



THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM IN AZAD JAMMU & KASHMIR:

BACKGROUND, EVALUATION AND THE WAY FORWARD

Dr. Waqas Ali

September 2020



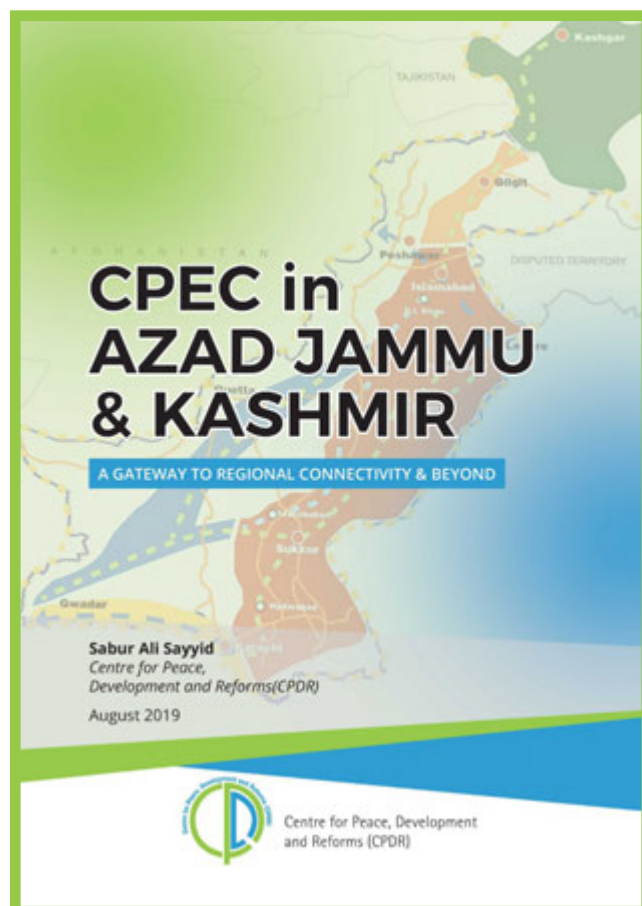
Centre for Peace, Development and Reforms (CPDR)



Tales of Separation and Reunion



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CPEC in AZAD JAMMU & KASHMIR

A GATEWAY TO REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY & BEYOND

Sabur Ali Sayyid
Centre for Peace,
Development and Reforms (CPDR)
August 2019



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The Local Government System in Azad Jammu & Kashmir
Background, Evaluation and the Way Forward
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The Centre for Peace, Development and Reforms (CPDR) is a nongovernmental, nonprofit and nonpartisan research, training and advocacy organization dedicated to promoting peace, development and reforms through dialogue and reconciliation.

Founded in 2010, the CDPR is registered with the Government under the Societies Act 1860 (Act XXI of 1860), having specified Memorandum of Association.



Our Vision

Promoting and encouraging peace and development at all levels through dialogue, reconciliation and reforms.

Our Mission

Strengthening civil society to ensure transparent and participatory governance through peaceful interaction between stakeholders and government and to propose necessary reforms for peace and development. Promoting accountability, cultivating civic culture, values of freedom, tolerance, economic development and democracy. Providing an effective platform for conflict resolution with special reference to the divided State of Jammu and Kashmir.

Our Objectives

- ★ Empowering civil society; promoting peace, participatory governance, transparency and reforms through dialogue and reconciliation.
- ★ Supporting democratic values, accountability, and human rights while striving for economic development and social justice.
- ★ Promoting ethical values, civic culture, and tolerance and striving to ensure that due attention to the marginalised and vulnerable sections of the society.
- ★ Providing an effective platform for conflict resolution with special reference to the State of Jammu and Kashmir.

