

# Decentralization Reforms in Pakistan

## During Ayub and Zia Era

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### Abstract

Since independence federal central administrative setup i.e. concept of centralized power of administration had been the theme for Pakistan. This system was neither responsive nor participative to the people of Pakistan. As a result the resentment for this system increased with the passage of time. To address the issue, many “new” ideas were experienced both at federal and local levels, but the grudges of the public could not be minimized. The system of local government was neglected in the first decade after independence mainly because of the political instability. General Ayub Khan’s Basic Democracies system was the first step that was taken towards decentralization. This system ended with the regime itself. In Zia regime, the Local Government Ordinance of 1979 was introduced. General Ayub Khan’s Basic Democracies system was revived and implemented with a new structure. Military leadership for the sake to gain political legitimacy, planned, encouraged and institutionalized local government institution. Keeping all this in view this article presents detailed historic analysis of decentralization from the political history of Pakistan. The two major eras i.e. General Ayub Khan and General Zia-ul-Haq are analysed in the context of the decentralization and devolution reforms and their implications over the political system of Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Decentralization, reforms, democracy

## 1. Introduction

Pakistan inherited a feudal based political system at the core of the politics. The worst part of it was revealed soon after the demise of the Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The study of decentralization reveals the internal weaknesses of the political system and it also reveals that at times in the political history of Pakistan the political conflicts and rifts increased to such levels that the whole stability of the system was put to danger.

It is true that the magnitude of the problems in all the dimensions e.g. political, economic and social etc was huge and the crisis of the leadership made it worst. But lack of political participation and the distrust of the people of Pakistan in the early period of the national political history is a major factor which guided the thoughts of the first dictator to feel the pulse of the people i.e. to involve them in political settings of the country. Concept of decentralization gets its support from the political dramatization by the politicians in the early days after the death of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Turbulence of political history misguided the national objectives and pretentious every sphere of nationalism.

Pakistan is one of the developing countries that have experienced repeated military take over. Pakistan army has taken control of governance through sidelining the weaker political class which tends to stay longer. Martial Law was firstly imposed in 1958 by General Ayub Khan, which set backed representative politics at the federal centre and provincial level by dissolving national and provincial assemblies (Siddiqi, 2007). It could be assumed that the military has strengthened its position as a dominant player in power politics. Having analysed the first decade of the Pakistani politics (1947-58) up to the imposition of first martial law in the country, it is more than obvious that the political participation of the people of Pakistan was neglected to such an extent that further jugglery of the politicians may had caused the total collapse of the system. It is however to be analysed that to what extent the fairness of the decentralization and devolution exist in our political history.

## 2. General Ayub Khan's Basic Democracies

General Ayub Khan's Basic Democracies were a totally new induction to the political system of Pakistan. It was the first major refurbish of the local government system in Pakistan. However this system had a specific and long term focus. In depth analysis of this system reveals that this system of local government had certain important motives.

- a) A shift towards urban to rural political participation
- b) Change of President's electoral college
- c) Safety and continuity of Presidential system
- d) A glimpse of upcoming overall political system change
- e) Neutralization of threat of mainstream political parties
- f) A "non-political" political system
- g) Political outreach and equality

- h) Decentralization of development
- i) Mass involvement
- j) Attainment of stability and security at all levels
- k) Refined participation of bureaucracy
- l) Controlled democracy

### **3. The Background**

The background for Basic Democracies of General Ayub Khan is no different than any other Martial law administrator. The motives were the same i.e. to enforce a long term dictatorship or one man rule in the disguise of controlled democracy. General Ayub Khan introduced the system of Basic Democracies under the ‘Basic Democracies Ordinance 1959’ and the ‘Municipal Administration Ordinance 1960’. A new era had begun in the history of local government in Pakistan. The people of the country had been experiencing a new political flavour in the “Khakis”. The entire machinery of the government was overhauled. The slogan was the shift of right of governance to the grass root level. Basic democrats were not only equal representators of the people of Pakistan but also they were the future electoral college of the coming President under a coming Presidential system. In reality the game of the elite politics was rolled out and a new easy to handle field was set where there was no chance of any kind of threat from any political elite. Conclusively speaking the President achieved stability and security. No doubt that it was the very first breakup of Pakistan with the local government system of the British India. The political power of the regime had to be institutionalized and it was done so through the implementation of Basic Democracy System.

