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Derailing Factors of Devolution Plan in Pakistan: A Study of Structural Issues in District Bahawalnagar (2001–2008)

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ABSTRACT

The most ambitious local government experiment in Pakistan was the Devolution Plan, introduced by General Pervez Musharraf in 2001. It abolished the old bureaucratic system and decentralized power. This experiment brought hope and some frustration to the district of Bahawalnagar, located in southern Punjab and comprising 118 union councils. The population was more than two million at the time. This research paper examines the structural factors that led to the failure of the devolution plan in Bahawalnagar from 2001 to 2008. The research is based on qualitative methods, with semi-structured interviews with purposively selected stakeholders who served in the elected local government of the District of Bahawalnagar between 2001 and 2008. Research identified six structural derailing factors: weak constitutional protection, fiscal dependency, and structural conflict with members of the provincial assembly, lack of training, elite capture through indirect election, and failure of citizen community participation. The results show derailing factors that were not incidental or accidental; it was a design deficiency in the Devolution Plan. The research contributes to the broader literature on decentralization in developing nations by providing on-the-ground evidence of the interaction between structural design defects and local power structures that subvert institutional change.

Keywords: Devolution Plan, Local Government, Issues, Decentralization, Bahawalnagar, Punjab, Pakistan, Governance, Fiscal autonomy, Elite Capture

Introduction

General Pervez Musharraf announced the Devolution of Power Plan on Pakistan's Independence Day, August 14, 2000, which he described as the most significant reform in Pakistani history. The plan, officially adopted with the help of the Local Government Ordinance (LGO) of 2001, would guarantee a revolution in governance. Power was decentralized to the districts and villages where ordinary Pakistanis actually lived. The district and tehsil administrations would be headed by elected Nazims and not unelected bureaucrats. Union Councils (the lowest level of government) would represent communities that had never participated in governance at any formal level. Women, peasants, and minorities would be introduced to politics through reserved seats for the first time since (Cheema, Khwaja, & Khan, 2005).

The promise was impressive, but the reality that developed in the District of Bahawalnagar over the following eight years was quite different. District Bahawalnagar is located in the Bahawalpur Division of southern Punjab. It has an area of about 8,878 square kilometers, and has a mostly agrarian economy based on cotton, wheat, and sugarcane (GOP, 2026). Its population, at the time of the plan's implementation, had surpassed two million. It was structured around the classic patterns of biradari (clan), and political life was characterized by landed families and feudal relations (Wilder, 1999). The district was represented by 118 Union Councils, each of which elected its Nazim, Naib Nazim, and councilors, making it one of the larger local Government systems in Punjab (ZC, 2010).

The paper examines why it was unable to do so and identifies the structural elements, design flaws, institutional contradictions, and systemic flaws that derailed the Devolution Plan in District Bahawalnagar during 2001-2008. The paper answers the following research question: What structural factors derailed the Devolution Plan in District Bahawalnagar? The paper has contributions to the available literature. It effectively separates the structural and operational factors that derail, providing an analytical framework applicable to other districts and reform initiatives. It relies upon the testimony of stakeholders who have first-hand experience of the system, which provides us with a ground-level view that is usually missing in the more academic literature.

Literature Review

There are a number of arguments behind the theoretical case of decentralization which are interlinked. First, decentralization brings the government near to people, which enhances the quality of information available to the decision-makers and makes the delivery of services to people more responsive and tailored (Oates, 1972). Second, it opens up new avenues of political engagement and responsibility, which make the society more democratic (Fung & Wright, 2003). Third, it has the potential to enhance administrative efficiency through decreasing the centralized decision-making and also by allowing local experimentation and learning (Shah, 2007). Fourth, decentralization allows differentiation of local preferences and needs in diverse and heterogeneous societies, minimizing the probability of conflict (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006).

Nonetheless, the theoretical literature also outlines the major risks and preconditions of successful decentralization. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) warn against the risk of local capture the risk that local institutions will be captured by local elites who then use it to achieve their own objectives instead of serving the interests of the general community. According to Prudhomme, (1995), decentralization has the potential to create regional imbalances, undermine macroeconomic stability and deteriorate the quality of public administration when the local governments are not able to meet their additional roles due to lack of capacity and resources (Prud'Homme, 1995).

