



## Women Empowerment and Local Government Reforms in Pakistan: A Study of Devolution of Power Plan

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### Abstract

Devolution of Power Plan, which was implemented by General Musharraf, had as its primary goal the empowerment and inclusion of the underprivileged sections of Pakistani society. This new system of local government, introduced a 33 percent quota for women. This article aims to examine the role of women in this local government system. It is critical to determine whether implementing a gender quota is sufficient for women's empowerment at grassroots' level. This study discovered that, while this system provided a new avenue for women to engage in politics at the grassroots level, their participation and representation remained unequal and uncertain. It is believed that such legislative and administrative reforms would be ineffective if they did not involve a shift in cultural norms and organizational structures.

**Keywords:** Devolution of Power Plan, Local government, Women empowerment, legislative and administrative reforms

### 1. Introduction

Decisions are made and implemented through the use of political and institutional processes, which are referred to as governance processes. Participatory, responsible, transparent, efficient, inclusive, and law-abiding governance procedures are the most effective when they are conducted in accordance with the rule of law. The ability of government to interact with residents and communities on a daily basis is particularly important for good governance, and a well-designed local government system is capable of performing this function effectively. It is critical to improve local government in order to maintain stability and promote economic development, as well as to maximize administrative efficiency (Mchunu & Theron, 2014). It also promotes social inclusion while also ensuring environmental sustainability, among other things. Decentralization and local finances, gender equality, and access to basic services are all important components of successful local government. Effective local government system can ensure equitable resource allocation, assist in mobilizing more resources for development, foster a sense of ownership among the population, ensure greater responsiveness, increase accountability, and strengthen national integration (Stoker, 2011). This system of government also helps to reduce the amount of time it takes for municipal services to be delivered to the public. Good governance principles were the driving force behind most local government changes in the 1990s in both developing and developed countries (*World Bank*, 1991). Around the world, people are more and more interested in decentralization. It is a global phenomenon, and most developing countries, whether in Latin America, Africa, or Asia, are implementing this approach to make government people responsive (Vetter & Kersting, 2003; Denters & Rose, 2005; Senturk & Ali, 2021). Many governments have recognized that decentralization is a critical political process for society's enjoyment of democracy and sustainable development. It is a universally agreed notion that the Devolution of formal state power, authority, and resources to elected local officials is the only way to achieve political stability in a democratic society.

The notion of an efficient local government is that it can provide more responsive and innovative services and, in turn, be held more accountable for operations by local voters than nationally provided tasks (Guess, 2005). According to the concept of a subsidiary, the Devolution of power tilts into a system of shared responsibility amongst government institutions at the federal, state, and municipal levels, with the federal government bearing the majority of the burden. It consists of elected local officials who have the authority and obligation to address any problems in their legal mandate and are within their abilities. This will improve the overall quality and efficacy of governance and engagement of citizens and other stakeholders (Bari, 2001; Ali et al., 2021). This system of government allows for direct participation in the functioning of government and citizens' participation in the formulation and implementation of decisions relating to the provision of basic services at the local level under this system. Specifically, one report states that it promotes greater responsibility and openness between citizens and the federal government (UNDP, 1999).

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## 2. Historical Background of Local Government in Pakistan

Prior to the establishment of British rule in India, there has been no established tradition of institutions of local self-government in the contemporary understanding of the term (Chaudhry, 2009). A weak local government system, on the other hand, did exist in the rural areas of the country. This would have been the institution of village panchayats (literally, five-member councils), which handled administrative, judicial, and occasionally developmental tasks in their respective villages (Siddiqui, 1992). The first Municipal Corporation was created in Madras in 1688 by the East India Company. It was not until 1842 that the Bengal Conservancy Act was promulgated, which resulted in the establishment of Sanitary Committees throughout the country (Cheema and Muhammad, 2003). In Karachi, the board of conservancy was founded in 1846, while in Lahore and Rawalpindi, the Municipal Act was passed in 1867. The resolution on local self-government passed by Lord Ripon in 1882 was a watershed moment in the history of local government. When the Decentralization Commission made its recommendation in 1902, it recommended the appointment of the nonofficial chairman of Municipal Committees. This recommendation was endorsed and expanded upon by the Simon Commission, which was established in 1925 to evaluate the performance of local self-government. The 1935 Government of India Act gave provinces the authority to draft legislation governing the local government system. One of the most significant features of the British local government system was the establishment of a rural-urban fragmentation (Tinker, 1968).

