

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21835655>

**Political Will and Local Government Autonomy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan:
Fiscal and Administrative Implications for District Nowshera (2013–2024)**

Muhammad Zubair

PhD Scholar, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar
zubairicup@gmail.com

Abstract: *Political will is a critical condition for the effective devolution of fiscal and administrative authority to elected local governments. This study examines how changing provincial political commitment, political alignment, political interference, and intergovernmental relations influenced local government autonomy in District Nowshera, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, during 2013–2024. The study employed a mixed-method combining quantitative data from 147 locally elected representatives of Nowshera, Pabbi, and Jahangira Tehsils with qualitative interviews of key stakeholders. The findings show that the 2015–2019 local government tenure operated within a comparatively more supportive political environment. Provincial commitment to devolution, the political association of the Chief Minister with District Nowshera, regular though not always complete fiscal transfers, and relatively smoother coordination with bureaucracy provided elected councils with limited but workable fiscal and administrative space. In the post-2021 period, political support weakened considerably after local election outcomes produced opposition-led local power centres. Qualitative data shows that 87% of respondents believed provincial political dynamics weakened local autonomy, 65% reported that party affiliation affected the provision of funds and institutional support, 74% perceived exclusion of elected local representatives from significant decision-making, 67% identified rivalries between local and provincial leadership as an obstacle to development implementation, and 61% reported political interference from higher levels of government. These political conditions coincided with non-release of PFC development funds, increased fiscal dependence, stronger bureaucratic control, reduced administrative discretion, and weakened service delivery. The study concludes that legal devolution alone cannot secure local autonomy unless it is supported by sustained political commitment, politically neutral fiscal transfers, clear administrative authority, and institutional safeguards against partisan and bureaucratic interference.*

Keywords: Political will; local government autonomy; fiscal autonomy; administrative autonomy; political interference; decentralisation; District Nowshera; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Introduction

Local government is the lowest and closest tier of democratic governance and is intended to bring public authority nearer to citizens. The rationale for establishing local government is that local problems are more effectively understood and addressed by local communities and their elected representatives than by distant central or provincial authorities (Laski, 1961). In this sense, local government autonomy is not merely the existence of elected councils; it requires meaningful political, fiscal, and administrative authority through which locally elected bodies can make decisions, mobilise resources, implement

development priorities, and respond to community needs.

Fiscal and administrative autonomy are central to the practical functioning of local government. Fiscal Federalism Theory emphasises that expenditure responsibilities should be matched by adequate revenue authority and predictable intergovernmental transfers, otherwise lower tiers remain dependent on higher governments for the performance of assigned functions (Musgrave, 1959). Decentralisation Theory similarly argues that the transfer of functions can improve governance only when it is supported by political commitment, an appropriate institutional framework, adequate resources, and administrative capacity (Rondinelli et al., 1983). Political will is therefore important because formal legal powers can remain ineffective when higher political authorities are unwilling to transfer resources, accept local decision-making, or permit elected councils to exercise their assigned responsibilities.

Pakistan's local government history reflects a continuing tension between decentralisation and centralisation. The thesis notes that local government reforms have often been affected by the political objectives of ruling regimes, while provincial political elites and bureaucratic institutions have remained reluctant to surrender substantial authority to elected local bodies. Even after the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment strengthened the constitutional basis of local government, the practical exercise of local autonomy continued to depend heavily on provincial legislation, political commitment, administrative cooperation, and fiscal decisions (Cheema et al., 2014; Rafique et al., 2023).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provides an important case for examining this relationship. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led provincial government introduced the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act, 2013 as a major element of its reform agenda. The Act was associated with devolution, participatory governance, and strengthening decision-making at the grassroots level, but the effectiveness of this framework depended not only on its legal provisions but also on the willingness of higher levels of government to transfer meaningful authority, responsibilities, and resources to elected local institutions (International Foundation for Electoral Systems [IFES], 2015; Haider, 2019).

The local government environment subsequently changed through the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act, 2019 and the Amendment Act, 2022. The 2019 reforms abolished the elected district tier, reduced devolved offices, and strengthened provincial and bureaucratic coordination. The political setting changed further after the local government elections of 2021–2022, when opposition parties won a substantial number of important local positions. The thesis treats these developments as important because political support, party alignment, and provincial-local relations affected the practical operation of fiscal transfers, administrative authority, development planning, and bureaucratic cooperation (Janjua, 2022; Rasool & Ali, 2022).

District Nowshera is particularly significant in this regard. During 2015–2019, the Chief Minister belonged to the district, and respondents repeatedly associated this political proximity with stronger provincial backing, relatively greater financial support, and smoother administrative coordination. In the post-2021 period, the political relationship changed as Tehsil Chairmen in important parts of the district belonged to opposition parties. The thesis found that political alignment and political will significantly influenced both local government finances and administrative functioning. This article therefore examines political will as the central explanatory theme linking provincial-local political relations with fiscal and administrative autonomy in District Nowshera during 2013–2024.

Literature Review

The literature reviewed in the thesis shows that local government autonomy in Pakistan has long been shaped by political incentives, intergovernmental relations, and the distribution of authority between elected institutions and higher levels of government. Rizvi (1970) emphasised the importance of empowering local institutions for successful development activities, but his work preceded the constitutional and provincial reforms that reshaped local governance after the Eighteenth Amendment. Later scholarship increasingly focused on the political and institutional conditions under which

decentralisation operates.

