

Evolution of the Devolution Plan (2000): Local government system revived or reformed?: A study conducted in district Mardan of the NWFP, Pakistan

By Sajjad Ali Khan, 2006

Abstract

On August 14th 2000, the military regime in Pakistan, unveiled a Local Government Plan intended to strengthen the democratic institutions and to empower the people at the grassroots. It was urged that the Plan would increase access of marginalized groups in society to politics, enhance participation of ordinary citizens both in politics as well as the delivery of services, enhance accountability of the government functionaries as well as elected members and improve the delivery of social services. The Devolution Plan paved the way for the reestablishment of local governments at the district and sub-district levels. According to the Plan, political, administrative and fiscal powers were devolved to the local governments at the union, tehsil and district levels.

The fact that local governments in Pakistan in the past have mainly been used by regimes to legitimize control over the state and to achieve future survival, makes this ambitious attempt controversial. Especially, its contextual resemblance with the previous two attempts at local government reforms, further strengthen the notion of legitimization and survival. This study was thus an attempt to find out whether the same old wine has merely been presented in new bottle for the third time or actions have spoken louder than words this time. In doing so, the study tried to explore the perceptions of both the ordinary people and the elected representatives on the recent devolution plan. It took into account a number of things e.g. the motivation for the process, the recent local government elections and the impacts of the devolution process on; citizens' participation in politics as well as delivery of service, accountability and transparency and service delivery.

Data for the study was collected from seven union councils in district Mardan of the NWFP, Pakistan. Respondents in the study area were divided into four major categories because of the nature of the data required for the proposed research. The study has found that the Devolution Plan (2000) has both promises and limitations. As for motivation for the process is concerned the study found that the architect has followed in the footsteps of his predecessors. Despite exhibiting some continuations, the recent devolution plan, however, is considerably distinct from the previous local government reforms as far its substance and structure is concerned. Contrary to the previous local government reforms, it has devolved substantial political, administrative and fiscal powers to the lower tiers of government. However, it has an ambiguous nature, which is one of the major causes of hindering elected representative from the exercise of power. It has resulted in substantial decrease in powers and control over resources of both the civil as well as political bureaucracy. In addition to its ambiguous nature, the process is incomplete in many respects e.g. some of the departments have been devolved while others still remain under the provincial control. Similarly, in most of cases, only few services with in a department have been decentralized.

Regardless of having a number of bottlenecks, the recent devolution's impacts on democratic participation both as voters and as representatives and the delivery of services have been positive. Most importantly, the new local government system accruing from the Devolution Plan (2000) is popular among majority of the people.

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Department of International Environment and Development Studies (Noragric), Norwegian University of Life Sciences