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Decentralization and Federalism: The Changing Face of Governance in Pakistan

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving nature of decentralization and federalism in Pakistan, focusing on how governance structures have transformed from a highly centralized system to a more constitutionally decentralized framework. It analyzes the historical trajectory of federalism from the early post-independence period to the present constitutional arrangement shaped significantly by the Eighteenth Amendment. The study highlights that Pakistan's federal structure has continuously oscillated between centralization and decentralization due to political instability, military interventions, and institutional weaknesses. It further explores the theoretical foundations of federalism and decentralization, emphasizing administrative, fiscal, and political dimensions as key pillars of governance reform. The analysis demonstrates that while decentralization has improved provincial autonomy and expanded administrative responsibilities, its implementation remains uneven due to capacity constraints, resource disparities, and weak local government systems. The study also evaluates fiscal decentralization through mechanisms such as revenue sharing and provincial financial autonomy, showing both progress and persistent structural inequalities. Additionally, it investigates governance outcomes in terms of service delivery, accountability, and intergovernmental coordination, revealing mixed results across provinces. The article identifies key challenges including institutional fragility, political conflicts between federal and provincial governments, and disparities in development capacity. It argues that although decentralization has reshaped governance in Pakistan, its effectiveness is limited by systemic weaknesses and inconsistent policy implementation. The study concludes that sustainable federalism requires stronger institutions, effective coordination mechanisms, and equitable resource distribution. Overall, the research contributes to understanding how decentralization influences governance performance and highlights the need for continued reforms to achieve a balanced and functional federal system in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Federalism, Decentralization, Governance, Eighteenth Amendment, Provincial Autonomy, Pakistan*

Introduction

Pakistan's governance architecture has been shaped by a persistent tension between central authority and demands for regional autonomy, a dynamic rooted in its colonial inheritance and early post-independence state building priorities. At independence in 1947 the new state inherited a highly centralized administrative system designed by the British to ensure control rather than participatory governance, and this legacy continued to influence institutional arrangements for decades. Early constitutional experiments including the Government of India Act 1935 emphasized central control, while political instability and repeated military interventions further entrenched centralized decision making structures, as seen in the 1958

Pakistani coup d'état and the 1977 Pakistani coup d'état which reinforced executive dominance at the expense of provincial autonomy (Rondinelli, 1981). Within this context decentralization refers to the transfer of authority, responsibility, and resources from central to lower tiers of government, while federalism denotes a constitutional arrangement that divides powers between national and subnational units in a manner that ensures autonomy and coordination. Scholars argue that effective decentralization enhances accountability, improves service delivery, and strengthens democratic participation by bringing governance closer to citizens (Oates, 1999). In Pakistan, however, the realization of these theoretical benefits has historically been constrained by political fragmentation, weak institutions, and uneven administrative capacity across provinces, making the study of its evolving federal system particularly significant in understanding contemporary governance challenges.

The adoption of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973 marked a pivotal moment in redefining the federal structure by formally recognizing the distribution of powers between the federation and the provinces and introducing a parliamentary democratic framework. Despite this constitutional commitment, subsequent decades witnessed significant deviations from federal principles due to authoritarian rule and the concentration of powers at the center, which limited the practical scope of provincial autonomy (Talbot, 2012). The reassertion of democratic governance in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries renewed debates on decentralization, culminating in landmark reforms such as the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan which significantly altered the balance of power by abolishing the concurrent legislative list and expanding provincial jurisdiction over key sectors including health, education, and social welfare (Shah, 2014). This reform also strengthened fiscal decentralization through mechanisms such as the National Finance Commission awards, which enhanced resource distribution to provinces, thereby enabling them to exercise greater policy autonomy. Empirical studies suggest that such reforms have contributed to improved governance outcomes in certain sectors while also exposing capacity gaps and coordination challenges between federal and provincial governments (World Bank, 2013). The evolving federal framework therefore reflects both progress toward decentralization and the persistence of structural constraints that shape governance effectiveness in Pakistan.

