

People's Assemblies on Devolution of Power: a case study on popular political participation in Pakistan

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The context: social and political exclusion

'Power must be devolved to the local level so that people can participate in governance,' said a farmer in rural Multan. 'Women should have 50% representation in local government,' recommended an old, turbaned man in the conservative town of Bannu. 'We want local government but this government will not be able to stop the feudal class from grabbing power through it,' feared a young student in urban Karachi. 'What will happen to our recommendations, will anyone listen to them?' doubted a female teacher in Balochistan. These are voices of ordinary citizens in Pakistan that were given space for expression through the People's Assemblies on Devolution of Power.

Ordinary citizens in Pakistan are socially and politically excluded. Since the state's creation in 1947, a certain political class, the bureaucracy, and the military have dominated politics and governance in Pakistan. The interests of ordinary citizens do not define the agendas of the main political parties. The bureaucracy remains elite-focused and unresponsive to the needs of ordinary citizens. The military is structurally incapable of enabling popular participation in decision making. Distanced and disillusioned with mainstream politics, ordinary citizens believe they cannot affect policies and action that affect their lives. Most are passive bystanders, understanding politics but not able or willing to participate in it. Declining membership in political parties and diminishing voter turnout are some of the indicators of this apathy.

Mobilising for change

The People's Assemblies process was initiated in 1998 to mobilise individual and collective participation of people in the political process. 'People's Assemblies will change the relationship between citizens and the state,' claimed Omar Asghar Khan¹ who conceptualised the process and provided leadership to it. The People's Assemblies aimed to serve as a platform for citizens to debate and analyse their issues and define their own political agenda. They sought to build coalitions among non-elite groups and create constituencies of support for implementing their

¹ Omar Asghar Khan was then the Executive Director of SUNGI Development Foundation, a leading NGO with an impressive ten-year track record of struggling for people's rights.

agenda. Their key objectives was to mobilise and organise citizens to form a robust and vibrant civil society in Pakistan that is able to effectively assert itself and engage with the state.

In 1998, Pakistan's civil society was severely threatened as the state attempted to control and constrain its independence through coercive legislation and other disabling measures, including deregistration of nearly 2400 NGOs. This provided further impetus to the People's Assemblies. Within a short span more than 50 civil society organisations formed its nationwide coalition. In the autumn of 1999, however, the process faced a crippling challenge and an exciting opportunity. In November, Omar Asghar Khan was inducted as a Federal Minister in General Musharraf's government. Without his leadership the People's Assemblies lost direction and momentum. At the same time General Musharraf's government focused on formulating a policy for devolving authority to create a local governance system. Unlike the previous democratically elected government, the military regime of General Musharraf recognised the role of civil society in bringing to an end the repression against it.

In January 2000, the nationwide coalition of the People's Assemblies regrouped and decided to pick up its momentum. They collectively decided to initiate a process of public debate and action focusing on the impending policy on local government. There were two reasons for this decision. First, effective devolution of power is recognised as an essential ingredient for democratisation, which continues to be the overarching objective of the People's Assemblies. Secondly, there was public interest in the impending policy and an expressed need to influence it.

People's Assemblies on Devolution of Power

Beginning in February 2000, the People's Assemblies on Devolution of Power were designed so that public debate began at the village/town level. Forty People's Assemblies were held at this level all over Pakistan. Public opinion from this level was synthesised at the provincial level with an Assembly held in each of the four provinces of Pakistan. The process culminated with a National People's Assembly in July 2000. The process involved over 15,000

citizens from the local village to the national level. About 30% of participants were women. The profile of the participants included farmers, labour, political workers, social and human rights activists, business persons, trade unionists, media persons, professionals, teachers, and students. The numbers and profile of participants are significant within the context of Pakistan's political culture that traditionally does not include citizens, particularly women, in policy dialogue (see Box 1).

Box 1 An example of a People's Assembly

9:00am 18 May 2000, Kotri, Sindh: It was a very hot and humid morning. In an open ground in the centre of town there was much hustle and bustle. Preparations for a People's Assembly were underway. The traditional *shamiana* (like a tent cover) and rows of red plastic chairs added colour to the dusty backdrop of the town. People were trickling in, in ones and twos. The local organisation hosting the Assembly, the Sindh Development Society (SDS), had spent weeks contacting and mobilising people from many parts of Sindh. It had also successfully held the pre-Assembly session in which about 100 women and men did an in-depth analysis of the issues related to democratic decentralisation. Their critique and recommendations would be used as a basic document to facilitate the public debate at the People's Assembly.