Except for Punjab, which was under the bureaucratic jurisdiction of the Deputy Commissioner, the provinces that became the part of Pakistan after the partition of the Su-Continent in 1947 inherited a very poor system of local government. From the years 1958-to 1969, Pakistan experienced its first martial law era. By the name Basic Democracies System, Ayub Khan launched the first significant attempt to establish a well-organized system of local administration in 1958 (Jabeen, 2021). Ayub Khan believed that full-fledged democracy was not appropriate for the people of Pakistan. He Because realized that, in the absence of National and Provincial Assemblies, there was a need for at least the involvement of the people at local level. A new model of local government system was introduced to ensure direct participation of the people in managing their affairs through representative bodies set up down to the village level. There were two sets of legislation, one for rural areas and another for urban areas. This local government system formed the Electoral College to elect both the President and the Legislative Assemblies. Due to being partially elective, this system could not accomplish a genuine decentralization of the development process. Corruption and political bribery weakened rural people's trust in the system, and as a result, support for it dwindled over time among the general public (Jabeen, 2021). Under this setup, women were not granted explicit representation in the municipal governments. It is argued that military administrations have always utilized and controlled local government without constitutional cover for their political objectives (Bari, 2001).

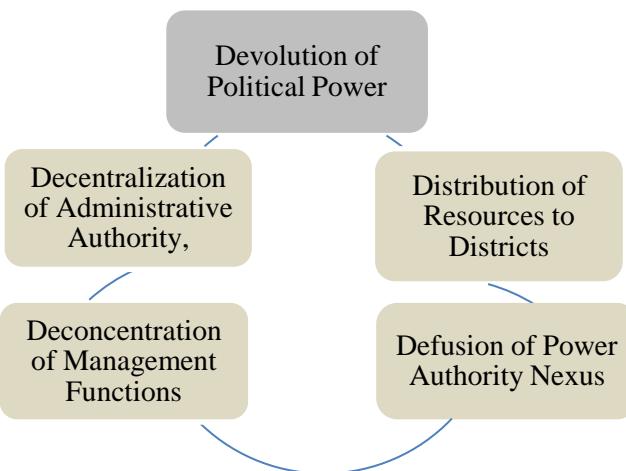
As a result of the first general elections held in 1970 and the "tragedy of 1971," the country was forced to adopt a completely different structure of administration. All of the provinces promulgated ordinances governing local administration beginning in 1972. The People's Local Government Ordinance was promulgated in 1975 by Pakistan's first democratically elected government, but elections were never held under this local government system. Zia-ul-Haq issued the Local Government Ordinance in 1979, and elections for Local Councils were held on a nonpartisan basis in 1979, 1983, 1987, and 1991 under the provisions of the ordinance. It is hilarious to note that in Pakistan, while civilian governments were in control, either there was no local government or it was discouraged from being. However, each military administration, from 1958 to 1969 and again from 1977 to 1988, placed a great value on the growth of local government (Government of Pakistan, 2004). It is argued that in general, both [Ayub and Zia] efforts had been resulted in the institutionalization of clienteles, personalized politics, had disempowered the provincial elected tier, limited the power of elected local governments, and placed 'control' in the hands of the bureaucracy while maintaining the centralized nature of the state at the federal level (Cheema and Mohammad, 2003).

## 3. Local Government Reforms of Pervez Musharraf

General Pervez Musharraf's military administration, which came to power in 1999, announced a "Seven Point Agenda" to address the country's institutional crises and move the country forward in its national

