

# LOCAL FOUNDATIONS FOR STRONG DEMOCRACY IN PAKISTAN<sup>1</sup>

by Roger Myerson, University of Chicago

## **Introduction**

Amid the great forces pressing Pakistan today, local democracy may seem a small matter. Local democracy was introduced only a few years ago, under General Pervez Musharraf's rule, for small local unions with an average population of under 30,000. But the nature of democratic politics can be profoundly changed when the number of popularly elected representatives is increased by almost 80,000 members of local union councils, compared to about 1200 members of national and provincial assemblies. Although local democracy was introduced by a military ruler for his own purposes and now might seem inconvenient for many politicians at higher levels of government, local democracy can provide an essential foundation for a strong democratic system in Pakistan. To see how, let us first consider the vital relationship between local and national politics, and then we can analyze alternative systems of local elections to see how they could strengthen the national democratic system.

## **The vital relationship between local democracy and national politics**

Just as economic competition should motivate suppliers to offer better values in the market, so democratic competition in the political arena should motivate political leaders to promise better public services and more efficient government. In a centralized unitary democracy, however, this competitive incentive could fail if no politicians had reputations for good governance. Voters may re-elect a known corrupt leader when they expect that other candidates would be just as corrupt or worse. Successful democracy requires many alternative candidates who also have established good reputations for using public resources responsibly to serve the voters.

Political decentralization creates autonomous opportunities for more politicians to begin building such reputations. If voters expected corrupt wasteful government at all levels, then a local leader who provides better public service could become a serious candidate for higher

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been profoundly influenced and improved by comments and suggestions from Adnan Khan, Ali Cheema, and Asim Khwaja. The author gratefully acknowledges their help but accepts all responsibility for any errors that remain. A broader analysis of Pakistan's constitution is also available at <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/lahore.pdf>

office. Thus, local democracy can make national democracy more competitive, by increasing the national supply of individuals who have good reputations for using public resources responsibly. Economists understand that the ability of suppliers to take exploitative profits from a market depends on barriers against the entry of new competitors. So in democratic competition, decentralized local democracy reduces barriers against the entry of new political competitors, by distributing opportunities for thousands of local leaders to prove their governing ability.

Many public services, from law enforcement to education, may benefit from supervision by locally elected officials. For local democracy to reduce entry barriers into provincial and national politics, however, it is only essential that the scope of authority for local governments should be substantial enough that a record of successful leadership in local government can demonstrate qualifications for public service at higher levels of government.

When local leaders are seen as potential contenders for higher office, national or provincial leaders could be tempted to try to control local politics by threats of budgetary reductions or administrative actions against local governments with rival political leadership. But the political benefits of local democracy depend on voters having the freedom to entrust local government to local leaders who could indeed become future competitors for higher leadership. So it is important that the scope of administrative and budgetary authority for local governments should be defined and protected by constitutional law. Funding of local governments must be determined by a revenue distribution rule that is transparently verifiable, so that deviations from this rule can be publicly scrutinized for any indication of local budgets being manipulated to influence local politics. Agents of higher levels of government should not directly interfere in the administrative work of local governments within their mandated domains. As a general principle, legal actions by the national or provincial governments against a local government should require some independent sanction, either from an independent judiciary or from the local voters.

Even within a democratic political party, top leaders may sometimes prefer to control advancement for party activists on the basis of their loyalty to the top leadership, rather than on the basis of their independent reputations for public service, as such reputations can become the basis for contesting leadership of the party. (This centralizing tendency has been called the "iron

law of oligarchy."<sup>2</sup>) But a party's competitive strength depends on its local agents' efforts to win popular support. Incentives for such local political work are strengthened when local agents' political advancement depends on their success in gaining local voters' trust and approval. Thus, when such approval is measured in local elections, local democracy can help a political party to decentralize in a way that (even if it sometimes seems against the interests of top leadership) makes the whole party stronger and more competitive.

Just as local democracy can help make national politics more competitive, so national democracy can also help make local politics more competitive, when national parties have the right to sponsor alternative candidates in local elections. Allowing the major national parties to nominate candidates in local elections can give these parties a vital interest in supporting the institutions of local democracy and in making sure that local elections are fair. Any democratic national party must maintain a reputation for defending its candidates' rights to compete in elections, and electoral abuse by its own people could tarnish a party's reputation. The participation of major parties can make local democracy more competitive, when rival parties sponsor challengers to established local leaders. Local bosses should know that, if they fail to provide good public service, they could face serious challengers supported by a rival national party. Thus, rules that prevent parties from sponsoring candidates in local elections (and in Tribal Areas) should be recognized as weakening local democracy.

Against violent insurgents, some restrictions on nomination to local elections may be necessary, to prevent elections from being stolen by candidates who use force to threaten voters. But such restrictions should not be used to exclude candidates of national democratic parties. A good rule is that any party which is endorsed by at least some minimal number of members of the National Assembly should be able to nominate candidates in all elections in all areas. To maintain a flexible party system that can provide a broadly inclusive range of democratic alternatives, members of the National Assembly should be free to endorse new parties.<sup>3</sup>

A violent insurgency can make local elections more difficult and dangerous, but local democracy can help build a stronger political system, which is essential for defeating

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of Oligarchic Tendencies in Modern Democracy* (NY: Hearst, 1915).