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BACKGROUND

In the modern world, the elected local government system is essential not only for fiscal decentralization but also for political transformation. Local bodies have dual role which includes promoting democratic process at the grassroots level and ensuring service delivery to the public. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), local governments are important for policy making process, catalysts of change and better positioned to link the global goals with the local communities.¹

Locally empowered communities are important to promote the conditions for stability, peace and development. In his pioneering work, Lederach stresses the significance of local people and their culture for sustaining peace in the long run. He believes that citizen-based peace making should be recognized as a principal component in peace-building efforts.²

According to Dr. Kenneth Bush,³ important characteristics of local government significant in conflict resolution include, legitimate leadership and close working relation with communities, participatory governance and strengthening public participation for peace-building. He further states that the local government facilitates and encourag-

es the participation of various stakeholders in promoting and supporting community-based peace initiatives and the optimization of their positive peace-building impacts. This also improves their conflict management capacities which include identifying peace-building challenges, restructuring themselves to respond to peace-building challenges and opportunities. Realizing the importance of domestic peace, former United Nations (UN) Secretary General Kofi Annan emphasized the link between reformed systems of governance which are responsive to local needs.⁴ There is sufficient academic evidence proving that the local governance and local capacity are increasingly used in peace building discourse for long term peace and development. Other than that, institutions like the United Nations (UN) consider local governance as a vital means and foundation for developing the state society compact and conflict prevention⁵ while the Department of International Development (DFID) and World Bank believe it to be useful in building bridges between society and the state, and fostering dialogue between citizens and their government representatives.⁶

¹ The Sustainable Development Goals: What Local Governments Need to Know; UNDP, retrieved from https://www.ua.undp.org/content/ukraine/en/home/library/human_development/sdgs-local-governments.html

² Lederach, J. P. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1997.

³ Building Capacity for Peace and Unity "The Role of Local Government in Peace building

⁴ United Nations. *No Exit without Strategy: Security Council Decision-making and the Closure or Transition of United Nations Peace keeping Operations*. 2001. <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/PKO%20S%202001%20394.pdf>

⁵ United Nations. *Peace Dividends and Beyond: Contributions of Administrative and Social Services to Peacebuilding*. 2012. http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pbso/pdf/peace_dividends.pdf.

⁶ World Bank. *The State- and Peacebuilding Fund: Addressing the Unique Challenges of Fragility and Conflict*. Washington, DC: World Bank 2011. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTLICUS/Resources/511777-1240930480694/OPFCF_fragility-brochure-final-150.pdf.

Introduction

The local government structures which have the capacity of offering spaces for leadership, building trust, and developing political and conflict resolution skills in young people have remained dysfunctional in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K) since 1996. These structures can address issues of marginalization by promoting transparent and equitable allocation of resources among groups. A party-based local government system can also serve as a catalyst to improve political entities, reduce social divisions and promote the culture of finding democratic solutions to various issues at multiple social levels. Over time, the absence of democratic structures in AJ&K has given birth to a new set of informal structures developed around exclusive issues and identities such as those related to ethnicities and castes which may be detrimental to the social and political fabric of the society in the long run. People with less access to the Members Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in AJ&K, resort to different means to solve local developmental issues which sometimes necessitate seeking help from unelected bureaucratic structures at district levels. These bureaucratic structures generally lack the ability to understand the issues close to the people's hearts and are not accountable to local people either, as the elected local bodies' members.

AJ&K, a politically vibrant territory which was established in 1947, has witnessed various forms of governance, including presidential and parliamentary systems, along with local government systems at different points in history.

A state, consisting primarily of a politically active youth population,⁷ requires an extensive engagement strategy offering young people useful platforms to articulate their visions and aspirations, and enabling them to play leadership roles in society. The young people surveyed during this research want to invest their energies and potential for the betterment of their societies. Local government is one of the major platforms that can enable them to play a more constructive and vibrant role as key actors in their respective settings.

A decentralized governance mechanism can be hugely beneficial for the people of AJ&K as it creates platforms which have the ability to respond to crises at local and national levels, prevent social exclusion, and offer incentives to engage with disgruntled voices. Besides increasing the state's legitimacy, it can enhance service delivery, broaden gender-balanced participation and improve national stability. AJ&K, despite its large young population, offers less political space and leadership roles to young people for various reasons including some major governance issues.