Muhammad (2004), in his study of local government finance in Punjab, argued that although local governments are important for community development, their fiscal potential has often been politically manipulated. This observation is relevant to the present study because financial autonomy can be weakened not only by limited revenue capacity but also by political control over transfers and development resources. However, Muhammad's study relates to the Musharraf-era system in Punjab and does not examine the post-2013 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa framework or the political dynamics of District Nowshera.

Khan (2014) examined the relationship between district-level elected leadership and bureaucracy in Nowshera under the 2001 devolution framework. He found that devolution altered the relationship between District Nazims and administrative officers, but the reform process remained constrained because elected and bureaucratic actors were not sufficiently incorporated into institutional design. The study provides an important district-level background, yet it does not examine the changing political commitment, fiscal constraints, and administrative pressures experienced by locally elected bodies after the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act, 2013.

Khan et al. (2021), in their legislative appraisal of local government in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, found that excessive centralisation, weak political, administrative, and fiscal decentralisation, and broad discretionary powers limited local autonomy. Their findings reinforce the importance of institutional safeguards against higher-level interference, but their analysis is confined to AJK and does not empirically examine how political alignment and changing provincial commitment influence fiscal and administrative autonomy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Malik et al. (2025) examined constitutional provisions, political party commitments, and implementation challenges in Pakistan and found that decentralisation remained weak because of political interference, centralised fiscal arrangements, and limited institutional capacity. Their work identifies the broader gap between formal constitutional promises and practical devolution. However, the national-level focus does not explain how these political constraints operate at district level or how they affect the daily functioning of local councils in a politically contested setting such as District Nowshera.

The historical discussion in the thesis also highlights the recurring tension between elected local institutions and higher political and administrative structures. Malik et al. (2025) identify political interference and centralised fiscal arrangements as continuing barriers to decentralisation, while Rafique et al. (2023) emphasise the persistence of bureaucratic dominance in local governance. These patterns suggest that the success of decentralisation cannot be explained by legal design alone; it also depends on whether political and administrative actors permit elected local governments to exercise meaningful authority.

The research gap therefore concerns the practical relationship between political will and local autonomy under the post-2013 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa system. Existing studies explain decentralisation, local finance, legislation, and governance constraints, but limited district-level empirical attention has been given to how provincial political commitment, party alignment, political interference, and political rivalry shape fiscal transfers, bureaucratic cooperation, local decision-making, and the operational autonomy of elected councils. The present article addresses this gap through the evidence generated in District Nowshera between 2013 and 2024.

Theoretical Framework

Fiscal Federalism Theory provides the primary theoretical foundation for analysing the fiscal implications of political will, while Decentralisation Theory provides a complementary framework for understanding administrative and political autonomy. Together, these theories help explain why formal

devolution may produce different practical outcomes depending on political incentives, institutional arrangements, resource flows, and administrative cooperation.

Fiscal Federalism Theory

Fiscal Federalism Theory, associated with Musgrave (1959), explains the distribution of expenditure responsibilities, revenue powers, and intergovernmental transfers among levels of government. The first-generation approach assumes that higher levels of government use fiscal transfers to correct vertical and horizontal imbalances and support efficient public service provision. From this perspective, local governments require predictable transfers and adequate own-source revenues if they are to perform responsibilities assigned to them.

The second-generation perspective, developed by Weingast (2007), adds a political-economy dimension by recognising that public officials operate within political incentives and institutional constraints. It does not assume that intergovernmental fiscal decisions are always politically neutral. This perspective is particularly relevant to District Nowshera because the thesis found that party alignment, provincial political support, and changing political circumstances significantly shaped local fiscal outcomes. The availability or absence of political support affected the practical flow of resources and therefore the fiscal space available to locally elected bodies.

Decentralisation Theory

Decentralisation Theory explains the transfer of political, administrative, and financial authority from higher to lower levels of government. Rondinelli et al. (1983) emphasise that decentralisation is more likely to succeed when central or provincial political leaders support the process, when policy and organisational arrangements are appropriately designed, and when sufficient financial, human, and physical resources are available. The theory therefore treats political commitment as a necessary condition rather than an optional element of decentralisation.

Applied to District Nowshera, the theory suggests that local autonomy depends on more than the legal assignment of functions. Elected councils must also receive financial resources, administrative cooperation, staff support, and practical authority to implement decisions. The thesis found that these conditions were comparatively more available during 2015–2019 and substantially weaker in the post-2021 period. Fiscal Federalism and Decentralisation Theory therefore provide an integrated framework for examining how political will shaped fiscal and administrative autonomy over time.

Political Will and Local Government Autonomy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Political will in this article refers to the practical commitment of provincial political leadership to devolve authority, release resources, respect elected local decision-making, and support administrative cooperation with local councils. Chapter Three of the thesis demonstrates that the local government framework changed substantially between 2013 and 2024. These legal and institutional changes were embedded within changing political contexts and therefore provide the background for interpreting the quantitative and qualitative findings.

a. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act, 2013: Political Commitment and Devolution

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act, 2013 emerged after the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment placed greater responsibility on provincial governments to establish elected local government systems. The PTI-led coalition government introduced the Act after assuming office in 2013, and the legislation became an important part of the party's governance agenda. The framework was associated with devolution, participatory governance, and strengthening decision-making at the grassroots level (IFES, 2015).

