Decentralisation in Ghana and Pakistan – a case of policy transfer or mere coincidence?

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Policy transfer is an umbrella term that covers a broad range of phenomena and activities in the realm of public policy, such as lesson-drawing, policy emulation, policy diffusion, cross-national policy learning, and so on and so forth. Policy transfer has been defined as ‘The process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system’ (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). During policy transfer, it may not be a significant factor whether issues are generated by social actors or whether government takes a lead in policy development. What is important, however, is that similar policies or solutions are in practice in different countries irrespective of differences in their social and political structures (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003).

While deliberate and conscious adoption of policies from other geographical locations has been found throughout human history, under various politico-administrative dispensations, the marked difference between recent emergence and past occurrences is that in the past, policy transfer or policy learning took place as a result of some kind of inspiration or influence between states or even within the state. However, with growing ‘internationalisation’, we now observe a wave of new ideas and trends spreading across the globe, not necessarily confined to recipient and originating countries. Policy change occurs as a result of the complex interplay of many factors, such as economic, social, political, cultural and institutional dimensions (Brinkerhoff, 2002). Today these societal factors have become more important as state-society relationship is being rewritten. In the wake of globalisation and the diminishing role of the state, the demand for good governance and involvement of private sector and civil society is prevalent.

It is in this context that this paper discusses decentralisation attempts in Ghana and Pakistan – both Commonwealth countries. The story of decentralisation in Ghana is an interesting one. As in Pakistan, military rulers in Ghana have proved to be strong supporters of local governments. Serious attempts to reform local government systems have been largely undertaken by military regimes. It has been argued by Ahwoi (2010) that decentralisation of national administration, particularly in unitary states, works best in the presence of a strong central government.

In this paper an attempt will be made to highlight similarities and differences between the process of local government reforms in Ghana and Pakistan. There are huge differences between the two countries in terms of population, the number of local governments and the system of local elections, as we will see below. But, as far as the history of local government reforms, and its subsequent strengthening under military rules are concerned, there are a number of similarities.

Local government in Pakistan and Ghana

The population of Pakistan, a country with a federal political system, is approximately 170 million in 2010. There are about 6,631 local governments in the country of varying sizes and at different tiers (Government of Pakistan, 2010). Local government elections are held by adult franchise every four years. In juxtaposition, Ghana is a unitary state with a population of about 24 million and has 170 district assemblies. Thirty percent of district assembly members are appointed by the president, in consultation with traditional chiefs and interest groups. The Mayor or District Chief Executive as it is known in Ghana, is also appointed by the President of Ghana. Therefore, the electoral system is a mix of elected as well as non-elected (nominated) components. Like Pakistan, Ghana also has a three-tier system of local government with the district being the main development, administrative and legislative body. See Table 1.

Since the independence of Ghana in 1957, a major change in the governance system was introduced in 1988 by Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings, the organiser of the fourth coup in the country in 1981. Unlike Ghana, General Musharraf’s government presented a new system of local government within a few months. Another important milestone was the promulgation of the 1992 Constitution that accords recognition of decentralisation and local government. The Constitution of Pakistan, under Article 32, binds the state to promote local government and the representation of marginalised segments of society. Moreover, General Musharraf catered for supplementary protection of the devolution plan through the 17th constitutional amendment; the local government system introduced by his regime could only be changed through a constitutional amendment in a parliament that is extremely challenging in itself, due primarily to Pakistan’s coalition government.

Flight Lieutenant Rawlings’ regime in 1982 announced its commitment to decentralisation with the slogan ‘Power to the People’. He stated that, ‘If power to the people is to be a reality, then we need to decentralise.’ Rawlings’ local government programme ultimately culminated in Chapter 20 of the 1992 Constitution that accords recognition of decentralisation and local government. The Constitution of Pakistan, under Article 32, binds the state to promote local government and the representation of marginalised segments of society. Moreover, General Musharraf catered for supplementary protection of the devolution plan through the 17th constitutional amendment; the local government system introduced by his regime could only be changed through a constitutional amendment in a parliament that is extremely challenging in itself, due primarily to Pakistan’s coalition government.

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<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Three-tier local government</th>
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<td><strong>Pakistan</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ghana</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tier</strong></td>
<td><strong>District/city</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Top</strong></td>
<td><strong>Taluka/town</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Lowest</strong></td>
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Constitution, which is dedicated to decentralisation and local government. When General Musharraf came to power in Pakistan in October 1999, he also presented a seven-point agenda that included grass-roots democracy as an integral part. The devolution plan was presented in the form of a ‘Green Book’, which was followed by a ‘White Book’, published after consultations with the stakeholders, which reflected a revised plan. The devolution plan was then transformed into a generic framework or law called the BNPS Local Government Ordinance (the initials ‘BNPS’ corresponding to the four provinces in Pakistan). This was later promulgated by all four provinces as a provincial statute in 2000. Similarly, in Ghana, the ‘Blue Book’ became famous as the blueprint of the new local government system.

To steer the reform process, most countries establish dedicated units, often attached to or within the highest political office; for example, the Prime Minister’s Secretariat or the President’s Secretariat. These dedicated departments are often named the Decentralisation Secretariat (e.g. in Sierra Leone, Swaziland). In some cases, a High-Powered Inter-ministerial Committee, or Task Force, is established (e.g. in Lesotho). Sierra Leone is an exception, as the Decentralisation Secretariat is largely supported by donors and is not attached to the President’s Office.

In Pakistan, the National Reconstruction Bureau (NRB) was a part of the Chief Executive’s (Prime Minister’s) Secretariat that not only served as a policy think-tank, but also managed implementation of decentralisation in the country. The NRB’s counterpart in Ghana, the District Assembly (district local government) is the basic unit of local government that also serves as the district planning authority.

Another hallmark of Pakistan’s Devolution Plan was that the district was made the main unit of the local government system, with a wide array of responsibilities and authority given to the district’s nazim (mayor). In Ghana, the District Assembly (district local government) is the basic unit of local government that also serves as the district planning authority.

Under Pakistan’s Devolution Plan of 2001, the divisional tier was abolished. Similarly, in Ghana, the regional level was made consciously weak, though not obliterated completely. Regional councils were purely administrative and coordinating bodies rather than policy-making entities.

Referring to the preamble to this paper, it is naive to believe that policy transfer is always successful. Generally, whenever there is a quest for a quick solution or a ‘magic wand’, the likelihood exists that policy transfer is not going to deliver. However, sometimes, political expediency prevents policy-makers from searching for a suitable model because of the peculiar circumstances of the country. Pakistan’s Devolution Plan of 2001 is an interesting case. This programme was presented soon after the coup to create legitimacy of the regime and to gain popularity at grass-roots level.

In conclusion, policy transfer analysis provides a useful means of integrating domestic political and economic issues with international policy trends, especially in the context of the changing role of the state. While there could be methodological problems in analysing country cases by examining policy development, it should be established whether policy transfer has occurred. Policy transfer has pros and cons. It needs to be emphasised that the borrowed policy may be inconsistent with the peculiar socio-economic milieu of the country. Therefore, policy-makers should attempt to develop a home-grown programme, borrowing only selected elements from various countries and institutions. Decentralisation of national administration, particularly in unitary states, works best in the presence of a strong central government (Ahwoi, 2010).

References