But today people were nervous, 'I don't know if people will turn up, as the local traders are on strike against the levy of the General Sales Tax,' said a worried *Ghaffar* of the SDS. But by 10:30am when the chief guest, the Federal Minister Omar Asghar Khan, arrived to begin the Assembly, the entire ground was packed. There were about 1000 people who had come from all over Sindh and had travelled at their own cost to participate in the Assembly. Participants included farmers, labourers, trade unionists, political workers, industrialists, the media, and professionals (including lawyers, doctors, and teachers). About 30% of participants were women. 'No Federal Minister has ever come to hear us before,' said a participant.

There was much support for effective devolution but there were some reservations too, 'We want devolution but not at the expense of losing provincial autonomy,' stressed a participant. There was also much public demand to minimise elite dominance, and the comment that 'the elites already have a lot of power, devolution must not increase their power,' was an oft-made recommendation.

Recommendations were made on what the functions of the proposed local government should be, on its electoral process, on who should be given representation in it, on how a system of transparency and accountability should be instituted in it. The assembly was to be concluded by 12:30pm. It continued until 2:30pm, even though lunch was not served and the temperature had reached about 40 degrees Celsius. The Federal Minister listened attentively to the voices of citizens. At the end he answered many queries, and also promised to take recommendations to the Cabinet. The organisers took notes of the discussion, sent key points to the media the same evening, and produced the report of the entire Assembly within 24 hours. They sent it to all key policy makers so that the voices of citizens could reach the corridors of power.



People's Assemblies reached over 15,000 citizens including about 30% of women

Strengths and successes

Three important factors contributed to making the People's Assemblies a meaningful and effective public debate and action process.

- First, citizens' voice was given primacy. Often public debate in Pakistan is about 'experts' talking to people for 95% of the time and perhaps 5% devoted to taking questions from them. This ratio was turned upside down in the People's Assemblies. In this process ordinary citizens became the experts. They set the tone and tenor of the debate. 'Nobody has asked our opinion before now,' said a daily wage earner in Kotri, a small town in Sindh. This complete reversal of roles also had a downside: it did not allow space for informed debate. For example, public opinion emerging from this process was overwhelmingly in favour of non-party-based elections. Aware that this opinion negated basic democratic principles, the organisers had little choice but to project this opinion as it represented the voice of citizens.
- Second, women's participation was made a non-negotiable element of the design. Even in the most conservative areas this design element was not compromised. However, cultural sensitivities required use of creative strategies to ensure the participation of women. In a conservative village in Dir, women were able to attend from behind a curtain. This emphasis paid off when one of the participants went on to contest and won the local government election. She is now a local councillor.
- Third, the public debate was not considered as an end in itself but a means to influencing public policy. Senior cabinet members were invited to the Assemblies, turning them into platforms of dialogue between citizens and policy makers. Written reports were also sent to key policy makers within 24 hours of holding each Assembly, and press articles helped give public opinion wide coverage. These efforts met with some



A participant sharing recommendations in a People's Assembly in Bannu, NWFP

successes but also encountered a few failures. Public opinion advocating at least 33% representation of women, creating political space for workers and peasants, and subordination of the powerful bureaucracy, contributed to including these elements into the final policy announced in August 2000. But strong public opinion favouring land reforms to level the playing field for the elite and non-elite and the abolition of the separate electorate system that effectively disenfranchises religious minorities, was not able to influence the final policy. However, in January 2002 the Musharraf government's introduced its electoral reform package that included elimination of the separate electorate system.

Shortcomings

The People's Assemblies process also had many shortcomings.

- First, the rushed pace needed to keep in sync with the government's schedule of policy formulation so that the Assemblies could influence it, led to greater centralisation. There was not much time to develop consensus on each decision, and so the initiative of the People's Assemblies shifted from partners at the local level to organisers at the centre. This also led to conflicts between organising partners.
- Second, the close interaction with policy makers enabled access to key decision makers and the ability to influence the impending policy. But it also shaped a perception that the process was too close to the government. Detractors of the government also used this aspect to allege that the process was legitimising the military regime.
- Finally, financial assistance from donors enabled the process to reach a nationwide scale and achieve a pace that maintained its relevance to the policy-making process. However, some misconstrued this support as donor dependence.

Conclusions

The People's Assemblies on Devolution of Power were successful in revitalising a culture of public debate and analysis. They enabled public opinion to influence public policy. They also helped politicise civil society organisations and develop nationwide relationships amongst them. This served as the foundation for a follow up: a political education and citizen mobilisation initiative called the Democratic Rights and Citizens' Education Programme, which was initiated in August 2000. But perhaps most importantly, the People's Assemblies provided political space for popular political participation.

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