Treisman (2007) shows, the evidence of the linkage between decentralization and the outcome of governance is extremely dependent on the design of institutions, on the political environment, and on the particular processes of power and resource transfer (Treisman, 2007). Such theoretical understanding offers a valuable guide to the understanding of the Bahawalnagar experience. As it will be shown in this paper, most of the risks that were described in the theoretical literature elite capture, fiscal dependency, capacity deficits, and institutional resistance became a reality in Bahawalnagar in acute form, namely, because the structural design of the Devolution Plan did not offer sufficient protection against them.

In 2001, a system of three tiers of elected local government in every district in Pakistan was established through the Local Government Ordinance of 2001. The highest was the District Government, headed by a District Nazim (mayor) who was the overall executive of the district

with control over major government departments such as the education, health, agriculture and community development departments. A senior bureaucrat was the District Coordination Officer (DCO), who was the head of the administrative apparatus of the elected Nazim (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006).

The Tehsil Municipal Administrations (TMAs) at the middle-level were led by a Tehsil Nazim, and under this was municipal services such as water supply, sanitation, roads, and building regulation. The Union Councils were at the lowest level, and they were led by a Union Nazim and Naib Nazim and were charged with the responsibility of local development, resolution of disputes and overseeing of the local services. The plan included a few innovative aspects: reserved seats of women (33 percent), peasants and workers, minorities; Citizen Community Boards (CCBs) to be used to help provide direct citizen involvement in development planning; and education and health monitoring committees on the union council level (Cheema et al., 2005) But, in the design of the plan there were inherent contradictions in the plan, as many scholars have observed. According to Cheema et al. (2006), it was by the military that the devolution was top-down and motivated by the interests of the Musharraf regime, rather than the governance requirements of the citizens (p. 260). The International Crisis Group (2004) explained the plan as providing dependent autonomy which meant that the local governments were formally autonomous but practically relied on the higher levels to provide resources, authority, and survival (ICG, 2004). Waseem (2006) suggested that the non-party elections of the plan and the indirect electoral systems of the higher-tier Nazims were calculated so as to produce a local political class that was fragmented, politically dependent and would be pro-military regime. The scholarly sources regarding the application of the Devolution Plan in Pakistan are extensive but inconsistent. Some of the key researches have investigated the structure of the plan, and its political consequences at the national level (Waseem, 2006). Some have concentrated on particular issues of the implementation of the plan such as fiscal decentralization, the place of women councilors the operation of Citizen Community Boards and the interaction between elected officials and the bureaucracy (Gazdar, 2007).

The existing literature, however, does have major gaps. First, the majority of the studies have focused on the analysis of the Devolution Plan on the national or provincial level, but only a few have been conducted at the district level. Second, the opinions of elected local government members, whose opinions should be heard most, are not largely represented in the scholarly literature. Third, although a substantial number of studies have listed the issues with the plan, not many were systematic in their separation of structural and operational factors and have tried to theorize the causal processes in which certain design attributes contributed to certain results. No prior academic study has been conducted on District Bahawalnagar specifically on the Devolution Plan. This district is mentioned in some general studies of Bahawalpur Division or southern Punjab, but the particular experience of its devolution has never been written or studied. This gap is closed in the current paper, which is the earliest evidence-based description of the structural factors that failed the Devolution Plan in the district.

Research Methodology

A qualitative case study of District Bahawalnagar is used in this study. Data Collection: The study relies on two types of data. Primary Data: Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders who served in the District of Bahawalnagar's elected local government between 2001 and 2008. Purposive sampling was used to choose respondents who represented important variables such as tier of service (Nazim, Naib Nazim, general councilor, and women councilor), term of service (first term 2001-2005 and second term 2005-2010), geographic location (district headquarters vs. tehsil, urban vs. rural), and gender. Secondary Data: Government sources such as the Local

Government Ordinance of the year 2001, district development plans, election figures of the Election Commission of Pakistan, and census figures of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.

Results and Discussion:

The Six Structural Derailing Factors of Devolution Plan

Research identified six structural derailing factors: weak constitutional protection, fiscal dependency, structural conflict with members of the provincial assembly, lack of training, elite capture through indirect election, and failure of citizen community participation.