<sup>3</sup> Rules that restrict MNAs' ability to change party affiliation, as in Article 63A of Pakistan's Constitution, can be barriers against the entry of new parties, and thus weaken democratic competition, if they prevent MNAs from endorsing new parties for upcoming elections.

antidemocratic insurgents. Insurgents can be defeated only when the political authority of the government is restored throughout the nation, and military operations against insurgents can succeed only by contributing to this political goal. Indeed, a classic study of counterinsurgency warfare summarized its essential mission in one sentence: "Build a political machine from the population upward."<sup>4</sup> With effective local democracy, party networks extending into all communities can become such a political machine. Successful counterinsurgency requires such networks of local leaders who can establish the government's authority in all communities.

Denying legal and political rights to people in Tribal Areas and excluding national political parties from these areas left a narrow tribal leadership that was vulnerable to militant insurgents. Since 2001, efforts in Afghanistan to build a centralized democratic government without political parties have also been disastrously unsuccessful. Parties are social networks that can distribute power and privilege to their active members, but such networks are needed to mobilize agents who have stakes in sustaining democracy. Military operations can be effective for counterinsurgency only in cooperation with local leaders of democratic political parties.

In the long run, violent insurgencies can be fueled by expectations that some groups will be effectively excluded from political power. When local democracy opens more opportunities for entry into national politics, such fears of exclusion can be reduced.

### **Reforming local elections for stronger democracy**

The strength of local democracy as a foundation for national democracy can depend on the detailed structure of local political institutions. So it is worth carefully considering the democratic structure of the local government and how it might be reformed.

Under Pakistan's local government ordinance, over 6000 local union councils have been elected throughout the country. These union councils have been popularly elected by a voting rule called single non-transferable vote or SNTV. SNTV is a kind of multi-seat proportional representation system, but each voter must cast a ballot that endorses one single candidate. There is no option to vote for any party list; each voter must name one candidate among those available for the seats. Historically, SNTV was introduced in Japan in 1900 by oligarchic rulers who had an interest in keeping democracy weak. We should understand how it can do this.

Under Pakistan's original local-election system from 2000, for example, a voter could

---

<sup>4</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (Praeger, 1964), page 136.

cast one vote for a candidate to fill the 8 general unreserved seats on the council, plus separate votes for several other categories of reserved seats for women, minorities, and disadvantaged groups. To see the problems with SNTV, imagine that two factions are competing to control the council, and each has nominated enough candidates to take a majority of the council. Suppose that one faction is preferred by a majority of voters, but this faction has not organized its supporters or directed them how to vote. Without organizational discipline, it could easily happen that most of this faction's supporters might give their general-seat votes to the faction's most popular candidate. Then the other faction could win all the other general seats, even with support from less than half of the voters, by organizing its supporters into 7 equal-sized subgroups and directing each group to cast its ballots for one of 7 candidates for the faction. Such a victory for the minority faction would depend on its leaders knowing accurately how many supporters they have in each subgroup, and on these supporters being ready to obey their leaders' directions about how to vote.

Thus, in the contest for power, SNTV favors factions that have supporters who will obey their leaders' coordinating directives about how to vote. So SNTV tends to reinforce the power of corporate or tribal leaders who exercise authority in patron-client relationships. Democratic elections are supposed to be opportunities for people to choose their leaders, but this basic function of democracy is undermined when SNTV compels voting blocs to identify their coordinating leadership before the election.

These coordination problems under SNTV become more severe when the number of seats being allocated is larger. So the problems of SNTV may have significantly contributed to the decision in 2005 to decrease the size of the local union councils from 21 to 13.

This bias against less-organized groups of voters can be eliminated by changing to a proportional representation system in which people vote for an entire party list, so that the list that is endorsed by the most voters will always get the most seats. But if people can only vote for a party list, then there is no electoral competition between members of the same party list (as the party's leadership decides how the party's seats are allocated among its listed candidates). For intra-party democracy, it may be better to use an electoral system in which people can vote both for a party and for individual candidates within the party's list. Under such an *open-list* proportional-representation system, seats are allocated to each party in proportion to the total number of voters who support it, and then the seats of each party are given to those candidates in

its list who get the most individual votes.

In the open-list proportional-representation system that is used in Brazil, for example, a voter must name one candidate on one party's list. So the Brazilian system looks very similar to SNTV, in that each voter expresses a preference for just one individual candidate. But in the Brazilian open-list system, a party's supporters can make independent uncoordinated choices among the candidates in the party's list without affecting the total number of seats that the party gets. So the Brazilian open-list system seems a clear improvement over the single non-transferable vote system that has been used in Pakistan's local-council elections (and in Afghanistan's national-assembly elections). When a voter can support only one individual politician, however, the voter becomes dependent on this politician to represent the voter's interests. Thus, like SNTV, the Brazilian rule of voting for only one individual candidate can reinforce patron-client relationships of political dependency.

