

The centre-periphery relations and governance issues: the role of decentralisation in post-conflict North-Western Pakistan

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Abstract: This study explores the centre-periphery relations and the role of local governance (decentralisation) in filling the governance gap in post-conflict North-Western Pakistan. The study investigates whether the local government can contribute to establishing a state's writ and perform governance functions better. There is a strong correlation between conflict situations, decentralisation and governance. A state can have adequate governance and a strong state-society relation if local governance arrangements are ensured with a conducive environment for socio-economic development, guarantee national security and solve the common problems of all citizens irrespective of any discrimination based on ethnicity, religion or region. The study analysed that the central government has a low political and institutional infrastructure presence that promotes hurdles to strong state-society relations necessary for stable and equitable social relations and social contracts. In the more centralised administrative system, the provision of public goods by the state created pressures on the state compared to the decentralised system. The study shows that decentralisation provides opportunities for better governance, equity, and improved efficiency by handling diversity. Moreover, decentralisation moves the authority and responsibility from the centre to the local level, thus expanding the roles and functions of central government agencies to other state affairs.

Keywords: Governance, Local governance, Central government, Peripheries, Local government, Legitimacy, Decentralisation, Devolution, Conflict management.

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1. Introduction

There is a wide governance gap between the central government and the periphery of North-western Pakistan, especially in the post-conflict situation. Rebuilding the governance gap is a vital step toward reconstruction, stabilisation and socio-economic recovery in post-conflict situations. Generally, it is the responsibility of the central government to provide and fulfil the governance functions: provision of security, essential public goods and services, and political legitimacy in territories under its jurisdiction. This study focused on the role of centre-periphery relations and the local government system (decentralisation) in filling the governance gap (rebuilding of governance) in the post-conflict North-Western areas of Pakistan. The study examined the governance in terms of state-society relations. The study overviewed the relationship between governance and decentralisation in fragile/weak post-conflict situations within this governance context. Filling the governance void is a vital step toward reconstruction, stabilisation, growth and socio-economic recovery in post-conflict states (Jones et al., 2008; Khan, 2017b). In post-conflict situations, the three tasks- restoration of governance, stability, and reconstruction- are tied together to ensure the smooth functioning of administration and political stability. Among these tasks, the most important is the restoration of governance, which includes core functions: ensuring security, effective and efficient delivery of essential public goods and services, and political legitimacy.

Thus, the decentralisation literature is blind to the role of local governments in building political legitimacy in post-conflict settings. This literature only focussed on administrative issues. That is why centre-periphery relations are significant in post-conflict situations for achieving stability; they affect societal contracts and conflict resolution. A state can be called effective governance if it can negotiate with and mediate among the different interests of its citizens. All developing states lack political and institutional infrastructure, i.e., a politico-administrative setup that promotes strong state-society relations, which is necessary for stable and equitable social relations and contracts for strong state-society relations such kind of governance arrangements are needed that can produce public goods such as the conducive environment for socio-economic development, guaranty of national security and other such things which could solve all the common problems faced by all their citizens irrespective of any regional, ethnic, and/or religious groups biasedness. In a centralised, integrated and larger administrative unit, the provision of these public goods creates problems and pressures, while in decentralised, smaller and autonomous units, handling diversity and heterogeneity is easy. Political leaders in many developing states prefer centralised command and control over decentralised ones. Thus, they rule through their patronage networks and repression of opposition to get political support.

Thus, the government often fails to provide just and equitable public goods and services in a large, centralised state, leading to fragility, weakness and conflict. This leads to the assumption that though weak states have functional governments, these governments are incapable of providing essential services, economic opportunities, and security to their citizens and cannot thus develop legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, thus leading to mistrust and lack of confidence of citizens on it. The weak states have histories of grievances, distrust, and violent conflicts, and their citizens are polarised into class-based groups and ethnic and religious factions. These states cannot fill these gaps, address the grievances, cooperate and develop the trust of their people. These capacity deficits lead these states to conflict, crisis, collapse and failure. The only way forward and cure which provides a remedy to all ills of fragile states is

decentralisation. Decentralisation is desired for various political, financial, and technical reasons. The political benefit of decentralisation is that it leads to local autonomy by increasing local participation, and it reduces regional and ethnic differences by redistributing power and addressing distributional inequities. On the financial side, it gives greater control to local units over revenue and resources, thus honing accountability and increasing cost efficiency. On the technical side, it improves service delivery and thus results in administrative effectiveness (Smoke, 2003; Ali, 2022). Thus, overall, it leads to equity, poverty reduction, increased efficiency, and better governance. For political, administrative and fiscal systems between the centre and the periphery, decentralisation also devises the allocation of responsibility, authority and power. It moves the responsibility and authority along roles and functions from central agencies and organisations to multiple agencies and organisations at the local level jurisdictions and organisations at different physical locations across the country (Khan, 2017b; Farooqi & Forbes, 2020).

