of substantive democratisation as well as more sustained and equitable urban interventions.

Methodology

This paper builds its central case of the Lahore BRT through two distinct phases of research, each corresponding to the two institutional transformations in the political sphere mentioned earlier. In the first phase, fieldwork was carried out in Lahore between January and February 2014. 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted during this period, between 30 and 60 minutes long. Background work for these interviews was carried out by using secondary literature and press coverage related to public transport provision and the adoption of BRT in Lahore, and later by updating questions based on the responses received during the fieldwork.

Those interviewed included senior and mid-tier politicians—both from the party in power and the main party in opposition (PMLN and PTI, respectively), who help lay out the political salience of the project and its intermeshing with politico-institutional events of the time. Interviews were also conducted with technocratic and bureaucratic officials—working at the Transport Department, Punjab Metrobus Authority, Urban Unit, and Lahore Transport Company—who were directly involved with the BRT project. Additionally, interviews were also conducted with bureaucrats and specialists who worked on the mass transit project for the previous government, as well as academics, architects, journalists, and lawyers.

Barring one interview conducted through Skype, all interviews were conducted in person. All respondents were given the choice of being anonymous, and only those who explicitly agreed to be quoted have been mentioned by name in this study. Professions have been used for the rest. Upon completion of fieldwork, follow-ups were arranged with a few interviewees by asking for clarifications regarding some of the matters discussed, while an additional interview with the ex-chairman of the Lahore Transport Company via phone was also carried out.

The second phase of primary research that this paper draws on was part of a larger project that explored urban political contestation in Pakistan, carried out between October and November 2015 in the city of Lahore. This phase involved non-participant observations and nine semi-structured interviews with voters and ward-level candidates from both PMLN and PTI in several dense inner-city wards ahead of the city's local government elections. The material gathered in the second phase helps qualitatively understand the legitimacy of such infrastructure as well as its legacy from the "ground up" to evaluate its implementation by political decision makers.

In addition to the interviews and field observations, research also involved analysing television coverage of public transport and mega-project-related issues prior, during, and after construction and operationalisation of the BRT corridor to be cognisant of the debates and opinions in popular media. Finally, secondary data collection was carried out by collecting copies of planning meetings for the period of interest.

Mega-Projects and BRTs in the Global South

Cities in the global South, like Lahore and its counterparts in Pakistan, have witnessed a surge in the development of mega-projects towards the turn of the 21st

century.³ Ranging from dams to highways to mass transit systems, cities have adopted these projects in their bid to meet specific needs, modernise, stimulate economic growth, enhance competitiveness in the global economy, and—in the case of transport mega-projects—to also enhance connectivity. There is significant literature on the role of transport infrastructure in facilitating modernisation goals, particularly in the context of roads and motorways (Anand 2006; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Khan 2006). Scholars have shown that states have employed the language of connectivity and enhanced communications, all the while creating new forms of exclusion and limits to mobility.

While BRT systems are not traditionally defined as mega-projects given their lower costs vis-a-vis other large infrastructure projects, in Pakistan, BRT design has also comprised of overhead bridges and road widening components, and they quite closely resemble Frick's (2008:240–241) characterisation of mega-projects as captivating, controversial, complex, and representative of control issues. At the same time, for governments in the global South that have limited financial resources, and “competing (and more pressing) expenditure priorities that make spending on public transit seem superfluous” (Flores-Dewey 2013:17–18), they can also be *costly*, which Frick (2008) notes is another key characteristic of mega-projects. For these reasons, we argue that BRT corridors in Pakistani cities can be characterised as mega-projects.

The adoption of BRT systems in particular has increased exponentially in cities globally over the past ten years (Flores-Dewey and Zegras 2012), from limited examples in the late 1990s to over 150 in 2013 (Flores-Dewey 2013), and over 400 in 2015 (WRI 2015). Existing literature centred around the analysis of transport systems and urban development identifies three kinds of drivers for BRT: first, the role of the international class of policy experts who specialise in BRT systems (Flores-Dewey 2013; Mohan et al. 2008; Sellers 2011); second, decision-makers and key stakeholders (Bassett and Marpillero-Colomina 2013; Wright and Fjellstrom 2002); and third, the political will shown by strong leaders (Hidalgo and Carrigan 2010; Matsumoto 2006; Wright 2005).

Scholars note that BRT systems provide a ready-made solution that can be taken up by policy-makers to meet the rising demand for improved public transport caused by increasing urbanisation, and simultaneously enable them to convert “the very complex challenge of public transportation reform into a set of manageable projects”, in a fairly short period of time (Flores-Dewey 2013:29). Wright and Fjellstrom (2002) find that they offer administrators the ability to implement a modern transportation option within their political term period, and meet their personal needs of leaving, as Flores-Dewey (2013:29) notes, a “lasting and conspicuous legacy”. Bassett and Marpillero-Colomina (2013:143) too argue that politicians rely on visible, large-scale transport projects as a “powerful negotiating device in the political landscape” to enhance their chances of coming into power. As documented in this paper, these findings regarding the visibility and value of BRTs in other cases across the world resonate with the political and ideational dynamics of the Lahore BRT as well. Yet, we demonstrate that these need to be understood within the context of larger structural and institutional changes

that have also fashioned new roles for mega-projects. The next section elaborates on these changes in the context of Lahore.