The Act established a three-tier system comprising district, tehsil/town, and village/neighbourhood councils. It devolved a broad range of government offices and provided elected local governments with

a legal basis for fiscal and administrative functioning. Fiscal provisions included Local Funds, annual budgets, local revenue powers, and a Provincial Finance Commission responsible for formula-based allocations. The development grant for local governments was legally fixed at not less than 30% of the provincial development budget, while fiscal transfer rules provided procedures for the regular authorisation and transfer of funds (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2013; Janjua, 2022).

Administrative devolution under the 2013 framework placed specified devolved offices under elected local structures for routine management, while elected Nazims exercised executive roles at district, tehsil, and village/neighbourhood levels. At the same time, substantial provincial oversight remained through policy direction, staff control, rule-making, and corrective powers. The thesis therefore does not present the 2013 system as fully autonomous. Rather, it identifies the 2015–2019 tenure as a comparatively more decentralised and workable period in which political commitment and provincial support enabled local councils to exercise some meaningful fiscal and administrative authority despite continuing structural limitations (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2013; Haider, 2019).

b. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act, 2019: Restructuring and Provincial Oversight

Following the 2018 general elections, the PTI provincial government reassessed the local government structure and justified reform primarily on administrative grounds. The provincial position was that weak coordination among tiers, implementation problems, and service-delivery inefficiencies required a simpler structure and stronger supervision. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act, 2019 was therefore presented as a corrective intervention, although the thesis describes it as a substantial reversal of the devolution trajectory initiated under the 2013 framework (Janjua, 2022; Khan & Khan, 2024).

The 2019 amendment abolished the elected district council and introduced a two-tier system consisting of Tehsil/City Local Governments and Village/Neighbourhood Councils. District-wide coordination and administration increasingly returned to the Deputy Commissioner and provincial departments, while the number of devolved offices was reduced. The amendment also expanded provincial oversight over budgeting, taxation, staff, and administrative coordination. These changes strengthened vertical administrative control and reduced the institutional space available to elected local councils, even though direct elections for Tehsil Chairmen provided a stronger electoral mandate at the tehsil level (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2019; Janjua, 2022; Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency [PILDAT], 2024).

From the perspective of political will, the 2019 reforms are important because they show that political commitment to decentralisation may change even under the same governing party. The thesis treats the reform as evidence that the balance between local autonomy and provincial supervision shifted toward stronger provincial control. Consequently, the practical autonomy of elected councils depended increasingly on provincial administrative cooperation and the willingness of higher authorities to permit local governments to exercise their formal responsibilities (Janjua, 2022).

c. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act, 2022: Post-Election Political Context and Autonomy

The political context changed further after local government elections were eventually held in two phases in December 2021 and March 2022. The election results created new local power centres outside the direct political control of the provincial government, with opposition parties winning important Tehsil Chairman and mayoral positions. The thesis links this altered political environment with the introduction of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act, 2022 and interprets the amendment as part of a broader shift toward stronger provincial oversight of opposition-led local institutions (Rasool & Ali, 2022).

The Amendment Act, 2022 changed fiscal and administrative arrangements in several important ways. It deleted Section 30(2)(b), which had required government grants and funds from public authorities to be credited directly into local government funds; introduced stronger pre-audit arrangements; and shifted important powers of Tehsil and Village/Neighbourhood Chairmen from the principal Act to subordinate rules. The result was that financial transfers and administrative authority became more dependent on provincial procedures and executive discretion (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2022; Qadri, n.d.).

The thesis also notes that after the 2021–2022 elections, development funds remained withheld while provincial departments and district administrative offices retained substantial influence over planning and execution. Rasool and Ali (2022) are cited in the thesis for the observation that development funds remained withheld and budgetary powers were taken back after elected representatives assumed office. These developments are central to the political-will argument because they show how fiscal and administrative autonomy can be narrowed when provincial political incentives and local political alignment change, even where elected councils continue to exist formally.

Taken together, the 2013, 2019, and 2022 frameworks reveal a changing relationship between devolution and provincial political control. The 2013 Act provided comparatively greater institutional space and operated during a period of stronger political support for local government. The 2019 and 2022 reforms progressively increased provincial and bureaucratic oversight. Chapter Four and Chapter Five of the thesis provide empirical evidence showing how these changing political and institutional conditions were experienced by locally elected bodies in District Nowshera.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings are drawn from the survey of 147 elected representatives from the three tehsils of District Nowshera: Nowshera (59 respondents), Pabbi (51), and Jahangira (37). For the present article, the survey results are organised around the fiscal and administrative implications of political will. The political theme of the original questionnaire measured higher-level interference, party-based support, exclusion from decision-making, provincial political dynamics, and rivalry between local and provincial leadership. These political indicators are read together with fiscal and administrative variables that show how the political environment affected the practical autonomy of local councils.

a. Fiscal Implications of Political Will

Political will has a direct fiscal dimension because local councils in District Nowshera remained dependent on provincial transfers and possessed limited own-source revenue authority. Under such conditions, party alignment, provincial support, and the predictability of fiscal transfers significantly affect the capacity of elected councils to prepare budgets, undertake development work, and provide municipal services.