The state is required to deliver core governance functions of security, legitimacy and provision of services. Thus, according to the performance of their governance system, states vary in fulfilling these functions (Grindle, 2007b; Brinkerhoff, 2007). To restore governance in the post-conflict fragile and weak state, the state must have sufficient authority and control over the use of force. For a state to have a monopoly on the use of force is one of the key tests of its sovereignty (both internal and external sovereignty) (Krasner, 1999). The lack of or weak sovereignty constrains the state actors' capacity to exercise governance because it creates legitimacy problems for a state in the eyes of its citizens and other states.

2. Research questions, hypothesis and approach

The study investigated the governance gap in the centre-periphery relations and the role of local government in filling this gap in North-West Pakistan. In post-conflict situations, the fragility and weakness of the state in North-western Pakistan implores the questions (a) Why is a weak relationship between the central government and North-western Pakistan leading to a governance gap? (b) How has this governance gap led to state fragility and weakness? (c) How can the local government fill this governance gap? These questions have been investigated using a qualitative approach, reviewing only the secondary data. For this purpose, the secondary data obtained from various published materials are reviewed.

The central hypothesis is that balanced governance between the centre and the periphery leads to better governance than centralised governance. The sub-hypothesis is that the governance gap can be filled and duly addressed in post-conflict situations through decentralisation at the sub-national (peripheral) level. However, broad generalisations of restoring governance issues in post-conflict settings oversimplify because the literature demonstrates that local governments and fragile states contain significant variation.

3. Theoretical framework: centre-periphery relations and local governance

This section comprises two parts and reviews the literature on central and local governments. The strengths and weaknesses and the pros and cons of central and local governments have been discussed in detail. The first part discusses and identifies various problems related to central government in the context of weak or conflict-affected fragile states. The second part identifies and discusses various benefits of the decentralised local government, which mainly

depends on the governance facilitating conditions. These facilitating conditions are necessary for the effectiveness of the local government, which contributes to the restoration of governance in the post-conflict affected states.

In the post-conflict fragile/weak states, there is a natural tendency to stress the strengthening of the central government to restore governance, reconstruction, and stabilisation (Khan, 2017b). At the central level, the aggregation of authority is required not only to implement large-scale infrastructural programs but also to maintain and achieve a monopoly on the use of force, which is required for the central government to exert its sovereignty. It is equally important for the central government to exercise its economic and regulatory functions and meet fiscal and monetary policy requirements. However, other sub-national-level governance issues can be addressed through decentralisation (Picard et al., 2006), which is the main argument of this study.

3.1.1. Central government

Mostly, in the conflict-affected states, the central state remains weak because it has weak roots and presence in society and, as a result, has low legitimacy and efficacy in the eyes of its citizens, which is very important for viable governance. Thus, states having weak roots in the peripheral regions fail to integrate their regions and minorities into central politics. Thus, they have only power, authority, and state resources concentrated in the capital cities, and the peripheries and hinterlands are controlled by traditional chiefs, who are governed mainly by informal rules. These under-represented, disenfranchised and disaffected communities in the hinterlands provide support and a conducive environment for non-state actors and other activities that oppose the central state in these areas (Jackson, 2007; Janjua et al., 2019).

Also, these conflicts affected fragile states; the central government did not perform inclusive resource allocation, and the distribution of services remained poor, which affected state legitimacy in the hinterlands. Mostly, in these states, the central government's reliance on patronage and clientelism leads to economic inefficiency and social and ethnic tensions (Hegarty et al., 2004; Malik & Rana, 2019). These conflicts affected fragile states, and the central government lacked integrated power, sovereignty, and authority across geographical jurisdiction and an integrated sense of national identity. This lack of capability to govern its territories results in the emergence of powerful sub-national entities (e.g., tribes, ethnic or religious groups), which operate autonomously and resist the central government (Lister & Wilder, 2007; Windybank & Manning, 2003).