In contemporary governance discourse, decentralization is widely regarded as essential for addressing complex socio economic challenges, particularly in diverse and populous states where centralized systems often fail to respond to local needs effectively. In Pakistan, the post reform era has witnessed increased provincial engagement in policy making and service delivery, which has the potential to enhance responsiveness and innovation in governance. However, the transformation is neither uniform nor complete, as disparities in institutional capacity, political will, and resource allocation continue to influence outcomes across regions (Cheema et al., 2010). Furthermore, the absence of robust local government systems and persistent tensions between federal and provincial authorities underscore the incomplete nature of decentralization reforms and highlight the need for deeper structural adjustments. This study advances the argument that while decentralization has begun to reshape governance in Pakistan by redistributing authority and fostering provincial autonomy, its success remains contingent upon strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring fiscal discipline, and enhancing intergovernmental coordination. The ongoing evolution of

federalism in Pakistan thus presents both opportunities for more inclusive and effective governance and challenges that require sustained political commitment and policy innovation to achieve long term stability and development.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundations of federalism have developed from classical constitutional doctrines to more dynamic and functional interpretations that reflect the evolving nature of governance in complex societies. Classical scholars such as Kenneth C Wheare conceptualized federalism as a rigid constitutional arrangement in which powers are clearly divided between central and regional governments, each operating autonomously within its jurisdiction (Wheare, 1963). This legalistic approach emphasized institutional balance and the prevention of power concentration, but it often overlooked the political and socio economic realities that shape federal systems in practice. Modern perspectives, however, have reconceptualized federalism as a flexible and adaptive framework characterized by intergovernmental cooperation, shared rule, and negotiated authority. Daniel J Elazar argued that federalism is sustained not only by constitutional provisions but also by political culture and institutional practices that enable collaboration across levels of government (Elazar, 1987). Contemporary scholarship further integrates fiscal and administrative dimensions, highlighting the importance of efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness in decentralized systems. These theoretical advancements are particularly relevant to countries like Pakistan where historical centralization has conflicted with regional diversity and demands for autonomy, thereby necessitating a more nuanced understanding of federalism as a dynamic governance model rather than a static constitutional design.

Decentralization as an analytical construct is inherently multidimensional, encompassing administrative, fiscal, and political components that collectively shape governance outcomes. Administrative decentralization involves the transfer of decision making authority and implementation responsibilities to subnational entities, thereby improving efficiency and responsiveness in public service delivery. Fiscal decentralization refers to the distribution of financial resources and revenue generating powers across different levels of government, enabling local authorities to allocate resources according to regional priorities. Political decentralization, on the other hand, focuses on enhancing democratic participation by empowering local representatives and strengthening electoral processes. Foundational contributions by Dennis A Rondinelli emphasize that decentralization is a complex and context dependent process that requires strong institutional capacity and accountability mechanisms to be effective (Rondinelli, 1981). Similarly, Wallace E Oates highlights that fiscal decentralization can lead to more efficient allocation of resources by aligning public services with local preferences (Oates, 1999). However, the literature also cautions that decentralization can produce unintended consequences such as regional disparities and governance fragmentation if not accompanied by adequate coordination and oversight. This multidimensional perspective provides a critical framework for evaluating the successes and limitations of decentralization in diverse governance contexts.

Global empirical studies on decentralization reveal a wide spectrum of outcomes across developed and developing countries, underscoring the importance of contextual factors in determining its effectiveness. In developed countries, decentralization has often been associated with enhanced service delivery, increased citizen participation, and greater policy

innovation due to strong institutional frameworks and administrative capacity. Research by Jonathan Rodden demonstrates that successful decentralization in such contexts is supported by robust intergovernmental coordination and clearly defined accountability mechanisms (Rodden, 2004). In contrast, studies focusing on developing countries highlight more mixed and sometimes adverse outcomes, where decentralization may exacerbate inequalities and inefficiencies due to weak institutions and limited fiscal capacity. Reports by the World Bank indicate that while decentralization can promote local development and democratic engagement, its success is highly contingent upon complementary reforms in governance, transparency, and institutional capacity (World Bank, 2013). Comparative analyses further emphasize that decentralization is not a universal solution but a context specific strategy that must be carefully designed and implemented to achieve desired outcomes.

