GOVERNANCE IN PAKISTAN:
LEGITIMACY REGIME OF NGOs

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Abstract

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have proliferated dramatically in Pakistan. They have become a part of contemporary governance with crucial roles to overcome challenges and threats to governance and national security. While their roles have been evolving, they are under scrutiny of government, media, and civil society. The spread of NGOs and simultaneously militancy/terrorism in Pakistan is seen by many Pakistanis as a complementary phenomenon. Rising influence of NGOs is attributed to absence of government and the governance failure is considered as a major cause of the rise of militancy. This paper examines the milieu of the NGOs in Pakistan and the prevalent practices and attitudes towards their legitimacy and accountability. It explores complexities of NGOs’ legitimacy, drawing from and adding to the literature on governance and national security. This paper takes a descriptive approach and a democratic theoretical perspective that is so close to the ideology of Pakistan. It reflects as to how legitimate NGOs can become vital social organizations, or conversely, a security risk without public support for their missions. It provides an understanding as to what this sector is doing or not doing for Pakistan, and concurrently suggests measures for its efficacy.

Introduction

Pakistan has been exposed to conflict and terrorism for the last three decades with varying intensity. The security threats are multidimensional ranging from internal to international which have ripped the very fabric of society and put severe strains on its governing mechanisms. Government institutions face declining resources but enormous problems and
extensive spaces for their operations. Consequently, it has created space for non-state actors to fill the vacuum. Global politics have pushed Pakistan to become a frontline state, initially to counter the leftist and later the rightist extremism. In both situations, Pakistan was a conduit of military operations and hence, a fertile ground for growth of national and international NGOs in the multibillion security market. The simultaneity in the growth of NGOs and terrorism in Pakistan gives a look of a complementary phenomenon. Both NGOs and fragile security milieu are thus considered the two sides of the same coin. Putting it scholastically, one may refer to it as the problem of legitimacy of NGOs to engage in the functions of the state as they find little acceptance with skeptical Pakistani nation. NGOs do not have the power of the government, thus their survival hinges on credibility and legitimacy. If that becomes shady, their roles in society will be contested radically. Hence, study of NGOs in Pakistan, though a manifestation of governance overwhelmingly has national security connotations.

NGOs have become a part of contemporary governance with crucial roles to overcome challenges threatening interdependent world. While their roles have been evolving, they have come under scrutiny of government, media, and civil society. It has resulted in deep international concerns focusing on their accountability and legitimacy. People suspect their credentials and powerful stakeholders raise doubts on their ideologies and intentions to advocate policies and engage in public service. They are also criticized to be unaccountable and websites like “NGO Watch” are dedicated to expose NGO activities. These questions hit at the very heart of their legitimacy to engage in actions that are principally the domain of government.

This paper examines the milieu of the NGOs in Pakistan, their prevalent practices and public attitudes towards their legitimacy and accountability. It reflects as to how NGOs with their legitimacy can become vital social organizations in Pakistani context, or conversely, a security problem without public support for their missions. It provides an
understanding as to what this sector is doing or not doing for Pakistan.

**NGO Phenomenon in Pakistan**

Phenomenal growth of NGOs in Pakistan in the past few decades is mainly credited to inflow of massive foreign funding due to the security situation of this region, dominated by the protracted American War on Terror in Afghanistan. USA, being one of the donors, claims to have channeled more than ten billion dollars after the incident of 9/11. Consequently along with Afghan refugees, Pakistan was also a ‘refuge’ of international NGOs working for/in Afghanistan and beyond. This could be attributed to proximity of Islamabad and Kabul, liberal visa regime, and porosity of Pak Afghan border that allows NGOs’ workers to travel across even illegally. Another reason for proliferation for NGOs could be oscillation of Pakistan between democracy and dictatorships. Such political instability provided fertility to NGOs to sprout on any known human issue. Natural calamities in the shape of earthquake (2005), and floods (2010-2011-2014-2015) also provided rationale to philanthropic sector and those with modern technological equipment and professional expertise, rush to Pakistan to get it out of trouble. With money raining on one pretext or the other, both governmental and non-governmental sector reached out to fill their buckets. Pakistan thus now relishes a both government and NGO glut.