⁷ P&D, Government of AJ&K Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Year Book 2019 retrieved from <https://www.pndajk.gov.pk/uploadfiles/downloads/AJ&K%20Statistical%20Year%20Book%202019.pdf>

This report focuses primarily on identifying the challenges in the inclusion of young people in political processes due to the absence of local government system. It aims at exploring and identifying major issues and challenges in creating an empowered and sustainable local government system by ensuring youth empowerment. It documents cross-party perspectives and the opinions of civil society on the local government sys-

tem which will be helpful to generate a wider debate regarding the restoration of an empowered and inclusive local government in the region in future.

Finally, the report offers a set of recommendations originating from the discussions at the grassroots to the conversations made in the policy-making circles for stimulating a fruitful debate on the subject.

Methodology

The report was prepared by following the Participatory Action Research framework through extensive discussions, focus group discussions and interviews; involving 500 young people aged between 18-35 years. Around 10 face-to-face interviews were carried out with the heads of various political parties and other leaders belonging to the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference (AJKMC), Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). In addition, 20 face-to-face interviews were carried out with Ex-Councilors, Ex-Chairmen district councils, civil society representatives, lawyers, media personnel and academicians. A small perception survey was also carried out from 400 young people on issues and challenges to restoration of local government and dividends of restored local government system in AJ&K.

LOCAL BODIES IN AJ&K:

Evolution to Dissolution

The local government system was introduced in AJ&K under the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Basic Democracies Act, 1960 and the governance system was consequently devolved to the grassroots level via local councils. The councils comprised of Union Councils, Town Committees, Tehsil Councils and District Councils. However, it was also ensured under this new system that not more than half of the total number of Councils came through nomination alone. Local bodies soon attained an overriding importance as the power to elect the President of the State, previously enjoyed solely by the All Jammu & Kashmir Muslim Conference (AJ&KMC), was transferred to the Electoral College. This comprised of around 2,200 members elected at the district level. People who were elected through the local government system (BD system) formed the Electoral College to elect the President of AJ&K. The same Electoral College was responsible for electing the 12-member State Council which formed the government of AJ&K at the state level.⁸

In the subsequent years, a number of amendments were introduced in the local government system. Some of the changes aimed at making it more democratic and responsive while others made it more subservient to different authorities. The Azad Jammu and Kashmir Basic Democracies Act 1964 (Amendment), for example, was introduced to lay down the formula of no-confi-

dence motion against the heads of different councils. In the same year, the position of "Chief Adviser" was created who was directly answerable to his appointing authority, the Federal Government of Pakistan, and enjoyed sweeping powers in AJ&K.⁹

There was a gradual evolution of the political process in AJ&K. Over the period of time, gradual constitutional and political development had a varied impact on the local bodies system. For example, a new Act was introduced in 1968 which was massively resisted by the political parties, which according to them was undemocratic but it had retained the functional local government system, as the members of State Councils were to be elected by the elected people at district level.

Through an Act in 1970, a democratic setup was introduced under the Presidential system on the basis of adult franchise for four years. The people of AJ&K and the refugees of Jammu and Kashmir settled in Pakistan elected the Legislative Assembly as well as the President of Azad Jammu and Kashmir for the first time. The Assembly consisted of 24 members and one co-opted lady member. The new set up totally sidelined the local government system in AJ&K. This was analogous to the disenfranchisement of a large section of population. While the structures of local government in AJ&K were taking roots, the system was disempowered.

⁸ History of Kashmir (combined) by Syed Mahmood Azad, New edition published in 2016

⁹ The Azad Jammu and Kashmir Laws Code Volume II From 1963-1970 (Both Inclusive)

The Era of Development and Devolution (1978-1996)

The institution of local government regained its significance and importance in 1979 when after more than a decade; local bodies' elections were conducted. This proved to be a leap in the socio-economic and political development of AJ&K. A more effective and vibrant local body system came into being in 1979 which remained functional until 1994. Around 3290 candidates contested the local bodies' polls for a total of 1397 seats in AJ&K in 1979. Most of the candidates were young and educated, and played a vital role in the subsequent political life of AJ&K.

