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Decentralisation in a unitary government

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TWO types of governmental structure define the territorial administration in a country: the unitary government and the federal government. In the unitary government there is one national government at the centre and one national assembly in the capital; there is no other government or assembly in any other part of the country. Contrary to this, in a federal structure of government the country is divided into a number of provinces or states with each having its own government and assembly. The state or provincial government is responsible for administering the subjects transferred to it through statutes framed in this regard. The provincial assembly deliberates on the subjects, enacts laws in these areas and also forms the provincial or state government in the same way as is done in the centre. The provincial government does not work as a directly subordinate body of the central government. So far transferred subjects are concerned, it works independently of the central government subject to national laws, rules and regulation. For subjects retained by the centre, it has to abide by the decisions and instructions of the centre. Else the central government will enforce its decision if necessary by force. Subjects usually retained by the centre are foreign policy, defense, monetary policy, national integration and inter-states transactions. In an



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ideal situation, all other subjects are transferred to provincial or state government.

The rationale of federal government lies in maintaining regional balance, ensuring inclusiveness, promoting equity and removing disparity. The call for federal structure is most audible in countries with heterogeneous population and swinging area. USA, India, Pakistan, Brazil and Russia are good examples with such characteristics. In these countries unitary government will soon be rendered dysfunctional as centrifugal forces will undermine the central authority by whetting demands for autonomy, cultural freedom and fair share of national resources of all types. Countries with an overwhelmingly homogenous population and not too large an area often opt for unitary structure primarily on consideration of cost and national integration. France, Japan, Bangladesh and Barbados have opted for a unitary system of government. Central government directly administers the whole country without depending on the provincial government for administering the transferred subjects. Central government's presence is palpably felt at every nook and corner of the country.

Decentralisation as a management style is very popular among academics, media people, NGO representatives and common people. Its appeal to top administrators is, however, mixed. Some of them do not prefer to

go via state or provincial governments to get their projects implemented. Notwithstanding their preference, decentralised management ensures speedy and smooth implementation of assigned tasks without interference or filibustering by the authority at the top. Enhanced budgetary flexibility, higher devolution of financial and administrative authority to implementing agency accelerate the execution process and reduce harassment of clientele. Top apparatchiks at the centre contend that organizations at the lower echelon are not manned by appropriately trained, motivated and efficient functionaries to accomplish the task satisfactorily. It is not uncommon to find that the programme has been distorted to suit the preference of the local authority or it has been shelved because the local authority lacked the capacity to implement such a programme. It is true that decentralization will not deliver expected results if the local authority is not equipped with appropriate type of manpower and logistics. An effective and efficient local authority is a pre-requisite for successful operation of a decentralized regime. The extreme form of decentralisation, some economists argue, is delivery of all necessary goods and services through free market mechanism. A detailed deliberation on this aspect will be beyond the pale of this write-up.

One has to make a distinction between decentralisation and de-concentration. Simple dispersal of

delivery points to remote areas does not imply decentralised management if the operators at the delivery points are not autonomous decision-makers. Decentralisation is an inclusive concept; its inherent objective is empowerment of local authority so that the management is responsive to local needs and expectations. If the functionaries of the local authority are appointed or controlled by the central authority their loyalty will be to the controlling apparatchiks at the centre rather than the local people or their institutions. For decentralisation to be effective, local bodies have to be empowered so that they can act as a buffer institution in case the central authority makes any move to undermine the interest of the local people. At the same time the central authority should have the power to rein in the management of the local bodies if they substantively deviate from the fundamental policy of the centre. The delicate balance can be maintained by designing appropriate instruments of checks and balances. Existence of provincial and central government provides a built-in buffer in the federal structure.

One big strength of decentralised management regime is its scope for inclusiveness. It can accommodate people with diverse shades and preferences. Centralised management encourages cronyism at every level and deprives the dissenting groups and nonconformists of their rightful claims. Absolute control over the management structure is apt to allow the ruling oligarchy to persecute their opponents and non conformists without any resistance from the lower echelon of management. Grievances and anger accumulate among the excluded groups and this may culminate into mass upsurge at times. By accommodating people of different opinions and shades at various layers of management the seething discontent is arrested before it degenerates into explosive situation. Interaction with and creating a space for groups with diverse opinions and preferences improve the quality of decisions and render them acceptable to otherwise disgruntled groups. The system may

thus be saved from destabilisation. Provincial governments affiliated to different political parties help diffuse frustration among parties defeated in the national elections and promote participation of major parties in the governance of the country. Loss in the national elections may be partially compensated by victory in the provincial elections.

Decentralisation is best facilitated by elected bodies at the local level. Provincial governments in the federal structure are by and large elected. Since there is no provincial or state government in the unitary governance structure, existence of autonomous and strong local governments is a critical desideratum in this dispensation. Autonomous local bodies with sizable administrative and financial authority is apt to meet the local needs much faster and better than the central government. It can also cushion the local people against arbitrary and partisan actions of the central government. Multiparty administrators in the local governments preclude emergence of exclusive politics and ensures participation of diverse political groups in the governance of the country. In the absence of elected local governments, "winners take it all" syndrome may create a suffocating situation for the excluded groups. This in turn precipitates confrontational politics ridden with agitations and violence. Experiences of Bangladesh in the last few years conform to this scenario.

Bangladesh constitution emphatically and unequivocally provides for elected local governments at all tiers of administrative units. The higher courts have also instructed the government to install elected local governments. All in vain uptill now. Consecutive governments since 1991 have disregarded both constitutional obligations and the rulings of the higher courts with impunity. The results have been disastrous for the country. Only lately the most important units of local administration, the sub-districts (Upazila) have had elected parishads. Besides city corpora-

tions/ municipalities the only elected government was visible at the union level. Supporters of different political parties have been elected as the heads of union level and upazila councils. If supporters of different political parties and citizens groups were elected as the heads of administration at the sub district (Upazila) level, frustration of defeated and excluded groups at the centre would have waned to a great extent. Arbitrary and tyrannical instructions from the central government could be diffused or resisted much to the relief of innocent local inhabitants. It is not, however, unlikely that elected local leader might turn out to be a tyrannical and corrupt person. In such circumstances central government's intervention may be necessary to save the local people from the tyranny of a malefactor.

Decentralisation is not a panacea for all the malaise in the governance of a country or an organisation. How far decentralisation will succeed depends on the capacity and character of the local heads of decentralised management. Corrupt and inefficient local managers, elected or nominated, militate against the viability of decentralised institutions. Proponents of decentralisation have to guard against such possibility so that an otherwise sound concept of decentralisation does not suffer owing to bad selection of local managers. The objective of good governance is to strengthen the institution of decentralisation by demonstrating the harmful elements and introducing corrective measures. Decentralisation may be confronting bad experiences here and there but on average it has always been found to deliver in the long run suffocating situation for the excluded groups. This in turn precipitates confrontational politics ridden with agitations and violence. Experiences of Bangladesh in the last few years conform to this scenario.

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