

Name Muhammad Hassan Shahzad

PMS Punjab online batch.

Local Self Government: a missing link in the governance of Pakistan

Outline

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2 Need of LSG

A Principle of Subsidiarity

B Political training

C School for leader ship

3 Causes of under developed Local government system.

A lack of constitutional protections

The research in journal of social and administrative sciences says that lack of consistent legislation is main reason preventing LGs in Pakistan from becoming the major pillars of governance.

UNDP says that lack of permanent constitutional safeguards for the terms of LGs allow provincial governments to use administrative apparatus instead of LG bodies for years.

B The challenge of bureaucracy

World bank notes that fragmentation of authority in cities like Karachi is the main cause of managerial failure because it renders no one responsible.

C traditional political parties

FAFEN [free and fair elections network] argues that reluctance of political parties to hold regular elections stems from fear of losing control over lucrative local projects.

D lack of Fiscal decentralization

As per PIDE LGs spend only less than 1percent of total national income.

4 Effects of weak local government system.

A: Poor human development

UNDP identifies Pakistan's inability to localize government as the main reason of its stagnant progress in fulfillment of sustainable development goals.

B administrative collapse in metropolitan cities

ADB argues that poor Urban management is direct result of the lack of third tier capable of managing integrated municipal functions.

Administrative breakdown of Karachi from 2010 to 2025.

5 Recommendations

A Strong constitutional cover

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6 Conclusion

The Essay

Good governance in Pakistan is contingent with implementation of principal of subsidiarity. Good governance means responsive, equitable and real time management of state. On the other hand, principal of subsidiarity means that administration should be undertaken in the local context. It means that local problems need local solutions, which is possible only under the system of LSG. This rule is obeyed in all the model states of the contemporary world like in Finland and Sweden. Unfortunately, in Pakistan this golden rule is not followed in its essence. For example, working LSG, which is the result of subsidiarity principal, is missing in most of the areas of country. UNDP has attributed administrative inefficiency in Pakistan to the lack of LSG in the country. Ironically, Pakistan saw improved state responsiveness and service delivery, during martial law regimes. Mushrif's devolution plan is the most recent example. However, consistent application of this principal has been missing in democratic governments. The relented approach toward the principal of subsidiarity and LSG has rendered Pakistan a failed administration. To bring state apparatus to the doorstep of citizens, deployment of working LSGs, as per the spirit of subsidiarity principal, is inevitable. Therefore, it can be said that principal of subsidiarity, which necessitates LSG, is the textbook rule for efficient administration in the country.

Besides resolving local issues, LSG system provides political training to the masses.

Without LSGs people feel disconnected in the grand architecture of state; this

disconnection leads to alienation and disengagement between state and citizen. Due to growing indifference, people stop participating in political activities, which results in politically unaware and untrained franchise. On the other hand, LSG system brings politics to the grassroots level, and provides an opportunity for the public to participate directly in political affairs. Direct participation, like election of more accessible local leaders, imparts political knowledge to people. As per Cambridge law journal, LSGs provide necessary “education in democracy” to the people. Generally, public has more knowledge about grassroots level issues that enables them to check the performance of LSG representatives more efficiently; this basic exercise trains them to behave similarly at the national level. In this way, more engaging and aware electorate formulates. This awareness translates into the performance of the elected members, which in turn improves the quality of governance. Therefore, it can be said that LSG system educates masses and provides them with a nursery to learn politics and effect local administration positively. Unfortunately, this basic link is missing in the governance of Pakistan. One must learn to handle a gun before firing a bullet. Hence, it can be concluded that LSGs are needed to ensure the political training of masses, which is important to ensure good governance.

Along with aforementioned benefits, LSG system also provides breeding ground for people centric leadership. The leadership, having ample knowledge of local affairs, can ensure efficient service-delivery at the grassroots. LSGs ensure the knowledge of grassroots issues in the generation of young leaders. For example, leaders contesting for local government elections build their campaign around local and people-oriented issues, instead of embarking on national or international jargons. Therefore, their election and reelection depend upon the local parameters. This fundamental practice inculcates the importance of local issues in the planning of leadership. UN SDG report 2025 emphasizes the significance of LSG in breeding a well aware leadership, both at subnational and national level. However, absence of functional local self-government in Pakistan, deprives her of responsive, agile and anticipatory cadre of leaders. This missing link in governance, hinders Pakistan from governing its subjects efficiently. It means that working LSGs are important for producing capable leadership, and capable leadership necessitates good governance. But in Pakistan first and the basic link is missing, LSG system, which makes good governance illusive. Hence, it can be said that robust local leadership is important for good governance, which is absent due to the missing link of local self-government in Pakistan.

So far, it is discussed that how LSG is the most crucial missing link in the governance system of Pakistan. In the following paragraphs, the causes of missing LSG structure will be discussed.

