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# Devolution and political accountability: Some insights from Pakistan

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**This paper studies the relationship between devolution and political accountability in District Dera Ismail Khan, KPK, Pakistan. It examines the extent of political accountability through the gates of popular participation in elections, level of transparency in decision making process and accessibility of general public to public information at grass roots level. The main findings of this paper are two fold. First, citizen's participation in election especially in local body's election 2005 is unequivocally greater after devolution; however the genuine voter choice is restricted by the dominating elite class, especially in rural areas of the country where majority of the people are uneducated and poor. Second, the transparency level of the system is not up to the mark. The present devolution plan provides mechanisms of transparency by declaring citizens' right to information thereby forcing the district government to display public information but the present study reveals limited transparency regarding the business of local governments. The public in general and the poor in particular have no access to information, for instance, the researcher himself visited the DO Social Welfare several times to get the list of registered CCBs, but did not succeed. Although it is well documented that a transparent system makes it easier to hold the local government accountable; however, transparency itself depends on the demographic characteristic of the society as verified by this study, which are not very conducive among the population under study.**

**Key words:** Devolution, Political accountability, Public information

## INTRODUCTION

Decentralization has been recognized as an important theme of governance in both developed and developing societies of the world (Dasgupta and Victoria, 2007; Khan, 2006). "Being closer to the public local government is in better position to promote accountability through transparent decision making (Nupia, 2006)". Faguet and Sanchez (2006) argued that decentralized bodies can be more easily watched, accessed and monitored which facilitates holding these bodies accountable.

Devolution of power is one of the most important reforms introduced in Pakistan in recent years. It has brought about a radical transformation in the political and administrative structure of the country, especially at local level. By transferring powers and decision-making to the grass root levels and promoting community (especially women) participation in government, devolution can

make a significant contribution to hold the public representatives and government officials accountable. Given this, it can be argued that new system will promote better local representation and transparent decision making which ultimately leads to good governance.

Several studies have evaluated the impact of devolution on accountability in developing countries (Faguet and Sanchez, 2006; Anderson, 2004), however, no research especially empirical in nature has been conducted to measure the relationship between devolution and accountability in Pakistan. The research at hand tested the relationship between devolution and political accountability in Pakistan by examining first the extent of citizen's participation in the policy formulation and implementation process at local level, second the level of transparency in decision making process and third the degree of accessibility of general public to public information. We also assessed the demographic impacts on participation and access to information. The paper is structured as follows: theoretical framework for the link

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between decentralization and political accountability; description of Pakistan's local government system, focusing on the structural, functional and procedural changes introduced and accountability mechanism provided; Research methodology; relationship of devolution and political accountability in Pakistan; discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

## THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Before the popularity of globalization, highly centralized system of administration was working in the world with weak regional governments (Pose and Gill, 2002). The advent of the 21st century changed the whole scenario and caused greater tendencies towards devolution (Pose and Gill, 2003). Consequently, concern of strengthening local government has got momentum in countries of both the developed and developing world (Geddes, 2006; Devries, 2000). Decentralization is argued for promoting accountability through transparent decision making (Nupia, 2006). Similarly, Faguet and Sanchez (2006) argued that decentralized bodies can be more easily watched, accessed and monitored which facilitates holding these bodies accountable. However the practical experiences of decentralized societies show mixed results regarding the extent of accountability at local level. Manor (1996) reports an improved information flow between government and citizens and improved level of accountability and transparency (Faguet and Sanchez, 2006). Similarly, Blair (2000) argues that the major promise of democratic decentralization is the promotion of participation and accountability and effective public service delivery. Whereas, other authors, such as Nygren (2005); Anderson (2004) considered decentralization much more problematic and confusing. The reason for such deficiencies is due to limited popular participation, non-transparent decision making culture and non-accessibility of the general public to public information.