reconstruction. A variety of arguments was presented in support of a new local government system in the Pakistan. According to some, political and administrative systems have been abused by political families in the past, resulting in the collapse of political and administrative systems. Corruption is another scourge that has wreaked havoc on the country's governance (Asian Development Bank, 2004). During the month of May, 2000, a more complete devolution proposal was offered for public feedback and debate. Finally, on August 14, 2000, the government approved the new Local Government Plan 2000 (Government of Pakistan, 2000). With the Devolution Plan, government structure and service administration were to be decentralized while important public service administrations were restructured in order to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. It can be done through the engagement and supervision of the public, and a more responsiveness to the needs of the people (Asian Development Bank, 2004). One of the goals was the Devolution of authority to the people at the grassroots level, and to achieve this goal, the government sought to transfer power to people's representatives at all levels while also providing them with accountability and administrative authority, as well as checks and balances to prevent abuse of power or authority (Naqvi, 2000). The National Reconstruction Bureau (NRB) was established with a wide range of responsibilities to devise a system to devolve the political, administrative, and financial powers to grass root level. However, the most significant reform was the Devolution of power, which includes empowerment of citizens, decentralization of administrative authority and deconcentration of functions. A certain checks and balances was also introduced to prevent abuse of power (Paul, 2010).

According to the drafters of the proposed plan, a comprehensive restructuring of all aspects of the political system is necessary because they believe that rebuilding institutions in a service-oriented manner cannot be accomplished without a well-developed participatory structure. Another study finds, "the system is designed to ensure that the people's genuine interests are served and their rights safeguarded through an enabling environment, people's participation, clear administrative responsibilities without political interference, and making it the elected head of the districts. At the same time, it promises checks and balances to safeguard against abuse of authority (Paul., 2010, p.43). A combination of political and institutional reforms is a critical component of any strategy aimed at halting the marginalization of an increasingly large segment of the population (Naqvi, 2000). This approach is based on five fundamental concepts or five Ds; Model



**Figure 1: The 5 D's, Source: Steyaert & Jiggins, 2007**

This plan suggested several noteworthy aims. It claimed that this system would increase government agencies' efficiency by streamlining their structure and allowing citizens to participate in decision-making. It also found a way to monitor government officials effectively. Various mechanisms were introduced at the district and tehsil levels to reduce delays in administrative and financial decisions and to dispose of citizens' grievances. It also introduced special initiatives to allow the most active members of society to participate in community service and development-related activities. The participation of the community has been secured by the establishment of village/neighborhood councils and the establishment of a Citizen Community Board (CCB). The community can participate in the planning and execution of development initiatives, and it can take ownership of the projects as they progress. By providing information on

development activities, the residents are given the ability to monitor the progress of the project. The monitoring committees in each of the three local councils will be notified to keep an eye on the administration. Additionally, through the Citizen Community Boards, citizens can directly participate in the performance evaluation of district councils and departmental staff. All information will be made available to the public to maintain transparency. It will be mandatory for the local council to display information on various development efforts for the general public's benefit. This will be done for the sake of public awareness.

**Table 1: Seats Reserved for Women in Devolution Plan**

	Number of Councils	Total Seats	Reserved Seats for Women
Union Council	6022	126462	36066
Tehsil Council	305	8192	1749
Town Council	30	773	161
District Council	96	8806	1988
Total	6453	144233	39964

Source. Reyes and Azizah, 2002

#### 4. Women Seats in Devolution Plan

This new system of local administration was largely supported by women due to the reserve of 33 percent of seats to female candidates and even this was called the "Cultural Revolution" (Bari, 2001). It had been demanded by women rights groups. They want the institution of local government to be egalitarian and not hierachal, accountable and not autocratic, responsive to people's needs, and not serve their narrow organizational interests (Jahan, 1996). Alternatively, it has been suggested that any state-driven decentralized governance reforms will fall short of achieving women's empowerment (Abro, 2004; Audi & Ali, 2018; Ashraf & Ali, 2018). Another researcher voiced caution about the new political activities and pointed out that new system will establish new power relationships at local level and might disempower women (Bari, 2000). It has been asserted that the 33 percent reservation of seats for women has impacted the composition of elected councilors in terms of gender representation in the institution (Bari, 2005).

