

Decentralization Without Empowerment: An Analysis of Local Government in Balochistan

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Abstract: Decentralization is the beacon of change in democratic countries. Developing countries like Pakistan are yet to witness the true benefits of this system. It has long been promoted as a mechanism to strengthen democracy, improve service delivery, and empower local communities. In Balochistan, however, repeated local government reforms have failed to translate into meaningful political, administrative, and fiscal empowerment. This study critically examines the paradox of “decentralization without empowerment” by analyzing the structure, functioning, and outcomes of local government in Balochistan. For this purpose, qualitative methodology is adopted with data collected through secondary sources. Document analysis is favored in order to assess the devolution plan through local governments. The findings of the paper reveal that decentralization has mostly been procedural. Firm provincial control, limited devolution of fiscal power, inadequate administrative capacity, and strong informal (tribal) power structure have confined the actual role of local governments. Finally, policy-driven recommendations are suggested, considering the case of Baluchistan, for a strong and stable local governance mechanism.

Key Words: Decentralization, Local Government, Balochistan, Governance; Empowerment, Federalism

Introduction

Decentralization means the devolution of power and responsibilities from the central government towards units or regional/ local governments, lower tiers of the state (Samuelson, [1954](#)). Democratic or political decentralization, on the other hand, refers to a process by which the power to govern is passed on to lower-level governments (Arends, 2018). Mechanisms of political representation imply a higher degree of independent local decision-making. In Assah S. Muhammad and Francis Xavier Tuokuu's words, decentralization is the second name of delegating power, resources, and decision-making from top administration deep down to grassroots level administration, including metropolitan cities, communities, and locals. According to Faquet (1997), “the debate on decentralization dates back to the writings of the 17th and 18th century social philosophers like Rousseau, Mill, Tocqueville, Montesquieu, and Madison (Kee, [2003](#)). In fact, more responsive governments are formed when power and authority are further devolved to lower tiers, paving the way for councils and assemblies to handle the administration of schools, roads, and waste management, so that community needs are addressed at their doorstep (Shah, [2006](#)). In federal states, power is distributed between the central government and its constituent units. Cheema et al. ([2005](#)) adds that in federal and ethnically diverse states such as Pakistan, decentralization is also viewed as a mechanism for reducing political alienation, managing diversity, and strengthening state-society relations (Cheema et al., [2005](#)). Overall, Pakistan's constitutional framework (after the 18th constitutional amendment) recognizes the necessity and directs Provincial governments under Article 140-A to set up local government elections.

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Although constitutional commitments exist, the establishment of a meaningful and long-lasting grassroots governance system has never been materialized in Pakistan, in general, and in Balochistan, in particular. Wider (2009) recalls Pakistan's experience with decentralization by stating that the military regimes had the privilege of introducing local governments while civilian authorities were always reluctant to devolve real power to the grassroots level, further weakening democratic and institutional foundations in the country (Wilder, 2009). Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province in terms of territory, presents an interesting case study where decentralization is yet to take place. The least developed province represents a critical and equally interesting case where decentralization has not translated meaningfully into improved governance outcomes.

This paper is an attempt to examine why decentralization in Balochistan has failed despite constitutional provisions and provincial autonomy guaranteed under the 18th constitutional amendment in 2010. Moreover, we also witnessed local governments for a short span of time during civilian rule from 2013 to 2018 (although powers were delegated from 2015 to 2019). The paper will throw light on all these aspects one by one. It will also make a considerable addition to the debate on decentralization in third-world countries, focusing on analyzing legal frameworks with sociopolitical dynamics and institutional mechanisms and/or arrangements in a broader aspect of federalism in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Conceptual Framework: Decentralization and Empowerment

Prominent scholar Thomas Welsh conceptualizes decentralization as "Decentralization is about shifts in the location of those who govern, about transfers of authority from those in one location or level, to those in another level" (Welsh, 1999). Rondinelli (1981), has a different stance on decentralization and conceptualizes it through three central forms, namely: De-concentration, Delegation, and Devolution. De-concentration refers to the redistribution of administrative responsibilities within central or provincial bureaucracies; delegation means the transfer of functions to semi-autonomous agencies, while devolution implies the transfer of political, fiscal, and administrative authority to elected local governments. Similarly, Manor (1990) signifies decentralization as the capacity and/or potential of local governments to take decisive decisions in terms of managing available resources by implementing long-term policies and remaining open to accountability before citizens (Manor, 1990).

