

SHIV NADAR
INSTITUTION OF EMINENCE DEEMED TO BE
UNIVERSITY
DELHI NCR

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR
HIMALAYAN
STUDIES

Issue Brief

No.36

May 2026

New Districts in Ladakh: “Administrative Convenience” or a Policy of Division?

Muzaffar Hussain



© Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence

About the Author: Muzaffar Hussain is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad. He can be reached at muza.ladakh@gmail.com.

Cite this publication as:

Hussain, Muzaffar. 2026. 'New Districts in Ladakh: "Administrative Convenience" or a Policy of Division?'. Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR. *Issue Brief*. No. 36. May.

<https://snu.edu.in/centres/centre-of-excellence-for-himalayan-studies/research/new-districts-in-ladakh-administrative-convenience-or-a-policy-of-division/en/>

Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence
NH-91, Tehsil Dadri, Gautam Budh Nagar District
Uttar Pradesh - 201314
INDIA

Ph: +91 120 7170100

E-Mail: chs.shss@snu.edu.in

Website: <https://snu.edu.in/centres/centre-of-excellence-for-himalayan-studies/>

New Districts in Ladakh: “Administrative Convenience” or a Policy of Division?

Muzaffar Hussain

Abstract

The politics of Ladakh ever since independence has been characterized by weak developmental reach due to topography and marginality within the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and the crystallization of political identities due to partition and other developments associated with the broader politics of Kashmir. With these defining characteristics, the process of formation of administrative units in Ladakh has always responded to concerns of administrative convenience and the demands of identity politics. The announcement of new districts in Ladakh in April this year has led to a national discourse in which a section asserts that the decision is part of a ploy to create a split in the unity displayed by Leh and Kargil and Muslims and Buddhists in their movement for statehood and the Sixth Schedule. This article argues, however, that the decision to carve the new districts has the strong administrative logic of the expansion of developmental reach of the government. Further, the reception of the decision within Ladakh itself suggests a more cautious approach by its leaders to prevent any negative impact on broader unity in the statehood movement.

Keywords: Ladakh; administrative reorganization; Hill Council; political movement; statehood

The notification of the decision to carve out five new districts in Ladakh on 27 April is the second most important event in political history of the region this century - the decision to separate Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 clearly remains the most important event in that regard. Both the decisions are likely to have a lasting imprint on the political landscape of region. It is only the second occasion after independence that new districts have been carved out in Ladakh. The bifurcation of Leh and Kargil in 1979 was the previous occasion new districts were created in Ladakh.

A Brief History

Districts in Ladakh have always transcended their purpose as purely administrative units—and have led to far bigger political consequences. The bifurcation of the region into two districts in 1979 translated into Leh and Kargil emerging as two epicentres of politics of Ladakh and often competing with each other. The two districts not only emerged as administrative set-ups but also as entities with party politics, political posturing and political demands distinct from each other. While Leh was more easily identified with Ladakh as a whole and garnered great political attention nationally as the Buddhist voice, the struggle in Kargil has been simply one for recognition—often finding expression in the articulation that Kargil is also part of Ladakh and thus, an equal stakeholder. The creation of the districts addressed substantial administrative grievances but also formed faultlines of politics within Ladakh. Building up on a distinct experience of partition and other socio-political processes pushing crystallization of political identities around religion, the districts provided a framework to articulate these identities.

It is the intersection of the administrative necessities and the politics of identity that makes demarcation of administrative units, particularly districts, a contested and controversial process in Ladakh often attracting allegations of religious divides or communalism. While reflecting on the creation of districts in 1979, H.N. Kaul in the seminal book on the political history of modern Ladakh—*Ladakh Through the Ages: Towards New Identity*—observes, “The bifurcation of the district into Buddhist Leh district and Muslim Kargil district for so-called administrative convenience, inevitably lent communal complexion to this un-called for surgery”. Clearly, Kaul was critical of the state government of Jammu and Kashmir for the decision.