Table 1. Tehsil-wise Responses on Party Affiliation and Resource Allocation

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	7	11	41	59
Pabbi	7	6	38	51
Jahangira	5	16	16	37
District Total	19	33	95	147
Total Percentage	13%	22%	65%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 13.792$, p-value = .008				

Table 1 shows that 65% of respondents agreed that party affiliation affects the provision of development funds and institutional support to local councils. Only 13% disagreed, while 22% remained neutral. The statistically significant association across tehsils indicates that the intensity of party-based influence varied locally. The finding is important because it demonstrates that access to resources was not

perceived as entirely neutral or based only on community needs; political affiliation was viewed as an important determinant of fiscal and institutional support.

Table 2. Tehsil-wise Responses on Provincial Political Dynamics and Local Autonomy

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	2	5	52	59
Pabbi	2	5	44	51
Jahangira	1	4	32	37
District Total	5	14	128	147
Total Percentage	3%	10%	87%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = .243$, p-value = .993				

Table 2 provides the strongest quantitative evidence for the political-will argument. A very large majority, 87%, agreed that political dynamics at the provincial level weaken the autonomy of local councils. Only 3% disagreed. The consistency of responses across all three tehsils indicates that provincial political influence was perceived as a district-wide condition rather than an isolated local problem. Because provincial authorities control major transfer mechanisms and administrative support, such political influence has direct fiscal consequences for local autonomy.

Table 3. Tehsil-wise Responses on Timeliness of Provincial Fiscal Transfers

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	52	4	3	59
Pabbi	45	4	2	51
Jahangira	34	1	2	37
District Total	131	9	7	147
Total Percentage	89%	6%	5%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 1.159$, p-value = .885				

Table 3 shows that 89% of respondents disagreed that provincial fiscal transfers were timely and consistent in the post-2021 period. Since local councils remained heavily dependent on higher-level transfers, delayed or non-released funds reduced the ability of elected councils to implement approved budgets, maintain development schedules, and respond to local priorities. In the political-will framework, the importance of this result lies in the fact that practical autonomy depended on whether the provincial level actually released the resources required for devolved responsibilities.

Table 4. Tehsil-wise Responses on Restrictions in Accessing Development Funds in the Post-2021 Tenure

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	0	2	57	59
Pabbi	3	4	44	51
Jahangira	6	3	28	37
District Total	9	9	129	147
Total Percentage	6%	6%	88%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 12.134$, p = .016				

Table 4 indicates that 88% of respondents agreed that local councils experienced greater restrictions in accessing and utilising development funds in the post-2021 tenure. The statistically significant difference across tehsils shows some variation in intensity, but the overall finding is clear: elected representatives overwhelmingly perceived a contraction in development-finance access. This strengthened dependence on provincial authorities and reduced the fiscal space available to local councils.

Table 5. Tehsil-wise Responses on Financial Dependency on the Provincial Government

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	3	10	46	59
Pabbi	4	7	40	51
Jahangira	1	13	23	37
District Total	8	30	109	147
Total Percentage	5%	20%	75%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 7.417, p\text{-value} = .115$				

As shown in Table 5, 75% of respondents agreed that the existing structure of financial resource distribution creates dependency on the provincial government. This finding explains why political support matters so strongly in District Nowshera: where local governments do not possess adequate independent revenue sources, provincial transfer decisions become decisive for the functioning of elected councils. Financial dependence therefore creates an institutional channel through which changing political relations can affect local autonomy.

Table 6. Tehsil-wise Responses on Financial Autonomy under the Existing Legal Framework

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	46	6	7	59
Pabbi	40	8	3	51
Jahangira	30	5	2	37
District Total	116	19	12	147
Total Percentage	79%	13%	8%	100%

Table 6 shows that 79% of respondents disagreed that the existing legal framework provided sufficient financial autonomy to local councils. The finding demonstrates that political will operated within a structurally dependent fiscal framework. Even strong political support could not create complete fiscal independence, while weak political support became especially damaging because local councils lacked alternative financial capacity.

b. Administrative Implications of Political Will

Political will also shaped administrative autonomy by influencing cooperation with bureaucracy, participation in decision-making, implementation of development initiatives, and the degree to which elected local representatives could exercise authority over local matters. The survey results reveal a consistent perception that political interference and bureaucratic dominance restricted the independent role of elected councils.

Table 7. Tehsil-wise Responses on Political Interference from Higher Levels of Government

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	11	11	37	59
Pabbi	8	10	33	51
Jahangira	7	10	20	37
District Total	26	31	90	147
Total Percentage	18%	21%	61%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 1.450, p\text{-value} = .836$				

Table 7 shows that 61% of respondents agreed that political interference from higher levels of government affected the functioning of local councils. This suggests that elected councils did not

operate with complete independence in administrative and development matters and that local priorities could be influenced by political considerations originating outside the local council.

Table 8. Tehsil-wise Responses on Exclusion of Local Representatives from Significant Decision-Making

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	6	4	49	59
Pabbi	5	9	37	51
Jahangira	4	11	22	37
District Total	15	24	108	147
Total Percentage	10%	16%	74%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 9.172, p\text{-value} = .057$				

Table 8 indicates that 74% of respondents agreed that elected local representatives are excluded from significant decision-making processes. Exclusion from major decisions weakens political decentralisation because representatives remain electorally accountable to citizens without possessing corresponding authority over development planning and administrative priorities. The result therefore demonstrates a major gap between representation and practical decision-making power.