#### 5. Women Participation Local Government Elections of 2000-01

Local Government elections were held in five phases from December 2000 to June 2001 as a part of the devolution agenda. In these elections only 32222 women were elected to Union Councils in the four provinces. In 305 Tehsil Councils, 1675 women were elected including two Tehsil Nazims. It was quite encouraging that for 30 Town Councils, 161 seats were reserved for women, and all seats were filled (100%). There were 96 District councils with 1988 women seats; however, 1905, women were elected, making up 90 percent of the total number of seats. Women have a total representation of 36191 seats, including 16 women elected as Nazims and Nain-Nazims and 126 women elected to minority seats. During the five phases of these LG elections, 3844 women's seats remained vacant. Seats in general (women) category numbered 1903, while seats in the Peasants/Workers Women category numbered 1941.

**Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Five Phases of Local Government Elections 2000-01**

	UCs	Seats	Nominations	Elected Candidates	Vacant Seats	Candidates elected Unopposed
Phase-1	956	3822	5486	3399	423	1318
Phase-2	1459	5836	10005	5425	371	1174
Phase-3	1577	6244	12167	6077	167	1075
Phase-4	1683	6752	12876	6241	491	1206
Phase-5	347	1388	1589	937	451	297
Total	6022	24024	42123	22119	1903	5070

Sources of Data: ECP, 2004

Another significant trend was noted in that many candidates were elected unopposed in every province. However, the proportion of women candidates was particularly high in Balochistan regarding representation. According to ECP data, 5070 women were elected unopposed to the Muslim General (women) category. It has been related to a variety of social issues and conservatism. Observations by the ECP revealed that male members of society in the NWFP and Balochistan refused to allow their female relatives to vote in the elections (ECP, 2004).

**Table 3: Peasants/Workers (Women)**

	Seats	Nominations	Elected Candidates	Vacant Seats	Candidates Elected Unopposed
Phase-1	1912	2143	1446	463	743
Phase-2	2918	4352	2419	499	936
Phase-3	3154	5477	2882	272	982
Phase-4	3366	5780	2935	431	1052
Phase-5	737	737	418	276	214
<b>Total</b>	<b>16489</b>	<b>10100</b>	<b>1941</b>	<b>3920</b>	<b>3043</b>

Sources of Data: ECP, 2004

Peasants and workers previously had no representation in local government, but the Devolution Plan 2000 allocated six seats to peasants and workers in the local government. A noteworthy development in this plan was the addition of two seats for women in this category, which was the most significant change.

**Table 4: Total Number of Seats Won by Women at Union Council Level**

	Seats	Elected Candidates
Phase-1	5734	4848
Phase-2	8754	7884
Phase-3	9398	8959
Phase-4	10098	9176
Phase-5	2082	1355
<b>Total</b>	<b>36066</b>	<b>32222</b>

Sources of Data: ECP, 2004

It is quite promising that the success rate for women in local government elections has been approximately 90 percent in all phases, except for phase 5, where the success rate was just 65 percent. This could be because, in the Fifth phase, elections were held in the provinces of NWFP and Balochistan, which are considered conservative, where tribal culture is very strong. These two provinces are considered relatively conservative, have strong tribal cultures, and where religious leaders play an important role in local politics. Religious leaders issued even Fatwas against the participation of women in the elections during this period. It was observed during this period.

**Table 5: Women Elected in the Different Tiers of Local Government Elections: Provincial Results Comparison**

Province	Union Councils	Tehsil Council	Town Committees	District Council
Punjab	20007	1074	50	1115
Sindh	5878	207	59	360
NWFP	3963	175	30	278
Balochistan	2374	215	22	152
<b>Total</b>	<b>32222</b>	<b>1761</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>1905</b>

Sources of Data: ECP, 2004

It is clear from the table 5 that in the elections of UCs that overall, 90% of seats reserved for women were filled. The province of Punjab nearly 97% of seats were filled. There is a significant disparity between Punjab, Balochistan, and NWFP results. The women's remarkable achievement was that no seat remained

vacant in Town Committee elections. Women candidates showed better results in Tehsil Council elections. In the District Councils' elections, women had been very active and visible. In Sindh, 99.7% of seats were filled, the highest among the four provinces. In Balochistan, 87.9% of seats were filled. In Sindh, two women were elected District Nazim. These two women indeed belong to influential political families, but it should be remembered that most politicians belong to influential families. It is a good trend that even women of landlord families are coming to politics. It also indicates that District Nazims was made powerful in a certain way that pushed many national-level politicians to get elected a District Nazim.