A Transforming Urban Landscape

As outlined above, structural transformations in urban Pakistan are critical to understanding the adoption and development of large-scale mass transit projects in Pakistani cities, such as the Lahore BRT. This section looks more closely at these transformations, focusing on urbanisation patterns, adoption of neoliberal economic policies, and expansion of a globally connected citizenry, particularly in the context of the city of Lahore. Amidst fairly rapid socio-economic changes since achieving statehood in 1947, Pakistan currently stands as the most urbanised country in South Asia, with a conservative estimate of 39% of its population (about 73 million individuals) residing in urban centres. Urban areas have grown at an average rate of 3% per year since 1947, and the urban share of the population is expected to rise to 50% by 2030. In other words, urban areas will host a total of 116 million people in another 16 years.

Moreover, on account of outdated urban-rural administrative categories employed by government bureaucrats and the census administration, official statistics under-report the extent to which this transformation has taken place. GIS-based techniques show, for example, that over 80% of all rural settlements in the country's largest province, Punjab, are no further than one hour away from a town of at least 100,000 individuals (Ali 2013), catalysing rapid migratory patterns. Lahore's own demographic history captures these trends particularly starkly. The city's population growth has been nothing short of astronomical, expanding at nearly 4.5% per annum, to rise from 850,000 residents in 1950 to 11.1 million according to the most recent census (GoP 2017).

Intertwined with demographic changes have been deeper transformations in the economic realm, particularly since the early 2000s. The neoliberal authoritarian regime of General Musharraf (1999–2008) explicitly stated that its aim was to undertake rapid economic development and create a society of modern, globalised urban consumers. To achieve this end, the state undertook a pervasive set of pro-market reforms, similar to those undertaken around the same time in other countries of the global South (Anwar and Viqar 2014). Most sectors of Pakistan's economy were completely deregulated and made open to foreign investment, the average import tariff was further reduced to 25%, major government-owned banks were privatised, and a number of restrictions on capital accounts were lifted (McCartney 2013:151).

In the transport sector specifically, the Musharraf government continued the previous government's deregulation policies. The primary public agency directly responsible for bus-based public transport—the Punjab Urban Transport Corporation (PUTC)—had been disbanded in 1998 due to poor performance,⁴ and in its place, the private sector was increasingly incentivised to provide public transport with the state merely playing a regulatory role.⁵

Buoyed by an improvement in macroeconomic fundamentals and excess liquidity generated by high remittances from expatriate Pakistanis, the State Bank of

Pakistan (SBP) slashed interest rates and encouraged a liberalised lending regime for the banking sector. Consumer credit grew from only \$120 million in 2000 to \$3.6 billion by 2007. 40.6% of this outlay was in the shape of personal loans, while another 30.7% was for car financing. In Lahore alone, just between 2001 and 2008, the number of motorised vehicles per 1,000 residents increased exponentially from 95 vehicles to 238 vehicles (JICA 2012).

The outcome of cheap credit was a rise in the overall propensity to consume for middle- and high-income households, further enabled by the trend towards marketisation and deregulation that persisted well after the exit of the Musharraf regime and the resumption of procedural democracy in 2008. A number of fortunate exogenous circumstances over the next two decades, such as the episodic inflow of foreign civilian and military aid under the “War on Terror” and a dramatic increase in remittances from the Middle East and other regions, continue to catalyse these transformations. For example, by 2020, money being sent back by Pakistani workers abroad had risen to \$23 billion per annum, or roughly 0.75% of GDP. Research from the preceding decade showed that remittance money was partly being channelled for increased household consumption and partly for investment into high-return, speculation-based sectors such as residential and commercial urban real estate (Zaidi 2015:759).

As documented in the case of post-liberalisation metropolitan India (Fernandes 2006), the expansion of a consumerist public sphere both reflects and reproduces the class aspirational (and hegemonic) qualities of urban transformation. In Lahore, large billboards in public spaces and advertising on TV and digital media showcase high-end residential and commercial real estate projects targeting upper-income groups, while purposefully invoking the aesthetic ethos of elite-frequented cities like Istanbul, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and, increasingly, Doha. These images, and the attendant globalised migratory patterns undergirding them, play a significant role in shaping and reproducing hegemonic preferences for what cities are supposed to look like among a wide range of actors, including political elites, business classes, and common citizens alike.

In Lahore, this dynamic ultimately manifests itself in the shape of residential and commercial real estate projects that generate significant urban sprawl, and continue to be fuelled by remittance and finance capital that seeks to generate quick returns.

Helping sustain this transformation is the government’s complementary investment in Lahore’s road infrastructure in the form of road widening projects, construction of underpasses and flyovers, and the development of a ring road—a massive “circumferential arterial road” (Imran 2010:184) around the city, which has further encouraged suburbanisation. Imran and Low (2007) argue that large-scale spending on road infrastructure directly impacted the financing available for public transport. While there were some improvements in the quality of buses in the early 2000s, Lahore’s public transport services were not able to keep up with the demand, remaining, on the whole, overcrowded, unreliable, and unsafe (Imran 2010).