Factor 1: Weak Constitutional Protection

Factor One: Legal weakness was the weakest structural aspect of the Devolution Plan. A presidential ordinance implemented the entire system, the Local Government Ordinance of 2001, rather than a constitutional amendment. This implies that the system was not constitutionally safeguarded and could be changed, suspended, or abolished by any other Government, or by simple legislative procedure (Hashmat-ullah, 2025).

According to Shahid Amin Akuka, who served as Nazim of UC-25 in the second term, this was the core design flaw: It tried to establish a third level of government without a constitutional amendment to shield it. It was not a permanent constitutional amendment but a temporary ordinance. This implied that it was a weak system, constantly at the mercy of the provincial and federal governments. They were able to, and did, abolish it simply by a parliamentary act (Ameen, 2025).

In this long-term perspective, the lack of a constitutional guard implied that the opponents of the system, the MPAs, the provincial bureaucracy, and the political parties that Musharraf had marginalized under his non-party set-up had a clear scope of eradicating the structure. They did not have to conquer the system by its merits, but just to bring about a change of government at the center of power and then, through their majority in the legislature, get it abolished. That is exactly what occurred following the 2008 general elections, when the incoming civilian government allowed the local government system to rot and ultimately replaced it with another system (Pervez, 2025).

The fragility of the Devolution Plan was not predetermined by the constitution. The constitution of Pakistan was amended by the Eighteenth Amendment in 2010, which added Article 140-A, creating local governments in each province. Nevertheless, it allows the provinces to have a local government system but fails to stipulate its type, powers, and fiscal arrangements. The lack of constitutional protection was a structural weakness that exposed the entire Devolution Plan to being toppled (Razi, 2025).

Factor 2: Fiscal Dependency

Fiscal dependency was the most devastating in its practical effects, while constitutional fragility was the most fundamental structural factor. It established the Devolution Plan, which created local governments with large duties and responsibilities, though not with sufficient financial resources. The provincial government transfers that relied heavily on timing, were insufficient in volume, and were politically manipulated in distribution were overwhelmingly reliant on the local government in Bahawalnagar (Sukhera, 2025).

The Devolution Plan's fiscal architecture contained several peculiarities that compounded the problem, including the Provincial Finance Commission (PFC) structure. This was the primary avenue through which money flowed from the province to the districts and from the districts to the lower levels. Theoretically, this was a transparent, formula-based mechanism for allocating resources, intended to be equitable and predictable (Zaidi & Khalid, 2022).

Mian Mumtaz Matyana, District Nazim of Bahawalnagar, in his second term, said: "The Provincial Finance Commission money was to be a consistent, formula-based transfer." However, in

practice, it was a political instrument. The PFC money would either come very late or be significantly lower than the amount budgeted in the provincial budget. What about planning one year and not knowing how you will get the money to fund the projects within the next three months? The insignificant local revenue base: The LGO 2001 gave local government the ability to raise or collect taxes and other charges, including property taxes, service fees, and local betterments (Matyana, 2025).

A point was presented by Muhammad Sadiq, the first-term UC-28 Nazim, who testified that financial allocations were based on political affiliation rather than need. The Punjab government announced a policy of providing free textbooks to students. It was an excellent announcement, and they received a great deal of applause. The same year, however, they reduced the district's non-salary education budget. The local government, therefore, was supposed to ensure that the schools were operational, and we did not have the money to repair the broken furniture or pay the electricity bill. The overall impact of these financial limitations was disastrous. The local governments in Bahawalnagar were unable to plan, implement, and deliver (R. S. Ali, 2005).

Factor 3: The Structural Conflict

The Devolution Plan 2001 introduced a structural dilemma between elected local government and Members of the Provincial Assembly (MPAs), which, according to Syed Sabir Shah, was a recipe for conflict and confusion. This was not a conflict rooted in personality conflicts or political opponents, but was intrinsic to the design, which provided two distinct groups of elected officials with overlapping mandates but no distinct sketch of their districts (Shabir, 2025).