Whereas the concept of empowerment implies beyond the debate of just formal institutions. It is the ability to give authority and power to an institution to get stronger in achieving goals by making decisions on its own. Political empowerment, on the other hand, entails that elected representatives ought to have full authority over decision-making. Similarly, fiscal empowerment involves greater control over both revenues and expenditures. Lastly, administrative empowerment contains technical competence, institutional capacity, and staffing.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, decentralization does not sound well as it has largely remained confined to administrative de-concentration rather than genuine devolution of power. Whereas in Balochistan, the picture is even more ugly and unsatisfactory as local governments (when in power, which rarely is the case) are assigned responsibilities without adequate authority or resources. The paper in hand uses empowerment as an analytical lens to assess whether decentralization reforms have brought about meaningful change and altered the composition of power relations by strengthening democratic governance at the local level.

Evolution of Local Government in Balochistan

Colonial Legacy and Early Developments

Decentralization is not new. The concept of local government in the subcontinent can be traced back to the Indian (Hindu) rule before the Delhi Sultanate. Rural India had been under the Gram Panchayat, which used to function as basic village-based administration. However, it was the British East India Company that introduced formal local government in 1688. Madras had witnessed the first Municipal Corporation in the Indian subcontinent. Just before the War of Independence, the British (Company) administration had launched local governments in the annexed regions of both Punjab and Sindh in the 1840s. This evolution got further momentum after the 1857 tragedy that resulted in direct

British rule (the Crown took over the administration from the company by declaring the subcontinent its colony or dominion).

Following this transfer of governance, some of the significant developments under British rule were the Proclamation of the Municipal Act in 1867 (later updated in 1911) and the Lord Ripon's Resolution in 1882 (famous for initiating rural local councils and elected municipal representatives through the District Boards Act, 1882). Finally, the 1935 Act provided provincial authority to provinces and instructed them to legislate and implement local governments in their respective regions. According to Ahmed ([1998](#)) British authorities relied heavily on indirect rule through tribal sardars, limiting the development of modern representative institutions. This legacy of centralized authority and informal power structures persisted after independence.

Local Governments in Post-Independence Pakistan

Following the independence of Pakistan in 1947, the 1935 Act was amended and adopted for an interim period. Meanwhile, Local government remained on and off as political instability paved the way for military intervention. The first attempt to resurrect local government in Pakistan was made by General Ayub, who, like the British colonialist, revived it as the only so-called representative tier of the government. Following independence, Pakistan's local government trajectory was marked by discontinuity (Salman, [2009](#)). The Basic Democracies system continued till 1971, when it was abolished by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) regime in 1972. The Bhutto regime, after abolishing the BD system, introduced a new system under the Local Government Ordinance, 1972. All the provincial governments later passed legislation in line with this ordinance and implemented it in their respective provinces. After Bhutto, the local government was revived by another martial law dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, in 1979. He kept centralization and decentralization side by side by retaining powers of the center and transferring some powers of the provinces to the districts to legitimize his regime. Such as local bodies' elections during 1979-1980.

In essence, the then government adopted the policy of divide and rule (Jalal, 1995). Like Ayub, Zia also sought to neutralize the influence of political parties through non-party-based elections (Cheema et al., [2005](#)). Moreover, he disqualified the candidates of PPP in 1979 (Waseem, [1989](#)). Pakistan has a poor track record of democracy, with more than half of its history under military rule. Before LGO 2001, Pakistan experimented with two local government systems, which were both introduced during military regimes but failed to deliver. The new system is also designed by the military government, resulting in: a) the local government was negated by the democratic forces, and b) Every time a new system was designed, there was a minor link with the previous systems (Paracha, [2003](#)). Military regimes, particularly those of General Ayub and Musharraf, introduced local governments to bypass provincial elites and legitimize centralized rule. In Balochistan, the 2001 Devolution Plan represented the most comprehensive attempt at decentralization, yet its impact remained limited due to security challenges, elite resistance, and administrative weaknesses.

