



RESEARCH PAPER

The Federal - Unitary Debate in Pakistan: An Analytical Study of the State Structure

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine that which form of state is best suited for Pakistan among federalism or unitarism, and analyzes the historical and constitutional development of federalism in Pakistan while considering the important milestones like the 1973 Constitution and the 18th Amendment. The research also compares the federal system of Pakistan with other federal states to determine its efficiency. Qualitative approach is used in the research based on secondary data sources such as books, journal articles and constitutional texts. The results show that even with a federal constitution, Pakistan has been more of a centralized country given interventions by the military, Punjab political dominance and poor institutional mechanisms. Though the 18th Amendment was expected to reinforce federalism but incomplete implementation has restricted advancement. While on the other side unitary form of state is not suitable for Pakistan by any means due to country's ethnically, linguistically and regionally heterogeneous nature. The research holds the view that the federal model of cooperation, which guarantees actual devolution of power, fair distribution of resources and institutional independence, is necessary for political stability and national cohesion. Duly strengthening local government as well as participative policymaking are suggested for a viable federal system for Pakistan.

KEYWORDS Federalism, Unitarianism, State Structure, 18th Amendment, Constitution of 1973, Devolution of Power, Distribution of Resources, Local Government

Introduction

States are too large to be managed by a single ruler or a government dealing at the center or capital, so the sovereign states divided and subdivided into a number of administrated areas which are called as province, state, department etc. while their subdivisions called district, tehsil, etc. and also all these divisions have its own governmental bodies called as the local government or local self-government. The relation between the central and provincial governments can be divided into different ways, as the form of state, and we have the three main kinds of the state based on its structure, such as, unitary, federation and confederation. However, the focus of this research is only unitary and federal form of states

The principle of federalism has evolved over time largely by experience. Federalism was initially created with a view to making the scattered nation of the United States independent and powerful. At the moment, globalization is the trend. Moreover, due to the evolution of transportation and communication technology, the real sense of

independence has been transformed from control over land to control over people. Due to this change, in the unitary model not making individuals the subject of rights, the advent of federalism has been required. For federalism to really function, it should acknowledge the fundamental fact that power stems from rights and the obstacles limiting its movement should be reduced. Most democratic countries nowadays have government structures grounded on the principles of federalism. Nations like the United States, Germany, the Russian Federation, and Mexico have federal systems

At the time of independence in 1947, Pakistan consisted into two geographical wings: east wing (now Bangladesh) and west wing (Pakistan) with large ethnic groups and linguistic and cultural differences (Asghar, Cheema, & Muzaffar, 2025). This geographical separation needed a federal system to adjust regional differences. Pakistan's governmental structures have been disputed since independence. According to the Indian independence act of 1947 both India and Pakistan has to adopt 1935 Act of India with some ceremonial changes until they make their own constitution. So after the independence, Pakistan adopted the 1935 act of India with some certain changes as the interim constitution of Pakistan. Pakistan adopted vary centralized federal system under the amended 1935 act.

The debate between the federal system and unitary system has longed been from the independent of Pakistan since 1947. This debate has the important impact on the Pakistan's political and constitutional landscape. As a multi ethnic and culturally diverse state, Pakistan has suffered and struggled to find a good governance system that manage and balance the need for the national unity with the demands for regional autonomy. The choice for adoption between the unitary and federal system has great or intense implication for resources distribution, national integration, and governance. Despite constitutional provisions and reforms such as the 18th Amendment, the question of whether Pakistan functions more efficiently as a federal state or unitary state remains unresolved. Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyze the federal-unitary debate in Pakistan in its constitutional, historical and political dimensions in order to understand the causes of centralization, provincial dissatisfaction and their impact on governance, stability and national unity.

