



Unleashing the Power of Democratic Devolution: Impacts on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the Post-18th Amendment Era

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Abstract

This study examines the impacts of democratic devolution in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) after the 18th Amendment, focusing on local government, political stability, education, and fiscal distribution. The study explores how empowering local bodies has fostered citizen participation, accountability, and improved service delivery at the grassroots level. The transfer of authority to local governments has influenced the political landscape and has the potential to enhance political stability through greater cooperation among stakeholders. The study specifically assesses the impact of devolution on resource allocation and curriculum development in the education sector, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. Furthermore, the analysis investigates the impact of fiscal distribution on resource allocation and the promotion of equity, efficiency, and transparency in addressing development needs. Challenges such as legislative gaps, operational limitations, and budgetary/fiscal issues hinder the full realization of devolution's potential. Addressing these challenges is crucial for maximizing the benefits of devolution in Pakistan.

Keywords: Democratic Devolution, 18th Amendment, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Local Government, Political Stability, Education, Fiscal Distribution

Introduction

The concept of democratic devolution is the transfer of authority and decision-making powers from the central government to subnational units has emerged as a cornerstone of modern federalism. In pluralistic and multiethnic societies, such as Pakistan, devolution ensures inclusive governance, equitable development, and the accommodation of regional diversity through local empowerment. Within this framework, the 18th Constitutional Amendment of Pakistan, passed in April 2010, represents a landmark reform that profoundly altered the structure of intergovernmental relations by decentralizing political, administrative, and fiscal powers to the provinces (Rabbani, 2016). Historically, Pakistan's federation has struggled with a highly centralized power structure inherited from colonial rule. Despite early promises of federalism, successive constitutions and military interventions reinforced central dominance, marginalizing provincial autonomy. The Lahore Resolution of 1940, which laid the foundation for Pakistan, explicitly envisioned autonomous and sovereign units. However, from independence in 1947

until the enactment of the 18th Amendment, federal–provincial relations were marked by imbalances, bureaucratic control, and periodic tensions over resource distribution and political representation (Ali, 2018). The 18th Amendment redefined the balance of power between the federation and provinces by abolishing the Concurrent Legislative List and transferring 44 subjects to the provinces, including education, health, environment, and social welfare. It also restructured key institutions such as the Council of Common Interests (CCI) and enhanced the role of provincial legislatures. For Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province (N.W.F.P) the amendment carried additional symbolic significance by officially renaming the province, recognizing its distinct ethnic and cultural identity (Rid, 2022). In the post 18th Amendment era, KP experienced substantial institutional transformation. The province established new local governance frameworks, strengthened fiscal management mechanisms, and implemented reforms in sectors like education and public administration. These changes were designed to bring governance closer to the people, enhance transparency, and ensure more efficient service delivery. Nevertheless, despite these advancements, several challenges have impeded the full realization of devolution’s promise—ranging from weak institutional capacity and political interference to resource constraints and overlapping bureaucratic jurisdictions (CPDI, 2014).

Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the impact of the 18th Constitutional Amendment on governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
2. To examine the implementation status of devolution in the province.
3. To identify major areas of development resulting from enhanced provincial autonomy.
4. To analyze the key challenges and propose measures to strengthen democratic devolution.

Literature Review

The concept of democratic devolution has been widely studied in the context of federal governance, participatory democracy, and local empowerment. Globally, devolution is recognized as an essential tool for promoting inclusivity, accountability, and effective service delivery at the grassroots level. In Pakistan, however, devolution has remained an evolving and often contested process, shaped by historical centralization, political transitions, and institutional reforms.

Democratic Devolution and Federalism in Pakistan

The roots of devolution in Pakistan trace back to its colonial legacy. During the British era, municipal bodies were introduced with limited authority under the supervision of centrally appointed officers (Ali, 2018). Following independence, Pakistan’s federal framework aimed to balance autonomy and unity, but repeated military interventions and centralized constitutions undermined genuine provincial empowerment. Scholars such as Rabbani (2016) argue that the 18th Constitutional Amendment of 2010 finally restored the spirit of the 1973 Constitution, fulfilling the long-standing demand for true federalism by strengthening provincial autonomy and transferring key policy areas to the federating units. The Lahore Resolution of 1940 envisioned a federation based on self-governing provinces. However, it was not until the 1973 Constitution that Pakistan formally recognized this vision through a bicameral legislature and the creation of the Council of Common Interests (CCI). The 18th Amendment further institutionalized these mechanisms by redefining the distribution of legislative powers and introducing fiscal and administrative devolution (Rana, 2020). This reform not only altered the

vertical relationship between the federation and provinces but also transformed horizontal intergovernmental coordination.