The unique-dependency problem can be solved by allowing each voter to express approval for any number of candidates in the party list that he supports. Under such an approval-voting open-list system, after each party gets seats in proportion to the number of voters who support it, then the party's seats are allocated to its candidates who were approved by the largest numbers of party supporters. In contrast to the Brazilian single-vote system, which encourages each candidate to cultivate a small bloc of voters who look exclusively to him for representation, this approval-voting system encourages all candidates in a party list to cultivate good reputations for representing all of their party's supporters. Thus, allowing voters to approve as many candidates as they want in their chosen party list can help reduce narrow dependency on patron-client relationships.

I have argued that competitive local democracy can provide the basis for strengthening national political parties. Any political party must rely on the efforts of its local agents to build popular support in their communities, and these local agents must be motivated by an understanding that their long-term career rewards in the party will depend on some effective measure of their service. Approval-voting open-list elections can provide a particularly effective way for a party to measure the breadth of support that each of its local candidates has helped to bring to the party.

We have focused on local council elections because they can provide the primary route for thousands of local leaders to enter democratic politics, thus lowering political entry barriers

and strengthening the entire democratic system. The significance of these local councils has been reduced, however, by the current system of giving executive authority to a local union nazim (or mayor) who is separately elected (in a joint ticket with the assistant naib nazim). When one local official's election matters so much more than all the others, the basis of local democracy becomes narrower. So to strengthen the local base of democracy, it may be better to give local councils the power to select their local nazim, instead of having nazims separately elected. That is, the arguments for parliamentary democracy should be applied not only to national and provincial governments but also to local governments at all levels, including the local union governments as well as the larger units of local government at the tehsil and district levels.

At the district level of government, under the current rules, the district council is formed by the nazims of all local unions within the district, plus a small number of other representatives elected by the union councilors. This system of constituting district governments from union governments seems well designed to encourage cooperation between the different levels of local government. Certainly, a district nazim should have a strong incentive to maintain cooperative relationships with the local union nazims when they are members of the district council that elects him.

But to provide a way of identifying popular local leaders in larger districts, a district council should also include some representatives who are elected at large by the voters of the whole district, using the approval-voting open-list proportional representation system. With an average of about 60 union nazims in a district, about 15 at-large representatives might be appropriate. Even if these at-large representatives constituted only 20% of the district council, they could make a vital contribution to district politics, as representatives with broad approval from voters throughout the district. It would be natural to suggest that the district nazim should be chosen by the district council from among these at-large representatives. Then the position of at-large representative in a district council could become an important step in the ladder of democratic advancement (between local union councils and provincial assemblies) for politicians who earn the trust of voters in the district.

## **Conclusions**

Democracy in Pakistan faces formidable challenges. Intervals of military rule have

ended with recognition that effective stable government must be based on civilian political organizations that are widely trusted by the voters. Now many areas of Pakistan are threatened by violent guerrilla forces, and such insurgencies can be defeated only by effective cooperation between national military forces and local political leaders who are trusted by their communities. The nation urgently needs its political parties to develop broad networks of national and local leaders who have earned the trust of voters throughout the nation.

Successful democracy requires a flexible system of strong competitive parties and a plentiful supply of candidates who have good reputations for responsible public service. I have suggested electing local councils by a system of open-list proportional representation with approval voting, as a mechanism for inducing parties to strengthen their base of local democratic leadership in all communities. Such local democratic leadership should become 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. Pakistan's federal structure can be its greatest asset for building a strong democracy, when provincial and local governments are structured to reduce entry barriers into politics and to develop the nation's supply of responsible democratic leadership.

AUTHOR'S ADDRESS:

Roger Myerson, Economics Department, University of Chicago, 1126 East 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637.

Phone: 1-773-834-9071. Fax: 1-773-702-8490. Email: [myerson@uchicago.edu](mailto:myerson@uchicago.edu)

Web site: <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/>

This paper: <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/paklocal.pdf>

[current version: July 7, 2009]

*Epilogue:* Shortly after this paper was written, Prime Minister Gilani announced plans to dissolve the system of democratic local government in Pakistan. As this critical event was barely noticed in the international press, I include links to news articles (through July 20) from journalists in Pakistan. Their views of this action are generally very similar to those in this essay.

[http://www.thenews.com.pk/top\\_story\\_detail.asp?Id=23170](http://www.thenews.com.pk/top_story_detail.asp?Id=23170)

<http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/12-gilani+says+local+govts+illegal+unconstitutional--bi-04>

[http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily\\_detail.asp?id=187238](http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=187238)

[http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily\\_detail.asp?id=187776](http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=187776)

[http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily\\_detail.asp?id=187751](http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=187751)

[http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily\\_detail.asp?id=187884](http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=187884)

<http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/columnists/i-a-rehman-local-government-blues-679>

[http://www.thenews.com.pk/editorial\\_detail.asp?id=129845](http://www.thenews.com.pk/editorial_detail.asp?id=129845)

[http://www.thenews.com.pk/editorial\\_detail.asp?id=165349](http://www.thenews.com.pk/editorial_detail.asp?id=165349)