

## Reforming local government in Pakistan

*One year into the term of the new Pakistani government and promises to hold local government elections across the country have not fully materialised. Polling took place in Baluchistan in December 2013 but local elections scheduled to take place in Sindh and Punjab appear to have been deferred indefinitely. In this context, **Ali Cheema, Adnan Khan and Roger Myerson** analyse local democracy in Pakistan and recommend ways in which to strengthen the system.*

The history of Pakistan shows a paradoxically countercyclical pattern for local democracy. Three times since the creation of the south Asian nation, elected institutions of local democracy have been created by military regimes, and each time the subsequent civilian governments have either failed to revive elected local governments or replaced them with unelected administrators. Thus, although mainstream political parties promised local democracy in their election manifestos, the future existence of democratic local government in Pakistan is seriously in doubt.



*Image credit: flickr/Olaf Kellerhoff*

Supporters of democracy in Pakistan must understand this countercyclical pattern of local democracy to seek ways of escaping from it. Successful democracy depends on a vital relationship between democratic politics at the local and national levels. A commitment by civilian democratic regimes to functional elected local governments would strengthen the foundations of federal democracy in Pakistan. In a recent paper, [Breaking the Countercyclical Pattern of Local Democracy in Pakistan](#), we consider how this disconnection between political parties and local democracy evolved, and how the foundations of democracy in Pakistan could be strengthened by healing this rift.

### **Why has local democracy been associated only with military regimes?**

Elected local governments have helped military regimes to legitimise and strengthen their control over the state. To counter the popular support of democratic political parties, military regimes built an alternative base of political support by patronising a class of new locally elected politicians. Elected local officials could offer the non-representative central government a vital political connection to local constituencies throughout the nation. Local officials could communicate local concerns to the centre as they helped the non-representative centre to extend

its influence in local politics.

In all these local-government reforms, however, political parties have been consistently excluded from any role in sponsoring candidates for local elections. As a result of this rule, mainstream political parties have seen non-partisan local governments as an instrument of military regimes for creating a class of collaborative politicians to displace the parties' representatives at the local level.

In a democratic regime, it is very difficult to pass a new local-government act when the political parties' representatives in the national and provincial assemblies see elected officials of nonpartisan local government as competitors for power and patronage. Party manifestos might promise to reform local democracy, but the assemblies would find it more convenient to keep discussing plans for local government without implementing any.

### **The disconnection from local democracy has weakened national democracy**

In a strong democratic system, outstanding achievements in local government should open a path for local leaders to advance to higher political offices, but such paths are closed when mainstream parties are separated from local government. When local government is nonpartisan, political parties cannot enhance their reputations by sponsoring better local governance. Thus, democratic competition to improve local government is weakened, and barriers to entry are raised in provincial and federal politics.

The structure of political parties has been affected by their disjunction from democratic local government. Political parties in Pakistan are highly centralised, and their national and provincial leadership retains considerable control with regard to the nominations of legislative candidates and strategic decision-making.

### **Well-designed local government reforms can strengthen Pakistan's federal democracy**

A reformed local-government system that strengthens Pakistan's federal democracy must engage the mainstream political parties and give them a stake in supporting local democracy. Most importantly, by engaging the provincial and national parties, local democratic institutions should help the parties to develop a broader political base of active local supporters, whose energies should strengthen their party at all levels. The strength of a democratic political party must ultimately depend on the quality of its candidates. Well-designed local governments should serve as a primary source of candidates who can advance democratically to higher offices after first proving their ability to earn popular approval at the local level.

We believe local institutions could be designed better to meet these criteria. A vital role for parties in local elections can be assured by electing local councils according to a list system of proportional representation, in which voters choose among competing party lists. But if voters only choose among party lists that were formed by party leaders, then local elections will do nothing to promote the political advancement of individual candidates who achieve greater popular approval.

To achieve this function, voters' ballots in local elections should also include some indications of approval or disapproval for individual candidates. Such votes for individual candidates can be incorporated into a party-list system of proportional representation by using what is called an "open list."

Letting local councils at each level elect their own executive mayor or nazim would give effective responsibility for local government to a broadly representative group of local leaders, which would be consistent with the systems of parliamentary responsibility that are already constitutionally mandated in government at the provincial and national levels in Pakistan

Established leaders in the national and provincial governments might naturally have concerns about elected local officials becoming future competitors for power. Any reform that enhances democratic competition is bound to raise such concerns. But these concerns should be substantially assuaged when candidates for local elections are nominated by the parties that have representation in the national and provincial assemblies.

Credible commitment to effective local democracy will require protection for local governments against selective politically-motivated interference in their domain by higher tiers of government. There is always a risk that

provincial and national politicians may be tempted to use the power of the higher tiers of government to undermine local leaders who are seen as potential political rivals. So it may be important to provide some constitutional protection for local governments or independent judicial review of such actions against them.

Click [here](#) for the complete article, “Breaking the Countercyclical Pattern of Local Democracy in Pakistan.”

### **About the Authors**

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