Basic Democracies System: Democracy under the Cover of Control System

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This research paper critically examines the Basic Democracies System (BD System) introduced by General Muhamad Ayub Khan following the imposition of martial law in 1958. Presented as a model of grassroots democracy, the BDS was in reality a centralized and bureaucratic-dominated system designed to legitimize Auyb Khan's authoritarian rule under the guise of democratic reform. The system featured a five-tier structure intended to facilitate local government and development. However, power persisted firmly in the hands of bureaucracy and the presidency, reducing elected representatives to symbolic roles. The BDS also served as an Electoral College, allowing Ayub to consolidate his political authority, including his presidential victory against Fatima Jinnah in 1965. Despite claims of political inclusion and developmental decentralization, the Basic Democracies failed to create genuine democratic participation, instead perpetuating elite dominance and administrative control. The system's legacy highlights the challenges of instituting authentic democratic governance in a politically and administratively centralized state.

Introduction

The first martial law in Pakistan was imposed on 8th October 1958 by Ayub Khan. He took full powers on 27th October 1958 and became the sole de facto ruler of our country. He introduced new reforms in the country. He wanted to change the country according to his wishes. He wanted to give powers to the public. He wanted to end the game of corrupt politicians.

On the other hand, he wanted to keep all the powers in his own hands. At that time, the political fabric of the country looked for a scheme of the controlled democratic system, so he introduced a comprehensive system of local self-government, which was known as Basic Democracies. He assumed that the politicians in Pakistan were not good at running the businesses of the country. In this scheme, the name of democracy was used, but in reality, Ayub Khan wanted to prolong his own rule. He implemented his own rules, and in practical form, it was a dictatorship under the cover of democracy.

On September 2nd, 1958, Ayub Khan discussed his views about democracy with the public. On this occasion, Ayub Khan said that "Our nation lacked a fundamental component of the democratic structures found in the West. In order for the people to understand the importance of their vote in terms of broad national policies and an advanced communication system for the prompt and accurate dissemination of information on a wide range of topics of individual and general interest, Western democracy required a high level of social and political awareness as well as mass literacy.[1]

At the very outset, President Ayub spoke of a democracy that could outfit the genius of the people. His idea of democracy originated in the form of basic democracy, which was actually more elementary than democratic.[2]

Ayub Khan came out with his constitutional plan to make himself a formidable dictator. His constitutional plan was unfolded and adopted at the conference of the governors in Karachi on 1st May 1959. A month later, a detailed program of action to create "Basic Democracies" was approved in Nathigali on 12 and 13 June 1959. The official Basic Democracies Order was publicized on 26 October 1959,[3] which provided a setup for the formation of different institutions extending from local councils to Provincial Development Advisory Councils.

Ayub Khan gave the justification for the scheme: "We have… kept the different factors in shaping the system of Basic Democracies of our country."[4]

This order has 102 articles and 8 schedules. The government served its interest and amended the Basic Democracies Order in 1961, 1964, and 1967, and 25 changes were accrued in the Basic Democracies Order in these years. The new scheme of local government was hierarchical in character. It was a buildup of five tiers.[5] Under the Ayub regime, an ambitious effort was made to generate an implicit agreement between the people and the state by electing native privileged persons for the lower.

On the other hand, under this Basic Democracies system, President Ayub Khan attained solidity and safety. He went on to establish an autocratic rule in the state with the support of the bureaucracy. According to Ayub Khan, the Basic Democracies were a way of learning self-government; they also sought to expand developmental operations at the grassroots level.

The Basic Democracies system was based on the concept of gradual induction of the people into democratic processes.[6] But in reality, it was not true. The bureaucracy controlled all the matters and ran the system according to the wishes of Ayub Khan.

The Basic Democracies system approach promoted the localization of political activities and sought to partially mobilize rural communities.[7]

Ayub Khan said about the objectives of the Basic Democracies that creating a new government-people relationship is one of the main goals of Basic Democracies in order to address the issues facing the nation today. For this reason, representatives of the people and government officials have been viewed as equals rather than in a superior position. The purpose of officials is to support local communities, not to control them. In order to hold the administration answerable to the public and responsive to their real needs and desires, it is expected that councils discuss government operations. If the bureaucratic behavior of the officials, chairmen, and council members were allowed to continue unchecked, the whole goal of basic democracies would be undermined. I am of the opinion that this issue must be addressed with a resolute determination in order for the new democratic system to establish itself in the nation.[8]

The Basic Democracies has the following objectives to achieve:

1. To provide as much authority and responsibility to people at all levels
2. To effectively explain and promote government plans, and secure public support and cooperation, government officials responsible for implementing these initiatives should maintain close, institutionalized engagement with public representatives.
3. To make government officials aware of the importance of respecting public opinion and actively seeking the people's suggestions and constructive criticism.
4. To foster mutual respect and understanding between government officials and elected representatives.
5. To ensure that the administrative and technical expertise of government officials is accountable to local councils for planning and implementing their development programs.