Any phenomenon which attains power and grows rapidly in a society will surely come under public as well as business scrutiny. One finds Pakistani NGOs subjected to all types of criticism challenging their legitimacy to exist. They are termed undemocratic creatures, insensitive to culture and religion, existing with the sole aim to act as an agent of foreign countries. However, all NGOs are not evils or business concerns. They have many good works to their credit and people in Pakistan have contributed billions of Rupees as charity through these organizations for the welfare of the poor and needy. Are NGOs doing something or do they exist as a vocation for rich and powerful? Are they working for Pakistani
people or do they have a foreign agenda? The succeeding paper dilates on major roles of NGOs in Pakistan

Humanitarian Assistance: Many NGOs in Pakistan focus on providing services to the poor and those in need. They are engaged in many human development ventures and government has relied on them to deliver aid to the needy. At any time of need and disaster, NGOs were faster than government to come to the support and meet people’s demands. This is in line with global trend as documented by Mathew that “subject to availability of funds, NGOs have outperformed government in the delivery of many public services.” Generally, Pakistani NGOs have been more dynamic than government in far flung, barren and rural areas of Baluchistan. Agha Khan Foundation has deep roots and extensive involvement in development projects in Northern Areas of Pakistan. Overall, NGOs have been efficient and forthcoming to assess and meet the public needs due to their acquaintance with grass root organizations and superior functional abilities.

Professional Guidance: NGOs focus on specific issues, collect relevant information, and then publicize it to promote awareness. This makes NGOs specialists in their jobs. They are competitor of state in professionalism and offset the averseness of government in monitoring state functions. Pakistani government as well as businesses have often reached NGOs to acquire specialist advice and input. NGOs have been forthcoming with their technical and legal knowledge to contribute professionally. In one example, an NGO provided data to government to celebrate world women’s day. The government used and published it but the name of NGO was not explicitly cited.

Financial Support: Pakistani governments have traditionally pushed rural development and poor to the lowest priorities and instead going for money guzzler visible projects for political mileage. NGOs can boast budgets of billions, though this is rare. They have, in some cases, highlighted governance gaps, and used their money to push these issues
back on the ‘decision agenda’ of the government. NGO have attained such power through the money, they possess. More funds also mean extended abilities to do work for the needy. The money power puts these NGOs in a position to monitor government actions or inactions on ‘people’s agenda’. NGOs provide valuable information, travel to needy people in remote locations and create a supporting infrastructure for delivering goods and services. Pakistani NGOs have spent money on many public issues that governments have ignored. Their money enables people to lobby for policies, do research and generate policy options. They have tried to fill gap between requirements of the people and the competencies of government. This has given some credibility and legitimacy to Pakistani NGOs and their projects.

**Government’s Watchdog:** NGOs with their expertise have been a tool to monitor Pakistani governments’ compliance with national and international standards. They have been compelling government for transparency by waging media campaigns. Some Pakistani NGOs have launched effective media campaigns to force both government and private businesses to change their detested policies or improve and speed up the implementation of desired projects. NGO monitoring has been vital on development issues and political rights of Pakistanis. Without them, governmental performance could be bleak. As documented by Synder, “When you all go home, it is the NGOs that keep a close eye on governments. We force government to act where it refrains due to political or financial priorities”. It has led to greater implementation concerns by political governments. For example, Pakistani NGOs have closely monitored the implementation of governments’ labour and wage policies in the private sector. They have been instrumental in getting concession for citizens where even government was reluctant to question corporate practices due to fear of losing the anticipated revenue. This is commendable in a country like Pakistan, where most political governments have been hostage to business enterprises.
Supporting Minorities: Pakistani NGOs have done work on gender issues specially empowerment of women in Pakistan. They have worked for the rights of Christians, for the emancipation of agricultural tenants (Haries), worked for Hindu population in Thar and supported families of people missing during American War on Terror in Afghanistan. They have spoken for power devolution and pressurized successive governments to increase public spending in underdeveloped areas. NGOs have pushed governments for child education, safe motherhood programmes, run literacy programmes, worked in slums (katchiabads), post conflict rehabilitation, and worked “under donor pressure” for making penal laws on honour killings. Pakistani NGOs have worked against use of drugs and for the rehabilitation of addicts. They provide voice to voiceless, speak to remedy their pains and have advocated justice for poor. They have highlighted dismal prison conditions and raised voice on rights of prisoners.