Implementation Challenges and Institutional Capacity

While the 18th Amendment provided a robust constitutional foundation, its practical implementation has encountered multiple challenges. The Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI, 2014) noted that in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, despite the enactment of over 35 statutes related to local governance, education, and health, progress remained limited due to bureaucratic inertia, insufficient administrative capacity, and weak coordination mechanisms between federal and provincial departments. Duplicate structures at both levels created confusion over institutional responsibilities, further slowing devolution. Similarly, Sohail et al. (2022) highlight that the post-amendment period improved provincial fiscal authority and political participation through enhanced representation in the National Economic Council (NEC) and increased share in the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award, which rose from 40 to 57 percent. However, provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa still faced hurdles in managing new responsibilities due to resource constraints and overlapping jurisdictions.

Devolution and Local Governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Empirical evidence indicates that democratic devolution significantly transformed local governance structures in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to Ehsan, Jamal, and Malik (2021), Article 140-A of the Constitution mandates provinces to establish autonomous and accountable local governments. In compliance, KP introduced a three-tier local governance system comprising district, tehsil, and village councils, allocating 30 percent of the provincial development budget to local representatives. This system enhanced participatory decision-making and improved responsiveness to local needs, although political interference and limited fiscal authority at the local level remained persistent barriers. Nabi and Shaikh (2010) emphasize that decentralization also empowered KP to assert its financial rights in the energy sector. The province sought royalties for hydropower generated at Tarbela Dam, but disputes with the federal government and the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) hindered fair compensation. Such fiscal tensions illustrate the broader challenge of achieving equitable resource distribution under Pakistan's federal structure.

Education, Fiscal Distribution, and Political Stability

The devolution of education under Article 25-A marked a major shift in Pakistan's governance system. The CPDI (2014) reported that provinces gained full authority over curriculum design, syllabus development, and educational planning. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa utilized this autonomy to improve infrastructure, teacher training, and female education. Yet, provincial disparities and financial limitations prevented the full realization of education as a fundamental right. On fiscal matters, Shams (2023) noted that KP continued to face financial inequities despite its enhanced share in the NFC Award. The province's outstanding arrears—particularly for merged tribal districts demonstrate ongoing fiscal dependency and administrative challenges. Likewise, Rid (2022) viewed the renaming of the province from NWFP to KP as a symbolic victory for self-determination but stressed that economic devolution remains incomplete without genuine fiscal empowerment. Rabbani (2016) and Zaman et al. (2018) agree that political stability in KP improved post-2010, as evidenced by the peaceful completion of successive provincial governments. However, they also underline that stability is contingent upon sustained cooperation among political actors and the consistent enforcement of devolved powers.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** to explore the impacts of democratic devolution in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) following the 18th Constitutional Amendment.

Data Collection and Sources

Given the political and institutional nature of the topic, this research relies primarily on secondary data sources. Secondary data are previously published materials that provide contextual and analytical insights (Rashid, 2005). The data for this study were collected from multiple sources, including:

- Books and scholarly publications on federalism and devolution in Pakistan;
- Official documents and reports of the Council of Common Interests (CCI) and National Finance Commission (NFC);
- Policy papers and annual reports issued by the Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI);
- Articles from peer-reviewed journals focusing on governance and public policy;
- Government notifications, acts of Parliament, and constitutional texts;
- Newspaper archives and digital repositories providing updated information on post-18th Amendment developments in KP.

Findings and Discussion

Overview

The 18th Constitutional Amendment of 2010 redefined Pakistan's federal framework, transferring legislative and administrative authority from the central government to the provinces. For Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), this transformation was particularly significant, as it enhanced provincial autonomy and institutionalized democratic devolution. The findings of this study reveal that devolution in KP has produced substantial progress in local governance, political stability, education, and fiscal distribution, while simultaneously exposing deep-seated structural and operational challenges that hinder its full realization.