Table 9. Tehsil-wise Responses on Political Rivalries between Local and Provincial Leadership

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	7	9	43	59
Pabbi	11	8	32	51
Jahangira	9	5	23	37
District Total	27	22	98	147
Total Percentage	18%	15%	67%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 3.003, p = .557$				

Table 9 shows that 67% of respondents agreed that rivalries between local and provincial leadership affect the smooth implementation of development initiatives. The thesis interprets such rivalry as a coordination problem that produces delays and weakens administrative cooperation. This finding directly connects political relationships with the practical implementation capacity of local councils.

Table 10. Tehsil-wise Responses on Interference of Provincial or National Representatives in Local Administration

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera (59)	2	8	49	59
Pabbi (51)	5	7	39	51
Jahangira (37)	10	6	21	37
District Total	17	21	109	147
Total Percentage	12%	14%	74%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 13.502, p\text{-value} = .009$				

Table 10 indicates that 74% of respondents agreed that elected representatives at provincial or national level interfere in the administrative affairs of local councils. The significant variation among tehsils suggests that the extent of such interference differed locally, but the overall pattern remains strong. These findings show that higher-level political influence was experienced not only through funding decisions but also through administrative processes.

Table 11. Tehsil-wise Responses on Bureaucratic Control over Elected Decision-Making

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	10	9	40	59
Pabbi	3	7	41	51
Jahangira	7	7	23	37
District Total	20	23	104	147
Total Percentage	14%	16%	70%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 4.996$, p-value = .288				

As shown in Table 11, 70% of respondents agreed that bureaucratic control limits the decision-making capacity of elected local representatives. The result is important for the political-will analysis because stronger provincial political backing during 2015–2019 was repeatedly associated in the qualitative evidence with smoother coordination between elected representatives and bureaucracy, whereas reduced political backing in the post-2021 period was associated with increased bureaucratic dominance.

Table 12. Tehsil-wise Responses on Increased Bureaucratic Dominance after the Amendment Act, 2022

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	1	3	55	59
Pabbi	4	4	43	51
Jahangira	10	5	22	37
District Total	15	12	120	147
Total Percentage	10%	8%	82%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 19.960$, p = .001				

Table 12 shows that 82% of respondents agreed that bureaucratic dominance increased after the legislative changes introduced in 2022. The strong statistical difference across tehsils indicates variation in local experience, but the district-wide direction is clear. Increased bureaucratic control reduced the decision-making role of elected representatives and strengthened the administrative dependence of local councils on provincial institutions.

Table 13. Tehsil-wise Responses on Comparative Local Council Performance, 2015–2019 and Post-2021

Tehsil	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Nowshera	2	10	47	59
Pabbi	2	2	47	51
Jahangira	1	5	31	37
District Total	5	17	125	147
Total Percentage	3%	12%	85%	100%
$\chi^2(4) = 4.782$, p = .310				

Finally, Table 13 shows that 85% of respondents believed local council performance was more effective during 2015–2019 than in the post-2021 period. The comparative result brings together the political, fiscal, and administrative evidence: the earlier tenure was associated with comparatively greater political support, more available fiscal transfers, clearer administrative structures, and better coordination, while the later tenure was associated with reduced financial access, stronger bureaucratic control, and weaker political support.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings from Chapter Five deepen the quantitative results by explaining how political will was experienced in the practical functioning of local councils. Interviews were conducted with locally elected representatives, local government officials, citizens, civil society and development organisation representatives, and Members of the Provincial Assembly. Across these respondent groups, a consistent distinction emerged between the 2015–2019 tenure and the post-2021 period. The earlier period was generally described as limited but workable, while the later period was described as substantially weaker in both fiscal and administrative terms.

a. Fiscal Autonomy

The interview evidence shows that the fiscal functioning of local councils depended heavily on provincial transfers and therefore on the political and institutional environment in which those transfers were released. For 2015–2019, respondents generally described local councils as financially constrained but functionally active. PFC funds were released, even where they were delayed or incomplete, and the availability of these resources allowed local councils to undertake visible development and municipal activities (Munsif Ali, personal communication, October 25, 2025; Muhammad Zubair, personal communication, October 25, 2025).

Respondents repeatedly connected the comparatively better fiscal position of District Nowshera during 2015–2019 with stronger political backing. Munsif Ali stated that the Chief Minister belonged to District Nowshera, which resulted in greater political support and financial facilitation for local councils. Inam Ali similarly associated the earlier tenure with stronger provincial support and greater transfers, while Fazal Azeem stated that political will resulted in substantially greater transfer of funds during 2015–2019 and supported local development and service delivery (Munsif Ali, personal communication, October 25, 2025; Inam Ali, personal communication, November 5, 2025; Fazal Azeem, personal communication, December 26, 2025).

Civil society respondents presented a similar account. Ishtiaq Ahmad explained that the province had comparatively strong fiscal space during the 2015–2019 period and that District Nowshera benefited from the Chief Minister’s association with the district. Funds were available through several windows, including PFC share, special district packages, Chief Minister directives, and regular Local Government Department allocations. He reported that PFC funds were released on time and major funding blockages were limited during that tenure (Ishtiaq Ahmad, personal communication, November 4, 2025).