Criticism on Pakistani NGOs

“The answer doesn’t lie in the over regulation of the NGOs or their donors but a total dismantling of the NGO-industrial complex. Until then, conferences and consultations on ‘labour rights’ can continue to be held at five star hotels — which for one are known to underpay their employees — without a hint of irony and we’d continue to have lots of project reports to show for it”8. The Dawn

The greatest criticism of Pakistani NGOs is on their legitimacy. Such criticism finds its foundations in the lack of transparency and accountability in this sector. Legitimacy of this sector comes under severe scrutiny when NGO projects extend to the turfs of strong religious clergy or the feudal structure which sustain on the perpetuity of poverty and illiteracy. Pakistanis have expressed doubts that operations of NGOs are categorically impervious. This is not at tangent to global perceptions about NGOs. They employ influence on government decisions behind closed doors and without
pluralistic participation. This brings into light the democratic connotation of their legitimacy. NGOs are also considered to be anti-state and working on foreign agendas to seek funding. People believe that power and influence of NGOs should be controlled by some legal measure in order to provide some form of visibility and accountability in cases of their preconceived irresponsibility. Major criticism on NGOs is as follows.

**Despotic:** Many Pakistani NGOs do not follow democratic values in management of their organization. This is however, no different from NGOs elsewhere in the world. NGOs in Pakistan do not choose their leaders or governing members in any contemporary pluralistic manner. As Johan said, “They make their policies without any input or consultation from their members. Most of their projects are conceived top down and thrust down for implementation. Such projects often reflect the interests of the leadership than that of the organization or its employees.” Most of them do not draw on a popularly supported constitution. Many do not have a constitution at all and those who do are in accessible. NGO leaders relish wide-ranging discretion regarding what policies should be followed. Which is to be followed sincerely with focus and potency and which is to be just a semblance of activity? In Pakistan, it is strange that even well-established NGOs function undemocratically like a ‘family’ NGO. Even NGOs having standing with United Nations are least democratic. Mertussays, “This could be so because their policies and projects are based on the concerns of a well-defined constituency.”

Pakistani NGOs speak for women, speak against religious injunctions, patriarchy, and class discrimination etc, without having any mandate from any of these communities. They claim to speak for children, who by themselves have no idea as to what is good or bad for them. They have consistently lobbied for people’s right to education which is already a fundamental right in the constitution and there are numerous government departments at all levels to execute this constitutional provision. Despite that, residents of capital city
of Pakistan, having highest literacy rate, were thrust with persistent media “Ailaan” (pronouncement) that “education is a virtue”. An overnight NGO (with half Pakistani elitist owner) had appeared from nowhere with money from an international donor. This owner ‘has been’ an employee and contractor of USAID, and is himself foreign educated with foreign demeanour. People of Pakistan never choose the NGOs they encounter, or approach them to be their representatives. They have neither approved nor are made part of their agenda setting. Thus, NGOs contradict basic moral and normative rule that is to govern with the consent of the governed.\textsuperscript{13}

Foreign Agents: Pakistan is filled with rich and large NGOs from the developed West. Most of these organizations are either working directly or through their associated Pakistani NGOs. The purpose of their agenda is thus either subtle and masked or not openly shared with their targeted communities. Polio vaccination project is an excellent example of such projects. The project has not been able to achieve its targets because some NGOs’ workers were found spying for the donor countries. The conservative society in the Northern parts of Pakistan has even declared this vaccination against the teachings of Islam, which essentially is a consequence of lack of trust on the NGOs. Thus, it is the foreign donors who create and fund the projects. Pakistani NGOs simply tow them without any question. This is “only to get funds. It makes them rich and enables them to live in Islamabad in plush offices and cozy houses.”\textsuperscript{14}