The primary cause of fragile LSG system in Pakistan is lack of proper constitutional cover. Constitution protects the basic principals of public interest in modern states. For example, most of the written constitutions in the world safeguard fundamental rights, independent judiciary and local self government. Whereas, constitution of Pakistan features only a single sub-article, 140-A, for local self government. Ostensibly, this weak provision is not sufficient for establishing an entire tear in the structure of administration. Journal for social and administrative sciences says that lack of consistent legislation prevents LSG from becoming the major pillar in the governance of Pakistan. Moreover, the only constitutional provision, 140-A, does not delineates the necessary details for the process. For instance, unlike detailed chapters about federal and provincial governments, sub-article about LSG does not even mention fixed term or procedure for functioning. As per UNDP report, lack of sufficient constitutional cover allows provincial governments to manipulate LSG elections to prevent distribution of funds. Countries with strong local governments have adequate constitutional safeguards for LSGs, USA, France and India are notable examples in this context. On the basis of these facts, it can be determined that proper constitutional cover is unavoidable to establish sound LSG system in the country. Therefore, it can be concluded that lack of constitutional cover is main cause of inconsistent LSG system in Pakistan.

In addition to lack of constitutional cover, bureaucracy has also hindered the establishment of proper LSG system in Pakistan. Pakistan inherited the colonial bureaucracy, which had its own political ambitions. After its inception, Pakistan witnessed an era of political instability, which left a vacuum of power. This vacuum was filled with bureaucracy and other non-democratic forces. Bureaucracy has always seen LSG as the rival and parallel system of governance, which reduces their influence. Due to this reason, top civil servants have never endorsed the idea of LSG. As per institute for strategic studies, research and analysis [ISSRA], "Civil bureaucracy sees empowerment of LSG as erosion of its own traditional authority". Moreover, Bureaucracy has used its administrative and legislative influence to claw back the functioning of LSG as well. For example, it has hindered the functioning of established LSG in Islamabad. In 2020, basic subjects like water management and sanitation were transferred back to CDA, capital development authority, from local government. Similarly, in Punjab local government act 2025, elected metropolitan has been made accountable to provincial bureaucracy. Keeping all the discussion in the view, it can be said that bureaucracy has not only desired extra influence, but also used various tactics to acquire it. Therefore, it can be concluded that bureaucracy is a major cause behind dysfunctional LSG in Pakistan.

Complementing constitutional loopholes and challenge of bureaucracy, traditional political parties have also exacerbated the fate of LSG in Pakistan. Traditional political parties in the third world are family enterprises, which are based on personality cult and patronage. Functional LSG system challenges both tenets of their existence. Local leaders operate on the grassroots level that brings them in direct contact with public. Exclusive relation with the public affords local leaders an opportunity to make their own face value. This phenomenon on the grassroots threatens the personality cult of the party leaders on the top. People stop buying the “final savior” narrative of top party leaders because the similar role is now fulfilled by the LSG leaders. This process makes costs too high for political parties to allow LSGs. Similarly, political parties in Pakistan form alliances and maintain patronage/allegiances through fund allocations. LSGs carry away this leverage of political leaders as well. In robust LSG systems tax collection and funds allocations become the discretion of local bodies. According to FAFEN, free and fair election network, “political parties fear from local bodies because of the threat of losing control over lucrative local projects”. This reasoning shows that Local self-governments challenge the essence of traditional political parties, giving these parties a huge incentive to hinder their growth. Therefore, it can be affirmed that traditional political parties are a major contributor behind broken LSG system in Pakistan.

Aggravating all the factors mentioned, lack of fiscal decentralization further complicates the equation for LSGs in Pakistan. Fiscal decentralization refers to revenue collection and expenditure at local level. It ensures that tax collection should be done in local context, which improves revenue collection; it also endorses resource allocation in local framework that enhances efficiency and productivity. Regrettably, this feature is missing in the economy of Pakistan. Islamabad is one of the few capitals which collect tax in the country and distributes the extract. This vertical distribution of financial resources puts local administration at the disposal of federal and provincial governments. Financially dependent local governments find themselves fettered by the will of central governments. Due to the fiscal dependency local governments fail in serving their purpose owing to lack of resources. Political parties at provincial and federal levels prefer to spend resources to burnish their political capital, instead of transferring them to local tears. As per PIDE, Pakistan Institute for development economics, LSGs spend less than 1 percent of the annual budget. Similarly, journal of public policy practitioners, attributes fiscal strangulation as the main cause for the failed system of LSGs in Pakistan. These facts point to the reality that lack of fiscal decentralization keeps the link of LSGs missing in the governance of Pakistan. Hence, it can be safely concluded that lack of fiscal decentralization is the main cause of ineffective LSGS in Pakistan.