What is also worth mentioning here is that the city’s development trajectory in the preceding two decades—both in terms of its ideals and its implementation—has

unfolded under the persisting absence of effective and representative local government institutions. Similar to other urban centres across South Asia, decision-making power on key urban issues of real estate planning, road infrastructure, and transportation in Lahore continues to rest with provincially controlled development authorities—principally the bureaucratic Lahore Development Authority (LDA).

Institutional Change at the National Scale, 2007–2013

Beyond structural transformations, it is worth paying attention to the institutional shifts taking place that enable or constrain particular developmental possibilities. In the case of the Lahore BRT, this compels us to turn to the evolution of the macropolitical landscape during the crucial period from 2007 to 2013 that coincides with the resumption of democratic contestation. In this section, we posit that the institutional changes taking place during this time period—the heightening of party competition under nascent democratisation and the devolution of governmental administrative and fiscal authority to the subnational (provincial) level—are important in the development of particular infrastructural forms.

Pakistan's political sphere has been frequently characterised as authoritarian or autocratic, given the overt preponderance of the military in exercising executive authority (Lieven 2012; Cohen 2006). Since achieving statehood in 1947, the country has spent just over three decades under authoritarian rule by the military, with the institution exercising considerable sway on politics when out of formal power.

However, despite these constraining conditions, political parties to some degree continue to provide the motivation for various policies and projects adopted by the state when in power, and also serve as the “pivotal intermediaries between the state and poor and marginalised groups” (Bari and Cheema 2012:7).

The persistence of party contestation and their relevance has been further amplified under the most recent phase of democratisation. In February 2008, after several months of oppositional protest led by all three mainstream parties (PPP, PMLN, and PTI), worsening economic conditions due to the global recession, and escalating violence from a growing Islamist insurgency, Pakistan went to the polls in what was widely seen as a referendum on the decade-long military regime of General Musharraf. While the PTI boycotted the elections questioning their legitimacy, Musharraf and his allies suffered a resounding defeat, with PPP stepping into power as the largest party nationally, and the PMLN taking charge of the subnational government in the most populous and politically salient province, Punjab.

The subsequent five years—2008 to 2013—witnessed the PPP-led government at the centre initiating long-overdue decentralisation reforms by creating a more equitable formula for dividing tax revenue among the provinces. These steps—enshrined in the 18th Constitutional Amendment⁶ and the 7th National Finance Commission⁷ (NFC) Award—can be categorised as central to the process of partial democratisation, as they reduced the centralisation of state authority at the national tier, and helped, in part, to improve inter-provincial and inter-ethnic trust

by distributing more central government resources to subnational/provincial governments (Tudor 2014).

By mid-2011, however, harsh economic conditions and a host of corruption scandals perpetuated anti-incumbency sentiment against the PPP government, especially in the urbanised province of Punjab. The growing anger, vocalised in large parts by a fiercely critical television news media sphere, provided an opening to cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan to stage a political upsurge on an anti-corruption platform. Posing as a populist “clean” antidote to both the much older PPP and the PMLN, PTI was able to draw in surprisingly large crowds in political gatherings across the country, including unprecedented numbers from the historically apolitical urban demographics (Khan 2020). It was this particular phase of mobilisation that firmly marked the PTI’s entry as a third major party in national political contention, and the principal opposition party in the PMLN’s stronghold of Punjab.

To summarise, the contextual shift of subnational fiscal strengthening and heightened party contestation in the political sphere provide us with institutional building blocks, which when accompanied by the structural transformations detailed in the preceding section, help us situate and understand the new role of urban mega-projects in the country. In the sections that follow, we draw on archival records and fieldwork interviews with political elites, bureaucrats, and voters in the city of Lahore to demonstrate how these structural and institutional dynamics culminated in the development and, ultimately, the political consecration of the Lahore BRT.

Infrastructures of Legitimacy

History of Corridor: Shifting Political Priorities and Institutional Flux

Although the BRT corridor was constructed and inaugurated in less than a year, mass transit solutions had been considered at various points in the preceding two decades. A mass transit mega-project for Lahore was first conceptualised in 1991 as part of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency’s (JICA) comprehensive study of the transportation system in Lahore. The study recommended the construction of a Light Rail Transit (LRT) system along 12.5 km of Ferozepur Road (see Figure 1) as this corridor was expected to have the highest expected travel demand in the future (JICA 1991). In 1993, JICA’s study was reviewed and updated under the World Bank funded Lahore Traffic and Transportation Studies. These studies re-confirmed the need for the LRT on Ferozepur Road.

Over the next six years, several attempts were made to secure financing for the project. However, the project suffered due to institutional flux and shifting political priorities. Some of the key developments that took place during this period are outlined in Table 1.