Post-18th Amendment Developments

The 18th amendment incorporated Article 140A, which directed each province to establish, by law, a local government system and devolve power, political, administrative, and financial to the elected representatives (Ahmed, [2020](#)). This constitutional landmark reaffirmed provincial autonomy and mandated local governments. However, provincial governments retained significant discretion over the design and powers of local institutions. Khan ([2014](#)) says that the reality is that the members of the National Assembly and the Provincial assemblies are allergic and hence do not want an actual local government system because most of the financial powers go into the hands of the local governments (Khan, [2014](#)). Therefore, the true benefits of provincial autonomy are not being materialized until the local government is restored. "The issue is that the devolution of power and resources from provincial governments to local governments, as stipulated by the insertion of Article 140A, remains unfulfilled" (Farooqui, [2020](#)). In Balochistan, local authority is further undermined due to various issues such as frequent amendments to local government laws, delayed elections, and bureaucratic dominance.

Table 1*Evolution of Local Government in Balochistan*

Period	Key Features	Impact on Balochistan
Colonial Era	The British introduced local government mainly for administrative control, relying on indirect rule through tribal sardars rather than elected institutions.	Limited political participation and weak institutional development; legacy of centralized authority and informal power structures.
Post-Independence (1947–2001)	Local governments remained inconsistent; major systems introduced under military regimes (Ayub, Zia, Musharraf) to legitimize rule and bypass political parties.	Decentralization remained symbolic; non-party elections, elite resistance, security issues, and weak administration constrained effectiveness.
Post-18th Amendment	Article 140A constitutionally mandates local governments with political, administrative, and financial devolution, but provinces retained control.	Frequent legal changes, delayed elections, and bureaucratic dominance continue to undermine effective local governance.

4. Legal and Institutional Framework of Local Government in Balochistan

Article 32:

The State shall encourage local Government institutions composed of elected representatives of the areas concerned and, in such institutions, special representation will be given to peasants, workers and women.

Article 140A:

- Elections to the local governments shall be held by the Election Commission of Pakistan.
- Each Province shall, by law, establish a local government system and devolve political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local governments.

The legal framework governing local government in Balochistan reflects strong provincial oversight. While local governments are formally responsible for municipal services and local development, key sectors such as education, health, and policing remain largely centralized. Provincial bureaucracies exercise significant control over staffing, budgeting, and project approval, limiting local discretion.

Table 2*Distribution of Functions Between Provincial and Local Governments in Balochistan*

Sector	Provincial Government Responsibilities	Local Government Responsibilities
Education	Policy formulation, curriculum, and higher education	Primary schools maintenance, monitoring
Health	Policy, tertiary hospitals, staffing	Basic health units, sanitation support
Infrastructure	Major roads, highways	Local roads, streets, and drainage
Water & Sanitation	Policy oversight	Water supply, waste management

Research Methodology

The study selects a qualitative research method in order to examine decentralization in Balochistan. For focused and in-depth analysis of sociopolitical dynamics, institutional practices, and governance structures, qualitative design is more suitable, as this is beyond the capacity of the quantitative method alone.

Data Sources

A collection of data was made through the following:

- ▶ Literature review of secondary sources such as books, academic journals and publications, government and non-government reports, and so on.
- ▶ Document analysis of the provincial local government acts, constitutional provisions analysis, and documents concerning policy reports.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done thematically. Focused areas included not only the sociopolitical aspect but also the administrative and fiscal aspects as well. For validity and reliability, triangulation of multiple sources was used.

Political Constraints on Local Empowerment

If we look at the political structure of local government in Balochistan, it favors greater centralization of power. In fact, despite constitutional safeguards (Article 32 and 140A), decentralization remains a daydream. It is the provincial government that has final authority over administrative postings, development priorities, and finance by reducing local governments' position from being an independent and autonomous body to a fully dependent unit on the provincial government (Cheema et al., 2005). Wilder explains this phenomenon of exercising maximum power at the central level and hesitating to devolve power to the grassroots as a patron-client politics where control over resources further strengthens electoral dominance on the one hand, while on the other weakens accountability (Wilder, 2009). Moreover, the case of Balochistan is slightly different, where political decentralization is compromised over prolonged political unrest and security issues (Gazdar et al., 2007; Shah, 2006). Hassan (2010) points out that the delayed revival of the local government system has eroded the confidence of the general public in both leadership and democratic institutions (Hassan, 2010).