Local Governance and Grassroots Empowerment

The establishment of local governments in KP following the 18th Amendment marked one of the most visible achievements of democratic devolution. Under Article 140-A, provinces were constitutionally obligated to establish autonomous and accountable local government systems. In compliance, KP adopted a three-tier system comprising district, tehsil, and village councils (Ehsan, Jamal, & Malik, 2021). This institutional arrangement enhanced citizen participation in decision-making and allowed communities to identify and address local needs. Approximately 30 percent of KP's Annual Development Budget was allocated to local representatives, signaling a substantial shift in resource distribution to the grassroots level. Furthermore, the successful conduct of two consecutive local government elections (2015 and 2021–22) demonstrated the province's commitment to sustaining democratic structures. However, despite these advances, persistent issues remain. Many local representatives lack administrative and financial management skills, while frequent interference by provincial elites undermines the independence of local councils. Moreover, fiscal dependency on the provincial government and limited revenue-generation capacity continue to weaken local autonomy. Effective devolution thus

requires not only constitutional guarantees but also sustained political will, capacity-building, and institutional support at the grassroots level.

Political Stability and Institutional Maturity

Political stability is one of the key indicators of successful devolution. The findings suggest that the 18th Amendment contributed to an era of relative political continuity and democratic consolidation in KP. The renaming of the province from North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa fulfilled a long-standing demand for ethnic and cultural recognition, reinforcing regional identity and ownership (Rid, 2022). Furthermore, both the Awami National Party (ANP) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) governments successfully completed their full tenures in KP after 2010, an achievement that reflects growing institutional maturity and political consensus. According to Rabbani (2016), the devolution of power contributed to a more balanced federation by reducing tensions between the center and the provinces. Nonetheless, political stability in KP remains conditional on continued federal cooperation and equitable resource distribution. Political polarization, weak coordination between federal and provincial institutions, and security challenges in the newly merged districts have occasionally undermined governance. Strengthening the role of the Council of Common Interests (CCI) as a platform for dispute resolution can ensure continuity in intergovernmental collaboration and policy harmony.

Education Sector Transformation

Education emerged as one of the most impacted sectors under the 18th Amendment. The transfer of education to the provinces particularly through Article 25-A, which guarantees free and compulsory education for children aged 5–16 provided KP with a historic opportunity to reform its education system (CPDI, 2014). Following the amendment, the Elementary and Secondary Education Department (E&SED) was established to oversee provincial educational planning, curriculum development, and teacher training. Significant budget allocations were made to upgrade school infrastructure and enhance learning outcomes. The focus on female education was particularly noteworthy, with the government constructing girls-only schools, providing incentives for female enrollment, and running awareness campaigns to promote gender equity. However, several structural problems persist. The province continues to face shortages of qualified teachers, disparities in urban-rural schooling, and insufficient monitoring mechanisms. Furthermore, frequent political changes have disrupted policy continuity, while financial limitations hinder the full implementation of Article 25-A. These challenges illustrate the gap between constitutional ambition and administrative reality.

Fiscal Distribution and Financial Autonomy

The 18th Amendment also brought transformative changes to Pakistan's fiscal landscape through the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award. The share of provinces in the national divisible pool increased from 40 percent to 57 percent, enabling KP to design its own development agenda (Sohail et al., 2022). Despite this, fiscal autonomy remains constrained. As Shams (2023) reports, KP has struggled to recover arrears from the federal government amounting to Rs. 233 billion for merged districts and development projects. These unpaid allocations have restricted the province's ability to finance critical social services. Furthermore, dependence on federal transfers persists because provincial revenue generation—particularly in non-tax sectors remains weak. The International Growth Centre (IGC, 2015) notes that while decentralization has improved local expenditure efficiency, it has not yet resulted in fiscal sustainability. For devolution to succeed financially, provinces like KP must enhance their tax collection systems,

develop transparent budgeting mechanisms, and explore new revenue streams such as tourism and small-scale industries.