The early dismissal of two successive democratically elected governments, different priorities of each party in power, sanctions associated with nuclear tests, and a military coup in 1999 created an environment of political instability due to

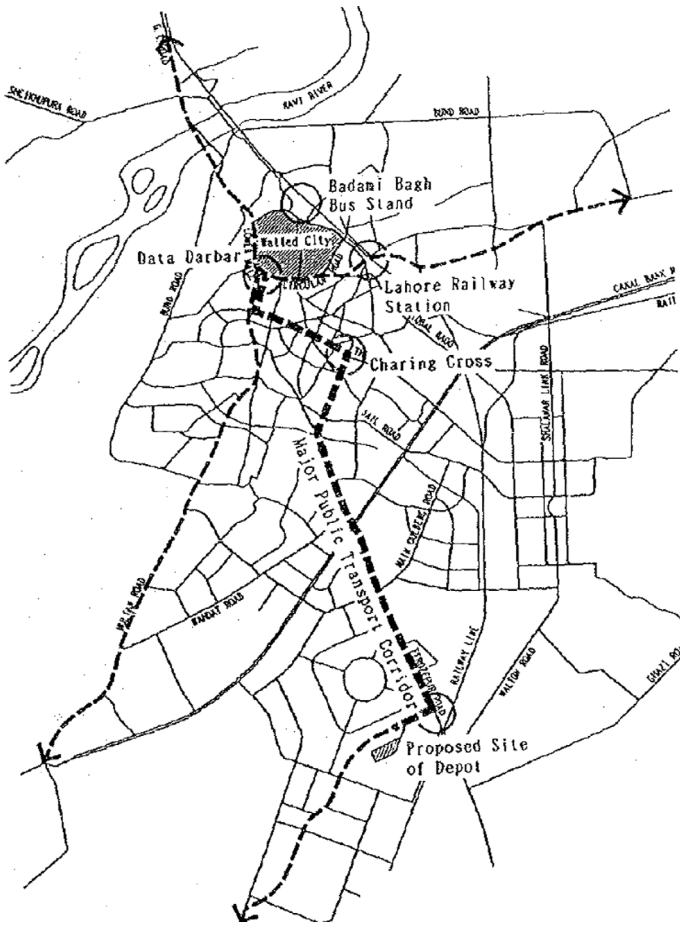


Figure 1: Proposed LRT corridor on Ferozepur Road, 1991 (source: JICA 1991)

which it was challenging to prioritise the project, and seek out and negotiate financing.

Global Dreams, Local Realities

The events leading up to the construction of the BRT in Lahore suggest that mass transit considerations in Lahore were not simply linked to the growing demand for public transport, but part and parcel of a bid to achieve “world class city” status. For the PML–Quaid (PMLQ) led government in Punjab, a splinter group of the PMLN after the PMLN was ousted from power in the 1999 coup, modernising communications and transport services in the province was seen as a means of enhancing the competitiveness of Pakistan’s economy.⁸

Alongside road infrastructure, mass transit networks in mega-cities would serve as engines of growth. According to a senior government bureaucrat involved with the planning of a rapid mass transit system for Lahore, the aim, however, was not

Table 1: Timeline of mass transit planning in Lahore leading to the construction of the city's first BRT

Oct. 1989	Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) agrees to conduct a Comprehensive Study of the Transportation System in Lahore in response to a request from the Pakistan Government
Oct. 1990	<i>PPP Government dismissed, PMLN government elected to power</i>
Sep. 1991	JICA completes its study and recommends a 12.5 km Light Rail Transit for Ferozpur Road Corridor as one of its key long-term recommendations (2001–2010)
1993	World Bank funded Lahore Traffic and Transport Studies update JICA's study and confirm need for a LRT (to be initiated by 2001)
1993	The Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF), Japan, expresses interest in providing a soft loan of \$1.4 billion for the LRT
1993	<i>PMLN Government dismissed before terms negotiated, PPP government returns to power</i>
1995	PPP launches the Big Cities Renewal Program that includes a LRT for Karachi, Lahore, and 3 other cities
1996	<i>PPP government dismissed, PMLN returns to power</i>
1997	OECF agreement to fund project suspended after Pakistan carries out nuclear tests
Oct. 1999–2002	<i>Pakistan Army overthrows PMLN government in a coup, establishes regime of political loyalists</i>
2006	MVA Asia recommends a Rapid Mass Transit System (RMTS) for Lahore and recommends a 27 km medium metro (Green Line) on the Ferozpur Road LRT as the priority line. Cost = \$2.4 billion (see Figure 2)
2006	Punjab Government approves the RMTS as well as early implementation of the Green Line
2007	Asian Development Bank (ADB) commissions experts to review MVA Asia ridership forecasts and analyse project viability
Nov. 2007	<i>PMLQ term ends</i>
2008	ADB agrees to partially finance the LRTMS project in phases and approves a \$1b loan for the green line
2008	<i>Return to procedural democracy, PMLN elected to power in Punjab</i>
2008	Negotiation with ADB suspended. Government changes its investment priorities and unable to fund the project capital cost. ADB loan lapses.
2008–2010	Shahbaz Sharif visits other countries, including Turkey, to find a lower cost mass transit project
Mar. 2010	<i>Parliament passes 18th Amendment to the Constitution and President signs the 7th National Finance Commission Award—effective from July 2010</i>
May 2010	Transport Delegation visits Istanbul and signs MOU with Istanbul Electricity Tram and Tunnel (IETT)
June 2010	Punjab Government decides to build a BRT in Lahore—location undecided
Jun.–Sep. 2010	South Korean delegations visit to construct a BRT system in Lahore
Oct. 2010	Khwaja Ahmad Hassan, senior PMLN politician, visits Seoul to see their BRT system and signs a MOU with them
Dec. 2010	Punjab Transport Department signs a MOU with the Istanbul Municipality to proceed with the development of a BRT corridor in Lahore—location undecided
Jul. 2011	MOU signed between Punjab Government and NORINCO to develop an altered version of the Green Line on Ferozpur Road
Aug. 2011	NORINCO asks for a sovereign guarantee from the federal government that the provincial government cannot get due to tense centre-province relations