### Popular participation

It is widely agreed that citizen's participation is an essential feature of a democratic political system as Verba and his colleagues insist, "Citizen participation is at the heart of democracy" (Verba et al., 1995). The degree of equality in popular participation can have important equity and efficiency effects. If one demographic group, for example, is more politically active than another, parties and politicians are likely to cater to this group's interests more, and policies will deliver more benefits to it than to other groups. Biased participation can also create economic distortions if politicians divert resources to specific groups of more active citizens (Benabou, 2000; Rodriguez, 1998). It is well documented that decentralization can facilitates good governance through

empowering people, allowing them to participate in decision making affecting their every day life (Jutting et al., 2004). The opportunity it provides for participation should also increase security and accountability of public representatives in delivering services and transparency in decision making (Herridge, 2002).

### Transparency

Transparency means that information is freely available and directly accessible to those who will be affected by decisions and that enough information is provided in easily understandable forms and media. This requires that decisions are made and enforced in a manner that follows rules and regulations. The word "transparency" carries with it a powerful array of moral and political associations, including honesty, guilelessness and openness (Kim et al., 2005). Similarly Khan et al., 2008 is of the view that "transparent governance implies an openness of the governance system through clear processes and procedures and easy access to public information for citizens. Access to information on the action and performance of government is critical for the promotion of government accountability. Unless the public knows what goods and services have been provided by the government, how well they are provided, who the beneficiaries are, and how much they cost, they cannot demand effective government. Also the central government needs to be able to monitor the performance of local governments". Decentralization is considered as one method to promote transparency and reduce corruption in the government (Nupia, 2006). As one author stressed, "decentralized bodies in comparison to national governments, are more accessible, more sympathetic and quicker to respond to local needs" (Faguet and Fabio, 2006).

### Access to public information

It is widely recognized that access to information is an essential feature of a democratic political system, as Noble et al. (2005) states, "the public release of performance information is also seen internationally as an important lever to improve service quality". The disclosure of information is justified on the grounds that it promotes an efficient market economy through informed consumer choice, ensures visible accountability of provider and purchaser organizations and encourages quality improvement. It is widely recognized that decentralized bodies being closer to the people are more accessible and accountable (Besley et al., 2004).

## A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

This study presents a conceptual model of factors

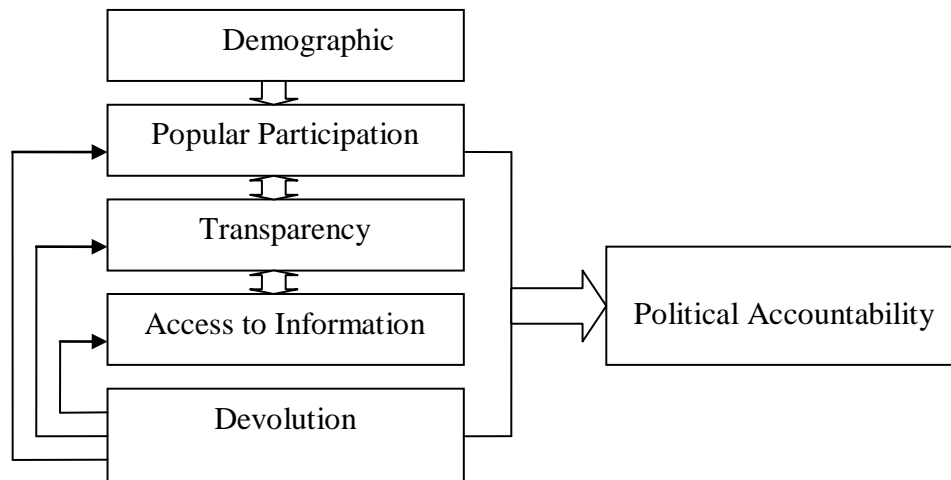


Figure 1. A conceptual model of political accountability.

Table 1. Population distributions.

S/No	Strata	N	1%
1	General public	4, 20, 002	99.74
2	Representatives	656	0.16
3	Government servants	450	0.16
Total		4, 21, 108	100.00

affecting political accountability. As diagrammed in Figure 1, political accountability depends to certain degree on the citizen's participation, transparency and citizen's access to public information. Demographics such as gender, income level, social class, education, profession and location also affect the level of participation and access to information.