However, the entrenched bureaucratic dominance inherited from the colonial era prevented these principles from being effectively implemented. At the same time, landlords found themselves increasingly constrained by highly localized political dynamics, becoming victims of extreme localism.

Structure and the Functions of the Basic Democracies System:

The Basic Democracies were premeditated as a broad system whereby people could accept responsibility for their own growth and development.

To associate the rural folks with the administration, the government had decided to introduce a scheme of Basic Democracies in the whole state, which contained a five-tier arrangement: the Union Council, the Thana Council or the Tehsil Council, the District Council, and the Divisional Council.

The below councils were established according to the Basic Democracies formula:

1. A union council for a member of adjoining villages in the rural areas and a town committee to each town.

2. Tehsil (Sub-District) in West wing of Pakistan and a Thana Council for each Thana (Sub-District) in East wing of Pakistan. The municipal committees were established for big cities and cantonment boards for army areas.
3. District Council for a district.
4. Divisional Council for every civil division.
5. Two Provincial Development Advisory Councils for the East and West Wings.[9]

The main structure was as follows:

Each union council was designed to cover a zone with minimum 8,000 to maximum 10,000 residents, with lower and upper limits being 4,000 and 14,000, respectively.

In villages there was a Union Council, in towns, there was a Town Committee, and in big cities, there was a Union Committee. Union Councils consisted of many villages. The total population for Union Council was 5000 to 10,000 people. One B.D. member was elected for 1000 people.

They elected their chairman, who was a member of the Thana or Tehsil Council. The representatives of the Union Council were chosen based on universal adult suffrage. At this level, the government could also nominate as voting members up to 1/3 of elected members. According to the second schedule of B. D. Order, all mem and women citizens of Pakistan over 21 years of age (barring criminals and those of unsound mind) might cast their vote in the elections, which were held with the intervals five-year.

Union Councils, in the Basic Democracies System, were required to be developed as institutions of local government, but practically over 70% of the Union Councils had not performed any function of local government.

Tehsil Councils were established in West Pakistan and Thana Councils in East Pakistan. In total, East Pakistan had 411 Thana Councils, while West Pakistan had 211 Tehsil Councils. Each Thana/Tehsil Council typically covered around 15 unions and 150 villages. All chairmen of Union Councils and Town Committees within the council's jurisdiction served as ex officio members. Additional members were drawn from various nation-building departments, and the total number of officials was kept equal to or fewer than the elected representatives. The Sub-Divisional officer acted as the

chairman of each Thana/ Tehsil Council. In Large Cities, Municipal Committees functioned as the equivalent administrative units, 28 in East Pakistan and 81 in West Pakistan. [10] In military areas, Cantonment Boards performed similar functions. Although the names of these bodies differed, their roles and responsibilities were essentially the same.

There were 19 District Councils in East Wing of Pakistan and 46 in West Wing of Pakistan, making up the third tier. Elected and official members made up the District Council. The elected members were accepted by an electoral college made up of the chairman, the Union Council, and the district's town and union committees in accordance with Article 15 of the Basic Democracies Order. Nearly half of them received nominations. Its members included a number of civil servants. The Deputy Commissioner led the District Council, and the Vice Chairman was picked from the members who were chosen to serve a five-year term. At this level, practically elected members have no authority. They served as advisors.

Divisional Councils were the fourth tier of the Basic Democracies. There were four divisional councils on the East side and twelve on the West side of Pakistan. The elected seats were taken by contingents from the district drawn from the municipal committees, cantonment boards, and the district councils on the vote of the selected members of those authorities.[11] The head of the Divisional Council was the Divisional Commissioner. The real powers were vested in the hands of the bureaucracy, who were safeguarding Ayub's interests. The status of public representatives was advisory.

A provision was made for the establishment of two Provincial Advisory Councils, one for each province. These councils would consist of official members and non-official members, and the non-official members would be selected by the president with the approval of the governor of the province. These two groups were to be same in number, and of the selected non-official members, a minimum of 1/3 were to be nominated by chairmen of union councils and union committees. These advisory bodies, consisting of forty-eight members, with the provincial governors as chairmen, were set up for the first time in May 1960.[12] They were answerable to the president in all matters about the operation of the extended system. Provincial advisory councils were replaced in 1962 with the opening of new provincial legislatures, reducing the pyramid to four tiers.

The structure of Basic Democracies is impressive because of its neat hierarchical form. But "basic democracies under the complete control of the bureaucracy."