Emerging Challenges and Grievances

Although the 18th Amendment strengthened the constitutional framework for devolution, KP continues to face serious challenges in implementing its provisions. Institutional overlap between federal and provincial departments, delayed resource transfers, and inconsistent political commitment have hindered reform outcomes. KP has repeatedly expressed grievances regarding the equitable distribution of natural resource royalties and representation in federal forums. Despite being a major producer of hydropower and natural gas, the province claims that it does not receive a fair share of revenues or timely payments (Haider & Faqir, 2023). Disputes over the Kalabagh Dam, delayed NFC awards, and underrepresentation in the National Economic Council (NEC) have exacerbated the sense of deprivation. These grievances highlight the need for strengthened mechanisms of federal-provincial coordination through constitutional forums such as the CCI and NEC. Enhancing the CCI's role in arbitration and policy harmonization could mitigate mistrust and reinforce cooperative federalism across Pakistan.

Findings

The 18th Constitutional Amendment stands as one of the most transformative reforms in Pakistan's political history, reconfiguring the country's federal architecture and redefining the relationship between the federation and its constituent provinces. In the case of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the amendment not only conferred administrative and fiscal authority but also symbolized political recognition through the renaming of the province and the enhancement of its autonomy. The findings of this study demonstrate that democratic devolution has yielded notable improvements in local governance, fiscal management, education, and political stability. The establishment of decentralized institutions has increased citizen participation and accountability at the grassroots level. Political stability in the province has also strengthened, with successive governments completing full constitutional tenures an indication of institutional maturity. Moreover, devolution of education and fiscal functions has expanded KP's capacity to design localized development initiatives. However, these gains are offset by persistent challenges. Weak institutional capacity, overlapping bureaucratic structures, limited fiscal autonomy, and inconsistent political commitment have slowed the full realization of devolution's objectives. Resource disputes between the federation and KP especially regarding hydropower royalties and delayed National Finance Commission (NFC) allocations continue to strain intergovernmental relations. The absence of clear coordination mechanisms between federal and provincial institutions further undermines cooperative federalism. In sum, the success of democratic devolution in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa depends not only on constitutional provisions but also on the political will to institutionalize accountability, strengthen administrative competence, and ensure equitable distribution of resources. True federalism can thrive only when both the federation and provinces work in partnership to uphold the principles of autonomy, inclusion, and shared responsibility.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen democratic devolution and optimize governance outcomes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and beyond:

- 1. Empower Local Governments:**

Strengthen local bodies by granting them adequate administrative and fiscal authority.

Allocate a fixed percentage of the provincial budget to local councils and establish transparent mechanisms for accountability and performance evaluation.

2. **Enhance Institutional Capacity:**
Invest in training programs for local representatives, bureaucrats, and education administrators to improve policy implementation, financial management, and public service delivery.
3. **Promote Political Consensus:**
Encourage collaboration between political parties and federal institutions to ensure continuity in devolution policies, irrespective of changes in government. Sustained consensus is vital for political stability and institutional maturity.
4. **Reinforce Fiscal Federalism:**
Ensure the timely announcement and implementation of NFC awards. Adopt a balanced formula for fiscal distribution based on population, resource generation, and developmental needs. Introduce provincial taxation reforms to enhance self-reliance.
5. **Address Provincial Grievances:**
Resolve intergovernmental disputes particularly regarding energy royalties, natural resource revenues, and development allocations through proactive engagement within constitutional forums such as the **Council of Common Interests (CCI)** and the **National Economic Council (NEC)**.
6. **Education Sector Reforms:**
Increase investment in education infrastructure, promote teacher training, and strengthen monitoring systems to ensure quality learning outcomes. Prioritize female education through scholarships and school access programs.
7. **Public Awareness and Advocacy:**
Launch awareness campaigns to educate citizens, policymakers, and civil society about the benefits of devolution. A well-informed public can serve as a check against mismanagement and political interference.
8. **Institutionalize Cooperative Federalism:**
Enhance the constitutional and administrative role of the CCI by making its meetings more frequent and binding in effect. The CCI should act as the primary dispute resolution and policy harmonization body for center province relations.

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