**Table 6: Women Representation in all Tiers of the Local Government**

	Total Seats	Elected
Union Council	36066	32222
Tehsil Council	1834	1761
Town Council	161	161
District Council	1988	1905
Total	40049	36049

Sources of Data: ECP, 2004

Female candidates showed remarkable performance in the elections for Town Councils, where 161 seats were reserved for female candidates, and all seats were filled by female candidates. There were 40049 allotted for women at UCs, and 36049 of those seats were taken up by women. Only 4000 seats remained vacant. Among the District Council's seats, 1988 seats were reserved for women; 1905 seats had been filled, and 83 seats remained vacant.

**Table 7: Elected Nazims/Naib Nazims and Minority Seats (Women)**

	Union Council	Thesil Councils	District Councils	Total
Nazim/Naib Nazims	13	1	2	16
Minority Seats	125	1	0	126

Sources of Data: ECP, 2004

Two women from Sindh were elected as District Nazim, and one woman from Sindh was also elected as Tehsil Nazim and two women were also elected as Union Council Nazim. Nine women in Punjab were elected as Union Council Nazim and two more were elected as Union Council Naib-Nazim (ECP, 2004). Only four women were elected as District Nazims in Pakistan's 2005 Local Government elections, out of 107 districts from Sindh. It was the first time that many women were elected as members of different tiers of local government. As one women rights activist and scholar pointed out, Women have only been recognized as a political category twice in the history of Pakistan, one during the elections of 1970, when women voted independently against the wishes of the male members of their families in favor of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and secondly when they marched in substantial numbers into the local government elections in 2001 (Bari, 2010).

## 6. Findings

As far as political background, age, educational qualification, marital status, and occupational background of women are concerned, they stayed constant throughout the five phases of the election, with most candidates (almost 75 percent) having never previously run for office. Almost 60% of the women were younger than 45 years. Half of the women who ran for office and were elected to any local government institution were illiterate. This could have major ramifications for their ability to function as an elected official in the activities of local government. The agricultural sector was represented by 80 percent of the candidates and elected members. Many familiar faces and members of feudal clans were also elected in LG elections, but their numbers were relatively small in comparison. These individuals from strong political and feudal families have deep roots in Pakistan's political system. It is argued that only the electoral system alone will not transform the entire landscape of local politics. Still, land reforms, a high level of literacy, the democratization of political parties, and a more effective role of civil society and community-based organizations (CBOs) are all important steps toward replacing the traditional political elite with new faces (Bari, 2005).

In the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan, there have been a number of cultural and tribal elements that have made women's participation in local government politics difficult. Some male members denied to let their female relatives to vote in the elections in particular areas because they believe it is unethical. In contrast, women's engagement remained high in many parts of Punjab. The number of persons who voted increased with the passage of each phase, and this trend persisted. Women were unable to vote in several parts of the country because of a lack of Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs). It is projected that an average of 20% of female voters did not have identity cards during the first two phases of the local government elections. The level of women participation in Balochistan and NWFP remained low (in terms of voter turnout, unopposed candidates, and nominations) throughout all five phases of the electoral process. Even Nevertheless, the level of participation in Punjab remained high throughout all five phases of the local government elections.

In some parts of the country, women were not allowed to participate in or cast ballots in the Local Government elections. A large number of religious leaders from the NWFP's Deer and Malakand divisions gathered on May 27, 2001, to announce that the Nikah, Namaz Janajah, and other religious rites of female candidates and voters in Deer will be boycotted. It is a blatant breach of articles 25 and 34 (Principles of Policy), which require the state to ensure that women have equal opportunity to participate in all aspects of society (Mooraj, 2005). According to media reports, women were reportedly barred from voting in elections in the NWFP districts of Sawabi and Dir under the pretense that female participation in politics is against the norms and practices of the local community. The South Asia Partnership carried out research on the performance of the local government system in 18 districts of the Punjab province. According to the findings of this research study, there are still numerous vulnerabilities in the local government system of the country (South Asia Partnership, 2005). Female respondents to the study were still considered to be a minority, with the vast majority of women professing no political opinion. The meetings were attended by male relatives of the elected members as well. Women were asked to observe purdah in a large number of Union Councils.