Although there has subsequently been a huge pause in local bodies' elections in AJ&K, the old structures established through the Basic Democracies system proved to be of great help in continuing and accelerating the pace of development in AJ&K. This mainly happened because of the availability of some old local bodies' structures, alongside people's experience and understanding.

The 13th Amendment in the 1974 Act of AJ&K (2018) and its Impact on Local Bodies

Despite continuous pressure from various civil society groups, the restoration of the local bodies never remained on the agenda of any political party in AJ&K. There was a tacit consensus in AJ&K between all political

parties to delay the local bodies' elections mainly due to the fear of the shifting of administrative and financial powers of MLAs to the local councilors.

However, after long tiring efforts of the civil society and youth groups, the government of AJ&K, in its 2018 amendment of the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Interim Constitution Act 1974, incorporated a clause stating, that the

“**State shall encourage local government institutions composed of elected representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions, special representation will be given to peasants, workers and women**”.

In another clause defining the duties of the Chief Election Commissioner, it says,

“**it shall be duty of the Commission to organize and conduct the election for the office of the President, the Assembly, the Council and local government bodies...**”¹⁰

¹⁰ Azad Government of the State of Jammu and Kashmir Law, Justice, Parliamentary Affairs and Human Rights Department

Although this statement clearly mentions that holding local bodies elections would be included in the duties of the Chief Election Commissioner, yet it was possible only if

the government decided to conduct the elections. There has been a lot of criticism on the language of the clause, as it is not binding in nature.

During the last 25 years, almost all the previous governments of AJ&K have made public commitments at different points in time to hold local government elections but their pledges never got fulfilled. In 2016's AJ&K elections, the revival of the local bodies was a part of the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party's (PPP) manifestos.¹¹ Despite many promises, the political parties never lived up to their commitments as political leaders are never willing to compromise their administrative and financial powers by sharing them with the local bodies' representatives. The absence of the local bodies system provided them an opportunity to spend money for their own benefit and distribute jobs without upholding the principle of meritocracy or fearing accountability.

¹¹ Manifestoes of parties published before legislative assembly elections 2017 in AJ&K

CHALLENGES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE ABSENCE OF LOCAL BODIES

Leadership Deficit & Accountability Gap

The failure to hold local government elections has weakened the democratic institutions and slowed down the process of the induction of new political leadership. It has also paved the way for family dominated politics. Therefore, the sense of participatory governance has long since evaporated from the political horizon. A high rate of unemployment and growing frustration amongst young people for not restoring lo-

cal bodies has increased their vulnerability to radicalization. The population of AJ&K which has increased significantly over time has now reached 4.5 million. This growing population also creates huge pressure for the government to restore the local bodies in order to ensure service delivery, access to decision making and other social opportunities.

AJ&K has also witnessed administrative growth with the addition of administrative divisions at all levels. Since the local government elections did not take place for more than two decades, the same old faces with only a minor addition of new entrants dominated the political landscape of AJ&K. Ironically; many of these leaders who had themselves emerged through the local government system strongly opposed and resisted the idea of its restoration. This did not only cause the creation of a leadership vacuum but also resulted in the lack of a fair governance system. People with no access to decision makers do not usually have considerable chances of holding them accountable for their deeds and actions.

The Administrative Division of AJ&K					
Divisions	3	Muzaffarabad, Poonch and Mirpur			
Districts	10	Neelum, Muzaffarabad, Hattian Bala, Bagh, Haveli, Poonch, Sudhnoti, Kotli, Mirpur, Bhimber.			
Sub Divisions	32	Muzaffarabad	2	Haveli	3
		Neelum	2	Poonch	4
		Hattian Bala	3	Mirpur	2
		Bagh	3	Kotli	6
		Bhimber	3	Sudhnoti	4
Union Councils	256	Muzaffarabad	38	Haveli	11
		Neelum	15	Poonch	36
		Hattian Bala	13	Mirpur	18
		Bagh	34	Kotli	45
		Bhimber	27	Sudhnoti	19
Revenue Villages	1769				
Municipal Corporations	5	Muzaffarabad, Bagh, Poonch, Kotli, Mirpur.			
Municipal Committee	13	Authmuqam, Hattian Bala, Patika, Kahuta, Hajira, Charrhoi, Islamgarh, Sikandarabad, Dudyal, Bhimber, Chaksawari, Palandri, Sehnsa.			
Town Committees	18				
Markaz Councils	31				