Similar allegations of communal divide have flooded both media and social media in the aftermath of the decision of 27 April 2026. The Pandora’s box of the debate at national level was opened up by Asaduddin Owaisi, who while calling it a second round of “gerrymandering in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir”, linked the decision with the objective of the government “to divide the unified statehood movement of Buddhists and Muslims” (Owaisi 2026). At the local level, a similar expression was articulated by Sajjad Kargili, a prominent political activist of Kargil, when he portrayed the decision as “less an administrative reform and more a calculated attempt to fragment the unified democratic and statehood movement of the people of Ladakh” (Kargili 2026). The expression by Kaul and observations by Owaisi and Sajjad while being divided across three decades captures a similar sentiment and draws a unique parallel on how the Government of erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir and the Government of India have approached the affairs in Ladakh.

The creation of new districts in Ladakh thus requires an assessment accounting for both administrative/governance necessities associated with it and the broader politics of perceptions and reactions.

Administrative Logic

At the administrative level, Ladakh simply due to its geographic size has always presented the case for an increase in the number of districts. The average area of districts in India is around 4,000 square kilometres. This stands in stark contrast with Ladakh which had only two districts for a region with total area of around 60,000 square kilometres. This distribution has for a very long time kept remote areas outside the scope of administrative reach. Further, several places like Changthang, Zaskar and Nubra remained connected with the district headquarters in Leh and Kargil only through mountain passes—remaining periodically closed due to adverse weather conditions. Zaskar, in particular, remained cut off from Kargil for half of the year due to closure of the roads during winter. The remoteness of many of these areas made the benefits of services of the state inaccessible for the people. Civilian administration in general had limited presence due to remoteness and harsh topography. It is the Indian Army—with its presence in borders and far-flung areas that has stepped in on a routine basis to fill in the administrative gaps particularly in the domains of health, education and development (MOD 2023).

Owing to marginality in the developmental map and identity concerns, occasional demands for separate districts were made by many of these regions. Zaskar, in particular, had the oldest and the strongest movement for district status. The fact that Zaskar (with areas added to from Kargil) was one of the MLA constituencies (in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir) further reinforced its claim for district status (Dorjay 2020). In a similar vein, Nubra which was also an MLA constituency has also been articulating demands for district status for a decade (Dolma and Padma 2024). Beyond these two, demands for other districts

were not really a part of the political discourse. Regardless of the history of movement or of the demand for districts, the decision in general is likely to go a long way in pushing the stated purpose of the delivery of “administrative services” to the “doorsteps of the people” in all of the new districts (AUTL 2026a).

In his elaboration of the aims associated with the creation of new districts, the Lieutenant Governor V. K. Saxena did put an emphasis on decentralising governance (AUTL 2026). However, what is not being accounted for is how the decision is going to have a bearing on democratic decentralisation or on the institutions (particularly Hill Councils) associated with democratic governance in Ladakh. Under the second chapter of the Hill Council Act, Leh and Kargil are governed by individual Autonomous Hill Development Councils (FAO n.d.). The latest decision then casts a cloud over the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), Leh elections which were postponed earlier. It has also created an ambiguity regarding the authority of the existing Council and councillors of LAHDC, Kargil, who are now split between four districts of Sham, Kargil, Drass and Zaskar.

One area where the central government has sought to address the confusion arising from the making of new districts is in the conduct of developmental activities and financial management. Here, the government has issued interim guidelines through Chapter X of the Council Act containing “Miscellaneous” provisions that allows the Government to issues “instructions or directions” for the purpose of the “proper implementation” of the objectives of the Council (AUTL 2026b). As per the guidelines, development activities have been allowed to continue under “existing arrangements” through the LAHDCs of Leh and Kargil—now reimagined as “parent” LAHDCs.

However, a new “weighted criterion”, has also been introduced for the rationalization and approval of projects by the Chief Controller of Finance (CCF) of the respective LAHDCs. This weighted criterion is based on a formula assigning 60 percent weightage to population and 40 percent weightage to geographical area of the new districts. With these guidelines, the government has ensured financial continuity in the functioning of the two parent Hill Councils with respect to the new districts. While, the Section 38 of the Hill Council Act designates the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of the districts as “the Chief Executive Officer of the Council”, it is most likely that with the reimagination of the two Hill Councils as parent Councils, only the DCs of Leh and Kargil among the DCs of the seven districts are likely to act as Chief Executive Officers (FAO n.d.).

