

Local elections: A driving force for local democracy?

The democratization of political systems in many developing countries has often been triggered by urban protest movements. The ousting of unpopular autocrats are key moments in these transition processes. However, major time lags occur in adopting legislation that establishes elected bodies at regional or local level too. In this context, local councils face numerous challenges. In many countries, they must first identify their role and secure their position.

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In most regions of the world, the election of local representative assemblies under municipal charters is now an accepted feature of political life. Local councils and committees are elected even in the Arab Peninsula, whose authoritarian regimes deny the general public any opportunity for political participation at national level.

However, the mere fact that local elections are held in a country does not mean that the population as a whole can take part in them. Often, only the urban areas, which fulfil specific criteria relating to population size, geographical concentration etc., have elected councils, while rural communities are governed by appointed officials (as in Mozambique). In other cases, district councils are elected which cover vast areas and are therefore just as remote from the population as the national parliament.

Elected councils – genuine decision-making bodies?

The responsibilities of elected municipal and local councils are generally defined by law; in some cases, they are set forth in constitutional texts. In many countries, the councils elect the mayor or the head

of the executive from among their members and, as collegiate bodies, exercise control over the administration that reports to them. Their responsibilities can range from waste disposal, street lighting and providing a power and water supply to education, healthcare and policing.

In very poor countries in particular, the council's responsibilities also include a wide range of development policy tasks, such as poverty reduction. We should not be misled, however, by this impressive catalogue of competencies. Local councils are powerless unless they are equipped with the requisite financial and human resources. Some governments use the transfer of wide-ranging powers to local authorities primarily to ease the burden on central government, without safeguarding the efficient provision of services to citizens at local level.

Central government subsidies are often allocated through a tendering process; as a result, it is not necessarily the neediest

Preparing for local elections in Mali, May 2004.



Photo: Beke

communities but those with the best political connections or most professional administrations that are successful in securing funding.

The role of a local politician – a thankless task

Against this background, many local politicians have a thankless task. They often have to spend a great deal of time and money on getting elected. They are usually unpaid, merely receiving a small expense allowance (and in some cases, not even that), although they are responsible for deliberating complex technical issues and budgetary matters.

In some cases, the administrative service which reports to them is so small that it is completely ineffectual in political terms; elsewhere, the administration is not even formally accountable to the local council. In other instances, the administrative apparatus is so large and well-trained that the politicians, for whom politics is a spare-time activity, are unable to exercise any control over its accumulated expertise.

Many newly elected local councils also find it hard to comprehend why they have no direct access to the administration and why the law stipulates that they may only communicate with local government officers through the head of the administration. Many local councils therefore find that their hands are tied, but nevertheless, the local community quickly concludes that they, too, are corrupt since they are, after all, part of the government apparatus. And there is, undoubtedly, some corruption at local level. Nonetheless, this inevitably takes place on a much smaller scale than at national level, where ministries, paragonovernmental agencies and «supervisory authorities» control the major sources of funding.

How well-educated must a local office-holder be?

In many countries, finding candidates to stand for elected office presents no problems as even the most modest expense allowance offers a substantial incentive. For the parties, however, finding suitable candidates who are genuinely literate and numerate in the official language poses a major problem. On the one hand, the principle of democratic representation dictates that the pool of potential candidates, male and female, should not be restricted too much from the outset. On the other, specific skills are required if councils are to work effectively. Respected figures in the local community often do

not meet the formal requirements which, for good reason, are defined in law.

Unfortunately, the legislative provisions are rarely framed in such a context-specific way that they distinguish between the formal attributes required to govern a major city, on the one hand, and a local community, on the other. As a result, councils often bypass the legal requirements, such as the stipulation that meetings must be conducted and recorded in the official language. The few political experts in the council generally join together and form executive committees which debate and adopt decisions on all the key issues, with the remaining council members merely turning up for the monthly or quarterly council meetings. The many training programmes offered within the framework of development cooperation are of only limited assistance here.

Parties, voters' associations and independent candidates

But who do the elected councils really represent? Are they elected because the individuals concerned have proven their worth in the service of the local community? Or are they elected because they stand for specific political ideas? Or because they have been nominated by a political party? The extent to which local politics are dominated by political parties depends both on the country's political traditions and on its electoral law. In majority voting systems, the local area is divided into constituencies and members are elected, on the basis of their personal qualifications, one for each constituency, whereas under proportional representation, party lists of candidates are drawn up and compete for election. Under this system, there is less likelihood of inde-



Photo: Hornbein

pendent candidates being elected to a local council. On the other hand, proportional representation does allow the parties to reserve places on the party lists for technical experts or women, thus safeguarding their election. In a majority voting system, these groups of candidates would stand little chance of securing a local council seat since the election would be decided on the basis of the candidate's personality.

Wherever different ethnic groups live together within communities, majority voting systems also tend to increase ethnic polarization, as only one candidate (who

In secret elections, ballot boxes must be properly sealed.