(continued)

Oct. 2011	<i>New opposition party PTI carries out its first large address in Lahore</i>
Dec. 2011/Jan. 2012	Agreement signed with Turkish company Ulasim to assist with the design of a BRT corridor on Ferozepur Road
Mar. 2012	Construction of a 27 km Bus Rapid Transit Corridor initiated on Ferozepur Road
Feb. 2013	Lahore Metro Bus Service Route inaugurated
May 2013	<i>General Elections: PMLN emerges as the leading party by a wide margin</i>

just to stimulate growth but to modernise the city and use mass transit as “a thinking shift, a project of urban renewal for the city”. He added:

We didn’t want a harking to the past: our stations were not to look like forts and Mughal monuments. This was meant to be cultural shift. This was going to be a moderniser much like shopping malls are modernisers. (Interview, 2014)

While constrained by fiscal and political considerations, political and bureaucratic elites under the subsequent PMLN led government (2008–2013) too saw mass transit as an aspirational goal, a means through which Lahore’s built environment would resemble other mega-cities. Visiting South Korea in October 2010, Khawaja Ahmad Hassan, a senior PMLN politician and one of Shahbaz Sharif’s closest aides, recalled:

[Upon seeing the BRT corridors] I was impressed. I was amazed to learn of the difficult process through which the BRT was built. For me, it was stunning to see how they had gone through this process ... I also visited their industrial hub, sat on their fast train, saw their mass transit, and was very impressed. Upon returning, I told the Chief Minister that this is something that will help us out as far as Lahore is concerned. We don’t need to bring in a train, we just need to have buses and we just need to have a dedicated corridor for that. (Interview, 2014)

Visiting Istanbul several months later with the Chief Minister, Shahbaz Sharif, Hassan shared that he found the Istanbul BRT to be doubly impressive: “We saw the state of the art BRT there in Istanbul. Although I was moved initially in Seoul, to see this concept was unique and I thought this is our way forward” (Interview, 2014).

For PMLN officials, urban landscapes and management in Istanbul, in particular, increasingly reflected their aspirations for urban development. According to Cheema, senior economist and policy expert, Shahbaz Sharif saw the AKP’s Islamic conservative brand of economic and developmental modernisation as a model to emulate and saw many similarities amongst the two governments (Interview, 2014).

It was no coincidence then that on their return from Istanbul, the ruling party announced that the government would be developing a BRT corridor on Ferozepur Road with the help of the Turks. Subsequently, in January 2012, the Punjab government hired Ulasim, an engineering subsidiary company of the Istanbul Municipality, to conduct a detailed BRT feasibility study and preliminary design for various Lahore BRT corridors, including Ferozepur Road, Multan Road, and Canal Road at the cost of PKR 67.606 million (\$349,000).⁹ However, as its first task, the provincial government asked Ulasim to prepare a preliminary design and

tender documents for the BRT corridor to be built on Ferozpur Road at a cost of \$207,000 (GoP Transport Department 2012).

Institutional Change and Political Compulsions

Central to the case study at hand is the role of the political-institutional context that enabled the development of the BRT project itself. The ruling party's intent, rooted in aspirations of globalised urban modernity, was supplemented by changing configurations of the Pakistani state's fiscal architecture. As highlighted earlier, the 18th Constitutional Amendment, passed in 2010, increased provincial autonomy through the abolishment of the Concurrent List¹⁰ of the constitution, which had historically centralised government policy and legislative control over a number of infrastructure-related issues. The act of devolution led to enhanced provincial control over 44 of the 47 policy items stated in the constitution itself. Further, it allowed the provinces the "right to raise domestic and foreign loans with the approval of the National Economic Council",¹¹ and collect excise, oil and natural gas duties (Nabi and Shaikh 2010). Most crucially, it constitutionally prescribed the minimum amount of fiscal resources that would be given to the provinces each year through the 7th NFC Award.

The 7th NFC Award itself was agreed to after a period of 19 years as the provinces had not mutually agreed to a distributional formula since 1991. Under the Award, "annual resource transfer to the province" was to increase substantially: from "47.5%–56% for the first year to 57.5% for the remaining years" (Nabi and Shaikh 2010:9). Punjab, in particular, was to receive "PKR 83 billion additional revenue in FY 2010/11" (Sabir 2010), and see a 24.4% increase in revenue in 2011/12 (Khan 2011:107)—revenue that in turn could be utilised for implementing the governing elite's developmental visions.