Perception Management

Moving on to the final issue of the perceptions related to the decision and its reception, the district decision was timed just three days before Union Minister for Home Affairs (MHA) Amit Shah’s visit to Ladakh to attend the first-ever international exposition of the holy relics of Lord Buddha. While the approval of the district was done in August 2024, there was some uncertainty over its execution (MHA 2024). What is more interesting is that, the report of the five members New Districts Committee which was constituted on the MHA’s direction to “assess various aspects related to the formation of new districts, such as headquarters, boundaries, structure, creation of posts, any other aspect related to the formation of districts” was never brought out in the public domain (MHA 2024). Regarding the role of report itself, the Chairman of the New Districts Committee Pramod Jain said that the recommendations of the Committee appear to have been accepted “in toto”. In the elaboration of the exercise of the Committee, Jain mentioned that the Committee conducted 65 meetings in different villages and responded to the 183

deputations/representations made by the public in the report—which is around 340 pages long and which was submitted to the Ladakh administration in March 2025. The report made recommendations on key issues like boundaries of the proposed districts, headquarters of the districts, administrative infrastructure and institutional arrangements including number of staff and officials alongside a “roll out” plan to be undertaken in phases (TENL 2026).

The reactions coming from Kargil could have been resolved if a deliberation based on the recommendations of the New District Committee report had been carried out with the public. The notification of the districts also generated reactions at the national level. With the exceptions of a very few youth leaders—who have called it an exercise directed at “ghettoisation of Muslims” or an exercise driven by an objective to create a religious divide, reactions within the region have been measured and cautious, unlike the reception at the national level (Peerzada 2026). The narrative in the media at the national level across the ideological spectrum interestingly relies on quotes/positions from the same set of individuals to present polarized pictures of a deepening “Buddhist-Muslim divide” or opposition by “Muslim organisations” (Geelani 2026, Shraddha 2026).

Most leaders from Kargil including the Member of Parliament from Ladakh—who comes from Kargil, however, welcomed the decision as an effort directed towards the delivery of development and governance at the doorstep. At the same time, Kargil has registered its discontent by invoking injustice or discrimination (Kargil Today 2026a). The decision of treating Kargil with 80 revenue villages at par with the new districts—most which have around 30 revenue villages justifies this perception. The various positions on the decision in Kargil have, up to this stage, culminated in the announcement of a new movement for districts at a joint address of all political parties and religious organisations of Kargil (Kargil Today 2026b). With a case based on population size and backwardness, the joint gathering decided to push for a struggle for two new districts of Sankoo and Shakar-Chiktan.

Conclusion

Beyond, the articulations/positions on the new districts decision, some engagement with the question of whether the decision is likely to have a bearing on the Sixth Schedule and the Statehood movement is important. As stated at the outset, one set of responses projected the creation of districts as a design by the Union government to simply divide the movement for Ladakh Statehood. The case for the five districts at a broader political level was first made as a part of the election promise by BJP during 2019 parliamentary elections (Journey Line 2019). Subsequently, the demand was articulated in the floor of parliament by Jamyang Tsering Namgyal (then Member of Parliament for Ladakh), when Ladakh was still part of Jammu and Kashmir (Sudarshan Northeast 2026). So, the inception of the five districts as a grand political design “to divide the unified statehood movement of Buddhists and Muslims” requires a highly impressive skill at political prognosis capable of visualizing not only the bifurcation of the state of Jammu and Kashmir but also the future course of politics in Ladakh after that.

Further, the fact that the sub-committee level talks held between leaders of Ladakh and the MHA held on 22 May produced a “historic consensus” towards the granting of safeguards and a legislature for the region displays positive intent on the part of the central government. This development (coming three weeks after the district decision) suggests that the government is willing to accept the broader objectives of the statehood movement (ANI 2026).

Within the region itself, the very fact that there was a muted celebration of the decision in Leh and measured agitation in Kargil, reflects the caution exercised by Ladakhi leaders towards preservation of their unity, which they believe is vital for the final success of the movement.