Literature Review

Conceptual comparison between unitary and federal systems

A unitary system centralizes authority, provides consistency, administrative uniformity and quick decision-making mostly during emergencies. However, it limits local autonomy and political freedom while often resembles with authoritarian tendencies. On the other hand, a federal system divides power between central and regional governments and provides a room for local self-rule and greater flexibility. It promotes negotiation, decentralization and protects local liberties but often become more expensive and slower in decision-making (Kandel, 2024).

Historical Evolution of Federalism in Pakistan

Jalal (1995) argues that at the very formation of Pakistan there were two visions of state structure: one demanded centralized authority and another advocated for provincial autonomy. Also, the early constitutional experiments such as the Objectives Resolution of 1949 set a tone for ambiguity in centre-province relationships and left a significant room for political contestation. The 1956 Constitution established a federal

framework formally but its collapse in 1958 and the imposition of martial law declared the weaknesses in the constitutional federalism. Ziring (2003) is of opinion that military interventions disrupted the evolution of federal governance in Pakistan and reinforced the centralization and weakened the provincial institutions.

Constitutional Framework: 1973 Constitution and Beyond

The 1973 Constitution is known as a foundational document of Pakistan's federal system as it delineates legislative, executive and financial powers between the federation and provinces (Bhurgri, 2010). However, scholars have critiqued the Constitution for the embedment of asymmetries that favor centre. For instance, the distribution of residual powers to the federation and the dominant role of the National Finance Commission (NFC) in resource distribution have been noted as mechanisms that limit true provincial autonomy (Shah, 2007). Nasir (2014) states that constitutional federalism in Pakistan has been constrained by political practice where the federal government often uses administrative and financial levers to exert influence over provinces which is consistent with political theory that suggests that formal constitutional provisions may not translate into substantive autonomy without supportive political institutions (Rodden, 2004).

Failure of federalism in Pakistan due to centralized power structure

Pakistan's federal system, although constitutionally provisioned, has not worked because of continued central dominance of power, military takeovers, and weak institutional framework for managing provincial autonomy. In spite of the promise of the 1973 Constitution and the creation of institutions such as the Council of Common Interests (CCI), functional federalism has been undermined by hegemonic central control, particularly because of Punjab's demographic and political dominance. Ethnic inequalities, unequal distribution of resources, and lax enforcement of constitutional provisions have been the sources of provincial grievances, especially in provinces such as Balochistan and Sindh. Democratic institution building, effective constitutional reforms, and fair representation are imperative in order to develop an effective and participative federal system in Pakistan (Kundi, 2002).

Structural crisis of federalism in Pakistan and lack of provincial trust in Pakistan

Pakistan's federal framework is confronted with a structural crisis in the absence of an honest federal covenant among the provinces, resulting in military and bureaucratic dominance at the center. The constitution has been used frequently to justify centralized purposes at the expense of provincial autonomy. Historical injustices, ethnic rivalry, and economic inequalities have generated inter-provincial distrust. Even though the 18th Amendment and 7th NFC Award made efforts towards resolving such challenges by decentralizing powers, the follow-through is poor. Strong federalism in Pakistan would need constitutional consolidation, trust, inter-provincial confidence-building, and commitment to inclusive decision-making (Ahmad, 2010).

Early advocacy of federalism in Pakistan: Butto's perspective 1954

In his 1954 address "Pakistan: A Federal or Unitary State? ", Bhutto examined the political framework of Pakistan. He underlined federalism's significance in a nation characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and provincial diversity. Bhutto countered that a unitary system was responsible and would be counterproductive to national unity and promoted responsible federalism promoting regional autonomy and ensuring national

integrity. He stressed that only through a genuine federal framework could Pakistan ensure democratic governance, equitable resource distribution, and long-term stability.

Impact of military rule and centralization on Pakistan federal system

Akhter and Nasreen (2011) state that the federal system of Pakistan has weakened by the military intervention in government and centralized governance and highlight the significance and need for the stronger provincial autonomy to address regional difference. Khan and Adeel (2003) argues that by the dominance of central government the federal structured government has been undermined. Rizvi and Askari (2015) explores that in the favor of centralized decision making, the provinces have often been sidelined. The 18th amendment (2010) in the constitution of 1973 was a significant step toward decentralization but its implementation remains incomplete.