The Benefits of Local Bodies in AJ&K

An empowered local government structure brought immense benefit to AJ&K in many ways, along with some long-term impacts. The era of economic development in AJ&K is attributed to the local bodies system in which the network of roads and bridges, water supply schemes as well as health and education infrastructure were established. These decision-making structures were devolved to the most basic unit (i.e. village level) across AJ&K, providing space and opportunity for the common people to communicate their issues and challenges to the elected representatives. Participatory mechanisms enabled people to identify their needs and challenges, and facilitated their participation in the development process through volunteerism. A huge constituency of people felt empowered and connected with these structures, and was consequently able to change their socio-economic conditions for better. It improved service delivery, promoted equity and development, and reduced poverty.

This can be seen in the context of various programs introduced during the local bodies era in AJ&K like the Rural Works Program (RWP) which was a community development program started in 1963, with the objectives to increasing employment opportunities, broadening the participation of people in governance, creating infrastructure, with

the completion of 60,000 projects in a variety of local schemes. Besides, in late seventies and early eighties, international donor organizations like the World Bank (WB), International Development Agency (IDA), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Asian Development Bank (ADB) also provided funding for the socio-economic development and uplift of AJ&K which was utilized through local bodies.¹²

Platform for New Leadership and Inclusive Participation

Local bodies provided an effective platform and procedure for evolving and nurturing the political leadership in AJ&K. It expanded the sphere of politics from just a few people to the larger public. Decentralization at the grassroots level opened up new avenues of political participation for people of all ages. For young people, it proved to be the most effective and useful platform to demonstrate their leadership skills. It helped them articulate their needs and challenges to the authorities, and ensured their inclusion in the political process which otherwise was a challenging task. It also nurtured the young leadership. It helped young people who contested the local bodies elections to go for door-to-door campaigning, contest elections, identify community issues, build relationships with communities, gain trust and demonstrate their leadership skills.

¹² Local Government and Rural Development Department, History of LG&RDD, retrieved from <http://lg.gok.pk/history-of-lgrdd/#> dated August 05, 2020

Around 50 percent of the people from the existing political leadership of AJ&K who are either sitting in the AJ&K Assembly or had at least contested elections, emerged through the process of local bodies elections. It served as a “nursery” for the political leadership of AJ&K. Moreover, at a time when politics had become an expensive affair, requiring a lot of resources; this system offered a great support to the people who were marginalized and economically poor to come up and build their political careers with fewer resources. Politics, at the local level, doesn't require many financial resources due to the small size of the local constituencies. Since politics was devolved at the village and ward levels through local bodies, people did not need massive resources to organize meetings or carry out consultations.

The gradual evolution of the local bodies system in AJ&K was also a source of strength to the broader democratic structures. Pakistan inherited a strong colonial bureaucratic model of governance, with less participation of common people in the decision making process. The local bodies system created a process of empowerment with accountability in politics by empowering the elected chairmen at various levels and holding the authorities answerable to the elected representatives. Over time, the concept of enhanced public participation in development work was associated with the idea of having public servants responsive, transparent in service and accountable to the general public.

The participation of women in the political process was another key dividend brought by the local government system. Although AJ&K has a largely patriarchal society, this system also offered some space for females to get involved in the process by offering them reserved seats via quota system. Despite the fact that the population of AJ&K consists of 51 percent females (2,064,421 women),¹³ the overall representation of females in the present assembly is around 12 percent only. At present, out of 49 members of the Legislative Assembly of AJ&K, only one woman is a directly elected member while the other four female members secured their legislative assembly seats through the quota reserved for women.¹⁴