REFERENCES

- ANI (2026). ““Historic consensus” reached in talks with MHA, Ladakh to get customised political system with law-making authority: Former MP Chhewang”. *ANI News*, May 22. <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/historic-consensus-reached-in-talks-with-mha-ladakh-to-get-customised-political-system-with-law-making-authority-former-mp-chhewang20260522231610/>.
- Ashiq, Peerzada (2026). “Kargil voices concern over Ladakh’s 7 new districts, ‘only 2 Muslim-majority’”. *The Hindu*. April 30. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ladakh/kargil-voices-concern-over-ladakhs-7-new-districts-only-2-muslim-majority/article70921527.ece>.
- AUTL (2026a). Administration of Union Territory of Ladakh. “L-G Vinai Kumar Saxena approves constitution of UT-Level Committee for operationalisation of five new districts in Ladakh”. May 11. <https://ladakh.gov.in/l-g-vinai-kumar-saxena-approves-constitution-of-ut-level-committee-for-operationalisation-of-five-new-districts-in-ladakh/>.
- AUTL (2026b). Administration of Union Territory of Ladakh. “Interim Guidelines for Administrative and Financial Management of Newly Created Districts in the Union Territory of Ladakh”. May 18. <https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s395192c98732387165bf8e396c0f2dad2/uploads/2026/05/202605181402742412.pdf>.
- Dolma, Yangchan and Stanzin Padma (2024). “Political promises and public aspirations: Scrutinizing Nubra’s quest for district status”. *Reach Ladakh Bulletin*, January 30. <https://www.reachladakh.com/news/opinion/political-promises-and-public-aspirations-scrutinizing-nubra-s-quest-for-district-status>.
- Dorjay, Urgain (2020). “District Status for Zaskar”. *State Times*, December 30. <https://statetimes.in/district-status-for-zaskar/>.
- FAO. (n.d.). Food and Agriculture Organization. *Ladakh autonomous Hill Development Councils Act, 1997*. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/IND227527.pdf>.
- Geelani, Gowhar (2026). “Ladakh’s new district map deepens a Buddhist-Muslim divide”. *Frontline*, May 4. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/ladakh-district-rejig-kargil-discrimination/article70938502.ece>.
- Journey Line (2019). “BJP releases election manifesto for Ladakh Parliament Constituency”. *Journey Line*, May 30. <https://www.journeyline.in/newsdet.aspx?q=174468>.
- Kargil Today (2026a). “MP Ladakh Haji Hanifa Jan Speaks on Kargil Council, New Districts & Amit Shah Visit”. *Kargil Today*, 2 May.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0eQ70VlqVU>.

Kargil Today (2026b). "All-Party Delegation Seeks Separate Districts for Sankoo & Shakar-Chiktan". *Kargil Today*, 7 May.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X208yI8O-WE>.

MHA. (2024), Ministry of Home Affairs. "In pursuit of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's vision to build a developed and prosperous Ladakh, Ministry of Home Affairs has decided to create 5 new districts in the Union Territory". August 2024.

<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2048877®=3&lang=2>.

MOD. (2023). Ministry of Defence. "Operation Sadbhavna in Ladakh". February 2023.

<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1895974®=3&lang=2>.

Kargili, Sajjad [@Sajjadkargili_]. (2026, April 29). *The recent decision of the Government to create five new districts in Ladakh—raising the total from two to seven* [Post]. X.

https://x.com/SajjadKargili_/status/2049442228892799115.

Owais, Asadudin [@asadowaisi]. (2026, April 28). *The govt has created 5 new districts in*

Ladakh. There are now 7 instead of 2 districts. The govt [Post]. X.

<https://x.com/asadowaisi/status/2049175464946880793>.

Pandey, Shraddha (2026). "Muslim organisations oppose creation of 5 new districts in Ladakh: Read why the administrative restructuring was needed and how it will have no impact on elections", *OpIndia*, May 1.

https://www.opindia.com/2026/05/muslim-organisations-oppose-creation-of-5-new-districts-in-ladakh-read-why-it-was-needed/#google_vignette.

Sudarshan Northeast (2026). "Ladakh Gets 5 New Districts in 2026". *Sudarshan NorthEast*, April 29.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qdJ1Pa1ftY>.

TENL (2026). "Five New Districts for Ladakh: Architect of reforms, Pramod Jain calls it a '50-Year Vision'". *The Earth News Ladakh*, April 30.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AO6L9Wiw4ps>.