Colonial legacy and constitutional contradiction in Pakistan's federal structure

Siddiqui and Kalim (2012) observe that the Pakistan's federal structure has been shaped by its colonial legacy and post-independence challenges and argues that for addressing Pakistan's regional and ethnic diversity federalism is important. The constitution of 1973 was established as a federal system but its implementation has been contradictory (Cheema & Shandana, 2003).

Fiscal Federalism and Resource Distribution

Fiscal federalism is central to understanding federal-unitary tensions in Pakistan. The NFC Award, as a legally mandated mechanism for revenue sharing, has been both a site of political contestation and a tool for negotiating provincial interests. Ahmed (2018) observes that debates over the NFC often weigh up concerns about equity, development and political bargaining, and states that provinces, particularly Balochistan, have consistently demanded for a more equitable share of resources to address disparities in development. Similarly, Gazdar (2014) opines that fiscal imbalances contributes to perceptions of marginalization and fuel demands for greater decentralization.

Institutional Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite constitutional and legal reforms, institutional challenges persist in Pakistan's federal structure as bureaucratic centralization, weak provincial legislatures and party politics undermine the effective exercise of autonomy (Waseem, 2016). Therefore, there's a need for institutional capacity building and a culture of cooperative federalism to sustain the federal framework (Khan & Ali, 2020). The future of federalism in Pakistan depends on fostering inclusive political dialogue and intergovernmental mechanisms, and addressal of socio-economic disparities that fuel separatist and regionalist movements (Hussain, 2021).

Material and Methods

This research has adopted a qualitative method and employed the historical and comparative approaches for which data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included government documents, constitutional amendments and policy reports while the secondary sources included academic journals, books and articles on federalism and Unitarianism.

Results and Discussion

Federalism encourages power-sharing between central and regional authorities and allows for greater local participation, protection of regional interests, conflict management and national integration and flexibility in policy-making. It supports democratic inclusion and helps to manage social, cultural and administrative diversity. However, its effectiveness can be weakened by poor coordination, conflict over resources distribution, risk of regionalism and separatism, that overlaps responsibilities, political conflicts and delays in decision-making (Wheare, 1963; Elazar, 1987). On the other hand, a unitary system emphasizes centralized authority, which can ensure administrative uniformity, policy consistency, less political conflict between regions and rapid responses during emergencies. At the same time, excessive centralization may limit local autonomy, overburdened centre government, risk of authoritarianism, reduced public participation, and create governance gaps at the grassroots level (Heywood, 2013). Overall, both systems require strong institutions, accountability and cooperative governance to function effectively and sustainably.

Pakistan is a plural society with multiple ethnic groups, languages, and regional identities. So federalism is more suitable for Pakistan than a unitary system. Scholars argue that federal arrangements promote national integration by allowing shared rule at the center and self-rule at the regional level (Elazar, 1987).

Pakistan's provinces Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are distinct in culture and languages. Federalism gives each province the means to maintain its cultural identity and manage local matters suitably.

Pakistan's linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity makes federalism a more suitable model of administration than unitarism. Greater regional autonomy, improved delivery of services, and greater facility of the provinces in responding to local needs is available in Pakistan's federalism.

Pakistan's experience with the constitution has been one of persistent oscillation between unitary and federal government, but in the direction of centralization in spite of federal tendencies. The 18th Amendment of 2010 was a watershed reform that tried to enforce federalism by devolving legislative and fiscal powers to provinces.

Political participation, responsiveness, and conflict management improve in particular where decentralization has taken place in poor and periphery areas such as Balochistan and KP. Practiced federalism remains weak irrespective of constitutional enforcement because of centralization in politics, inefficacy in institutions, and scarcity of political will.