3.1.2. Local government

In conflict and post-conflict situations, when the central government is weak, especially in peripheral areas, the local government can help to fill the governance gap resulting from its weakness and bad governance. These arguments can stress the importance of the local government. Generally, in developing states, the central government institutions, due to their low presence in peripheries, have weak efficiency and thus cannot correctly address the needs of providing security and other essential public goods. This results in the grievances of the peripheral people. The local government addresses the local people's needs and priorities and provides them with speedy delivery of services. Thus, in post-conflict, conflict-damaged infrastructure bases and dilapidated situations, the local government provides speedy

essential public service delivery through rehabilitation, repairs, enhanced maintenance, and the extension of services to unserved or underserved populations. At the same time, we are waiting for large-scale, new infrastructure projects, which take several years to deliver benefits and complete. Thus, the local government can enhance its legitimacy by providing basic urgent needs and services. The local governments provide power, authority and sufficient resources for addressing inequities and imbalances. However, there is a general fear that decentralisation can further worsen territorial and ethnic inequities. However, it can be avoided if it is accompanied by equalisation measures (Crook, 2003; Rafiq et al., 2020). The practical implementation of decentralisation measures lessens and discourages the forces of territorial, ethnic, socio-political and economic fragmentation (Sukma, 2003).

The benefit of decentralisation is that the decision-making authority and resource distribution are devolved, creating institutional grounds for local government. This leads to participatory local government, which provides an opportunity for ordinary people how to get awareness and exercise their rights, voting on local issues of education, streetlights, garbage collections, making budgets and tax choices, encouraging dialogue, problem-solving, learning democratic and leadership skills and conflict resolution of common community issues (Brinkerhoff & Azfar, 2006; Rahim & Shirazi, 2018). Local government also provides multiple arenas of influence and power contestation at the local level. It allows the opportunity for opposition leaders to check on and challenge the central government by remaining in government at the local level. This multiplication of arenas of political power helps political stability in post-conflict societies and avoids the winner-take-all, the zero-sum in the centre (Bland, 2007). In post-conflict situations, local leaders (traditional, religious, and tribal) can play a more significant role in restoring governance (Khan, 2017b). In this regard, the local government increases the chances of identifying and working with local emergent leaders who have strong links to their local areas and are perceived by the local population as more legitimate (Wunsch, 2005).

4. The role of local government in filling governance gap: analysis and discussion

North-western Pakistan, which has remained a conflict area since 2003, presents many of the issues characterising the federal (central) government of Pakistan, as generally discussed in the literature review above, provides the best argument/example for focusing on centre-periphery relations and local government for restoring the state government or filling the governance void in this conflict-affected society of NW Pakistan. In North-western Pakistan, in the conflict situations, not only did the federal (central) government lose its control and support of the local population, but the provincial government has also been criticised for providing local administration and other social services because mostly the region was occupied by the anti-state militants.

4.1. Shortcomings of central government

North-western Pakistan, being a periphery, is primarily a hilly and less developed area with a rough topography. This area was given the status of a province in 1901 by the British Colonial power with two clear administrative divisions of areas, i.e. administratively controlled (Qalang society) and uncontrolled (Nang society) (Ahmed, 2013; Rosilawati et al., 2018). Most of the territories of North-western Pakistan mostly remained outside the direct state control of the British Monarch and then of the Pakistani state control. The most notorious

among these was the princely state of Swat, which was governed under a monarch till 1969 when it was included in Pakistan by the consent of its princely king by signing various agreements and contracts with the Pakistani state. These include the exemption of provincially and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (PATA and FATA) from all kinds of Taxes and the provision of other such immunities and privileges to the residents of these areas (Ahmed, 2013; Taj & Baker, 2018). Being a hinterland, neither the provincial government nor the central government, through its development works, fully integrated the area, and the central government did not deeply root itself in the society of the northwestern region. That is why, more recently, these gaps in the central state governance emerged in a full-fledged movement and revolt in most of the areas of North-western Pakistan against the central government in the shape of various demands in the shape of revolts. These demands included speedy justice, provision of services, security and other public goods (Khokhar et al., 2014). With the literature and theoretical framework discussed above, the problems of the central state government in the context of North-western Pakistan have been analysed as below:

4.1.1. Weak presence of central government

The problems that troubled the central government of Pakistan in North-western Pakistan have been rooted in the very chemistry of its governance structure, i.e. the political party bases, the provincial government, the federal government, the administration and its structure, and the nature of the political interaction among the major actors involved. The central government is rooted in the major political parties based either in Punjabi or Sindhi dominated and partly on the strong identity of various ethnic groups and parties. The administrative structure of North-western Pakistan consists of a mix of settled, Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which is different from the rest of the country (Khan, 2017; Khan et al., 2022). These attributes of the different administrative systems and political differences in the North-western region did not lead to a vision of a strong Pakistani state. Since independence, mainly on the provincial level, there has been no clear majority for a single political party, and the government mostly remained a coalition government, which has always been complicated. Also, on the national level, the majority government, as mentioned above, was always dominated by one ethnic group, i.e. either the Punjabi ethnic group or other regional parties (Visweswaran, 2011). Since its independence, Pakistan's political stage has been confused and dominated by three major problems: the place of religion in national politics, the centre-province relations, and the military's role in politics (Visweswaran, 2011).

