Basic Democracies

**Basic Democracies** a local government system introduced during the Ayub regime in the early 1960s. General [ayub khan](http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Khan,_Field_Marshal_Mohammad_Ayub), President of Pakistan, introduced the concept of basic democracy under the Basic Democracies Order, 1959 having made an attempt to initiate a grass-root level democratic system. Of course, most of the political parties of East Pakistan had different ideas about his scheme, and considered it a bid to usurp power in the hands of Ayub Khan and other vested groups.

The system of Basic Democracies was initially a five-tier arrangement. They were: (i) union councils (rural areas), town and union committees (urban areas); (ii) thana councils (East Pakistan), tehsil councils (West Pakistan); (iii) district councils; (iv) divisional councils; (v) provincial development advisory council.

At the base of the system was the union council which consisted of a chairman and usually about 15 members. It had both elected and nominated members. Two-thirds of the members were elected representatives and one-third consisted of non-official members nominated by the government. However, the nomination was abolished by an amendment in 1962. The members of the council were elected by the people from their respective unions on the basis of universal adult franchise. The chairman of the council was elected by the members from amongst themselves. In a way, it was at par with the erstwhile union board with minor differences. The elected representatives of the union council were called basic democrats. The total number of such councils was 7300.

In the second tier was the thana council which consisted of ex-officio representative members, official and non-official members. The representative members were the chairmen of the union councils and town committees. The official members were the representatives of various nation-building departments of a thana and their number was fixed by the district magistrate of the concerned district. The total number of official members could not in any case exceed the number of non-official members. The council was headed by the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) who was the ex-officio chairman. In his absence the Circle Officer (development) would preside over the meetings of the thana council as ex-officio member. In case of West Pakistan, the thana was known as tehsil and it was presided over by a tehsilder. In all, there were 655 thanas and tehsils in Pakistan.

The third tier was the district council. It consisted of one chairman, official and non-official members. The number of members would not exceed 40. The chairmen of thana councils were its members, and other official members were drawn from district level officers of development departments and an equal number of non-official members. At least 50% the non-official members was drawn from amongst the chairmen of union councils and town committees. The district magistrate acted as chairman of the council while the vice-chairman was elected by the elected members of the council.

In absence of the chairman the vice-chairman had to perform such other functions assigned by the chairman. There were 74 district councils in Pakistan. The district council was the most important tier in the basic democracy system. It was the successor organisation to the district board. So far as the composition of the council was concerned, it regressed beyond its 1885 position when 25% members were nominated.

The fourth and the apex tier was the divisional council. The Divisional Commissioner was the ex-officio chairman of the council. It had both official and non-official (representative) members. The maximum number of members was 45. Official members consisted of the chairmen of district councils of the concerned division and representatives of development departments. The total number of divisional councils was sixteen.

Basic democracies specified a provincial development advisory council for each wing. Its composition followed the pattern of the divisional council except that only one-third of the appointed members had to be selected from union council chairmen. The council did not have any power. However, it was dropped with the introduction of provincial assemblies in both East and West Pakistan.

Of the five councils created by the Basic Democracies Order only the union and district councils had been given specific functions. The divisional and thana council performed mostly coordinative functions.The union council had been entrusted with a variety of functions such as agriculture, small industry, community development and increased food production in the union. It maintained law and order through the rural police and had been given judicial powers to try minor civil and criminal cases through its conciliation courts. The union councils were given the responsibility of planning and implementing rural public works programmes for construction of roads, bridges and culverts, irrigation channels and embankments. The union council was empowered to levy taxes, impose rates, tolls and fees. The most important feature of the basic democracy system was that it formed the national electoral college consisting of 80,000 members from East and West Pakistan for the elections of President, members of national assembly and of the provincial assemblies.

The thana/tehsil council was mostly a coordinative and supervisory body. All the activities of union councils and town committees falling within its jurisdiction were coordinated by it. All development plans prepared by the union councils and town committees were coordinated by the thana council including supervision of on-going schemes. It followed the directions of the district council and remained responsible to it.

The district council had been entrusted with three types of functions: compulsory, optional and coordinating. Some of the compulsory functions included construction of public roads, culverts, bridges, maintenance of primary schools, plantation and preservation of trees, regulation of public ferries, and improvement of public health. Optional functions included education, culture, socio-economic welfare, and public works. In addition, the district council was also given broad functions such as agriculture, industry, community development, promotion of national reconstruction and development of cooperatives. Coordination of all activities of local councils within the district was also a responsibility of the district council. The council was supposed to formulate schemes and projects taken by nation building departments and make suggestions for further improvement and development and recommend them to the divisional council and other concerned authorities. The fourth tier, the divisional council, was least important functionally. It was simply an advisory body at that level.

Apart from being the agent of local government, the basic democracies also performed political and electoral functions to legitimize the government through popular support and participation. In the referendum for presidential elections held on 14 February 1960 the basic democrats voted for Ayub Khan. The monopolisation of electoral rights by the basic democrats was strongly despised by the vast rural and urban masses, which led to mass upheaval against Ayub in 1969. As a political institution it not only failed to legitimize the regime, but also in fact lost its legitimacy after the fall of General Ayub in 1969. [Shamsur Rahman]

**Bibliography** Samuel P Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, New Haven, 1968; KB Sayeed, The Political System of Pakistan, Boston, London, 1967; Herbert Fieldman, Revolution in Pakistan: A Study of Martial Law Administration, London, 1967.