Rapid Inclusive Development and the Introduction of a New Culture

Most respondents involved in the survey feel that when the local bodies system was in place, development was far quicker, better planned and more inclusive where the community played an active role in the progress of AJ&K. It is largely believed that during the early 1980s, major development took place in AJ&K and the credit goes to the locally elected representatives who did not only manage to receive funds from the government but also received enormous support from the community. Young people

¹³ Planning and Development Department AJ&K, Census 2017, retrieved from <https://www.pndajk.gov.pk/uploadfiles/downloads/Final%20AJK%20at%20a%20Glance.pdf>

¹⁴ Members AJ&K Legislative Assembly, government of AJ&K retrieved from <https://pmajk.gov.pk/legislative-assembly> dated Jan 2020

performed a huge amount of physical work themselves to complete various construction projects. A healthy competition among villages and urban centers motivated people to work for the rapid development of their areas. Additionally, the transparency of work and accountability of the authorities were ensured to a great extent in the projects as local stakeholders were involved in the decision-making processes.

One of the key impacts of greater devolution of powers to local government in AJ&K was the building of the trust of people in the political and democratic processes which gave birth to the culture of participation, dialogue and reconciliation. A whole new culture of democratic values gained prominence at the grassroots level which had far-reaching effects on the whole fabric of the society. Almost 70 percent of the entire area of AJ&K lies along the Line of Control (LoC) and has been strongly impacted by the Kashmir conflict. Sustained firing along the LoC, loss of lives and property, and the continued suffering of local people pushed young people towards violence but AJ&K's strong democratic culture at the grassroots level supported a peace building narrative in the region by maintaining a spirit of non-violent struggle.

A large of number of young millennials, involved in today's politics and local development in AJ&K, gathered support and motivation from their parents who had positive experience with politics in their youth, as most of them belonged to the generations who had witnessed the local government era.

The young people of AJ&K are generally politically active and civically engaged, receiving a lot of support and encouragement from their families in contrast to the youth

in other parts of Pakistan or the region. This is primarily because of their parents' enriching experience with the local government system through which they had played central roles in local development and political progress. Besides this; political discussions, affiliations and debates are integral parts of the rural and urban culture in AJ&K, and people of all age groups have a great interest in politics. Though there are various historical reasons for this, witnessing and experiencing a comprehensive process of 15 years of an uninterrupted system of local government enabled people to discuss politics, experience decision-making and feel empowered. Besides providing an understanding of the political processes and their dynamics, it proved to be a great training ground for the future leadership and enhanced their understanding of the district-level development and progress.

As local government promoted free and fair elections, a competitive local political system emerged in AJ&K which gave birth to a new political culture and leadership. Resources were made available to be administered by the local government representatives which benefitted the community and led to rapid development. The local communities were a part of local planning and development. With the introduction of new and young leadership, traditional sources of authority were challenged. Most specifically, with the participation of women, peasants and other marginalized sections of the society in elections through reserved seats; the prevalent authorities, who were manipulative and controlling, were challenged. A process of capacity-building of local government officials and the elected representatives, with deep community involvement, enabled ordinary people and their community organizations to interact with the local government for the betterment of their areas.

Key Conclusions Drawn from the Discussions

- ★ The local bodies acquainted the participant citizens with the functioning of local government, including power distribution and budgetary mechanisms.
- ★ They created a sense of awareness and the ability amongst community leaders to use their right to negotiate and discuss various political issues.
- ★ They developed cooperation and lobbying skills in communities, facilitating networking and alliances within and beyond their localities.
- ★ They supported civic initiatives aimed at monitoring compliance of local government officials with the law (e.g. by exposing cases of corruption or stimulating existing regulatory bodies to enforce regulations and pressing for institutional reforms at local level)
- ★ They facilitated the effective functioning of social audits put in place by the local government or setting up alternative audit systems driven by the civil society (e.g. local governance 'barometers'). They established public-private partnerships for social service delivery and for benefiting the poorest in society.