## Hypotheses

The following hypotheses have been developed and tested in this study:

1. Participation, transparency and access to information significantly explain variance in political accountability.
2. In contrast to the public representatives, general public report limited political accountability.
3. Existing disparities and power relations determine level of popular participation.
4. Demographic background of the people determine their level of access to information.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Subjects

The survey method was used to collect the primary data. The survey was conducted in district Dera Ismail Khan of Khyber

Pakhtoonkwa Province, Pakistan. The target population of the study included the registered voters, local representatives and the local government officers (BPS- 17 and above) of the District concerned. District Dera Ismail Khan is bounded on the north by the Lakki Marwat and Bannu districts, while, on the south by the district Dera Ghazzi Khan of the Punjab Province, similarly, on the east by the Bhakkar and Mainwali districts of the Punjab Province, and on the west by the Tribal Areas adjoining Dera Ismail Khan district (Shirani), South Waziristan Agency, Tank district and by the Koh-e-Suliman. The technical distribution of the total population is given in Table 1. The table shows the total number of each population category (N) along with its percentage in the total population.

### Sample and sampling procedure

A pilot study was conducted to prepare to get the required statistics for applying random sampling procedures in sample selection. The formula for finite population was used to compute the sample-size for each population category. Population was made of 4, 20,002 general public, 656 elected representatives and 450 government servants (BPS-17 and above). The difference between different groups of the population is too big therefore; the formula for stratified sampling is not applicable because the smaller groups are then not represented properly. Given this, the formula for selecting a sample from 'finite population' was applied on all the populations individually, which gave the advisable size of the sample. In social sciences 95% confidence level is usable, which equals 1.96 z-values. Table 2 details the whole sampling procedural applications and results. Note: PSn stand for pilot study sample; SD = standard deviation; SE = standard error; N = population of the study and n = sample size of the study.

Out of total population, 68.6% of the respondents were male and were 31.4% female; 60.7% were dwellers and 39.3% were councilors; 26.2% belonged to urban area, and 19.9% belonged to urban-cum-rural area, while 53.9% belonged to deep rural area; 14.3% were rich people and 85.7% were poor people. 46.8% belonged to elite class and 53.2% were non-elites; 21.1% were highly educated, 36.1% were educated and 42.9% were uneducated people.

### Measures

The dependent variable of the study 'political accountability' was

**Table 2.** Sample sizes for three groups of population.

Group	PSn	SD	SE	N	Sampling procedure	N
General public	45	0.65	0.097	4, 20,002	$[\sigma^2/((E^2/Z^2)+(\sigma^2/N))]$	170
Representatives	35	0.80	0.137	656		110
Govt. servants	20	0.74	0.185	450		56
Total	100			4,21,108		336

**Table 3.** Description of research variables.

Variable	Description
<b>Dependent variable</b>	
Political accountability	Recognition and feel of responsibility in public service delivery by the local government officials
<b>Independent variables</b>	
Citizen's participation	Participation in elections, meetings, debates and discussions
Transparent decision making process	Openness and legitimacy
Access to information	Resources estimation, developmental expenditure, non- developmental expenditure, Routine matters, and rules and regulations

**Table 4.** Multiple regression analysis.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	R	R-Square	df	Beta score	Significance	Result
Political accountability	Participation	0.857	0.735	3	0.141	0.044	Accepted
	Transparency			276	0.176	0.031	
	Access to information			276	0.586	0.000	

measured by a series of statements about the citizen's participation in (elections, meetings, debates and discussions); transparent decision making process (openness and legitimacy) and access to information (resources estimation, developmental expenditure, non-developmental expenditure, routine matters, and rules and regulations) is given in Table 3. The data was collected through 5-point Likert scales with responses ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The Respondents were asked several demographic questions, including gender, income level, education, social class, profession, education and location. Six response categories were used to measure the variable of income, ranging from "less than Rs 1,000" to "Rs 50,000 or more." Two new categories were created for analysis: poor (Rs 15,000 or less), and rich (Rs 16,000 or more). The response categories for education were "illiterate," "literate," "primary," "middle," "high," "inter," "graduate," and "post graduate degree". Three new categories were created for analysis: uneducated (illiterate), educated (intermediate or less) and highly educated (graduate or more). The response category for social class was classified in to elite (landlords, khans, maliks, pir groups, and ulemas) and non-elite (peasants, students, farmers, housewives and layman). The profession of the respondents consists of employees (both public and private), businessmen, shopkeepers,