The resolutions made by women were not carried out in a realistic manner. Involvement of women in the sessions of local council sessions was deemed unnecessary by the majority of the council members. Another practice that has been observed in many rural areas is that feudal lords and influential families designate their maidservants or the wives of their servants to represent them. Nominations for various committee assignments in the all tiers of local administration were not considered suitable. The way male Nazims and Councilors ignored women councilors, treated them with contempt, denied their development funds, and expected them to confine themselves to women issues, created a strong oppositional consciousness among women Councilors that resulted in increased awareness among them of their own identity (Bari, 2005).

When comparing the circumstances of the 2005 local government elections to the situation of the previous local government elections, there has been a positive progress. Women ran for office in greater numbers in the 2005 local government elections than they did in the 2001 local government elections (ECP, 2005). Women ran in local government elections in 2005 with greater political confidence than they had four years earlier, thanks to four years of political training at the grassroots level (Khan, 2005). Sixty- women submitted nomination papers in 2005 local government Elections, even in religiously conservative areas such as the Northwest Frontier Province and Balochistan, where religious groups have a large presence. Only 18 women have submitted nomination papers in 34 local councils in these areas (Timergarh and Lower Dir) in the previous LG elections, leaving 196 seats unfilled in the previous LG elections (Dawn, July 28, 2005). It has been hailed as "a big step forward in the advancement of women's empowerment in Pakistan (Pakistan Observer 2005). Similarly, significant was an occurrence that occurred on August 22, 2005, when 100 women from the Nowshera district of the Northwest Frontier Province protested in Islamabad outside the headquarters of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). They were calling for re-election in their constituency, where they had been essentially barred from participating in previous elections.

Following that, the Acting Chief Election Commissioner issued a press release calling the results of seven polling stations in the Nowshera and Sawabi districts "null and void" only two days later (ECP, 2005). The Election Commission of Pakistan further asked the district police officers of Nowshera and Swabi districts to pursue legal procedures against those responsible for the aforesaid illegal act of denying women the right

to vote (ECP, 2005). Another study discovered that the vast majority of women at the union council level were the relatives of the male members of the council, who were brought in indirectly through the vote of male members who were already directed, primarily to serve the agenda of the male members, according to the findings (Bari, 2005).

## 7. Conclusion

The notion of Devolution is an important component of a democratic system since it involves people in the mainstream of politics. However, in Pakistan, this principle has been utilized to legitimize a dictatorship by providing it with legitimacy. That is why the military dictators in Pakistan were always keen to establish a local government structure. Although the Devolution of Power Plan has many glitches, it has instilled hope and enthusiasm in the hearts and minds of women everywhere. On the other hand, the election of a huge number of women is a very positive sign for the country's future. The majority of the female members were in their early twenties. In the past, there have been issues with financial decentralization, an overpowering misunderstanding of boundaries, and political meddling, among other things; the strategy was successful in many areas across the country.

The Devolution of power plan was implemented to empower the marginalized segments of society to allow them to feel as though they are a part of the decision-making process. Even though the first tenure of the local government system in Pakistan was a learning experience, there are still numerous loopholes in the system. Female members have been allocated 33% of the seats. However, they have not been granted adequate representation in decision-making processes. Women elected in the different tiers of local government pointed out a difficult time. Women were even barred from running for office in some parts of the NWFP in some areas. Fatwas were issued by religious leaders prohibiting women from participating in local government elections in Pakistan. In a few instances, women were threatened with death. The behavior of male members was likewise quite strident. Women members did not receive any development grants throughout their tenure. Many union councils had women as members-only on paper. They were never present in the official meetings, and on numerous occasion, male relatives were there in place of female relatives. The harsh reality is that majority of female members were uneducated. Such women who lack education cannot make their presence felt effective.

Perhaps the most significant triumph of the system is that people now believe that they can communicate with their elected representatives directly. The perception of representatives' availability and accessibility is a beginning point, and it may serve as a springboard for women's empowerment, as the new system has created numerous chances for women at the grassroots level, among other things. It provided them with valuable experience to play a more effective role in national politics. If this system were allowed to operate for 10 or 15 years, women would have meaningful representation.

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