Fiscal Decentralization and Financial Dependence

Speaking of Balochistan, there exists a strong centralized structure at both provincial and federal levels, as this fiscal framework limits the local administration's powers to autonomously carry out their own taxation system by generating revenue at the community level. For political and administrative devolution, financial independence and fiscal decentralization are a must, and that too in conflict-prone regions (Gazdar et al., 2007; Cheema et al., 2005). The following table reflects the relationship between fiscal empowerment and decentralization, which unfortunately relies heavily on the provincial government, making local administration less empowered in levying taxes and generating revenues.

Table 3

Sources of Local Government Revenue in Balochistan

Revenue Source	Description	Level of Autonomy
Provincial Transfers	Grants and development funds	Low
Local Taxes	Property tax, fees	Very Limited
User Charges	Water, sanitation, licenses	Limited
Federal Grants	Special-purpose programs	None

Administrative Capacity and Institutional Weakness

Institutionalized control has been predominant when we analyze the administrative structure of local governments in Balochistan, as reflected in the appointment and accountability patterns of key positions, which makes the senior-most positions, like Finance and Chief officers, responsible only to the provincial government, as their appointments come from the top, and the local representatives have nothing to do with this. In fact, such an arrangement further weakens the position of local authorities in managing day-to-day business, as the administrative grip of the upper tier is pretty firm. Bureaucratic grip of provincial administration limits the capacity and efficiency of local leadership as technical staff,

hired on a contractual basis, either lack professional commitment or are barred from rigorous institutional accountability that ultimately affects community governance. The following table highlights the shortage of dedicated officers, administrative and technical staff, and trained personnel to execute local governance according to modern lines in Balochistan.

Table 4

Administrative Staffing Patterns in Selected Local Governments

Position	Mode of Appointment	Accountability
Chief Officer	Provincial posting	Provincial Government
Finance Officer	Provincial posting	Provincial Government
Technical Staff	Contractual	Mixed
Support Staff	Local hiring	Local Government

Sociopolitical Dynamics and Informal Power Structures

The decentralization debate on sociopolitical dynamics of Balochistan reveals that there exists a certain level of growing tension with exercising real power between the formal institutions and informal power structures consisting of tribal chiefs and sardars, which undermines devolution efforts that restarted in 2013 under civilian rule. The local population has historical grievances from central governments that favor elite dominance over resource distribution, neglecting their rightful demand and fair share in mega-projects like CPEC, Reko Diq, and Saindak, to name a few. Political engineering by the central government, making informal structures powerful over genuine leadership, has fueled instability and ethnic fragmentation among Baloch, Pashtun, and Hazara groups, rendering decentralization ineffective as local services remain captured by clientelist hierarchies rather than responsive governance.

Impact of Decentralization on Service Delivery

Decentralization is often seen as a way to improve the quality and effectiveness of public services by transferring decision-making authority from the central government to local governments. Decentralization aims to bring services closer to the people, at their doorstep (Ayenagbo, 2023). Decentralization has produced positive impacts on most occasions on service delivery. Speaking of developing countries, the overall impact is huge, especially in areas like health, education, and basic needs. Both Kenya and Honduras are textbook case studies where, under supportive conditions, the livelihood of common citizens has improved considerably, especially in healthcare (Hémet et al., 2024; Zarychta, 2024). However, there have also been numerous challenges, such as inadequate resources, an inconsistent local governance system, and, most importantly, risks of corruption or elite capture that can undermine gains, sometimes leading to uneven or even worsened service provision, particularly when municipal-led models lack strong oversight or community engagement (Ibrahim, 2024; Zarychta, 2024). In Balochistan, though, the empirical evidence on decentralization shows limited impact on service delivery along with poor coordination, inadequate funding, and most importantly of all, greater political interference that halts overall improvement in municipal services, including healthcare, education, water supply, and so on.

Table 5

Service Delivery Outcomes Before and After Local Government Reforms

Sector	Before LG Reforms	After LG Reforms
Municipal Services	Poor	Slight Improvement
Water Supply	Inadequate	Marginal Improvement
Primary Education	Low monitoring	Moderate monitoring
Health Services	Weak outreach	Limited improvement

Discussion and Way Forward

To empower the local governance framework in Balochistan, the following steps are recommended.



Strengthening Legal and Constitutional Guarantees

First and foremost, decentralization needs legal and constitutional backup with stable and consistent local governments. Legislation must be carried out at both the central and provincial levels to ensure the continuity of local governments with fixed tenures after free and fair elections throughout the country, in general, and in Balochistan in particular. Moreover, the American federal structure is copied, where each state has its own government, and amendments are brought about by the state governments.