Ayub clarified while traveling in his railroad train called the Pak Jamhuriyat Special (Democracy Express) in the countryside areas of West Wing—he said that I wished to see the state as systematized, organized, and controlled as our army.[13]

It would also act to tie the elite mass differences. The Basic Democrats would work in collaboration with governmental officers in the local councils and would help them to generate an association between the city and village areas.

Basic democracies were a tiered arrangement. Its lowest level was directly elected Basic Democrats who represented the local population.[14]

Under the Order of Basic Democracies, 1959, the entire country was distributed into 8000 units, each unit having the right to select 10 members on the foundation of universal adult suffrage.[15]

The first elections were held under the B.D. System, which was planned to be conducted at the end of 1959 and in the early 1960s, in which only 69 percent of the electorate took part.

Basic Democracies members were elected for a term of five years, and uniformity was preserved in their number in both parts. 80,000 B.D. members were elected, forty thousand from East Pakistan and forty thousand from West Pakistan. They were elected for five years. These elections were conducted on a non-party basis.

In 1964, five term years of B.D. members were completed. Second B.D. elections were conducted in 1964. In these elections, the number of B.D. memberships was increased from 80,000 to 120,000. These elections were held on a party basis. These elections ended on 19 November 1964.[16] They were also elected for five years.

The personalized political activity was reflected in the Basic Democracies elections.[17] The people used their personal contacts to win the elections of Basic Democracies.

Basic democracies were given more power related to development and local government. This structure was established by the government to work in a society deprived of politics.[18] But in the post-constitutional period, the Basic Democracies were highly politicized. Basic Democrats were seemingly made accountable to the electorate, whose felt needs were to be reflected in the action taken by the lowest-level Union Councils.[19]

The Basic Democrats collectively formed the Electoral College for the parliament and for the president. However, the participation of bureaucracy created an impression that the administration sought to keep these institutions under its wings so that the Ayub government might safe their voters in elections.

The Electoral College consisted of B.D. members who affirmed Ayub Khan as president in 1960. Ayub Khan needed to get validity and acceptability as the head of the state.

The result of the first B.D. election was not announced. Ayub Khan wrote in his book Friends Not Masters that "At that point, I believed I needed a mandate from the populace to carry out my assignment. In order to offer the nation a constitution under the will of the people, it was determined that I should take advantage of the chance to ask the 80,000 Basic Democrats for a vote of confidence before the Basic Democracies election results were revealed. According to the Election Commission's announcement on February 15, 1960, I received 75,283 votes in support of the vote of confidence, or 95.6% of the 80,000 or so votes cast."[20]

Under the Presidential Third Order of 1960, Basic Democrats were obligatory to vote by secret ballot. Manzur Qadir called up a statement that would be the basis of the survey deferred to the Electoral College on 15 February 1960:

"Do you have confidence in President Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan, Hilal-i-Pakistan, Hilal-i-Jurat?"[21]

The B.D. Members gave their vote of confidence, and the result was announced on 15th February 1960. In this way, the first phase of Ayub's rule was completed. He got legitimacy. He was already very authoritative; he became more authoritative after his self-proclaimed victory as President of Pakistan.

The Electoral College Act was passed on 17th April 1964, transforming the Basic Democracies System into an Electoral College for the Presidential elections as well as foe elections to the national and provincial legislatures.[22] The Basic Democrats voted in presidential elections that were conducted in 1965. Miss Fatima Jinnah was the candidate of the Combined Opposition Party and fought the election against Ayub Khan, who was the candidate of the Muslim League Convention. The governing party (ML Convention) activated bureaucrats, making it the responsibility of D.C.s and District Deputy Commissioners to convince local B.D. members, who were members of the Electoral College, to vote for Ayub. The Intelligence Bureau provided Ayub a cheery note that 75 percent of the B.D. members would back him and vote for him as a presidential candidate. The whole election was an administrative operation to ensure Ayub's victory.[23] As a result of these efforts, Ayub won the elections. The Basic Democrats were a more easily maneuverable body of men than the entire electorate, and their vote could more easily be purchased. In this way, only a few thousand Basic Democrats decided the fate of millions of people in the country. The system of Basic Democracies had estranged rather than took the people nearer to the regime.

According to the Basic Democracies Order, the local government could collect and recover the taxes. Funds were given to them for development. The government could delegate any executive power to any B.D. member or official. The bureaucratic elite, which controlled the authority of the local system, controlled the money matters. The elected representatives of the public did not enjoy the power that was given under Article 65 of the Basic Democracies Order.

Public representatives at the local level were subordinated to bureaucratic tutelage under the Basic Democracies, while legislatures at the national and provincial levels became redundant in the face of the patriarchal rule of the president.