The origin of the conflict was simple. Historically, in Pakistani politics, the political power of the MPAs has been based on their ability to offer patronage to their constituents, construct roads, install electricity transformers, secure government employment, intervene with the police, and settle disputes (Wilder, 1999). Many of these functions were also devolved under the Devolution Plan to elected Nazims, posing a major threat to the MPAs' political business model. Of course, the MPAs did not take a passive stance; they agreed to a lesser role but launched a long-term campaign of obstruction against the local government system (A. Ali, 2025).

A problematic citizen did not know where to address his problem to the Nazim or the MPA. This proved to be confusing and enabled each party to avoid accountability by accusing the other. It was a negative sum, and it crippled the rule. The system sought to render the MPAs irrelevant at the local level, and the MPAs became its mortal enemies (Sukhera, 2025).

Competition over development projects was not the only conflict that existed between Nazims and MPAs. Another aspect in which MPA sought to block local governments' activities was its influence over the provincial bureaucracy. The Devolution Plan introduced a structural issue between elected local authorities and MPAs by shifting patronage functions to a new cadre, but it neither redefined MPAs' roles nor eliminated jurisdictional overlap. This war drained colossal amounts of political vitality, diverted focus from governance, and gave the MPAs a strong incentive to bring the system to ruin (Rauf, 2025).

Factor 4: Lack of Training

The Devolution Plan burdened the new local officials with heavy responsibilities, and most had never been in government before; their education was minimal, and they had no training in the legal, financial, and technical aspects of the administration. The resulting capacity deficit was a structural factor, since it was an anticipated and avoidable effect of the plan's design, an effect that the plan's designers either could not foresee or deliberately overlooked (A. Ali, 2025).

A councilor named Malik Bashir Ahmed Naseem of UC-7 explained the factor: the most significant challenge was that we were not trained and had no capacity. We were not lawyers or bureaucrats; we were enthusiastic, we knew our local troubles and ills, inside out. We were

presented with books of legal ordinances and government regulations that we could never comprehend. The engineers and accountants in the TMA office would send us away at cross-purposes during meetings with the TMA officials. We were to exercise supervision, but how are you going to keep a check on what you do not know well? We sorely needed good, sustained training to be efficient, yet we never received it (Bashir, 2025).

The lack of capacity, as reported by Muddasara Irfan, a women's councilor, was even more severe among women: the ability issue was even more critical for female councilors. The majority of us were not well educated and had no prior experience with government processes. Everything was new to us: the way meetings are conducted, reading an agenda, and making a resolution; we had to learn all of these (Irfan, 2025).

Since the elected officials were not technologically competent to exercise strong oversight, the bureaucracy succeeded in exerting de facto control over governance processes despite its formal subordination to elected jurisdiction. The resulting capacity deficit thus strengthened and increased the bureaucratic resistance of the above section (Cheema et al., 2006).

The Devolution Plan placed a massive capacity strain on devolved governance, leaving newly elected officials tasked with highly technical governance responsibilities without sufficient training or technical support. This was a structural deficit, since it was part and parcel of the plan's design, and one could not foresee what would happen.

Factor 5: Elite Capture through Indirect Election

"Devolution of Power Plan," a method of indirect elections at the district and tehsil levels, led to several serious problems and criticisms. Some of the major problems associated with the method of local government elections during the Musharraf era are as follows: the indirect election method was used to shift political loyalties at the district and tehsil levels. While the members of the union council were directly elected by the people, the district and tehsil Nazims were elected by the same elected councilors. As a result, the general public had no direct role in electing their district heads (Ameen, 2025).

This promoted the politics of biradarism in Bahawalnagar. Despite democratic behavior, the nazims focused on alliances rather than on district development. The system promoted patronage politics, in which benefits were channeled to secure councilors' support rather than to fund fair projects in rural tehsils such as Fortabbas, Haroonabad, or Minchinabad. Such a design ran counter to democratic rhetoric, resulted in elite domination by powerful clans, and undermined the populace's credibility (Atif & Ahmad, 2025).

According to Advocate Kshif, a former Nazim UC-101, a factor in the failure was elite capture; the system was hijacked by elites at the top. It was the old wine in the new bottle. The son of the largest landlord secured the position of Nazim in our area. The Naib Nazim was his cousin. His loyalists were the key councilors. Was anything really different with the ordinary man? It merely confirmed the old patronizing ways of doing things (Kashif, 2025).