Alien Development Perspective: While the richest NGOs are from the developed western countries, Pakistani NGOs are comparatively minion. Larger NGOs attract the greatest donor funding. About fifty of 2,000 NGOs control eighty percent of NGO resources.\textsuperscript{15} The power of international development agenda setting thus has remained and will perhaps continue to remain in the hands of rich Western NGOs. International donors impose their self-interested agenda. No doubt that Pakistani press has every now and then blamed NGOs as foreign agents. The repetitiveness thus
becomes dappled by moving into the realm of anti-state agenda. This manner of imposing and carrying agenda is what encourages government officials, citizens, as well as some NGOs to question the legitimacy of such NGOs. One NGO manager told me that he was doing a project on child labour. Knowing that an INGO was about to fund a programme on literacy, he dropped the child programme and started a literacy initiative to obtain the funding.\textsuperscript{16} Another smaller women NGO leader proclaimed that Pakistanis having dual nationalities use western nationality to rope in foreign donors and local nationality to consume these funds on paper projects. They are oblivious of social realities in Pakistan.\textsuperscript{17}

**Elitist:** Gary says that “criticism on legitimacy and accountability of NGOs is the developing elitism guised in professionalism.”\textsuperscript{18} Pakistani NGO leaders do not represent the poor and voiceless. NGO managers are rich and absolutely not in touch with the poor segments of Pakistani society that they assert to represent. Those who run Pakistani NGOs are from power wielding networks. NGOs are used for preservation of personal interest or class interests. Most of them have an interest in the perpetuation of their NGO and the persistence of their projects. NGOs may be a vocation, a profession or a business. While such criticism is normative for our politicians and public servants, its application on NGO sector goes against the very philosophy of these organizations.

**Careerism:** With increased funding to NGOs in Pakistan especially after 9/11 and Kerry Lugar Act, there has been a surge in wages and job security for NGO employees leading to increased competition for jobs in NGOs. This has led to professionalism and careerism. It exists in the developed world and it does so in Pakistan. In the developed world however, it is not the wealthy or most internationally connected who join NGOs. It is the same employees who hop from one NGO to another or from government to private agencies. Conversely in Pakistan, NGO sector boasts wealthier employees who are socially mobile at international level and our ‘Diplomatic Enclave’. Their lifestyle, perks, privileges and comfort take them away from abject realities of the lives of the
people they work for. Pakistani NGOs managers and owners have become virtually a shadow copy of their donors from the West.

**Self-Preservation:** Pakistani NGOs management engages in enhancing their persona, rather than the objectives and policies they espouse to project. Instead of being servants to the poor and oppressed, as they claim on their websites and in their missions, they have become privileged class of our society. One government official dealing with these NGOs at provincial level commented that, “many championing human rights come from elite backgrounds. They have very selective and limited membership base. They are a community of narrowly interested professionals or careerists. NGOs should be a medium of social justice or ideological movement. But it has become the specified language of choice professionals with its own rites and methods.”

NGOs in Pakistan have become a money-spinning business. Even globally, the sacred human issues have become a certificate of privilege personality building with plenty of professional jobs. NGOs with enormous funding and media attention have become exclusive phenomenon, especially in Islamabad.

**Legitimacy of Pakistani NGOs**

**Democratic Dimension:** Democracy has progressively grained into political values of Pakistani population. That is how one assesses the legitimacy of these organizations. However, many government institutions are also non-democratic but no criticism has ever been directed to those institutions. For example, Pakistanis do not question the legitimacy of religious institutions or private educational institutions. Similarly, there are many public companies, private companies, housing societies, transport agencies, semi government departments etc. that, though having undemocratic credentials, are legitimately accepted despite being undemocratic in character. While democracy is good as a value, it does not fit into the philosophy of the existence of this sector. Majority rule can mean tyranny of majority, exploitation of minorities, and so on. If NGOs follow
egalitarian procedures, they might cease to claim emancipation of women, protect racial factions, and speak for oppressed and voiceless minorities. Thus, the very value we look into the structure of NGOs for its legitimacy can be at tangent to its mission. Moreover, what will be their raison d’être in a democracy because there is already a government representing majority. Also, the cost of having membership and representation is expensive and therefore, unattainable for many smaller NGOs.\textsuperscript{21}