formers, landlords, students and housewives. The response category for location was divided in to urban areas, urban-cum-rural areas and deep rural areas. The database was then created. The database was analyzed using SPSS Version 12. to run t-tests, ANOVAs and multiple regression analyses. All differences are significant at the  $p < 0.05$  levels unless otherwise indicated.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multiple regression analysis was used to test the first hypothesis, the result of which is given in Table 4. The results indicate the R (0.86) while R Square (0.73) of the regression model confirms that 73% of the variance (R-Square) in the political accountability has been significantly explained by the three independent variables. The calculated coefficient indicates that the highest number in the beta is 0.59 for an access to information 0.18 for transparency and 0.14 for participation, which is significant at the 0.000, 0.031 and 0.044 levels, respectively. The

**Table 5.** T-test applications (to compare Mean on political accountability).

Categorical variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	df	F-value	Table value	p- value	Results
Category	General public	170	2.29	0.73	278	-8.003	3.00	0.000	Accepted
	Local representatives	110	2.97	0.65					

**Table 6.** T-test and ANOVA (to compare means on popular participation).

Categorical variable	Popular participation						
	Test applied	Df	C. value	Table value	P-value	Impacts	Results
Gender	T-test	278	5.378	1.960	0.000	Yes	Accepted
Class	T-test	278	5.598	1.60	0.000	Yes	
Education	ANOVA	2 and 277	5.309	3.00	0.005	Yes	
Income	ANOVA	3 and 276	14.031	2.60	0.000	Yes	
Location	ANOVA	2 and 277	0.988	3.00	0.347	No	
Profession	ANOVA	4 and 276	6.249	2.37	0.000	Yes	

**Table 7.** T-test and ANOVA (to compare means on Access to information).

Categorical variable	Access to information						
	Test applied	df	Calculated value	Table value	P-value	Impacts	Results
Gender	T-Test	278	5.388	1.960	0.000	Yes	Accepted
Class	T-Test	278	6.813	1.60	0.000	Yes	
Education	ANOVA	2 and 277	5.590	3.00	0.004	Yes	
Income	ANOVA	3 and 276	22.210	2.60	0.000	Yes	
Location	ANOVA	2 and 277	0.125	3.00	0.887	No	
Profession	ANOVA	4 and 276	6.769	2.37	0.000	Yes	

positive beta weight indicates that for the improvement of political accountability, easy access to information and more transparent and participative decision making system is imperative.

T-test was performed to measure the mean difference of the two stakeholders (general public and local representatives) about political accountability. The category affected the responses. T-test, which compared the responses given by general public and local representatives, indicate that local representatives give more positive responses than the general public (Table 5). Local representatives with means of 2.97 have significantly higher scores in response to "political accountability" than general public with mean of 2.29.

T-test and ANOVA was performed to test the third hypothesis. The results in Table 6 clearly reflect the contextual implications for the participation levels of community when categorized on the basis of Income, Profession, Class, Gender and Education. Income effect is most significant and highly operative in shaping the participation trends in the general public with F- value of 14.031. The next highest impact comes from the profession with 6.249 F-value. But surprisingly, the influences of gender, class and education are decreasing as they fall

on the tail in the priority list of demographic implications with t value 5.379, 5.598 and F-value 5.309, respectively. Location has no impacts on participation as indicated by F-score of 0.988.

T-test and ANOVA was applied to test the fourth hypothesis, the result of which is given in table 7. The results confirm that demographic differences determine the degree of citizen's access to information. The results indicate that income effects are highly significant with 22.210 F-value. The elites capture is the next highly significant factor with 6.813 F-value. The other most influencing factors are the profession and education with F values of 6.769 and 5.590, respectively. The influence of gender is the minimum with t- score 5.388.