General Ayub Khan was of the view that the people of Pakistan are not yet mature for the democracy hence the Basic Democracies System was evolved to give them the necessary “training” to be democratic. It was therefore decided to give the people of Pakistan a flavour of what is true democracy through their representation at the grass roots level. However the planning and implementation of the Basic Democracies System was multidimensional in nature. The election of Basic Democracies began on 26 December 1959. Official figures indicated that 69 percent of the electorate took part, 73 percent in West Pakistan and 65 percent in East Pakistan (Ahmad, 1985). It had many objectives some of which are already highlighted above.

We can point out some of the important features of this system to understand the background.

- a) To limit the role of the urban political presentation
- b) To increase the rural political participation
- c) To equalize the political power of urban and rural representation
- d) To decentralize the political power structure but only in downward direction.
- e) To centralize and strengthen the political power in the office of the President

- f) To minimize the role and the impact of the traditional political parties
- g) To develop a political party less political system
- h) To control the overall political system
- i) To establish a strong presidential system of government
- j) To dilute the concentration of political power upto an easily manageable level
- k) To create rural leadership
- l) To create a grand assembly at national level
- m) To use it for the social integration
- n) Raunaq Jahan (1972) argues that there were a number of political reasons for such a move like, Ayub distrusted the urban middle class and the intelligentsia, particularly in Bengal and that he had romantic view about the goodness of the simple village folk and described them as “by nature patriotic and good people, tolerant and patient and can rise to great heights when well led” (Jahan, 1972).
- o) The Bureaucrats and the elected representatives of the people were expected to cooperate closely to maintain reciprocal feed back in the Basic Democracies councils. It was thought that by increased contact with the people’s representatives, the official would develop a less elitist attitude towards the people (Khan, 1967).

#### 4. The System

The design of the system is pyramidal in nature. It is a five tier system. Top to bottom arrangement of the basic democracies system can be outlined as follows:

<i>Provincial Development Advisory Councils</i>	{members were appointed by the President on the recommendation of the provincial governors}
<i>Divisional Level</i>	{Officials involved from bureaucracy}
<i>District Level</i>	{Same as above}
<i>Tehsil / Thana (East Pakistan) Level</i>	{bureaucracy involvement started}
<i>Union &amp; Town Councils</i>	{Pure people participation}

Initially the Basic Democracies system involved a five tier structure stretching from its base in the rural union councils and urban union committees, through the Thana or Tehsil committee, to the district and divisional councils, finally two Provisional Development

Advisory Councils. These were replaced in 1962, reduced to four-tier hierarchical structure of union council / union committee, tehsil council / town committee, district council and divisional council.

**Table No.1**

**Basic Democracy Structure, 1965**

Divisional Council (16) Chairman: Commissioner Members: half or more elected, remainder officers		
District: Council (78) Chairman: Deputy Commissioner Members: half or more elected, remainder officials		
In Rural Areas		In Urban Areas
Tehsil or Thana Council (630) Chairman: Sub-Division officer. Members: half or more chairmen of Union Councils, remainder officials	Cantonment Board (29) Chairman: Official Members: half chairmen of Union Committees. half officials	Municipal Committee (108) Chairman: official Member: half chairmen of Union Committees half officials
Union Council (614) Or Town Committee (220) Chairman: elected members: 10 to 15 elected	Union Committee. (888) Chairman: elected Members: elected	
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> <b>WARDS</b> </div>		
NOTE: The Municipal Corporations of Karachi and Lahore were represented at divisional level and were administratively subordinate to the West Pakistan Department of Basic Democracies and Local Government. These two corporations had component Union Committees.		

Source: Kim and Ziring, 1977.

Salient features of the system are presented below.