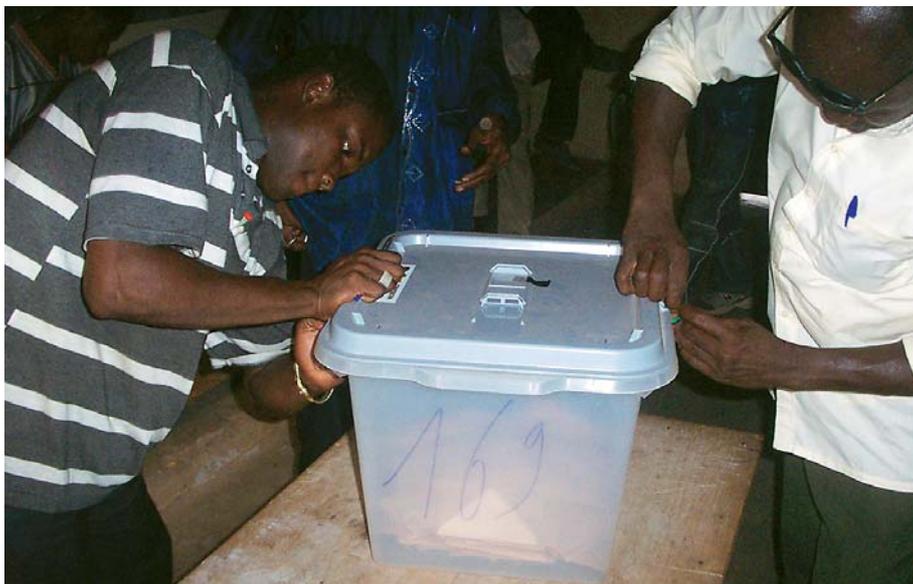


Photo: Betke



Local elections may be an effective instrument to achieve political change. As the principles of free, secret and fair elections gain ground, the traditional forces are becoming ever more alarmed by the ballot-box's likely verdict.

1990s as the involvement of target groups in DC projects and programmes. The political participation of these target groups in public decision-making processes and their role in building a civil society were viewed as less relevant, especially given that in many countries under authoritarian governments, opportunities for participation did not exist or merely consisted of public acclamation rituals. Based on a critical view of the state and its elite in the development process, promoting participation therefore tended to centre more on the involvement of stakeholders in development projects and programmes than on institutionalizing formal civil and political rights in electoral processes.

Do local elections lead to more democracy in local politics?

comes from a specific ethnic group) can ever be elected in each constituency. On the other hand, the champions of the majority voting system point to the stronger link between voters and their elected representative. Interestingly, we are also increasingly encountering independent local voters' associations in many countries comprising highly disparate groups: on the one hand, genuinely non-partisan residents' groups who focus on local and often highly specific interests, and, on the other, party members who have failed in their bid to be selected for a party list.

Local councils – «Schools for democracy»?

In Germany, politicians often begin their careers in local politics, but this is not necessarily the case in the developing countries. It is only in the major cities that elected politicians can genuinely acquire the management experience that qualifies them, in the eyes of the party leadership, for higher office. And if the formal entry qualifications (such as school-leaving certificates) are lower at local level, this is a further obstacle to local politicians' political advancement to national level. In some countries, the party headquarters largely control politics at local level too. Personnel decisions – such as the appointment of mayors – are thus adopted in the capital, not by the local grassroots party. Members of the national parliaments whose constituencies include local communities and municipalities also involve themselves, to a substantial extent, in local politics because they have more direct access to ministries and

donor organizations in the capital. If local elections are held at the same time as national elections, national issues generally dominate the local agenda as well. However, if local elections are held at a different time, the turn-out tends to be very low – countering the notion that local councils serve as «schools for democracy».

Representation and participation

Besides elections, democracy also involves other forms of participation. Active participation in social and political decision-making, such as the planning of local infrastructural projects and services, should be possible and meaningful, especially at local level. According to democratic theory, there is a clear correlation between a community's size and the nature of its democratic constitution. In smaller and more compact political communities, political participation is easier, the relationship between office-holders and citizens is more intense, and political decisions are more transparent and accountable. Against this background, elections at local level should be less significant than at national level, where direct political participation is associated with much higher costs. These theoretical hypotheses are often used to justify the decentralization process, where the aim is not only to enhance the efficiency of development processes but also to encourage participation in shaping them. Within the framework of development cooperation (DC), participation was mainly understood until the

Fortunately the notion of the «citizen» and thus the original meaning of participation are being rediscovered in development theory. While the participation of civil society in local decision-making processes is important (and much of the work undertaken in development policy rightly starts from here), local elections may be a more effective instrument by which to achieve political change. As the principles of free, secret and fair elections increasingly gain ground, the traditional forces are becoming ever more alarmed by the ballot-box's likely verdict.

We should not turn a blind eye to the nepotism and vote-rigging which take place before and during local elections. Nor should we expect newly elected politicians to resist the temptation to try and extend their power beyond what is permissible. But it would be equally naive to assume that the participation processes available under direct democracy offer more immunity to these phenomena, which after all are a permanent feature of our own European electoral histories as well. Local elections do not simply reproduce the same elitist monopolies. In many countries, they give women far better access to political decision-making than all the informal development committees and planning committees set up at district or municipal level.

In many countries, traditional leaders have read the writing on the wall and understand that most of their basic powers (such as control of land) are progressively transferring to elected politicians who can also be voted out of office. Their last-ditch efforts to retain their hold on power are clear proof that the introduction of local elections is paving the way, slowly but surely, towards effective democratization.