In fact, it was only in June 2010, a month before the 18th Amendment came into effect, that a decision was made by the provincial government for the first time to develop a BRT system in Lahore, and to do this using its own funds with the Lahore Transport Company (LTC) leading the efforts (GoP Transport Department 2010).

A closely linked factor that was central in translating that enhanced fiscal space into infrastructure spending was the issue of political competition itself. Unlike the preceding PMLQ government that faced very little political competition during its 2002–2007 term,¹² and displayed no definitive urgency to initiate mass transit projects prior to term completion, the PMLN government's decision to proceed with the construction of a BRT towards the end of its term was to a great extent driven by increasing political competition. As highlighted in the institutional context section, political competition increased particularly after 2010 due to the PTI's growing popularity. The PMLN was also under immense pressure to perform at the time, as this was the first time that it was completing a full five-year term in the province, and needed renewed voter support to secure re-election.

While provincial government transport delegations had visited other countries to see their transport systems since 2008, it was only between 2010 and 2011 that it began to sign Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with Istanbul

Electricity Tram and Tunnel (IETT), South Korean companies Dohwa Engineering and Green Pakor, and Chinese company NORINCO International, to assist with the development of mass transit in Lahore. At this time, the route of the priority corridor, which would be built first, was undecided.

Moreover, relations between the PMLN government in Punjab and the PPP-led federal government were extremely strained towards the end of the term. This national-local tension decreased chances of cooperation for development projects. This partly explains why, in 2011, the federal government did not give NORINCO sovereign guarantee to construct a metro train on Ferozepur Road. According to Sibtain Fazal Halim, a senior bureaucrat and, later, Managing Director of the Punjab Metrobus Authority, given that financing for a mass rapid transit system was not available immediately:

... he [Shahbaz Sharif] ran out of time. There were 1.5 years left in his tenure. The thinking was, "Let's do something. Let's do the bus. The bus will serve you for 8-10 years."¹³ (Interview, 2014)

According to Jehangir Tareen, a senior PTI politician, Shahbaz Sharif came under intense pressure to do something after October 2011 due to the PTI's increasing popularity: "After the 30th October PTI *jalsa* [rally], Lahore's fortune bloomed. So this would not have been there if Imran Khan's *jalsa* had not happened on 30th October" (Interview, 2014).

The urgency displayed by the government to initiate and construct a BRT corridor within its term certainly suggests that increasing political competition provided the impetus for the PMLN government to display its capacity to deliver through a large-scale public transport project, and as shared by Cheema (Interview, 2014), signal to voters that the party was committed to "modernising" the city of Lahore.

Infrastructure and Electoral Legitimacy

In March 2012, one year before PMLN was to complete its term, construction for the BRT began. The project had the undivided attention of the Chief Minister, and the aim was to complete the project as soon as possible, and especially before the end of the PMLN's term in office in February 2013.

Once construction started, the project, as is typically the case with mega-projects (Flores-Dewey and Davis 2013; Frick 2008), polarised public opinion. Affected populations along the route, particularly those whose commercial property was acquired for the construction of the corridor, as well as citizens concerned about environmental impacts, filed court appeals against land acquisition processes, and several protests were organised against the project. Yet, these were, similar to contexts with top-down planning contexts, "repressed or politically managed" (Flores-Dewey and Davis 2013:536) with limited pressure on the state. Amongst divided public opinion on the project, and elections coming up in less than a year, developers continued work by using eight-hour shifts for its workers that continued over 24 hours for the next 11 months. Explaining the construction process, Project Director at the Transport Planning Unit, Murtaza Bukhari, stated:

We had meetings daily. In the morning we had the main steering committee meeting that was chaired by the Chief Minister. In the evening we had the working committee meeting which had all the agencies that were working on site, this was chaired by Director General, Lahore Development Authority. In the meantime, during the day when it was needed, there would be a meeting on the problems that came up during construction; Local MNAs would come and report problems in their areas, and action was taken immediately to minimise the inconvenience to the public. (Interview, 2014)

According to a bureaucrat involved with the project:

We would leave at night, or early morning. Even if there were an issue at 11pm at night, the Chief Minister would make sure that we addressed the problem. We used to have buses of officials visiting the site and addressing problems on the spot ... I wouldn't use any other word than "missionary zeal" to describe the Chief Minister's involvement. (Interview, 2014)

This sentiment of expeditious frenzy was well captured by the ruling party's leader, Khawaja Ahmed Hassan, who stated: "We visited almost every day. It was God-speed. You couldn't—nobody has seen anything like this in the past" (Interview, 2014). Another bureaucrat closely involved with project implementation added: "the Chief Minister's decision removes all hindrances" (Interview, 2014).

Every day, reports were presented personally to the Chief Minister on the previous day's progress, and actions were taken accordingly. According to a member of the caretaker government after their term was over, "It seemed like the whole government was working on this one project" (Interview, 2014).