The functioning of local government in AJ&K promoted a strong political culture and proved to be a substantive forum for the inclusion of young people in decision-making at the grassroots level, serving as a great source of creating future leaders for AJ&K.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES TO THE RESTORATION OF LOCAL BODIES

The local government as well as student bodies and unions were great platforms for young people to take part in politics. Both these platforms which were the breeding ground for leadership, and its training and development became the target of the struggle for petty political gains, undemocratic attitudes and above all, the larger Pakistani politics. Many critics believe that MLAs strongly oppose the idea of the restoration of local bodies just to keep both financial and administrative powers to themselves, as development funds would be transferred to the local bodies once they get restored. Besides, political governments in Pakistan never stood in favor of the empowered local governments due to the fear of the devolvement of political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local governments. The political parties in AJ&K which are the extensions of the mainstream parties of Pakistan also neglected this important governance system.

Consequently, the politics in AJ&K which used to be very participatory in nature, became deeply infested with money and party factionalism, once the local government system ceased to exist. In the local government system, leadership was nurtured through the process of training at different tiers and this guidance came to an end with the closure of the system. As a result, the people who joined politics were not equipped with professional training and understanding got into the politics in AJ&K on the basis of wealth, clan or connections with the decision-making circles in Islamabad. Additionally, all powers associated with the local government, in particular financial powers, were transferred back to the members of the legislative assembly, which made them even more powerful.

Presently, the constituency politics in AJ&K is deeply controlled by money. More than 24 years of disruption in local government has led to entrenched bureaucratic control at the district level in AJ&K. During interaction with people from different strata of the society, it was found out that most of the young people who are politically active are less satisfied and have thus do not strongly associate themselves with the established power structures. They do not find their space in the existing political parties. One of the major critical arguments about the existing system is that, for MLAs it seems to be an arduous task to manage and carry out the duties of both legislation and local development. According to the AJ&K Planning & Development Department, Muzaffarabad; the total population of AJ&K is more than 4.05 million, with young people as the majority. The needs, issues, resources and challenges of AJ&K's society have all increased manifestly over time. With the increase in population; administrative units were expanded in AJ&K, requiring a more emancipatory and participatory governance mechanism. The number of districts and other units got almost doubled during this time. This administrative growth in the number of districts, tehsils and union councils further intensified the need of grassroots democracy for better development and participation of people. Due to the disruption in the local government system, cities were not developed in a well-planned and thought-out way.

After the disruption of the local bodies system in AJ&K, people lost the genuine platforms of engagement and consultation for the local development. A haphazard approach to development and construction, without any real public participation started in AJ&K and the development in major cities lacked proper planning based on the needs and issues of the people.

Taking Stock of Young People's Gains through Local Bodies

The profound effects of not holding local bodies' elections in AJ&K are obvious in many ways. Although the youth of AJ&K are civically engaged and have better literacy rate as compared to the youth in other parts of the country, they are the biggest victims of the changes to the system of local bodies. They are, consequently, unable to find spaces of meaningful engagement in politics. The majority of the young people surveyed believed that most of the authoritative people in political parties have promoted family politics, factionalism and the unfair use of money for political gains, without letting young people assume leadership roles in politics. One of the youth activists said that "politics today is defined by wealth, clan, and connections". Political leadership has been quantitatively reduced to a few people while a huge number of aspiring young political activists have been sidelined. It is a common perception noted during discussions that if local bodies' elections were held, it could have opened up spaces for political activists who would challenge dynastic politics and increase the prospects of a positive change. It is important to note that Pakistan's gradual transition towards democracy since 2008 has demonstrated many positive achievements as the provinces have gained a great deal of internal autonomy and the state structure has gradually been decentralized, consequently providing impetus to the devolution of power and the establishment of democratic norms. However, as far as Azad Jammu and Kashmir is concerned, it still has a long way to go.

Young people in AJ&K are deeply associated with the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir. They have intensely internalized this fundamental issue as it is a matter of survival for them. Over time, they have become more active and vibrant in their roles as stakeholders in the conflict resolution process. They envision broader roles in the decision-making processes which are currently missing. The UNSC Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security apparently provided a lot of confidence and legitimacy to the youth of AJ&K to become influential actors in the conflict. A huge number of young people who became victims of cross-LoC firing and shelling on the AJ&K side of the LoC are deeply frustrated over the lack of empathy of the international community to their unending plight. Many of them left their houses, gave up education and suffered permanent disabilities. They believe their political leadership did not highlight their issues and aspirations, and thus they had to resort to the option of voicing their issues directly to the world. Here, the biggest challenge for them is the lack of the availability of vibrant social and political platforms through which they can voice their stories and work for their communities.