In the Pakistani context, the literature on federalism and decentralization reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies, political dynamics, and institutional constraints that have shaped governance outcomes over time. Scholars such as Ishrat Husain argue that Pakistan's federal system has experienced cyclical shifts between centralization and decentralization, often influenced by changing political regimes and governance priorities (Husain, 2018). The introduction of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan is widely regarded as a transformative reform that enhanced provincial autonomy and redefined intergovernmental relations, yet its implementation has exposed persistent challenges related to administrative capacity, fiscal management, and policy coordination. Empirical research by Ali Cheema and colleagues suggests that while decentralization has improved service delivery in certain sectors, significant disparities across provinces and weaknesses in local government systems continue to limit its overall effectiveness (Cheema et al., 2010). Scholarly debates also highlight concerns regarding elite capture, fiscal imbalances, and the absence of strong accountability mechanisms, which undermine the potential benefits of decentralization. Despite a growing body of research, important gaps remain, particularly in understanding the long term impact of decentralization on governance quality, the role of local governments in strengthening federalism, and the strategies required to address regional inequalities. These gaps underscore the need for more comprehensive and empirical research to inform policy and enhance the effectiveness of decentralization in Pakistan.

Research Objectives

1. To critically analyze the historical and institutional evolution of federalism in Pakistan.
2. To comprehensively evaluate the impact of decentralization on governance efficiency and service delivery.
3. To systematically assess the role of the 18th Amendment in strengthening provincial autonomy.
4. To identify and examine key challenges in the effective implementation of decentralized governance structures.
5. To explore future prospects and policy directions for strengthening federalism in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. How has federalism evolved in Pakistan across different political and constitutional periods?

2. What are the major impacts of decentralization on governance efficiency and institutional performance?
3. How effective is the 18th Amendment in promoting meaningful and sustainable provincial autonomy?
4. What key challenges continue to hinder the effective implementation of decentralization in Pakistan?
5. What institutional and policy reforms are needed to strengthen federal governance in Pakistan?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design with elements of a mixed method approach to provide a comprehensive and analytically rigorous understanding of decentralization and federalism in Pakistan. The qualitative orientation is particularly appropriate for examining complex governance structures, constitutional transformations, and institutional dynamics that cannot be fully captured through purely quantitative techniques. It allows for an in depth exploration of how decentralization has evolved historically and how it has reshaped governance practices across different levels of government. The inclusion of limited mixed method elements strengthens the analytical framework by incorporating descriptive insights from existing datasets and reports, thereby enhancing contextual depth and interpretive validity. This integrated design ensures that the study captures both the structural and functional dimensions of federalism in Pakistan.

Data Collection

The study relies primarily on secondary data sources to ensure a broad and diverse evidentiary foundation. Academic journal articles form a central component of the data, providing theoretical frameworks and empirical findings related to decentralization and federal governance. Government reports and policy documents are used to examine official perspectives, institutional arrangements, and reform initiatives undertaken within Pakistan. Additionally, reports from international organizations offer comparative insights and highlight global best practices and challenges associated with decentralization. A key element of the data collection process is constitutional analysis, particularly focusing on the 1973 Constitution and the 18th Amendment. This analysis enables a detailed examination of the legal and institutional restructuring that has redefined the distribution of powers between the federal and provincial governments. By systematically reviewing these documents, the study captures both the intended objectives and the practical implications of decentralization reforms.