It is worth noting, however, that there is no uniformity in the picture of the capture of the elite in all 118 Union Councils of Bahawalnagar. Muddasara Irfan pointed out that the system did introduce new players sincerely into the political scene, such as farmers, women, and representatives of marginalized groups, especially at the Union Council level, where a direct election was held (Irfan, 2025). The non-party nature of elections and the indirect election system for District and Tehsil Nazims, together with structural conditions, led to the capture of the higher tier of local government by existing elites. Although the Union Council level was more inclusive of new entrants, at the top and middle levels, the same players played (Atif & Ahmad, 2025).

Factor 6: The Failure of Citizen Community Participation

One of the major operational factors in the derailment of the Devolution Plan 2001 was low community participation by the Citizen Community Boards (CCBs), despite the plan's strong focus on community participation. Section 98 of the Punjab Local Government Ordinance 2001 (PLGO 2001) permitted non-elected citizens in groups to constitute voluntary CCBs to plan, identify, and manage small development projects to enhance services and public facilities. According to the plan, every local government level (district, tehsil, union) was to set aside 25 percent of its development budget each year to finance CCB schemes. Communities were required to pay 20 percent of the project cost (in cash), and the local government paid 80 percent. The remaining funds could be carried over to create ownership, transparency, and self-help in deprived regions. In the first term, the CBC fund was not used; the main factor was that Communities were required to pay 20 percent of the project cost (in cash), while the local government paid 80 percent. The community had no money to commit to a big project, so their interest was going down (Matyana, 2025).

According to the respondents, this failure was caused by several structural factors: Anwar Ali: CCBs were virtually out of commission in our locality. The idea presupposed some civic organization and level of awareness, which simply was not present in rural Bahawalnagar. There was also the 20 percent community contribution requirement; a hindrance to poor communities" (A. Ali, 2025).

A more fundamental issue was pointed out by Murtaza Razi, MC Dunga: the administration was expected to assist communities in creating CCBs, yet the officials had no reason to do so, as the CCBs undermined their control over project selection (Razi, 2025)

The CCB mechanism failed structurally, in that there was an inappropriateness between the social reality and the institutional design. The CCB model made assumptions about literate, organized, and financially able communities that were not upheld in the majority of rural Bahawalnagar, where literacy levels were low, civil society was weak, and communities were so poor that they could not afford to pay 20 percent of project costs. The Citizen Community Board mechanism, which was the main direct citizen participation tool of the Devolution Plan, was structurally not fitting the social and economic realities of District Bahawalnagar. Its demise has left the system without the greatest source of bottom-up accountability and citizen participation (Matyana, 2025).

Conclusion

The Devolution Plan in the district of Bahawalnagar was not derailed by a mishap; It was derailed by bad design. This research paper highlighted six derailing factors that undermined the 2001 devolution plan in Bahawalnagar. All inherent to the system's architecture from the outset, weak constitutional protection, fiscal dependency, Structural conflict with MPA, bureaucratic resistance, Lack of training, elite capture through indirect election, and the failure of the citizen board. These factors were intentionally created to ensure the system served the political interests of military rule rather than the governance requirements of the citizenry. This does not imply that the Devolution Plan accomplished nothing. As the quotes from respondents in this study make clear, the plan not only brought Government closer to the people but also gave them new opportunities for political involvement, strengthened women and marginalized groups, and fostered political consciousness and civic awareness; however, its structural flaws made the system unable to survive. A system lacking constitutional safeguards can never be immune to political overturn. Any system that lacks fiscal autonomy will never be independent and strong. A system in which the elected officials are formally subjected to a bureaucracy, or any type of bureaucracy, which owes its loyalty to the other type, will always be sabotaged internally. The system in which untrained people are allowed to handle the complex duties of governing the

country will never be used by those who are more knowledgeable and experienced. An elite-capture system will never yield the equality it was meant to correct. And a system that does not establish efficient channels for citizen involvement will never be able to hold it accountable from the bottom up. Bahawalnagar has taught us that decentralization is not inherently bad or that local control cannot be effective in Pakistan. The clue is that decentralization should be planned with structural integrity, constitutional protection, fiscal independence, well-defined jurisdiction, effective capacity-building, and genuine citizen involvement. In the absence of these structural pillars, even the best-intentioned reform will not work.

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