The earlier period nevertheless did not provide complete fiscal autonomy. Village and Neighbourhood Councils had narrow revenue bases, local taxation powers remained weak, and locally elected bodies continued to depend heavily on provincial transfers. Muhammad Zubair and Fazal Azeem explained that lower-tier councils had limited own-source revenue authority, while Taimur Kamal noted that revenue collection was concentrated primarily at the tehsil/TMA level. Thus, even the comparatively functional 2015–2019 system remained dependent on provincial financial support (Muhammad Zubair, personal communication, October 25, 2025; Fazal Azeem, personal communication, December 26, 2025; Taimur Kamal, personal communication, October 28, 2025).

The post-2021 period was described very differently. Muhammad Junaid stated that no PFC development funds had been released since the beginning of the current local government tenure and characterised the situation as “financial paralysis,” in which councils existed legally but could not function effectively because of the absence of financial resources (Muhammad Junaid, personal communication, October 25, 2025). Ghayor Khattak similarly linked the non-transfer of funds to the weakening of the institutional mechanism through which resources should reach elected local bodies and referred to the amendment of Section 30 and the weak operation of the PFC and Local Government Commission (Ghayor Khattak, personal communication, October 28, 2025).

Several respondents connected this fiscal contraction with the changed political environment after the 2021–2022 elections. They argued that when opposition candidates won significant local positions, provincial political support declined and the flow of funds and facilitation became weaker. In District Nowshera, the Tehsil Chairmen of Nowshera and Pabbi belonged to opposition parties, and the thesis found that this political misalignment reduced cooperation and financial support. These views were expressed across locally elected and civil society respondents, who linked the post-election context with the stoppage of funds, reduced development activity, and declining local council visibility (Munsif Ali, personal communication, October 25, 2025; Dawood, personal communication, October 28, 2025; Inam Ali, personal communication, November 5, 2025; Naveed, personal communication, December 26, 2025).

The fiscal consequences were visible in service delivery. In the earlier tenure, respondents associated the availability of funds with sewerage, sanitation, street paving, drainage, water supply, and small-scale development schemes. In the post-2021 period, the absence of predictable transfers reduced local councils' ability to initiate projects or respond to local complaints. Civil society respondents described councils as having shifted from visible development institutions to financially constrained administrative structures that relied heavily on grants for salaries and routine expenditure (Imtiaz Ali, personal communication, November 4, 2025; Adeel, personal communication, November 6, 2025).

An important alternative perspective came from provincial stakeholders. Zar Alam Khan acknowledged the decline in fund flows but also linked the later fiscal difficulties to broader political and economic conditions, including provincial fiscal pressures, the caretaker period, and reduced transfers from the federal government. Mian Muhammad Umar likewise argued that delayed PFC transfers were influenced by economic difficulties, the effects of COVID-19, delayed federal transfers, and political transition rather than necessarily by a deliberate policy against local governments (Zar Alam Khan, personal communication, October 27, 2025; Mian Muhammad Umar, personal communication, October 23, 2025). This alternative view is important because the thesis does not reduce every fiscal problem to partisan intention; instead, it shows that political will interacted with wider fiscal and institutional constraints.

Overall, the qualitative evidence indicates that fiscal autonomy remained limited throughout the study period, but its practical operation changed significantly. During 2015–2019, stronger political support and the actual release of PFC and other funds produced a limited but workable fiscal environment. In the post-2021 period, weaker political support, political misalignment, non-release of development funds, and continuing dependence on provincial transfers substantially narrowed the fiscal space of locally elected bodies.

b. Administrative Autonomy

Political will also shaped the administrative functioning of local councils. Respondents from the three tehsils described the 2015–2019 period as comparatively more functional because elected representatives possessed a visible role in local governance and experienced smoother coordination with administrative officials. Muhammad Zubair explained that the 2013 framework provided greater administrative space and that political support at provincial and district levels, particularly because the Chief Minister belonged to Nowshera, facilitated cooperation with the bureaucracy and enabled councils to exercise a degree of decision-making authority (Muhammad Zubair, personal communication, October 25, 2025).

Munsif Ali similarly stated that political will existed at both local and provincial levels during 2015–2019 and that councils received greater support. Inam Ali associated the period with stronger political backing and better fiscal support, while civil society respondent Ishtiaq Ahmad explained that the earlier three-tier structure, defined reporting arrangements, PMRU monitoring, and political facilitation from the provincial leadership produced a comparatively clearer administrative environment (Munsif Ali,

personal communication, October 25, 2025; Inam Ali, personal communication, November 5, 2025; Ishtiaq Ahmad, personal communication, November 4, 2025).

This period was not free from bureaucratic influence. Respondents acknowledged that provincial oversight, the role of the Deputy Commissioner, and staff-control limitations existed during 2015–2019. However, the thesis found that bureaucratic dominance was less severe because stronger political support facilitated smoother coordination between elected representatives and administrative officers. The significance of political will was therefore not that it eliminated administrative constraints, but that it created greater practical space for elected councils to operate within them.