In December 2012, a new entity, the Punjab Metrobus Authority (PMA),¹⁴ was also set up to manage the project and to ensure that bottlenecks posed by the bureaucracy were overcome. As outlined earlier, the Turkish company Ulasim was hired as the designer of the project, while NESPAK, a parastatal engineering design entity, subsequently completed the "detailed design". The LDA was tasked with the execution of the project, while the financing was provided by the Government of Punjab. The procurement, maintenance, and operation of metro-buses was outsourced to Turkish company Platform Tourism/Albayrak. Several other public and private actors were also engaged as contractors and operators. While the Chief Minister's political will was more important at the implementation stage than at the planning stages, it is also important to note here that he was aided by the use of party machinery, and a close collaboration between bureaucrats, politicians, and developers.

Upon its completion in February 2013, ahead of the elections three months later, political fanfare around the project grew exponentially. Striking red articulated buses running along dedicated overhead bridges and corridors were shown on various media platforms, with users learning how to use new payment systems and technologies. In one of the first television interviews after the BRT's inauguration, Shahbaz Sharif (perhaps inadvertently) underscored both the modernising and proto-populist drivers of the project by stating that:

... this is an extremely modern service for the common people, the first of its kind. When has anyone spent so much time on a public transport project? This is a Pakistani mega-project. It's for the poor who see the rich flying off in cars.

In the run-up to the election, the incumbent PMLN positioned the Lahore BRT, and its plans for a Chinese financed rail-based project in Lahore (the Orange Line) as central planks of its campaign. A proposed image of the train flanked an image of an articulated BRT bus surrounded by glass-plated high-rises on the front page of the party's election manifesto, as an unsubtle juxtaposition of past performance and continued future aspiration (cf. Anwar 2015).

While a singular role of the BRT in electoral politics cannot be definitively teased out, the campaign strategy of drawing on infrastructure to legitimise government performance, much as seen in other cases globally (Bassett and Marpillero-Colomina 2013; Matsumoto 2006), worked in favour of the party. Results from the May 2013 general election saw the PMLN emerge as the largest party in the national parliament on the back of a near-hegemonic sweep in the province of Punjab. Shahbaz Sharif returned as a triumphant Chief Minister, this time backed by an enhanced supermajority in the provincial legislature and in the city of Lahore, despite the opposition party PTI's large public rallies and demonstrations, voters backed the PMLN on 12 out of 13 national and 23 out of 25 provincial legislature seats.

The resonance of the ruling political elite's modernising agendas and the associated political legitimacy drawn from infrastructure, such as the BRT and its follow-up, the Orange Metro-Train Project, remained palpable in subsequent years as well. In November 2015, the electorate in Lahore headed to the polls once more; this time to elect local government representatives.

On a cold evening, six days prior to the election, a PMLN ward councillor candidate addressed a huddled gathering of about one hundred residents in the crowded inner-city precinct (union council) of Shah Alam bazaar. He spoke about the macroeconomic stability induced by his party's central government, the tangible benefits attained by the city due to its electoral faith in the PMLN, and the vacuous character of the PTI and its "anti-development" leadership. In service of his last point he brought up the BRT project, citing it as a "gift" (*tohfa*) from Shahbaz Sharif to the people of Lahore that the PTI had opposed and called superfluous and wasteful. To rapturous applause, he proclaimed that vesting faith in the PMLN in yet another election would see many more such "gifts", including the overhead metro-train, the Chinese-funded Orange Line mass transit project, connecting the east of the city to its south-west.

Interviews with residents and voters in the election period, while demonstrating some disagreements regarding the need for transport projects in contrast to basic services like health and education, were revealing, as a majority of respondents echoed similar sentiments and referred to the BRT project as definitive evidence of the party's ability to deliver and meet the aspirations of city residents.

In the words of one voter—a small shopkeeper based in the Shah Alam neighbourhood—the PMLN was "bringing Dubai to Lahore", a notion that he granted considerable importance on account of an elder cousin who worked in the Middle

East as a migrant labourer and who often shared images of the two cities by way of comparison (Interview, 2015). It was references to such imagery that imbued the infrastructural development with an aspirational quality, one that was being curated by the political elite.

Another respondent when asked about why, despite poor sanitation and public health conditions in their community, residents continued to support the Chief Minister, said:

It will take time but they will deliver here as well. We must have patience—people were impatient earlier and they [PMLN] proved them wrong. Look at how many people are benefiting from the Metro Bus project; no one thought they would be able to build it, but now they have and all the other provinces want to build it as well. This will happen with the Orange Train [metro train] as well! (Interview, 2015)

This sentiment, and the importance accorded to infrastructure development, were visibly shared by a large number of residents of the city as evinced by results of city council elections held in November 2015 and January 2016. The PMLN ended up winning outright in 229 of the city's 274 union councils, while independent candidates, many of whom were supported by local PMLN politicians won in another 33. The PTI, on the other hand, was able to win only 13 seats.

Conclusion

As detailed in the empirical sections, the role of mega-infrastructure, such as the BRT, in the city of Lahore appears articulated as both a signal of effective governance and a symbol of urban modernity among sections of the citizenry and its political elite alike. This fused representation finds its reflection in the political consequences witnessed under structural transformations in urban life and the institutional conditions of nascent democratisation in the country from 2008 onwards. The turn towards mega-infrastructure development by the incumbent party in Punjab, the PMLN, should be interpreted from within this framework.