Enhancing Fiscal Autonomy

Fiscal autonomy is the lifeline of Local governments, which must be granted to reduce dependence on provincial transfers. This can be done through a rigorous and digital taxation mechanism by creating an independent local taxation department/ authority that deals with financial matters, improving property tax assessment, and increasing the share of locally retained revenues. Doing so with maximum political consensus, where political or tribal influence is extremely minimized to a point where transparent, formula-based fiscal transfers are institutionalized.

Administrative Empowerment and Capacity Building

One of the most pivotal recommendations when it comes to administrative empowerment and capacity building is to create a devoted and dedicated local government service cadre, which is tasked with recruiting professionals who go on to work in coordination and collaboration with the elected representatives. Furthermore, in order to enhance the capacity and administrative potential, modern and updated reforms should be introduced with artificial intelligence, digitization, and proper training. Doing so would establish a long-lasting foundation for administrative empowerment.

11.4. Political Ownership and Party Integration. Another significant recommendation in terms of political ownership and party integration in Balochistan is the commitment from both mainstream and regional political parties towards decentralization and the establishment of strong and stable local government. Unfortunately, Balochistan is home to hereditary politics and tribal sardars who maintain structural dominance as they are influential electables. In fact, political power in such a tribal system revolves around a few families, be they nationalist or religious, and they come up with securing alliances with either independents or joining nationalist parties to secure their seats (Mir & Bazai, [2015](#)).

Strengthening Accountability and Citizen Participation

Balochistan Local Government Act 2010 (as amended 2022) and the 2023 Community Led Local Governance (CLLG) Policy have the potential to enhance accountability and citizen participation in Balochistan through the decentralization process. By empowering and strengthening the Joint District Development Committees (JDDCs) and the Provincial Finance Commission, the officials can be made accountable and directly responsible for local needs. Meanwhile, for increasing meaningful citizen participation, the marginalized and common masses should be prioritized instead of elite capture. Women and youth should have special say in the system. Along with the above measures, some important recommendations include:

- ▶ Enforcement of Articles 32 and 140A in the real spirit.
- ▶ Keeping a strong check on corruption through the State Bank of Pakistan's anti-corruption audits.
- ▶ Promoting Sustainable Development Goals by aligning them with governance.

Addressing Informal Power Structures

The Sardari System in Balochistan is both a product of historical circumstances and a driver of contemporary challenges. Its continued presence hinders economic progress, reinforces social inequalities, and creates a disconnect between Balochistan and the rest of Pakistan. In order to counter-balance the informal power arrangements in the province, the establishment of strong local government institutions becomes pivotal. Although change cannot be brought about abruptly, taking the tribal chiefs into confidence to make meaningful reforms for the greater good of the society will come in handy. Hence, with the passage of time, the influence of elite capture will decrease, and new leadership will emerge as competition grows.

Conclusion

This study has put up a case by stressing the need for decentralization in Balochistan. Undoubtedly, decentralization is regarded as a powerful mechanism pivotal for strengthening democratic culture, providing timely service delivery, and bringing governance closer to citizens. These objectives cannot be achieved without genuine efforts in implementing decentralization in Balochistan. On the one hand, promises and constitutional reforms are made through articles 32 & 140A and 18th amendments, while on the other, the true spirit of local governments is missing as neither the central government nor the provincial government is serious about devolving powers to the grassroots.

On the bigger picture, as the findings of the study reveal, decentralization remains procedural rather than transformative as decisive powers rest with the provincial government. Local governments function as administrative units where bureaucrats hold limits on their area of influence to the subordinate level only.

This study argues that decentralization without empowerment risks deepening political alienation rather than addressing it. When local governments lack meaningful authority and resources, citizen participation becomes symbolic, and trust in democratic institutions erodes. For a peripheral and historically marginalized province like Balochistan, such outcomes have serious implications for governance, political stability, and state-society relations.

In conclusion, decentralization in Balochistan can only contribute to democratic consolidation and inclusive development if it moves beyond symbolic institutional arrangements toward substantive devolution of political, fiscal, and administrative power. Without this shift, local governments will continue to function as extensions of the provincial bureaucracy rather than as engines of grassroots democracy and empowerment.

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