The criticism does have a merit. Pakistani NGOs can buy public opinion by funding selectively. Pakistani people have frequently denounced NGOs as a means of cultural interventionism. While democracy and formal representation of people may not be possible, NGOs in Pakistan still need to be accountable for their claims to represent voiceless. These claims are thrust on government through popular media as and when NGOs attempt to lobby for a law or a policy or most importantly, for seeking foreign funding. They make such claims to bolster their legitimacy but in reality, those are mostly self-serving.

**Accountability Dimension:** NGO legitimacy and improved functioning need a transparent system of accountability. Well-financed NGOs are likely to have more power than their poorer counterparts, and the lack of accountability is likely to keep this power unchecked.\textsuperscript{22} Scholars advise that more than representation, accountability is necessary to assure that NGOs behave responsibly and ethically. NGOs can willingly ignore the “big picture” as they are more interested in the objectives linked with donor funding.\textsuperscript{23} This goes against the public interest, meaning that people will not be helped on merit or based on their needs but as a consequence of political and financial battles in the arena of aid. An NGO in Lahore knew that women in villages are an important part of farming culture. Yet, it was foreign donors who asked it instead to teach these women to stitch clothes to alleviate their poverty. Another Gujranwala based NGO did a similar thing for the village women and instead, went to improve their adult literacy rates. Some NGOs end up working
against the very interest of the people they support due to their limited knowledge of its beneficiaries and lack of accountability to them. Inadvertently, they end up harming people while they think they are helping them. An NGO was paid for releasing women held in bonded labour. The outcome was more women in bonded labour as it suited the ulterior motives of the kiln owners and labour women both.24 Similarly, NGOs helped people on both sides of the war, providing aid to both victim and terrorists during current American war on Afghanistan. Boutros-Ghali has been on record to ask NGOs to pay due attention to the politics in aid to peacekeeping missions. This takes a cue from the phrase that it is perfectly acceptable to lie for a good cause. There are unlimited accounts of NGOs engaging in lies and other unethical practices.25 Many NGOs have adopted this as their main philosophy.

Financial accountability is extremely necessary. People of Pakistan lack trust in NGOs because NGOs have been reported to pocket money meant for projects. It is also because their leaders are very wealthy and public perception is that they are rich through stealing money meant for them.26 NGOs being accountable to their beneficiaries mean projects that produce sustainable benefits. An official succinctly sums up that “NGOs go for small projects lasting ridiculously for short periods, have no serious long-term vision, are not transparent and are designed by their foreign masters. Delays in projects go in their favour as it means pays and perks for longer time. They create a friendly auditing and a weak monitoring system. While reviewing projects, they interview those whom they have provided financial benefits and not the targets of the project”.27

Neoliberal Dimension: NGOs in Pakistan rely on government and foreign funding to act on their missions. This is true for other countries, both developed and developing, like America, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Kenya, and Bangladesh. This dependency compromises the very features that provide independence and freedom of action to NGOs. UN does the same for of its NGOs to facilitate their support to host
countries. However, by selecting NGOs for funding, the UN influences the ideologies and politics of the host nations. To get money from UN, Pakistani NGOs are ever inclined to adapt their schemes to echo UN thoughts, whether it is in the interest of their beneficiaries or not. UN also uses its funding clout by offering pleasure international junkets to NGOs managers.

Funding from private donors is also problematic as they carve up the territory and fiefdoms. The pressure on local NGOs is thus enormous to mimic donor behaviour and rhetoric. Pakistani NGOs hunt for shards of the foreign aid which is controlled through foreign embassies in Islamabad. Some, who survive on specific donor money, start behaving and thinking like their donors. This results in conformity of planned projects, and causes visible rivalry among Pakistani NGOs. Then they indulge in bad governance practices confronting and blaming other NGOs which are their competitors. Power is sought and gained through funding and consumed to obtain funding. Those who advocate speaking for marginalized have been marginalized by the ‘big fish’ and made voiceless.” Thus, big NGOs in Pakistan dominate not only the domestic policy making but also international dialogues by thrusting their agenda.