Analytical Approach

The analytical framework of the study is based on thematic and comparative analysis techniques. Thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns, dominant themes, and critical issues emerging from the collected data. This involves a systematic coding process through which information is categorized into themes such as administrative decentralization, fiscal autonomy, political empowerment, and governance challenges. This approach facilitates the synthesis of diverse sources into coherent and meaningful insights, enabling a deeper understanding of the complexities of federal governance. Comparative analysis is used to evaluate changes in governance structures and outcomes before and after

major decentralization reforms, particularly those associated with the 18th Amendment. By examining pre reform and post reform scenarios, the study assesses the extent to which decentralization has influenced institutional performance, service delivery, and provincial autonomy. This comparative perspective also helps in identifying persistent gaps and challenges that continue to shape governance outcomes.

Evolution of Federalism in Pakistan

The evolution of federalism in Pakistan is deeply rooted in the political and administrative legacy inherited at independence in 1947, which established a highly centralized system of governance that prioritized national cohesion over regional autonomy. The early state structure drew heavily upon the Government of India Act 1935 which provided a provisional constitutional arrangement that concentrated authority at the center while offering limited autonomy to provinces. This arrangement reflected the immediate challenges faced by the nascent state, including political instability, refugee crises, and security concerns, which reinforced the need for centralized control. However, this centralization also generated tensions among provinces, particularly in East Pakistan, where demands for greater representation and autonomy intensified over time. The Objectives Resolution of 1949 and subsequent constitutional debates highlighted competing visions of federalism, with political elites struggling to balance unity and diversity within the state structure (Jalal, 1995). The eventual promulgation of the Constitution of Pakistan 1956 marked Pakistan's formal transition to a federal republic, yet its implementation was short lived due to political instability and the imposition of martial law. The early phase of Pakistan's federal evolution therefore reflects a pattern of constitutional experimentation overshadowed by centralized authority and institutional fragility.

The period between 1958 and 1973 represents a critical phase in the consolidation of centralized governance, largely shaped by military interventions and authoritarian rule that significantly altered the trajectory of federalism in Pakistan. The 1958 Pakistani coup d'état led by Ayub Khan marked the beginning of a prolonged era of military dominance, during which the federal structure was reconfigured to strengthen executive authority and limit provincial autonomy. The introduction of the Constitution of Pakistan 1962 further entrenched centralized governance by establishing a presidential system and reducing the powers of provincial governments (Talbot, 2012). This centralization was accompanied by administrative reforms such as the One Unit scheme, which merged the provinces of West Pakistan into a single administrative entity, thereby diminishing regional identities and political representation. The consequences of these policies were particularly pronounced in East Pakistan, where perceptions of political and economic marginalization contributed to growing discontent and ultimately culminated in the secession of Bangladesh in 1971. Scholars argue that this period demonstrated the limitations of centralized governance in managing ethnic and regional diversity, highlighting the need for a more balanced and inclusive federal system (Jalal, 1995). The failure of centralized policies during this era thus set the stage for a reconfiguration of federalism in the subsequent constitutional framework. The adoption of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973 marked a turning point in the evolution of federalism by establishing a parliamentary system and reaffirming the division of powers between the federation and the provinces. This constitution introduced a bicameral legislature, strengthened provincial representation through the Senate, and delineated

legislative responsibilities through federal and concurrent lists, thereby providing a more structured framework for intergovernmental relations. Despite these constitutional provisions, the practical implementation of federalism continued to be influenced by political instability and recurring military interventions, such as the 1977 Pakistani coup d'état which once again centralized authority and curtailed democratic processes. During this period, provincial autonomy remained constrained by executive dominance and limited fiscal decentralization, as the federal government retained significant control over resources and policy making (Husain, 2018). Nevertheless, the 1973 Constitution provided a durable institutional foundation that endured despite political upheavals, serving as a reference point for subsequent reforms aimed at strengthening federalism. The gradual restoration of democratic governance in the late twentieth century renewed debates on decentralization and highlighted the need to address structural imbalances within the federal system.