Up to this point, a detailed account of How LSGs are important, and Why they are missing, has been provided. From this point, effects of their absence and recommendations for revival will be discussed.

First and the foremost negative effect of missing link of LSG is poor human development in the country. Human development is the inculcation of important life skills and provision of basic facilities to the citizens by their government. The pith of this process is encapsulated in the functional system of LSG. For example, education and health are two of the most significant pillars of human development, and both are administratively local in nature. Pakistan has faced stagnation in the progress toward human development goals due to incapable LSGs [UNDP]. The nation ranks at the bottom of indices monitoring education, 157 out of 193 [world data], health, 130 out of 195 [WHO] and hunger, 106 out of 182 [FAO], continuously. Such rankings augur the fact that Pakistan is struggling to ensure human development; due to lack of strong third tier government. Consequently, it is prudent to propose that Pakistan's human development failure links with failed LSG system.

Likewise, lack of LSG in Pakistan has also caused poor urban administration and management. LSGs become especially crucial in the management of large metropolitan cities. They ensure the real time identification and resolution of nuanced and complicated problems emerging in cities. In Pakistan lack of viable local government has resulted in the complete administrative collapse in huge municipalities. Administrative degeneration of Karachi since 2010 is the prime example of this phenomenon. The absence of clear jurisdictional classification and self-sufficient local bodies has turned city of light into the city of chaos and confusion. Poor service delivery in the cities like Peshawar, Queta and Hyderabad mimic the same pattern as well. According to ADB, Asian Development Bank, poor urban management in Pakistan is the direct result of third tier incapable of managing integrated municipal functions. Strong local bodies have shown promise to govern massive urban centers. Like New York City, Shanghai and Tokiyo are managed very efficiently via local bodies. Pakistan should also follow the same course. In the end, it is determined that incoherent LSG structure has caused urban management to crumble in Pakistan. After discussing need of LSG, causes of its absence and consequent negative effects, the focus will now shift toward resolution. This section will ultimately lead to the conclusion.

Strong constitutional cover can provide an effective deterrence to protect LSG system in Pakistan. Though constitution of Pakistan mentions and emphasizes the importance of LSG and its implementation, it does not outline details pertaining the subject. For instance, functions and structures of provincial and federal government are described thoroughly, in

separate chapters, but system of LSG is only discussed in a single article [140-A]. To address this matter, an immediate and comprehensive constitutional amendment is required. Initially, Indian constitution did not provide a holistic chapter for LSGs, but they added it later in amendment 104 to their constitution. Now, LSGs of India are working with greater efficacy and consistency than those of Pakistan. Pakistan should also follow the suit to come out of this menace. Conclusively, a strong constitutional cover can provide a bedrock to the struggling system of LSG in Pakistan.

On the other hand, the practice of fiscal decentralization can further strengthen LSG in Pakistan. Pakistan is one of the few countries, which collect income tax at the federal level. While in most of the developed nations, such tax collection is done by local bodies. To ensure functional independence, LSGs should be given the authority to collect most of the taxes locally; Local revenue generation, speeds up service delivery and problem solving. Moreover, provincial finance commissions should be established to ensure continuous and timely transfer of due financial resources to the grassroots. Similarly, Provincial finance formula should also be implemented that can promote accountability and transparency in the allocation of finances. Enhanced financial powers will result in more efficient and empowered local government that can fight emerging challenges of population explosion and climate change at local levels. Therefore, financial decentralization should be enforced to fulfill the desire of establishing a robust framework of local self-government.

To summarize, it can be said that local self-government is a necessity for the governance in Pakistan. It ensures adherence to the principle of subsidiarity and trains people and their representatives. Its absence can be attributed to lack of constitutional cover, bureaucratic inertia, traditional political parties and lack of fiscal decentralization. Consequently, the missing link of LSGs has rendered service delivery/human development and administration ineffective. However, this missing link can be filled up by the provision of proper constitutional safeguards and practice of fiscal decentralization. Weak system of LSG is not exclusive to Pakistan, instead all the post-colonial nations have faced the same problem. The difference lies in approach. Nations like China, Indonesia Malaysia, Australia, Canada and New Zealand have efficiently dealt with the issue. Whereas, Pakistan is still sitting on the fence, and it has not taken any serious and sincere step to solve the menace. Nevertheless, history shows that Pakistan has the potential to solve even bigger problems than this one. The nation, which can break the shackles of slavery, fight with precarious circumstances since inception, bear the brunt of disintegration and become nuclear power, can also implement a robust system of local self-government. Merely, the resemblance of the wisdom and hard-work, which Pakistanis have already shown, is

required, and missing link of LSG will no longer be missing. If state and people of Pakistan decide to wake up and take necessary actions, the darkness of inefficient governance can easily be replaced with the bright morning of efficient service delivery and administration.