The post-2021 period was described as more restrictive. Muhammad Zubair stated that changes in the legal framework, absence of funds, stronger bureaucratic control, and weaker political support significantly reduced the administrative functioning of local councils. He further observed that district bureaucracy rather than locally elected bodies increasingly exercised administrative authority and that political actors at district and provincial levels were unwilling to empower elected local bodies (Muhammad Zubair, personal communication, October 25, 2025).

Ishtiaq Ahmad explained that political will for decentralisation weakened after the 2021–2022 elections because provincial and local governments were not always politically aligned. In his assessment, this reduced administrative cooperation and increased bureaucratic control. He concluded that the success of decentralisation largely depends on the political will of provincial leadership and that the decline in administrative autonomy in the post-2021 period was closely connected with the weakening of that political will (Ishtiaq Ahmad, personal communication, November 4, 2025).

Political interference was also reflected in the involvement of MPAs and MNAs in local matters. Respondents stated that higher-level legislators influenced local priorities, development planning, and the behaviour of administrative officials. Informal directions to the bureaucracy or TMA were perceived as affecting cooperation with local representatives, particularly where party alignment differed. This pattern is consistent with the survey result that 74% of respondents perceived interference by provincial or national representatives in local administrative affairs (Muhammad Zubair, personal communication, October 25, 2025; Inam Ali, personal communication, November 5, 2025; Muhammad Junaid, personal communication, October 25, 2025).

Parallel institutional arrangements further narrowed local administrative space. Inam Ali expressed concern that development planning and prioritisation increasingly occurred through District Development Advisory Committee mechanisms rather than elected local councils. Adeel similarly described overlapping institutional structures involving TMAs, Assistant Commissioners, district administration, development authorities, and other bodies, which created jurisdictional conflict and weakened the independent role of elected local governments (Inam Ali, personal communication, November 5, 2025; Adeel, personal communication, November 6, 2025).

The MPA interviews provided both critical and justificatory perspectives. Zar Alam Khan argued that the abolition of the District Council was inappropriate and that practical administrative matters remained heavily controlled by the Deputy Commissioner and Assistant Commissioners. He further stated that political differences between provincial and local governments can make local councils suffer and argued that locally elected governments should be allowed to function within their institutional domain without unnecessary interference (Zar Alam Khan, personal communication, October 27, 2025). Mian Muhammad Umar, by contrast, explained that the 2019 reforms were intended to simplify administration, reduce overlapping authority, and improve oversight, and that the 2022 changes were designed to standardise procedures rather than deliberately reduce autonomy (Mian Muhammad Umar, personal communication, October 23, 2025).

These contrasting accounts reinforce the central finding of the thesis: administrative decentralisation cannot be understood only through formal legal provisions. Its effectiveness depends on the political

relationship between levels of government, bureaucratic cooperation, clarity of institutional roles, and the practical willingness of provincial authorities to allow elected local councils to exercise their assigned responsibilities. Where political support weakened, bureaucratic dominance and administrative dependence became more visible, and locally elected bodies lost the practical capacity to translate community priorities into action.

Conclusion

This study examined how political will influenced the fiscal and administrative autonomy of locally elected bodies in District Nowshera during 2013–2024. By reading the political and institutional developments analysed in Chapter Three together with the quantitative findings of Chapter Four and the qualitative evidence of Chapter Five, the study demonstrates that local government autonomy depended not simply on the existence of legislation or elected councils, but on the willingness of provincial political leadership to support devolution in practice.

The 2015–2019 tenure provides evidence of comparatively stronger political commitment to local government. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act, 2013 created a relatively broad devolution framework, while the political environment in District Nowshera provided additional support because the Chief Minister belonged to the district. Respondents associated this period with greater fiscal cooperation, more regular PFC transfers, visible development activity, smoother coordination with bureaucracy, and comparatively greater administrative space. Nevertheless, autonomy remained incomplete because local councils still depended on provincial funds, possessed limited own-source revenue powers, and operated under continuing provincial and bureaucratic oversight.

The post-2021 period shows a substantial contraction in practical autonomy. The changed political environment following the 2021–2022 local elections produced important opposition-led local power centres. In District Nowshera, political misalignment between provincial and local leadership coincided with non-release of PFC development funds, restricted access to development finance, increased bureaucratic control, reduced participation of elected representatives in important decisions, and weaker service-delivery capacity. The survey results strongly support this interpretation: 87% of respondents believed provincial political dynamics weakened local autonomy, 65% believed party affiliation influenced funds and institutional support, 74% reported exclusion from important decisions, 67% identified political rivalry as a constraint on development implementation, and 61% reported political interference from higher levels.

At the same time, the thesis records alternative explanations for some post-2021 difficulties. Provincial respondents pointed to economic constraints, COVID-19, delayed federal transfers, administrative pressures, and political transition as factors contributing to delayed or reduced fiscal support. These explanations show that the weakening of local autonomy cannot be attributed exclusively to deliberate partisan action. However, the combined quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrates that political support, political alignment, and provincial-local relations materially shaped how fiscal and administrative institutions operated in practice.

The findings strongly support the second-generation fiscal federalism perspective because political incentives and intergovernmental relations influenced fiscal outcomes. They also support Decentralisation Theory by demonstrating that successful decentralisation requires sustained political support, adequate resources, appropriate institutional structures, and administrative cooperation (Rondinelli et al., 1983; Weingast, 2007). The experience of District Nowshera therefore shows that constitutional and legislative guarantees alone are insufficient to protect local government autonomy when political commitment to decentralisation is inconsistent.

