

Devolution is not working

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IT is now generally believed by both supporters and detractors alike that President Musharraf's devolution plan has not only not accomplished the goals it set out to achieve, but has, on the contrary, created so much confusion that it has adversely affected administration in the four provinces.

Its biggest drawback is that it is full of internal contradictions. These have, in fact, left the Local Government Ordinance of 2001 open to various, often conflicting interpretations which have made its implementation exceedingly difficult. No clear cut boundary lines have been drawn on the playing field, which could delineate the relationship between the mayor known as the nazim and the bureaucratic head of a district who represents the centre, referred to in bureaucratic jargon as the DCO. And even though the ordinance has officially designated the mayor as the chief executive of the district government, to be assisted by the DCO, the latter has on many an occasion ignored the former and struck out on his own.

How well one remembers that historic speech of August 14, 2000 when the people were led to believe that at last the nation had thrown up a person who was going to take them out of their misery and put the country right. They watched in a mixture of awe and pleasurable anticipation as a buoyant president in a starched khaki uniform, addressed the nation on television, and gradually unveiled his Local Government Plan. It was his finest hour.

The intention behind the plan, which had been approved in a joint meeting of the National Security Council and the federal cabinet nine days earlier, was, according to him, an attempt to build genuine democratic institutions and 'empower the people at the grassroots level.' Good, wholesome clichés. The only problem is, they are inflicted on the nation every time a reactionary military government takes over. But in spite of

check military adventurism.

As a consequence, the main effect of local government has been to undermine federalism by circumventing constitutional provisions for provincial, political, administrative and fiscal autonomy. Though the plan demonstrates the democratic credentials of a regime to audiences abroad, and especially to the international media, an important fallout of the move is that it depoliticizes governance and develops and sets in place a new political elite to challenge and undermine the authority of elected members of the opposition.

If one takes a cold hard look at the plan, one must come to the inescapable conclusion that, instead of strengthening local control and accountability, it has undercut the established political parties and siphoned off power from the provinces while doing little to minimize corruption or establish clear accountability at a local level. Instead of enhancing democracy, the reforms ushered in by President Musharraf have, in fact, strengthened and consolidated military rule.

The plan initially promised substantial autonomy for elected local bodies. And despite the rhetoric from Islamabad about empowering the local officials to put things right, local governments have only nominal powers. It is not clear if President Musharraf realizes the irony, but there is a huge contradiction in the dispensation of power. Devolution from the centre directly to the local levels, negates the very concept of decentralization, because Pakistan's principal federating units, its four provinces, have been completely bypassed.

Military dictators usually have a loathing for politicians who they believe are responsible for the mess this country finds itself in, and there is every possibility, that like Ayub Khan, President Musharraf's primary intention when he came to power, was to lay the foundations of a genuine local democracy. But things haven't worked out quite the way they should have. It's not just the PPP and the MMA that have

this, the people thought this time things were going to be different.

The main stated objectives of the plan were: political devolution, administrative decentralization and the redistribution of resources to local governments. The basic issue, in the words of the president, was to "empower the impoverished, and to make the people the master of their own destiny."

The speech contained a few more platitudes about wanting to introduce "the essence of democracy" and not sham democracy which promotes the interests of the privileged. Devolution was going to provide the panacea, the grail on the marsh that everybody had been waiting for, "and would change the fate of the country."

Unfortunately, none of this has happened. The rich are still getting richer, the people are still impoverished and in the process the sham democracy which has evolved has turned the military into a fountainhead of wisdom and enlightenment. Worse still, some of the nazims have been doubling as lumberjacks and systematically destroying the environment.

The Local Government Plan is not a new idea. Military dictators in Pakistan have used it to considerable advantage in the past, primarily as a weapon against traditional political adversaries and the well organized civil service, the last vestige of a colonial past.

It has a wonderful psychological appeal to members of the urban proletariat and to those members of the public who are more affluent but still outside the ambit of political party influence. It also conveys the impression that the man at the helm of affairs is trying to replace a system which is corrupt, which hasn't worked and is unworkable.

In essence, it institutes lower tiers of government as a substitute for democratization at the provincial and national levels. In one sense, however,

President Musharraf's plan could be regarded as an advancement in administrative rectitude because it promised to vest vast political and administrative authority in the nazims by providing substantial federal and provincial grants to enable them to fulfil their objectives. What is more, despite its lack of legitimacy, the plan has considerable support from international donors who believe the scheme is actually furthering the cause of democracy and keeping in

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proved to be a nuisance, his own plan has generated considerable friction between various levels of government and low domestic acceptance is undermining its long-term prospects.

The general conception nevertheless remains that the main rationale for devolution was the legitimacy and survival of the regime, and that the local governments were installed to create a pliable political elite which could be manipulated to ensure that the military's grip in local politics is strengthened. How else can one explain why district nazims used public funds and other state resources to stage pro-Musharraf rallies during the presidential referendum in April 2002 and to support the parliamentary candidates of the King's party in the 2002 national elections.

The local government experiment has been closely observed by public sector organizations in Europe and Asia. But the most incisive and comprehensive report on the subject is the one prepared by the International Crisis Group and released on March 22. There is evidence of deep investigative research and scholarship. The volume is bristling with analyses and ideas which if adopted might be able to put the derailed wagon back on the rails.

ICG in its executive summary has made a number of recommendations to the government of Pakistan and to the international financial institutions and key donor governments which, if implemented, would certainly make the plan meaningful and workable.

If nothing else it might ensure government elections are held on a party basis, with direct polls for district officials, and that the centre refrains from imposing political discipline on local officials and misusing them for political ends such as partisan electioneering. It would, at least, be a beginning.

Devolution of power from the