The constitution of Pakistan in 1973 also remained not federal in spirit, and most of the time, the provinces had different opinions and a sense of deprivation. This sense of deprivation led to parochialism in various parts of the country, including the Northwest region. There also remained a permanent tension for power among the national parties, parties with parochial sentiments, and religious parties, claiming to make Pakistan a Sharia State rather than presenting themselves as representatives of national/regional identities or programmatic platforms (Alagappa, 2004). Moreover, many of the national leaders are not indigenous. They were foreign educated after growing up in the West. They are not perceived as having strong connections with the people of Pakistan (Bohlken, 2016). The central government control the country through federal civil servants. The federal government's responsibility is to provide most of the public goods and services. However, the administrative centralisation of the Pakistani state is not extended deep into the political ties of all the parts. Most of the people

in the hinterlands of Pakistan, especially in North-Western Pakistan, perceive the national government as consumed with internecine power games, ineffectual in improving security and service delivery, and largely uninterested in the welfare of the average citizen.

4.1.2. Weak national integration

Mostly, the national debate and politics remain on provincial and parochial deprivation and differences, blaming some ethnic groups for exploiting other ethnic groups. This resulted in a weak sense of national integration and nation-building. Given this lack of progress, Pakistani citizens increasingly criticise federal government officials as caught up in political arguments that leave the nation poorly defended, services deteriorating rather than improving, and the country's natural wealth unexploited for the nation's benefit. The ongoing conflict and sub-national movements are other impediments to national integration, leading citizens to look to their ethnic affiliations or their regional links as the basis for protection and security (Khan, 2017b).

4.1.3. Poor distribution of services and resources

As mentioned, due to the lack of representative political parties at the national level and coalition government at the provincial level, the Pakistani central government did not gain complete control and representation, especially in peripheral parts/hinterlands. The region and provinces are always blamed for their deprivation and sense of biasedness, as well as the unequal distribution of resources and provision of services on an equal basis. Due to the lack of a clear majority of any political party, there remained disagreements on major national, provincial, and regional policy issues. At the national level in Pakistan, there has always been a disagreement on a revenue-sharing formula to distribute resources (Ahmad & Brosio, 2006; Ahmad et al., 2017). The provinces always have a feeling of inequality and argue for a more significant share for themselves based on various resources they have and believe that their region was exploited in the past but did not receive in return a fair share of the services and other benefits from the federal government. Party and factional control of ministries also are alleged by many people to result in a ministry's favouritism toward geographic areas of the greatest concentration of the controlling party in that ministry or even down to withholding services from individuals whose names identify them as not of the ministry controlling party (Khan, 2017b).

4.2. Local government as a solution to the governance gap

In the post-conflict situation in the Northwestern region of Pakistan, the only solution that can fill the state governance gap is the introduction of local government. Implementing local government offers the following benefits.

4.2.1. Speedy provision and delivery of services

The north-western region remained one of the underdeveloped hinterlands of Pakistan, only with a few developed areas, like settled districts of Mardan, Charsadda, Peshawar, Nowshera and Swabi, having urban infrastructure bases and services. The conflict in the Northwestern region of Pakistan has deteriorated the existing service infrastructure. In a post-conflict situation, most infrastructure plans now focus on immediate assistance from local government

to identify problems that could be addressed quickly. These immediate remedies to the local problems significantly impact the local reconstruction and services in the early days of the post-conflict situation, thus resulting in increased support and approval of the people for the state. It also resulted in building the capacity of the local delivery of services for the future. In the post-conflict situation in KP, the newly elected local government helped the citizens get social services and other public goods at their doorsteps. The people are now getting health, education, and other services with the help of their locally elected representatives, and their grievances are being addressed (Eris & Roberta, 2016).

4.2.2. Trust development and ensuring legitimacy

Due to the long ignorance by the central government, primarily, the peripheral areas, especially in the North-western region, lost their confidence and trust in the central government, which resulted in the loss of legitimacy of the central government and its institutions in these areas. That is why people rose in revolt against the government and provided support to the militants. In a post-conflict situation, the introduction of local government can provide an opportunity to build the people's trust in the central government and to develop the legitimacy of the central government in the eyes of local people by providing them with power at the local level through their local representatives at the doorstep (Eris & Roberta, 2016).