- a) Indirect democracy
- b) Broad mass of people would elect an electoral college
- c) 80,000 Basic Democrats or Union Councillors
- d) Non-party basis elections
- e) These local leaders would elect the legislature and the President
- f) Constitution of 1962 linked the office of the President to the local bodies.
- g) System of guided democracy comprised elected and non-elected representatives with a local administration acting as the eyes, ear and stick for the central government enabling it to maintain sufficient authority over the politicians (Siddiqi, 2007).
- h) Under the system each province would have to elect 40,000 Basic Democrats each representing at that time, about one thousand populations, out the total of 80,000 was eventually raised to 120,000.
- i) These councils were to have developments responsibilities so that the overall political plans would be built upon the views and needs of the local areas (Islam, 1990). Law and order duties eventually encompassed some powers under the Family Law Ordinance and some ability to tax. Despite the splendid administration about decentralization of power, the bureaucratic control over Basic Democracies System remained firmly in place.
- j) Because the civil servants were responsible for selecting candidates there by extending detailed administrative control over political issues (Noman, 1988).
- k) Initially Deputy Commissioners were appointed Chairman of higher tier of local bodies. Their continued dominance of the Tehsil/Thana; the District and the Division left their influence unimpaired (Kim & Ziring, 1977).

## **5. Critical Analysis**

Following points give the summary of the critical study of the system.

- a) This system ruled out the political activity. This is the key to the in-depth analysis of the system. The presentation of the people was not in the political arena rather they were involved in the economic development. This was not the case that they were given the political independence or training.
- b) This system offered avoidance in the decentralization of powers as far as the political power is concerned. Only the developmental authority was decentralized to some extent.

- c) This system in its core was based on the political system without any politicians.
- d) This system negated the so far achieved progress in the area of democratic culture or political participation in the country.
- e) This system provided stability and security to the President but did not strengthen the political system itself.
- f) Institutionalization of the political system did not happen.
- g) Political culture was not developed.
- h) Restrictions and bans on freedom of expression and media etc made sure that the democracy could not prevail in the country.
- i) Controlled structure of local government offered no good to the people of Pakistan.
- j) It was portrayed that bureaucracy and colonial practices were to be abolished but in fact it was more strengthened.
- k) Basic Democracies showed more capability and capacity in economic field rather than the political field.
- l) It showed the pattern of western political concept.
- m) Ayub Khan's concept of democracy found expression in the shape of Basic Democracies which in fact was more basic than democratic. It may be said that it made easy to bribe and buy the voters.
- n) Due to the system a disparity between the East and West Pakistan emerged that East Pakistan had more population than the West Pakistan but the equal representation in the Basic Democracies system increased the sense of disappointment among the people of the Eastern wing. According to Craig Baxter, (1988) "East Pakistan was of course under represented as it had been under the parity arrangement".
- o) This 'guided' and controlled democracy allowed the bureaucracy to override council proceedings, overrule their resolutions and decisions and even suspend elected members of the councils.
- p) The government used the bureaucratic control from the center to limit political competition at the local level.
- q) In February, 1960 elected representatives assumed their responsibilities. In February 1960, Basic Democrats were asked to say yes or no on a simple question; "have you confidence in President Ayub Khan?" General Ayub Khan was elected President by a 95.6 % of yes votes, an exercise which made East European elections look glamorous (Noman, 1988).
- r) Politicians criticized that the use of elected officials as an electoral college denied the population of their right to directly elect the President. In this way elections could be bribed, bought and paid for and their rules easily compromised.

- s) Under the system of Basic Democracies the President established autocratic rule in Pakistan with the help of bureaucracy.
- t) Provincial autonomy was circumscribed further through the appointment of governors, answerable to the center.
- u) General Ayub Khan's intent was not to decentralize or devolved authority to grass roots level but to extend centralized control over the federal units through a grass root political base.

Conclusively speaking, the Basic Democracies system was remarkably well orchestrated for extending direct patronage to, and manipulation of local power structure.

### **6. General Zia's Political Strategy: A Carry Forward of Ayub's Political Approach**

General Zia-ul-Haq derived his political strategy from his predecessor i.e. from the Presidential system of President Ayub Khan. The elimination of political parties especially the influence of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) from the political arena of Pakistan was surely targeted. General Zia again went for the "democracy at the grass root level" i.e. the revival and restoration of the local government system according to which three local government elections were held in 1979, 1983 and 1985 (Kennedy & Bottern, 2006). The essence was "non-party" basis (Siddiq, 2007). The rationale behind the non-party elections is the same, elimination of the role of the major political parties. It is however very interesting that major candidates in these local bodies elections were carrying the political party candidate i.e. having a particular political background from a recognized political party. The conduct of local bodies' elections in 1979 carries another important phenomenon as against General Zia's promise of election in 90 days he instead of going for the general elections went for the local bodies elections. This clearly marks his political strategy priorities that top priority is to the revival and restoration of the local bodies system and then the "Democracy".

