**The devolution plan**

Syed Muhammad Abdullah

Monday, Dec 20, 2021

Holding local government elections in Pakistan has always been a challenge and a dilemma for the sitting government, both politically and administratively. Even if the first phase is completed successfully, empowering local bodies in a true sense remains a dream.

Going through all the previous local government models, I believe there were some essential shortcomings which caused their eventual failure. However, there was this plan presented by the Musharraf’s regime, famously known as the Devolution Plan or Local Government Ordinance (LGO) 2001, which nearly struck the right balance in devising a sustainable local democracy. To view it as only a local government reform may not do justice to this comprehensive package; rather it may be viewed as a broad-based administrative reform which aimed at changing the governance landscape of the country.

First off, it was the first time in history that all departments, including district administration and police, were proposed to be brought under the direct subordination of an elected representative in a district; provisions were made for the nazim to be a district executive in the truest sense. Moreover, major provincial line departments were devolved to the district level; at least twelve grade 19 posts of executive district officers (EDOs), who were technical experts heading their respective departments such as health, education, finance & planning, communication & works, revenue and community development, were created.

Similarly, more than 20 posts of grade 18 of district officers (Dos) were also created to support EDOs and have a structure of departments at the district level. Previously, technical experts and provincial civil servants waited for at least 12-15 years in one grade before being promoted, thereby burdening the government with least motivated human resource. The LGO 2001 offered unprecedented career progression opportunities to the (provincial) civil servants and technical cadres alike, and improvement in general was seen at every level of the government. Administratively speaking, the district became a self-contained ecosystem wherein an effective interface was created which met local level development demands.

Second, a district secretariat was established and all the authority with respect to every department was devolved to the same in order to implement the enacted administrative decentralization in letter and spirit. For example, the executive district office (health) would head all the health institutions and staff of the district, and would act against any officer of the health department in case of non-performance (unlike the pre- and post-devolution system where the authority has been given back to the provincial departments). Moreover, the executive district officer (education) had the same authority and all the EDOs would report to the DCO who would be a senior grade 20 officer reporting to District Nazim/Mayor.

With such a robust accountability mechanism, it was witnessed for the first time that the decisions of districts remained in districts, and were autonomous with respect to all important matters – thereby reducing the unnecessary hierarchies of decision-making of the provincial or federal government, and directly improving the daily life of a regular citizen.

Third, it was an anomaly that there was no district government or any empowered political entity at the district level. The federal and provincial governments were headed by an elected political representative and it would have been only rational to replicate the same structure at the grassroots levels. Hence, the LGO introduced the concept of district governments headed by an elected political representative. In other words, he would act as the chief executive of a district.

Lastly, local governments in general can serve as a nursery for the development of second and third lines of leadership (which our political system direly lacks and which makes it crisis prone); and if the system is strengthened and perceived to be effective, then people with potential can actually come forward and deliver through that system. A few honourable mentions that came to the political limelight via the LGO – and rightly so – are Mustafa Kamal (mayor of Karachi), Naimatullah Khan (mayor of Karachi), Mian Amir (mayor of Lahore), and Major Tahir Sadiq (mayor of Attock) etc.

What were the challenges it faced? First and foremost, it lacked viable political legitimacy due to its origins. Historically, local governments are created by military regimes to patronise a pliant political class from which support can be gained. Moreover, federal and provincial parliamentarians were wary of losing sway over politically lucrative local development projects to local bodies. This created major incentives for the widening fissures between province and local level relations

Adding to that were the district administration and police – specifically members of federal services – which were not willing to serve under an all empowered nazim/mayor and thus weakening the latter's office. The former argued that if the authority of managing law & order and development funds were given to the nazims it would turn into victimisation of political opponents and development activities/funds would go in favour of a specific political party respectively (although the same logic applies to CM/PM as well).

Given the political interests and diversity in the political field, major political actors could not tolerate an empowered nazim. Moreover, the district governments lacked the financial autonomy that they rightfully deserved. The provincial finance commission existed but only in name and the brilliant idea of a district finance commission, which would have been a milestone in making financial decentralisation a reality, was not made operational. Musharraf could rightly be credited for devising a fine third tier of government – regardless of perceived intentions. However, if a sincere attempt had followed this magnanimous endeavour, we might have achieved our hitherto unrealised dream of democracy at the grassroots levels

In short, the devolution plan envisioned a system that was aimed at strengthening democratic institutions, giving ownership of decisions to people and improving governance at the grassroots levels. However, with the passage of time the spirit of decentralisation succumbed to different political and administrative interests that deformed the system and ended in its failure. Had Musharraf been a democrat and continued the initial resolve of what he intended to achieve, we would have been spared the unending governance challenges that are typical of the top-heavy system that we have today.

The writer is a public policy practitioner hailing from erstwhile Fata. He tweets @syedabdullah100