Research studies conducted earlier show that local governments have considerably promoted the level of accountability (Besley et al., 2005; World Bank, 1995), while others (World Bank, 2004) report limited accountability. This study also reveals limited political accountability (average for accountability is 2.39 on 5 point scale). Although there is both downward and upward political accountability, however, this study focuses only on downward accountability. Downward accountability is the responsiveness of representatives to the general public.

There are different mechanisms of official accountability to the public such as, elections; political parties etc., all have clear problems (Blair, 2000). Electoral choice is the key mechanism to hold representatives accountable for example; the people clearly rejected the unpopular and corrupt politicians in the local bodies' election 2005. However, this strength is dependent on the structure of electoral system, the regularity of elections and the extent of genuine voter choice. The study found an increased citizen's participation in local bodies' elections 2005 as compared to local bodies' election 2001 but the dominance of elite capture over genuine voter choice is also found. Furthermore, the study found limited existence of the other available mechanisms of accountability for example; highly infrequent open forum public meetings are reported in this study.

Income inequality is reported as major cause of limited people participation (D'Art and Thomas, 2007; Khan, 2004), which is substantiated in this research, however, the reservation of 5% seats for peasants and workers and minorities has increased the ratio of poor people's participation. The next highest impact comes from the profession, indicating more inclination of the landlords and businessmen to participate than the other groups. The elite capture also restricts the participation of common man (Dasgupta and Victoria, 2007; Bond, 2007), which is proved by this research. The scenario however is now changing or as World Bank Report (2004) states that "the induction of new blood and faces in local politics is reducing elite's dominance." Furthermore, the horse-trading in local body's election 2005 for Nazims (both tehsil and Zilla) also reveals the weakened status of traditional elite.

Political participation is much more common among people with higher level of education (D'Art and Thomas, 2007), which is also found in this study but is less important, showing that formal education has little impact, if any, rather political consciousness is the main determinant of filling the participation-gap between the educated and uneducated. Likewise, gender may also influence the propensity to participate (D'Art and Thomas, 2007); however, in this study this variable is emerging as less important, perhaps with the present government initiatives to increase the role of women in political system of the country, which is inconsistent with the findings of Levinson et al. (2005). Furthermore, the scenario is now changing or as Khan (2004) puts it "the new arrangement of the system contributed well in the increase of female participation in local affairs." By reserving 33% seats for women in the new local government setup the rate of women participation in the local government affairs has substantially increased although there are still barriers to this effect as evident from the fact that many seats of women councilors are still vacant. The impacts of the distance of location on people participation are evaluated but not proved significant by this research. The people of urban, urban-cum-rural and deep rural areas have similar

participation trends. Furthermore, the general public and local representatives perceived people participation differently. The difference in means shows that representatives' claim of involving common man in the formulation and implementation of different schemes has not been proved by the research as limited participation is reported by the general public. In addition to these factors, unawareness, poverty and illiteracy come out to be the main reasons of non-participation.

Several studies argue that accountability of local governments highly depends upon the transparent local government system (Blair, 2000). The present devolution plan provides mechanisms of transparency by declaring citizens' right to information thereby forcing the district government to display public information but the present study reveals limited transparency regarding the business of local governments. The public in general and the poor in particular have no access to information, for instance, the researcher himself visited the district officer of social welfare several times to get the list of registered citizen's community boards (CCBs), but did not succeed. Although it is well documented that a transparent system makes it easier to hold the local government accountable; however, transparency itself depends on the demographic characteristic of the society as verified by this study, which are not very conducive among the population under study.

It is well documented that decentralized bodies as compared to centralized authorities are more easily watched, accessed and monitored which facilitates holding these bodies accountable (Nupia, 2006; Faguet and Sanchez, 2006), which is not supported by this research as limited access to information is reported. Furthermore, the findings of the study suggest that the poor (and less privileged) are less satisfied with the degree and process of information access, which is proven by the research and by the following example. In this case, the researcher visited the office of the district officer (D.O.) of social welfare several times, to get the list of registered citizen's community boards (CCB), but failed. If an educated person faces problems in such a petty matter, the question is raised of what would be the position of a layman? It is well reported that the elites' access to information (Dasgupta and Victoria, 2007) is very powerful. Similarly, educated members of the community are the better users of public information than the less educated or illiterate. Research also shows that female councilors have a passive attitude in respect to paying visits to local offices, resulting in limited access to information (Khan, 2004), which is proven by this research. The impacts of location, however, on access to information have not been found in the study.

