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## Inauguration of Rawalpindi Road Projects Raises Questions Over Priorities, Costs, and Political Messaging

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In a high-profile ceremony marked by traditional fanfare, Chief Minister of Punjab Maryam Nawaz Sharif recently inaugurated two large-scale road projects in Rawalpindi: the GPO Chowk Underpass and the Nawaz Sharif Flyover. The projects, reportedly costing a combined US\$30 million, are part of a broader infrastructure initiative by the provincial government. While aimed at addressing chronic traffic bottlenecks, the rollout raises important questions about governance, priorities, and fiscal transparency.

The GPO Chowk Underpass, which spans approximately 2 kilometers beneath Mall Road, features what the Punjab government claims is Rawalpindi's first intelligent traffic signal system. The project is expected to channel over 200,000 vehicles daily, offering smoother access from Kashmir Road to the National Highway (N-5). According to official figures, construction began in February with an initial estimated cost of US\$16.18 million (PKR4.6 billion).

Meanwhile, the Nawaz Sharif Flyover named after the three-time former Prime Minister and father of the current chief minister began construction in January. Initially budgeted at US\$7.39 million (PKR2.1 billion), the final tab has surged to US\$12.67 million (PKR3.6 billion), an increase of over 70% within a matter of months. The flyover links Kachehri Chowk to key transport arteries, including GT Road, Rawalpindi Ring Road, and the Chakri Interchange on the motorway. Officials claim it will handle more than 300,000 vehicles per day and reduce travel times by up to an hour.

According to the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), 67 road projects spanning 607 kilometers are underway in Rawalpindi alone, with 51 already completed. Party officials argue these developments will bring long-overdue connectivity to underserved areas such as Adiala, Gorakhpur, and Khalsa Khurd. A 2km-long service road adjacent to the flyover was also completed to enhance local accessibility.

Yet, despite the technical scope and presumed utility, not all observers are convinced. The naming of the flyover after Nawaz Sharif, who remains a controversial figure in Pakistani politics, sparked criticism over the apparent politicization of taxpayer-funded infrastructure. Some analysts question whether these symbolic moves serve public interest or party branding.

The sharp rise in project costs also warrants scrutiny. Inflation and supply chain challenges are a reality, but a near-doubling of budget estimates in under a year raises concerns over transparency, procurement practices, and whether oversight mechanisms are truly in place.

Additionally, critics argue the government's heavy emphasis on visible infrastructure may be overshadowing more urgent needs in healthcare, education, and water management sectors, where the province continues to lag. The focus on megaprojects, often inaugurated with much media attention, has historically done little to address deeper governance or service delivery issues in Pakistan's urban centers.

Rawalpindi's long-standing traffic problems are real, and strategic infrastructure is part of any credible solution. But these solutions should be rooted in long-term planning, not short-term political expedience. With Punjab's budget stretched and inflation still pressuring working families, the public deserves more than just concrete promises and slogans. They deserve transparency, accountability, and a focus on priorities that serve people over parties.