A significant transformation in Pakistan's federal structure occurred with the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan which is widely regarded as a landmark reform that fundamentally reshaped intergovernmental relations and strengthened provincial autonomy. This amendment abolished the concurrent legislative list and transferred a wide range of subjects, including health, education, and social welfare, to provincial jurisdiction, thereby enhancing the scope of decentralized governance (Shah, 2014). It also reinforced fiscal decentralization through the National Finance Commission mechanism, enabling provinces to receive a greater share of national resources and exercise increased financial autonomy. Scholars have argued that the 18th Amendment represents a decisive shift toward a more balanced federal system by addressing longstanding grievances related to centralization and inequitable resource distribution (Husain, 2018). However, its implementation has also revealed challenges related to administrative capacity, coordination between federal and provincial governments, and the effectiveness of local governance structures. The evolution of federalism in Pakistan therefore reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies, political dynamics, and institutional reforms, with the 18th Amendment symbolizing both the progress achieved and the challenges that remain in realizing a fully functional and equitable federal system.

Impact of Decentralization on Governance

Administrative decentralization in Pakistan has increasingly become a defining feature of governance restructuring, particularly in the post reform constitutional environment where provinces have been granted wider administrative jurisdiction over key sectors. The transfer of executive authority from the federal level to provincial governments was intended to enhance efficiency, reduce bureaucratic delay, and bring governance closer to citizens. This shift gained institutional strength after the implementation of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan which devolved significant administrative control to provinces including health, education, and local development planning. According to Adnan Qaiser, administrative decentralization in Pakistan has improved decision making responsiveness in certain sectors but remains constrained by uneven institutional readiness across provinces (Qaiser, 2016). Provinces such as Punjab have developed relatively advanced administrative structures capable of absorbing devolved responsibilities, while regions like Balochistan face persistent capacity deficits in human resources and institutional coordination. This unevenness demonstrates that administrative decentralization is not solely a legal or

constitutional process but also a deeply institutional challenge that requires sustained investment in governance capacity, training, and bureaucratic reform to achieve its intended outcomes.

Fiscal decentralization has played a pivotal role in redefining intergovernmental financial relations in Pakistan, particularly through reforms in revenue sharing mechanisms and provincial fiscal autonomy. The National Finance Commission Award serves as the principal institutional arrangement for distributing financial resources between the federation and provinces, and its successive iterations have gradually increased the provincial share of national revenues. The NFC Award of 2010 is widely recognized as a transformative milestone, as it significantly expanded the fiscal space available to provinces, enabling them to undertake greater development planning and expenditure responsibilities. Nadeem Ul Haque argues that while fiscal decentralization has improved provincial autonomy, it has also exposed structural weaknesses in revenue generation capacity and fiscal discipline at subnational levels (Haque, 2015). Provinces remain heavily dependent on federal transfers, with limited capacity to generate sustainable own source revenues, particularly in less developed regions. This dependency creates fiscal imbalances that undermine the long term effectiveness of decentralization. Moreover, disparities in financial management across provinces further contribute to unequal development outcomes, highlighting the need for stronger fiscal accountability frameworks and capacity building mechanisms to ensure that increased financial autonomy translates into improved governance performance.

Political decentralization in Pakistan has evolved as a critical dimension of governance reform, particularly in the context of strengthening provincial autonomy and democratic representation. The expansion of provincial authority has enabled elected provincial governments to play a more active role in policymaking and development planning, thereby enhancing regional participation in governance processes. The constitutional restructuring under the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan significantly empowered provincial legislatures by increasing their legislative competencies and reducing federal dominance in key policy areas. According to Saima Ashraf, political decentralization has improved representational inclusion but has not fully translated into strengthened grassroots democracy due to weak local government institutions (Ashraf, 2017). In terms of service delivery, decentralization has produced mixed results across provinces and sectors. In Punjab, reforms in education and health sectors have led to measurable improvements in access and infrastructure, whereas in Sindh and Balochistan, service delivery challenges persist due to governance inefficiencies and limited institutional capacity. The Asian Development Bank notes that decentralization can significantly improve public service outcomes when supported by strong institutional frameworks and accountability systems (Asian Development Bank, 2018). However, in Pakistan, the absence of consistent local government systems has limited the full realization of political decentralization, resulting in gaps between policy intent and implementation outcomes.