There is a sever struggle between NGOs for “breaking news” to prey funds. NGO names have become brands. Name in Islamabad has real value. Donations and government grants come with infamy. Looking objectively, it is not bad to have vibrant media coverage. But this has led to exaggerated claims of transgression and bigoted press on a single issue at the expense of other more pressing issues.

Accreditation: Exercise of power by NGO must be legitimate and made accountable. Government thus has to intervene to establish a system to implement it. Pakistan has many laws under which various NGOs have registered to claim legitimacy. Government has also created few structures at public and private level to accredit NGOs. While government merely boasts a redundant bureaucratic structure (Trust for
Voluntary Organizations, TVO), one elitist NGO called Pakistan Center of Philanthropy (PCP) exists only to accredit, but simultaneously to promote its own interests. Most of such accreditations are merely to evade income tax liabilities. PCP somehow has been provided with a questionable mandate by Pakistani tax authorities to be a certifying agency to get income tax incentives. Many organizations who have not opted for this certification process, view PCP itself as an illegitimate mechanism of certification. NGO certifying another NGO can potentially turn into an unholy alliance for corruption. Amazingly, leadership of PCP itself was part of a funded study which recommends creation of such a certifying agency. One is thus not surprised to note that only few NGOs currently hold “certification” from PCP.

**Conclusion**

Are NGOs something good for Pakistan and considered legitimate by people? This remains a very difficult question as the perceptions are on both extremes. It is mainly the beneficiaries of this phenomenon who are very enthusiastic about these organizations. Such beneficiaries include people serving in these organizations, with deep acknowledgement and support coming from the NGOs leaders and managers. However, there is resentment and censure of NGOs originating from the middle and upper middle class citizens, academia, media and government agencies who look at these organizations very suspiciously. Such scepticism does have its root in the American War on Terror in Afghanistan. It gets practically manifested in the violent reactions to some NGO programmes especially in KP.

Looking at output side, perhaps these organizations are considered to provide more benefits than their discernable costs. This is a rationalistic view, as people think they get something without paying for it. This provides a prima facie legitimacy to these organizations. The negative answers are serious but are considered to be manageable. If serious efforts are made to tape potential of these organizations, the threats that they face to their legitimacy can easily be addressed. Both
NGOs and civil society might have to relook at their attitudes. Especially, NGOs will have to look for measures of coexistence with local, provincial and federal governments in Pakistan. It would enable both the partners to gain from each other.

Pakistan needs NGOs that are professional and committed to indigenous culture and philosophies. Such NGOs should have a very motivated team to head and manage these organizations instead of making it a family business. This sector must draw in volunteers who do not make NGOs as their vocation. Pakistani NGOs also need to reflect high standards of transparency, accountability and representation to be accepted as legitimate providers of collective goods. If Pakistani NGOs start paying attention to resolve these problems, they will not have to look towards foreign donors as Pakistanis are one of the leading philanthropic nations in the world. It will enable them to play important roles not only at national but also international levels.

Notes

6Director APWA (2013)Author Interview with, on March 15, 2013
8Newspaper “The Dawn” Sunday Magazine Published on May 25, 2014
11Johan, H (2014) Author discussion with, Program Manager at an INGO in Islamabad: September 19, 2014
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13 Supra Note 12
17 Aqsa, M (2014) Author Interview with, Tahrik-I- Niswan, Karachi April 26, 2014
19 Director( 2014) Author Discussion with, Social Welfare Department, (anonymity) Lahore: September 15, 2014
21 Deserving Trust: Issues of Accountability for the Human Rights NGOs, Report for Consultation, April 2003
22 Supra Note 18
23 Id
26 During my interviews, expensive restaurants were a favorite rendezvous of NGO people
27 Author interview with senior government officer in Ministry of Economic Affairs, Islamabad, October 18, 2014
29 NGO Participation in the World Conference Funding Process, www.igc.org/igc/gateway/arn/worldconf
30 Supra Note 20
31 Supra Note 20
32 Supra Note 18