At the same time, however, it is worth pondering on the social, political, and cultural legacy of such development. In particular, the consecration of aspirational infrastructural development—i.e. what we consider to be infrastructure that is presented as a window into future potentialities and possibilities of the urban form—leaves open a number of questions that are worth considering, both from the perspective of substantive democratisation and the sustainability of urban development in general. From a planning perspective, this paper suggests that politics is central to the adoption and operationalisation of “technical” infrastructure projects, and our case study brings into focus some of the processes and underlying politics that drive developmental change.

There is no doubt that a sense of voter-led accountability was an immediate concern in the development of Pakistan's first mass transit project, the Lahore BRT, in February 2011, a concern that was only made possible given institutional conditions characterised by heightened electoral competition. Simultaneously, though, it is worth considering whether the manner in which the Lahore BRT was implemented establishes limits on the extent to which political elites become

attentive to the concerns of urban citizens, especially when it comes to the deployment of state resources on large projects.

As shown in the paper, several rules and regulations were bypassed in the construction process which may have repercussions for transparency and accountability in the long-term. Similarly, the representation of the BRT as a “gift” to the people and the rushed, top-down mechanisms of its implementation (including the bypassing of environmental concerns), which has since then been replicated in other cities and provinces as well, showcase how infrastructure-for-legitimacy may potentially limit the way democratisation processes deepen, and further entrench the bureaucratised control of various dominant groups over the urban built fabric. By centralising, bureaucratising, and insulating state authority at the provincial tier for “efficient” deployment and “technocratic” delivery of large urban infrastructure, significant administrative, fiscal, and discursive constraints were set on the ownership, oversight, and, ultimately, democratisation of development processes.

Finally, from a methodological perspective, we propose that a melding of institutional and structural considerations are central to drawing up explanations for urban interventions that appear contingent or situational, such as mass transit projects. Further research that explores the adoption and implementation of mass transit projects in other cities will also offer additional insights into the role that infrastructure plays in democratising states of the global South. Likewise, studies that assess how decisions are operationalised on the ground during implementation stages, particularly through party machinery, and the collaboration between bureaucrats-politicians-developers is also important to shed light on the sustainability of such initiatives.

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Endnotes

¹ We use the term state/political elite to refer to senior decision-makers including politicians and bureaucrats.

² In its study of Lahore’s transport, the JICA (2012) team found that household income is positively correlated with household vehicle ownership. Hence, primarily those who do not own any vehicles, or those who “do not have any other choice” use public transport in Lahore. The absence of safe, affordable transport options also impacts women disproportionately as compared to men (see Sajjad et al. 2019). While not the focus of this paper, we find that decision-making around mass transit continues to be dominated by men, and improvements in women’s mobility are predominantly unintended by-products of existing interventions rather than explicit policy goals.

³ Dimitriou (2011) states that the challenges and resources in the global South differ from the global North (see Altshuler and Luberoff 2003; Ardila and Salvucci 2001), particularly as there is not the same type of pressure from citizen groups.

⁴ Haider and Badami (2007) state that the PUTC was draining public resources. However, they point out that the state's withdrawal from investment in public transport has impacted the mobility of millions of urban poor who cannot afford private vehicles.

⁵ Imran (2009) and Imran and Low (2003) claim that this shift largely occurred due to the influence of international development organisations and consultants who repeatedly called for increasing private sector involvement in meeting public transport demand. The privatisation of public transport was also supported by multilateral organisations such as the World Bank as it helped develop a number of policies (including the 1998 Urban Public Transport Policy and 1999 Public Transport in the Transport Sector Development Initiative) for this purpose particularly in the 1990s. Further, political parties such as PMLN and PMLQ have also pushed for this over time.

⁶ This entailed 97 amendments to the constitution that centred on federalism, provincial autonomy, and judicial independence.

⁷ The NFC Award uses financial formulas to manage the distribution of financial resources to the provinces from the centre.

⁸ The 2005 Medium Term Development Framework (MTDF) for the years 2005–2010 focuses on increasing the competitiveness of the national economy (GoP 2005). It stressed that infrastructure should be developed partly through the transportation and communication sector, particularly in metropolitan and mega-cities (GoP 2005:18).

⁹ Mentioned as Gr. Sr. No. 1671 as an ongoing scheme in the Annual Development Program 2012/13.

¹⁰ The Concurrent List is the “document that gave joint responsibilities to the federal as well as provincial governments” (Nabi and Shaikh 2010:9).

¹¹ The National Economic Council is a council that looks at the country's economic conditions and advises the Federal and Provincial Governments develop plans accordingly. It consists of the Prime Minister, the Chief Minister, a member from each province nominated by the Chief Minister, and four other members nominated by the Prime Minister. It is mentioned under article 156 of the Pakistan constitution.

¹² As the leaders of the PPP and PMLN were in exile due to the military regime.

¹³ Although he added that this was purely based on the city's needs.

¹⁴ Now the Punjab Mass Transit Authority.

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