Challenges and Future Directions

Weak local government systems remain one of the most persistent structural challenges undermining the effectiveness of decentralization and federalism in Pakistan. Although constitutional and administrative reforms have transferred significant responsibilities to subnational levels, the absence of stable and empowered local governments has created a

governance gap between provincial authorities and citizens. Local governments in Pakistan have historically been subject to repeated dissolution and reinstatement, often depending on the preferences of central or provincial regimes rather than institutional continuity. According to Bari Faisal, the fragility of local governance structures has significantly limited citizen participation and weakened accountability mechanisms at the grassroots level (Bari, 2017). In many districts, elected local bodies either function with limited authority or are replaced by bureaucratic administrators, which reduces responsiveness and weakens democratic consolidation. This structural inconsistency means that even when powers are devolved to provinces, the benefits of decentralization do not fully reach local communities. As a result, service delivery remains uneven, and citizens often continue to rely on centralized administrative channels. Strengthening local government systems is therefore essential for translating constitutional decentralization into meaningful governance outcomes.

Capacity constraints at the provincial level represent another critical barrier to effective federalism in Pakistan. While provinces have gained expanded administrative and fiscal responsibilities, their institutional capacity to manage these responsibilities remains uneven and in many cases insufficient. This includes shortages of skilled human resources, weak planning mechanisms, and limited technological infrastructure for governance management. Hassan Abbas argues that provincial governments often struggle to absorb devolved functions effectively due to inadequate administrative preparation and institutional fragmentation (Abbas, 2019). For instance, the management of health and education sectors requires specialized expertise and robust monitoring systems, which are not uniformly available across provinces. Punjab has made relatively greater progress in institutional capacity building, while provinces such as Balochistan face structural disadvantages due to geographical dispersion and limited bureaucratic strength. These disparities create unequal governance outcomes and reinforce regional imbalances. Without targeted capacity building initiatives, decentralization risks becoming a formal redistribution of authority without substantive improvements in governance quality or service delivery efficiency.

Political conflicts between the federal government and provincial administrations continue to shape the trajectory of federalism in Pakistan, often hindering the smooth implementation of decentralized governance. These conflicts typically arise over resource allocation, legislative authority, and administrative control, reflecting deeper structural tensions within the federal framework. The constitutional reforms introduced under the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan aimed to reduce such tensions by clearly delineating powers, yet disputes over interpretation and implementation persist. According to Raza Rabbani, unresolved ambiguities in intergovernmental relations continue to generate friction between federal and provincial institutions, particularly in areas of fiscal transfers and regulatory authority (Rabbani, 2018). These political disagreements are further intensified by partisan differences between ruling parties at federal and provincial levels, leading to inconsistent policy implementation and coordination failures. In some cases, political rivalry undermines collaborative governance, resulting in delayed development projects and weakened policy coherence. Such conflicts highlight the need for stronger institutional mechanisms to manage intergovernmental relations and ensure stability in federal governance.

Resource inequality among provinces is a structural issue that significantly affects the effectiveness of decentralization in Pakistan. Despite fiscal redistribution mechanisms such as

the National Finance Commission Award, disparities in economic development, revenue generation capacity, and infrastructure investment persist across provinces. Punjab, with its larger economic base and administrative capacity, continues to receive and generate higher levels of resources compared to less developed provinces such as Balochistan and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Rashid Amjad highlights that structural inequalities in resource distribution have long historical roots and continue to influence federal dynamics in Pakistan (Amjad, 2020). These disparities are further compounded by differences in population density, geographic accessibility, and institutional capacity, which limit the ability of weaker provinces to compete on equal footing. As a result, decentralization has not fully resolved regional inequality and in some cases has reproduced existing disparities under a new administrative framework. Addressing these imbalances requires not only fiscal redistribution but also targeted development policies aimed at strengthening weaker regions and ensuring equitable access to national resources.

