



Pakistan: will the military really give more power to the grass roots?

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Pakistan's military government has introduced a local government plan that could go a long way towards making federalism effective in that country.

The plan envisages the establishment of elected district governments in the 103 districts of the country by 14th August 2001. In a major departure from past practice, it would make the district administration and police answerable to the elected chief executive of the district.

Never before in Pakistan's history have the elected local chief executives headed districts. Non-local federal and provincial bureaucrats have always controlled the districts.

The new plan reserves a third of the seats in the district councils and other tiers of local government for women. It provides for direct elections on the basis of adult franchise for these reserved seats at the union council level. This has been a long-standing demand of human rights and women's rights groups.

Other main features of the plan include abolition of the 'division', an intermediary administrative unit between the province and the district, and lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18.

A long history of centralism

The system currently in place is a legacy of British colonial rule. It divides the country into four administrative tiers: the centre, the province, the division and the district. The districts and divisions are distinct legal entities and the provinces have constitutional status. But the centre governs them all through a bureaucratic command structure based on the colonial model.

In this model the personnel belonging to the elite District Management Group (DMG) and Police Service of Pakistan (PSP) are recruited by the federal

government through the Public Service Commission on the basis of a competitive examination

A quota is fixed for the four provinces on the basis of their population. In this way Punjab, which has about 56.5 % of the country's population, gets a major share of the vacancies. A quota also exists for the officers of the armed forces. As a majority of these officers also belong to the Punjab, that province gets a main chunk of this quota too.

Members of the elite groups, thus selected, are sent to the provinces where they fill from 40 to 60 per cent of the posts of the Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police in the districts. All the executive, magisterial, judicial, and developmental functions are combined in the person of a Deputy Commissioner. This Deputy Commissioner, who is also the District Magistrate, controls a district through a vast network of provincial, magisterial, police, revenue and administrative officials. The local people have absolutely no say in the affairs of the district.

The members of the DMG are also posted to all the important positions in the federal government including those of the Secretaries and Joint Secretaries. As with the DMG officers, the Centre also controls postings, transfers and promotions of police officers belonging to PSP. Plus, the federation also appoints the provincial Governors.

Many undesirable effects

Thus, under the present highly centralised system the federal government controls the administration at every level right down to the district. Provincial governments that don't toe the centre's line are frequently dismissed.

The vast and unrestrained powers of the bureaucrats have given rise to corruption. Critics point out that "lands and other resources of the districts have been plundered at will and development aid has been eaten up in the most shameless manner."

Unchecked powers of police have contributed to an increase in crime. Reporting of crimes at the police stations has become so difficult that quite often the provincial high courts and even Prime Ministers and Chief Ministers have to intervene to get a crime reported.

Control of the local government by the non-elected and non-local bureaucrats has resulted in the ill-planned growth of urban centres and depletion of education, health, sanitation and other civic facilities in both urban and rural areas.

Power to elected people

This system has prevented federalism from working in Pakistan. As well, it has cultivated the seeds of disharmony amongst the provinces.

The new local government plan aims at addressing these issues by abolishing the post of the Deputy Commissioner and transferring most of its administrative functions to the elected head of the local government.

The idea is that if the bureaucratic chain at the district level were to break it would result in reduced federal control over the districts—and give an indirect boost to federalism.

Three forces are opposing the new local government plan: the political parties, the bureaucrats and the religious elements.

The political parties have termed the plan "interference in provincial matters" and "infringement of provincial autonomy".

Political leadership in Pakistan has long thrived on official patronage. Through linkage with the bureaucratic hierarchy, tribal, feudal and industrialist political families have been able to sustain their hold on the districts. The system has helped them bar the entry of new classes into the political arena.

Political parties, once in power, use the system to prolong their rule and quash political opposition. Seldom in Pakistan's history has a party been voted out of power.

Bureaucratic and religious power threatened

The mainstream political parties oppose the proposed new system—despite the fact that there has been a growing consensus during the last decade that the existing system of governance has fallen to pieces and that centralised bureaucratic control over the affairs of the state, and exclusion of the vast majority of citizens from governance, has failed the country.

The bureaucrats vehemently oppose the plan because it would significantly curtail their powers. A committee of Federal Secretaries has reportedly unanimously rejected the new plan, asking the government to shelve it.

The control over districts had made the bureaucrats major actors on the political scene.

It was because of this system that the bureaucrats were, almost unnoticeably, able to take direct control of Pakistan's government in 1951, barely four years after independence. It took politicians 21 years to regain partial control of the government in December 1971 and at great expense. It only happened when the people of the majority province of East Pakistan succeeded after a long struggle, in throwing off the "yoke" of bureaucratic control by creating the new state of Bangladesh.

Religious groups and parties oppose the plan because of the 33 per cent representation it gives to women in the

local councils, which they say will promote "immorality" in society.

Popular support and a phase-in

Still, the people at the grassroots level have generally welcomed the new plan enthusiastically. Elections for local government are being held in the districts in a phased programme.

In the first phase of elections, held on 31 December 2000, the turn out of voters was close to 46 %. In the second phase of the elections, held on 21 March, 2001, it rose to nearly 60 %. According to the figures compiled by the UNDP-sponsored "Citizens' Campaign for the Women's Representation" in the Local Government, more than 8000 women were elected to the local councils in direct elections during the first two phases.

This in itself is history in the making.

In the first two phases eight women were elected as mayors of the union councils by defeating their male opponents in close contests. The mayors of the union councils, or *nazims* as they are called, will form the members of the district councils.

These directly elected women *nazims* are in addition to women members of the district councils who are yet to be elected in the indirect elections (under the one-third rule).

Besides the people of Pakistan, the international community has generally expressed its support for the proposed system, which has given a semblance of legitimacy to the military government.

The supporters of the new system feel that replacement of federal bureaucrats by elected mayors as district heads will go a long way toward changing the character of the Pakistan government from a centralist to a true federal state.

Making the district police answerable to district councils will place a check on the police's high-handedness. And possibly the crime rate will come under control.

Pakistan could achieve enormous progress in the fields of education and health and a general rise in the standard of living. The newly elected bodies can also be expected to invest in infrastructure for the development of districts, which has been long neglected.

What are the military's true intentions?

Most important of all these, reducing authoritarian control over regional governments might for the first time give real influence to those social classes that have up till now been barred from power. The emergence of women councillors from middle- and lower middle-class families is part of this story.

Good intentions and seemingly glowing prospects apart, a number of observers have not been able to comprehend the military government's thinking behind the move. After all, they argue, why would a military government try to undermine the centre's control over the districts?

And there is another worrying aspect.

The locally elected executives would head the districts under the new plan, but the system of central recruitment of bureaucrats for provincial and local posts would not be eliminated. In fact DMG officers would be appointed as District Co-ordination Officers in the new set up and district police chiefs would continue to be members of the elite PSP group.

All of which raises an important question that has yet to be answered:

What effective checks are there in the system to prevent elite groups from reasserting their power, especially given the fact that the military government has so far provided no constitutional or legal foundation for the new plan? (6)