They have the right to levy taxes. Article 60 and the fifth schedule are related to this power. Divisional and Thana councils have no right to levy taxes. Only district and union councils have the power to impose taxes. Each local council prepared a statement of its estimated receipts and expenditures for the years. They had the power to prepare a budget for their areas.

Cast a vote in a referendum on different issues. In 1960, the B.D. members participated in the referendum for the legitimacy of Ayub Khan. The B.D. Members followed the orders of bureaucratic elites; they could not take any steps.

If any dispute arises between two or more local councils, it would refer to the district or divisional councils. An offense under the (eighth schedule) shall be punished with a fine. No court could take any action until the chairman sent a written complaint to the court. A person could appeal to the same body against any order that was passed by the local council or its chairman regarding any offense. Any order passed in appeal shall be considered as final and shall not be challenged in any court.

The judicial powers of Basic Democracies were in the hands of chairmen of district and divisional councils who were bureaucrats. It was clear that Ayub Khan controlled the local bodies through bureaucrats.

All the governmental powers were remained in the hands of the president and rested on the institutions of Basic Democracies with their associations covering every nook and corner of the state.[24]

The Reality of the System:

By giving life to the existing native organizations and generating other, more expansive forms of local government, such as district boards and municipal councils, Ayub Khan has brought the constitutional watch back to the late 19th-century era of Lord Mayo and Lord Ripon, when self-governing trials were introduced. Ayub Khan's test also identified the kind of government that the Asian nation is anticipated to have. According to Ayub Khan, democracy in Pakistan should be a government run by the state's civil service elite for the people.All the powers that were given to Basic Democrats were exercised by the bureaucracy. Bureaucracy used these powers to serve the interests of the government. It follows the instructions that were given to them by the president. No one could do anything without the prior permission of the president. From 1959 to 1962, they followed the instructions of the martial law administrator. When the constitution of 1962 was imposed, they followed the instructions of the president. Ayub said that this system is more basic than democratic. The B.D. system could not provide a class of new leaders, but generally, power endured in the hands of those who previously enjoyed it.

The B.D. The system was meant to "suit the genius" of the illiterate masses.[25] The people who were elected as BDs were mostly illiterate, disorderly, and, in some cases, dangerous disorderly persons of their respective localities. They were those who were easily influenced by the administrative machinery of the state. It was over misfortune that persons were considered to be enlightened and competent to form the Electoral College.

The idea behind the concept of Basic Democracies was to have a limited franchise so that the members of the Electoral College could be within the reach of the administration to be dealt with properly by their area officers.

The Basic Democracies themselves were controlled for the political manipulation of the masses to prolong their power, and he provided all the fortification to the vested interests for their economic utilization.[26]

All development depended on the center's initiative, as it controlled the allocation of funds, the framing of projects, and their operation in the field. The only elected political office in the country was that of the president, while governors and central ministers were his agents, and provincial cabinets were in turn appointed by governors. There was no way to enter the Ayub system except through bureaucracy, which was entirely dominated by the West Wing.

The key feature of the Basic Democracies System was the establishment of the "controlling.

Authority," which not only symbolized bureaucratic dominance but also shaped how the system actually functioned. Under Ayub Khan, local governments were deprived of two essential powers:

1. They lacked the authority to generate their own revenue.

2. They were unable to effectively carry out their assigned functions.

Even in the suffocating atmosphere of martial law, criticism was voiced over the official stronghold claimed on the Basic Democrats system. This was popularly expressed in the derisive term Beks (helpless Democrats).

The other thing that was very important was that the traditional feudal leadership in West Pakistan manipulated the system of Basic Democracies, became the beneficiaries of the new rule, and adorned the assemblies, solidly aligned with the regime. The new countryside elite, shaped by the Basic Democracies had a slight social base and limited aptitude to engage mass support for the government.

The Basic Democracies did not provide for the type of initiative required to create a meaningful sense of participation and self-reliance. It could not generate political energy at the local level, which could ensure comprehensive participation at all levels.

The most important thing was that there was no fixed tool to cultivate harmony on domestic problems or to support the leaders at national level. The distinct pyramidal arrangements in the two wings were combined only at the top in the will of Ayub.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that Field Martial Ayub Khan introduced the B.D. System. This scheme was more structured and systematic and consisted of five tiers. Moreover, it highlighted the structure and the functions of B.D. system. Ayub Khan used this system to prolong his rule in the name of local government. The reality of the basic democracy system was the dictatorship under the cover of democracy. The misuse of the system was also unveiled. However, the guided system was also used for the presidential elections of 1965. Ayub Khan transferred the power at the grassroots level, but through bureaucracy, he controlled the whole system of government. The local government members were not free in their decision-making process, and they were under the check of governmental officials; this element made the system more dictatorial than democratic.

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