Governance and accountability issues represent a broader systemic challenge that affects all levels of federal structure in Pakistan. Weak oversight mechanisms, limited transparency, and inconsistent enforcement of regulations undermine the effectiveness of decentralized governance. According to Ali Cheema, accountability deficits in both provincial and local institutions significantly reduce the impact of decentralization reforms and contribute to inefficiencies in public service delivery (Cheema et al., 2014). In many cases, the absence of strong audit systems and performance monitoring frameworks allows administrative inefficiencies and corruption to persist unchecked. Furthermore, overlapping responsibilities between federal and provincial institutions create ambiguity in accountability structures, making it difficult to assign responsibility for policy outcomes. Strengthening governance therefore requires comprehensive institutional reforms that enhance transparency, improve oversight, and clearly define administrative responsibilities across all levels of government. Without such reforms, decentralization risks becoming administratively fragmented rather than functionally effective.

To address these challenges and strengthen federalism in Pakistan, a series of institutional and policy reforms are required that focus on improving governance structures, enhancing capacity, and ensuring effective coordination between different tiers of government. Strengthening local governments is essential to bridge the gap between provincial administrations and citizens, ensuring that decentralization translates into meaningful grassroots empowerment. This includes establishing stable electoral cycles for local bodies, enhancing their financial autonomy, and improving administrative authority. Better fiscal management is also critical, particularly through reforms that improve revenue generation at the provincial level and ensure transparent utilization of funds. International Monetary Fund emphasizes that sustainable fiscal decentralization requires strong accountability frameworks and efficient public financial management systems (IMF, 2021). Policy coordination mechanisms must also be strengthened to reduce conflicts between federal and provincial governments, potentially through institutionalized intergovernmental councils and dispute resolution frameworks. Collectively, these reforms would enhance the effectiveness of federalism in Pakistan by ensuring that decentralization is not only constitutionally recognized but also practically implemented in a coherent and sustainable manner.

Conclusion

The analysis of decentralization and federalism in Pakistan demonstrates that the country's governance system has undergone a complex and uneven transformation shaped by historical, political, and institutional forces. From its early centralized administrative structure to the more devolved framework introduced through constitutional reforms, Pakistan's federal evolution reflects an ongoing struggle to balance national unity with regional autonomy. The Eighteenth Amendment stands out as a landmark development that significantly redefined the distribution of powers between the federation and provinces, symbolizing a major shift toward decentralization. However, the practical outcomes of these reforms reveal that constitutional changes alone are not sufficient to ensure effective governance. The persistence of weak institutions, limited administrative capacity, and uneven development across provinces continues to constrain the full realization of decentralized governance. As a result, while provinces have gained greater authority in principle, their ability to translate this authority into improved service delivery and governance outcomes remains inconsistent.

The findings further highlight that decentralization in Pakistan has produced mixed results across administrative, fiscal, and political dimensions. On one hand, it has enhanced provincial autonomy, increased resource allocation, and improved local responsiveness in certain sectors such as education and health. On the other hand, it has exposed significant structural weaknesses, including disparities in provincial capacity, weak local government systems, and persistent tensions between federal and provincial authorities. These challenges are compounded by governance and accountability issues that limit transparency and efficiency in public service delivery. Moreover, resource inequality among provinces continues to hinder balanced development, reinforcing regional disparities rather than eliminating them. The study therefore concludes that decentralization in Pakistan remains an incomplete process, where progress in constitutional design has not been fully matched by institutional and administrative effectiveness. For federalism to function effectively, there is a need for sustained reforms that strengthen governance institutions, enhance fiscal discipline, and promote equitable development across all regions. Only through such comprehensive and coordinated efforts can Pakistan achieve a truly functional and balanced federal system that delivers inclusive and efficient governance for its citizens.

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