Theme of General Zia's regime was "Islamization". He used this well throughout his period of eleven years. Referendum-cum-Presidential election of 1984 is another example of this. Where an "obvious" question was asked from the nation which stated:

***"Whether the laws of Pakistan should confirm with Islam and whether they wanted power transfer to civilian government"*** (Mahmood, 2000).

General Zia-ul-Haq used the old tactic of "indirect" election in a more secure and fail-safe way and interpreted the 97.7% "Yes" answer as the mandate for his next term as President of Pakistan i.e. another five years in the office as President.

Sequence of all these happenings is carefully planned and well executed. Very soon after his "victory" in Referendum-cum-Presidential election of 1984 he went on to address the nation on January 12, 1985. Significance of this address was the announcement of the date of the long awaited election which was promised to be held in 90 days when General Zia took over in 1977. Second main point was the linkage of the announced elections to the establishment of the "Islamic Welfare System" in the country for the welfare of the people. As discussed



earlier it is a continuation of the main theme of General Zia's regime. However the conduct of General Elections of 1985 on non-party basis was another secure political move and actually was the implementation of the controlled democracy. Never to ignore the constitutional amendment of article 58.2 (b) in the constitution of 1973 which gave the ultimate powers to dissolve the National Assembly to the President. Having all these safeguards within the political system, the results were to some extent positive as anticipated by the regime. Now is a time to shift focus to the main features of the local government system revived by General Zia-ul-Haq.

## **7. Local Government System of Zia's Regime**

After very long suspension, the local government system was restructured and implemented. Main theme presented was the delegation of powers to the grass root level. Another purpose was to support the democracy and to create institutional approach to the implementation of the democracy. That is why it was given priority above the general elections and first the local government system was placed.

The local government system of Zia's regime is basically a four tier system. Following are the salient features of the system.

### **Structure**

- Union Councils were created to serve in rural areas.
- Zila / District Councils
- Town Committees in Urban Areas.
- Municipal committees, metropolitan corporations were created in Karachi and Lahore only.
- All the above formations are based on the population and the number of the representatives depends upon the population of the areas.

### **Role**

- Fundamental purpose was to delegate power to the grass root level.
- Arbitration at local level
- Conciliation at local level
- Provision of basic facilities at local level
- For example: role of chairman of urban and union council is to act as, chairman of arbitration under Muslim family ordinance of 1961 and chairman of conciliation court to settle criminal and civil matters / disputes at local level.

### **Finance**

- Federal grants

- Provincial grants
- From remunerative projects
- Through Levy of Taxes:
  - ❖ Property tax
  - ❖ Transfer of immovable property tax
  - ❖ Parking fee
  - ❖ School fee
  - ❖ Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition Fee

#### **Training to personal**

- By provincial government.

### **8. Local Government System of General Zia Vs General Ayub**

The system of local government devised by General Zia-ul-Haq looks different than the system of his predecessor i.e. General Ayub Khan but if analysed in detail it is all the same. The difference is in the motives and the timing of both the chief martial law administrators. Both have different motives but common tool to play with. Local government system of General Ayub Khan suited best to his requirement of strengthening the one man rule i.e. Presidential system where political participation is totally minus from the environment. Whereas the timing of the General Zia regime is a bit different. The emergence of Pakistan Peoples Party in post General Ayub period, dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971 was the events which totally changed the political course of the country. Not to forget the constitution of 1973 which had the plugging clause in it the famous Article 6 of the constitution according to which it cannot be abrogated. This prohibited General Zia from going all over and implements his wishes. He had to compromise to the changed political environment and therefore although the purpose of the General Zia's regime local government system was almost the same, the change was not so drastic and the system introduced was not so sharp to directly manipulate the politics of the country.

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