This study found that though the new system has several distinct features like peoples' participation in decision at gross root levels in order to get their problems solved locally however, besides its positive impacts if compared with the previous local government systems of

the country, one can easily find that the dream of popular participation is still a mile stone yet to be achieved with much improvement in the existing system. Furthermore, due to very poor systems of access towards public documents the system does not ensure transparency which was dreamt out by its advocates in National Reconstruction Bureau of Pakistan.

## Conclusion

The new system of local government overhauled the entire machinery to customize it with the new requirements for the critical success factors of good governance. However, despite all such provisions, the study found that the present local government system, as compared to previous systems, have increased the participation level as substantial number of local representatives got elected at union, tehsil and district level. However direct popular participation is still limited. It is due to the institutional absence, unawareness, illiteracy, income inequality; professional difference; and elite dominance. Illiteracy (especially in rural areas) is the most dominant factor in reducing participation. Gender and income inequality is also restricting popular participation. Furthermore, the study found limited transparency due to poor access to information and accountability failure of the government officials. Poor access to information is also due to the structural weaknesses. For example, it is difficult for a layman to visit the offices to get information. Likewise, interested people have to pay for the information they intend to get from the office thereby posing a restriction to transparency. Similarly, lack of accountability of the government officials is due to institutional absence of Zila Motasib and the passive attitude of the government officials to comply with the decisions of Zilla council. It is now imperative to overcome these problems as early as possible, otherwise the history may repeat itself.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the findings of this study, it is now possible to come up with fact-based recommendations to change rather adjust certain aspects of the new local government system. The recommendations fall into two categories: institutional and operational. Institutional refers to the structural arrangements as given in LG2001 documentation while operational is the use of the same structure and the procedural details of the local government system. Following are the recommendations:

1. Popular participation: Despite elaborate mechanism, the participation, particularly of the less privileged class is very limited. It is due to the unawareness of people about their rights, duties and roles in running the new system. Following steps are suggested to enhance awareness amongst the general public:

a) Holding monthly meetings in the office of union council are neither appropriate nor effective to motivate the people, especially the less privileged class. It is therefore, recommended that frequent open public forum meetings should be held in every village/ mohallah to inform and motivate the people for participation. Furthermore, public debates and discussions at village/mohallah level on different issues will also be helpful to increase their acquaintance level. This can be managed by the councilors or by the local NGOs.

b) The government must utilize the print and electronic media, especially radio and local cable network to telecast speeches, debates and discussions by renowned scholars, educationists etc, to educate the people.

c) Primary education can be made compulsory and free particularly for the villagers. Special informal evening education programs should be started to educate the rural adults. Special training programs should be managed to train the villagers to participate and monitor the ongoing schemes. The role of local NGOs will be very helpful in achieving this objective.

d) Only consultation of the people on various decisions is not an appropriate and effective strategy. They can be allowed to play decisive role in the decision making process. It is therefore suggested that local representatives should willingly place issues before the people to discuss and decide. The local representatives should follow the decisions taken by the majority of people.

The study found limited transparency in the operations of local governments. It is due to many reasons. However, limited access to information is the most crucial. Despite declaring the citizen's right to information, the government offices responsible to provide and display information are falling short of it. Both the political and administrative heads are not ready to share information with the people rather prefer to maintain secrecy to hide their irregularities. For transparent decision making following steps are recommended.

2. Openness: Open decision-making environment can be promoted. All-important policies/decisions can be made in the presence of people's representatives, journalists and representatives of local NGOs so that they can inform the general public about the proceedings.

3. Proper display and provision of information: Local governments should display or report public information, such as weekly posting of budgets in local papers and/or on notice board in the local government building. If the decisions about budgets, programs and spending are publicly posted, people will get the opportunity to evaluate the performance of local government. Thus, it is recommended that requested information should be available to public and it must be free of cost.

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