Federal institutions in Pakistan are afflicted by coordination weaknesses among the provinces and the center, underutilization of institutions, and delayed resource allocations. Disparities in provincial development create resentment and marginalization, undermining national integration.

The unitary system ensures uniform policies, quick decision-making, and administrative efficiency but is likely to overlook local interests and suppress dissent. Pakistan does not have strong institutional mechanisms relative to other federations such as the U.S., Germany, and India, where federalism is backed by strong legal and political frameworks.

Institutions such as the Senate, Council of Common Interests (CCI), and National Finance Commission (NFC) are constitutionally necessary but do not have the power of enforcement and maintenance of regular working. Political intervention and asymmetrical fiscal arrangements undermine the efficacy of federal institutions and intergovernmental management.

Marginalization of provincial cultures and languages works to alienate and erode the spirit of inclusiveness of federalism. An inclusive and cooperative federal model based on mutual respect, institutional reform, and resource equity is needed to guarantee Pakistan's long-term stability and cohesion.

Conclusion

The study of federalism versus unitarism in the context of Pakistan reveals a complex interplay between the country's diverse ethnic, linguistic and regional identities and the political structures designed to govern them. Pakistan's historical experience shows that a purely unitary system has often failed to accommodate this diversity that leads to political instability, regional grievances and challenges to national cohesion.

Federalism on the other side offers a framework that allows for greater regional autonomy and self-governance while maintaining the integrity of the state. The analysis of Pakistan's federal structure highlights both its potential and its limitations. While the constitution provides for a federal system that often leans towards centralization which fuels dissatisfaction among the provinces and undermines the principle of power-sharing.

Comparative insights from other federal countries demonstrate that effective federalism hinges on genuine decentralization, institutional autonomy, and respect for regional identities. In Pakistan's case, strengthening provincial autonomy and ensuring equitable resource distribution are essential steps towards a more balanced federal setup. Moreover, inclusive political dialogue and reforms that recognize and respect ethnic and linguistic diversity can transform federalism into a tool for national unity rather than division.

Ultimately, Pakistan's future political stability and socio-economic development depend on resolving the tension between federalism and unitarism. A well-implemented federal system, characterized by cooperation and mutual respect between the center and provinces, can better address the country's pluralism and promote sustainable governance. Thus, the challenge lies in moving away from an overly centralized unitary approach and embracing a more flexible, inclusive federal model that truly reflects Pakistan's complex socio-political realities.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

Strengthen decentralization by empowering local governments by the effective operation of Article 140-A of the Constitution. Ensure holding of regular, free, and fair local government elections to promote grassroots participation and delivery of services. Provide sufficient financial resources to local bodies through a transparent and predictable fiscal transfer mechanism.

Enact the 18th Amendment in its entirety by enhancing the province's administrative strength and minimizing federal meddling. Enhance federal bodies like the Council of Common Interests (CCI) by ensuring its regular meetings and conferring

legal enforcing powers upon it. Enhance the legislative power of the Senate for more provincial representation and checkmating population-based domination within the National Assembly.

Encourage the use and conservation of regional languages through educational policies, media programming, and public communication. Blend regional cultures with national identity through festivals, broadcasting, and curriculum change to minimize alienation. Review and revise the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award at regular intervals taking into account factors such as backwardness, population, and revenue earning.

Do proper distribution of development projects and national resources among all the provinces, particularly underdeveloped areas. Institute interprovincial exchange schemes and youth programs for enhancing national cohesion and mutual understanding. Enhance representation of all provinces in federal institutions such as civil services, military forces, and judiciary to ensure equal representation.

Impose constitutional promises of religious and ethnic minority rights to ensure justice, equality, and social harmony. Establish independent human rights commissions to report on violation and ensure equal access to justice for all communities. Foster participatory governance through public consultation, town hall meetings, and engagement of civil society in policy-making.

Counter extremism by reforming education, civic education, and hate speech regulation in media and religious institutions. Promote intercultural dialogue mechanisms and peace-building efforts by civil society to promote pluralism and tolerance.

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