The central conclusion is that political will must be institutionalised rather than depend on personal proximity, party alignment, or temporary political circumstances. Local councils can function as

autonomous democratic institutions only when fiscal transfers are predictable and politically neutral, administrative responsibilities are clearly protected, elected representatives participate meaningfully in decision-making, and bureaucratic institutions support rather than displace local authority. Without these conditions, local governments may continue to exist formally while remaining fiscally dependent, administratively constrained, and unable to fulfil their democratic role at the grassroots level.

References

- Adeel (GIZ representative). (2025, November 6). Personal communication.
- Cheema, A., Khan, A. Q., & Myerson, R. B. (2014). Breaking the countercyclical pattern of local democracy in Pakistan. <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/pakdemoc.pdf>
- Dawood (Chairman, VC Dagai, Pabbi). (2025, October 28). Personal communication.
- Fazal Azeem (Chairman, VC Ayub Abad, Jahangira). (2025, December 26). Personal communication.
- Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. (2013). The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act, 2013 (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Act No. XXVIII of 2013).
- Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. (2019). The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act, 2019 (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Act No. XXV of 2019).
- Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. (2022). The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act, 2022 (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Act No. XXII of 2022).
- Ghayor Khattak (Tehsil Council Nazim, Pabbi). (2025, October 28). Personal communication.
- Haider, S. Z. (2019, January 28). The 18th Amendment and Article 140 of the Constitution. Pakistan Today. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2019/01/28/the-18th-amendment-and-article-140-of-the-constitution>
- Inam Ali (Chairman, VC Behram Kali, Nowshera). (2025, November 5). Personal communication.
- Imtiaz Ali (GIZ representative). (2025, November 4). Personal communication.
- International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (2015). Local government: Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan factsheet.
- Ishtiaq Ahmad (CDLD representative). (2025, November 4). Personal communication.
- Janjua, M. A. (2022, April). An analysis of KP Local Government Act, 2013 as amended in 2019. Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI). <https://www.cpd-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Analysis-of-KP-Local-Government-Act-2013-as-Amended-in-2019.pdf>
- Khan, A. (2014). Liberating local democracy from subservience to bureaucracy in Pakistan: Ramifications and recommendations. *IPRI Journal*, 14(2), 25–48.
- Khan, G. B., & Khan, S. (2024). Implementation of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa local government reforms in terms of revenue generation (2013–2022) in District Peshawar. *Migration Letters*, 21(3), 1664–1672.
- Khan, N. A., Rahman, A., & Gardazi, S. M. F. (2021). The autonomy and efficiency in local governance: A legislative appraisal of the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Local Government Act, 1990. *Journal of Politics and International Studies*, 6(4), 76–85.
- Laski, H. J. (1961). *A grammar of politics*. George Allen and Unwin.
- Malik, S. A. A., Khalid, A., & Rehan, M. (2025). Between manifestos and reality: Assessing Pakistan's local governance challenges and reform pathways. *Journal of Public Policy*

- Practitioners, 4(1), 113–151. <https://doi.org/10.32350/jppp.41.06>
- Mian Muhammad Umar (MPA, PK-88 Nowshera). (2025, October 23). Personal communication.
- Muhammad, A. (2004). *Local Government Finance, Some Political Aspects: A Case Study of Punjab*. Oxford University Press.
- Muhammad Junaid (Chairman, NC Nawan Kali, Nowshera). (2025, October 25). Personal communication.
- Muhammad Zubair (Chairman, VC Kotarpan, Nowshera). (2025, October 25). Personal communication.
- Munsif Ali (Chairman, VC Kandar, Nowshera). (2025, October 25). Personal communication.
- Musgrave, R. A. (1959). *The theory of public finance: A study in public economy*. McGraw-Hill.
- Naveed (Chairman, NC Eid Gah Akora Khattak-1). (2025, December 26). Personal communication.
- Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency. (2024). *Understanding local government: A citizen's guide to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's local government structure and processes*.
- Qadri, G. (n.d.). *The Pioneer's Paradox: Local governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Annex C: Local Governance Profile – Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)*. AwazCDS-Pakistan / Pakistan Development Alliance.
- Rafique, S., Yaseen, Z., & Muzaffar, M. (2023). Historical background of local government in Pakistan: An exploratory study. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 7(4), 352–363. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2023\(7-IV\)33](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2023(7-IV)33)
- Rasool, S. W., & Ali, B. (2022). An assessment of local government dynamics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: 2015 and 2022 elections. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 4(3), 1151–1161.
- Rizvi, S. M. Z. (1970). *A reader in basic democracies*. Pakistan Academy for Rural Development.
- Rondinelli, D. A., Nellis, J. R., & Cheema, G. S. (1983). *Decentralization in developing countries: A review of recent experience (World Bank Staff Working Paper No. 581)*. World Bank.
- Taimur Kamal (Chairman, VC Tarkha, Pabbi). (2025, October 28). Personal communication.
- Weingast, B. R. (2007). *Second-generation fiscal federalism: Implications for decentralized democratic governance and economic development*. Hoover Institution, Stanford University.
- Zar Alam Khan (MPA, PK-85 Nowshera). (2025, October 27). Personal communication.