4.2.3. Addressing ethnic and regional inequities

Inside the underdeveloped and ignored North-western Pakistan at the national level, there were areas more deprived and ignored by the provincial government. At the provincial level, as most of the development projects were only centred in the settled districts of Mardan, Peshawar, Nowshera, Swabi, and Charsadda, the other regions remained deprived and ignored. In the post-conflict period, after the introduction of local government, the deprived districts of North-western Pakistan were given more attention as the federal government and the provincial government implemented a more equitable distribution. In this way, the external foreign donor reconstruction efforts and the federal government struggled to ensure the services to the people in these areas. This also helped address the previous inequities resulting from the ignorance of the previous governments in the North-western areas.

4.2.4. Inclusive and participatory planning

In the post-conflict situation in Pakistan, the government and international community's overall focus was to set up a local government system to encourage participatory governance at the local level and to avoid the centralisation of power to redress the grievances of the aggrieved party/groups. Though ignored by the central government institutions, it is now argued that with the introduction of local government, there has been a significant and apparent improvement in delivering essential services to the people of North-western Pakistan.

Thus, adopting and applying inclusive, participatory planning processes at the local level addresses the concerns of minority oppositions without harming the majority outcomes. In 2008, during the concluding session of the first tenure of the local government system, its chairman concluded the system's outcome in two points: that it provided decision-making and addressed the grievances of the community at the local level. Moreover, the participatory

process of the local government helped reduce the conflict over resource allocation at the provincial level by providing a win-win situation.

4.2.5. Conflict preventing and democratic capacity

In the post-conflict, the central government, even with the help of the national and international development organisations, started to introduce a local government system throughout Pakistan, with power devolved at the local level, including the North-western region of Pakistan. In the Northwestern region, the military initially started local-level efforts with the community to establish an interface with the civilian population and get community support in case of information sharing, further restricting the people from joining and supporting the militants—also, the military involved local representatives in various joint projects for local development. The government also started the local government system to expand the local councils across the country to introduce democratic governance at the sub-national level. Local government elections were conducted soon after the conflict in 2013, which was announced as a partyless election, but the representatives have affiliations with one or other political parties. However, with their local representatives, these local governments have been able to bridge the differences and grievances of the local community of North-western Pakistan and have their local-level decision-making, local-level distribution of resources, utilisation of funds, and delivery of services (Rehman et al., 2020).

4.2.6. Decentralization as a core element

The introduction and formation of local governments at the district and sub-district level, as well as municipality and neighbourhood levels, provided fertile ground for autonomy and self-governance at the local level in Pakistan, especially in North-Western Pakistan. In the North-western region, in post-conflict situations, the local government played a significant role in balancing the vigorous demands of the subnational autonomy of the local people in their decision-making and delivery of services at their local level. The division of responsibilities, power and authority at the provinces and centre level and further at the province and local level resulted in a very fruitful outcome in the governance structure of Pakistan. This moves formalised decentralisation as a core element of national governance due to the introduction of local government in Pakistan.

5. Conclusion

Considering the above discussion for further improving and restoring governance and filling the governance gap in post-conflict North-western Pakistan, the introduction of local government presents positive contributions in reconstituting and restoring governance. In post-conflict North-Western Pakistan, decentralised local government is one of the features of good governance. The suggestions have been presented for further improving the governance in post-conflict North-western Pakistan through local government and decentralisation. Effective communication, stakeholder participation, political will, and the role of an active civil society are pertinent to improved decentralisation. The local government alone does not ensure democratic or citizen-responsive choices, as it may lead to excessive power grabbing by local elites. In this way, the centre-local relations, particularly in the power relationship between the centre and local elites, can play an important role in questioning and checking whether decentralisation achieves democratic outcomes and service delivery. In post-conflict situations,

the weak states lack the skills to implement decentralisation. The sectoral ministries are also technically and administratively weak in the de-concentrated units. The central and provincial governments must supervise the local units to provide these skills. Further, the success of local government and the capacity to implement it is needed at the centre and the local level. Thus, administrative and technical skills, priority setting, planning, capacity to engage citizens in needs assessment, and program implementation are needed at the local level. In post-conflict situations, besides immediate intervention in reconstruction and rehabilitation, the citizens are primarily concerned with their security and access to essential services, followed by political power distribution. This is done through political decentralisation, including the election of the local leaders through an electoral process. This is an important feature of good governance.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest(s) concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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