This scenario shows that an empowered local government would have been an effective means for them to stay connected with their communities in leadership roles, share their grief, better identify and prioritize issues close to their hearts. Most of the land of AJ&K consists of remote, mountainous areas with social connectivity issues. Hence, it usually becomes impossible for an MLA to involve people in the consultation process. The detailed breakdown of the constituency wise population in AJ&K is as follows:

Constituency - Wise Populations of AJ&K

Sr. no Constituency	Population	Percentage
LA-1 Mirpur 1	92,430	2.28
LA-2 Mirpur II, Chaksawari	90,028	2.23
LA-3 Mirpur III, Mirpur city	151,499	3.75
LA-4 Mirpur IV, Khari Sharif	122,243	3.02
LA-5 Bhimber I, Banala	137,629	3.40
LA-6 Bhimber II, Samahni	124,169	3.07
LA-7 Bhimber III, Bhimber	158,826	3.93
LA-8 Kotli I, Kotli	175,592	4.34
LA-9 Kotli II	140,114	3.46
LA-10 Kotli III, Sehnsa	149,994	3.71
LA-11 Kotli IV, Charhoi	156,150	3.86
LA-12 Kotli V, Khuiratta	152,344	3.77
LA-13 Bagh I, Dhirkot	126,916	3.14
LA-14 Bagh II, Wasti Bagh	89,890	2.22
LA-15 Bagh III, Sharqi Bagh	155,113	3.83
LA-16 Bagh IV, Haveli	152,124	3.76
LA-17 Sudhnoti & Poonch I, Abbaspur	132,217	3.27
LA-18 Sudhnoti & Poonch II, Hajira	134,261	3.32
LA-19 Sudhnoti & Poonch III, Rawalakot	155,289	3.84
LA-20 Sudhnoti & Poonch IV, Thorar	95,986	2.37
LA-21 Sudhnoti & Poonch V, Palandri	139,052	3.44
LA-22 Sudhnoti & Poonch VI, Baloch	141,350	3.49
LA-23 Neelum Valley I, Neelum	191,251	4.73
LA-24 Muzaffarabad I, Kutla	131,751	3.26
LA-25 Muzaffarabad II, Lachrat	118,354	2.93
LA-26 Muzaffarabad III, Muzaffarabad City	172,032	4.25
LA-27 Muzaffarabad IV, Khawra	151,898	3.75
LA-28 Muzaffarabad V, Chikar	153,700	3.80
LA-29 9 Muzaffarabad VI, Leepa	153,165	3.79

Planning & Development Department, Muzaffarabad

Many young people residing in AJ&K near the LoC believe that their narrative of the conflict never received any prominence internationally due to the negligence of their political leadership. From the politicians' perspective, it seems an impossible task for the elected leadership to manage these constituencies because of the remote population and accessibility issues.

The New Trend of Development

One of the new trends in communities across AJ&K is community-led development. Communities, in the absence of local bodies, decided to pool resources and run donation campaigns for local development projects, including road networks as a top priority. The most perturbing thing that came out from multiple discussions and interactions with the young people is their sense of dissatisfaction with the performance of the MLAs and the disappointments caused by unfulfilled hopes associated with their leaders. The people of AJ&K living abroad in the Middle East, Europe and other regions of the world actively contributed to these funds to fulfill the needs of road network and connectivity services for the local communities. The idea of developing the local communities through financial help from the diaspora is not sustainable in the long run but people, out of a sense of desperation, started assuming the government's role. Most of them are not willing to share or create the Public-Private Partnership mechanism even which is a cause of worry for local MLAs. On the other hand, the space of local bodies and local consultation was occupied to some extent by the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in AJ&K. Many of these organizations carried out post-earthquake relief and rehabilitation tasks in AJ&K. How-

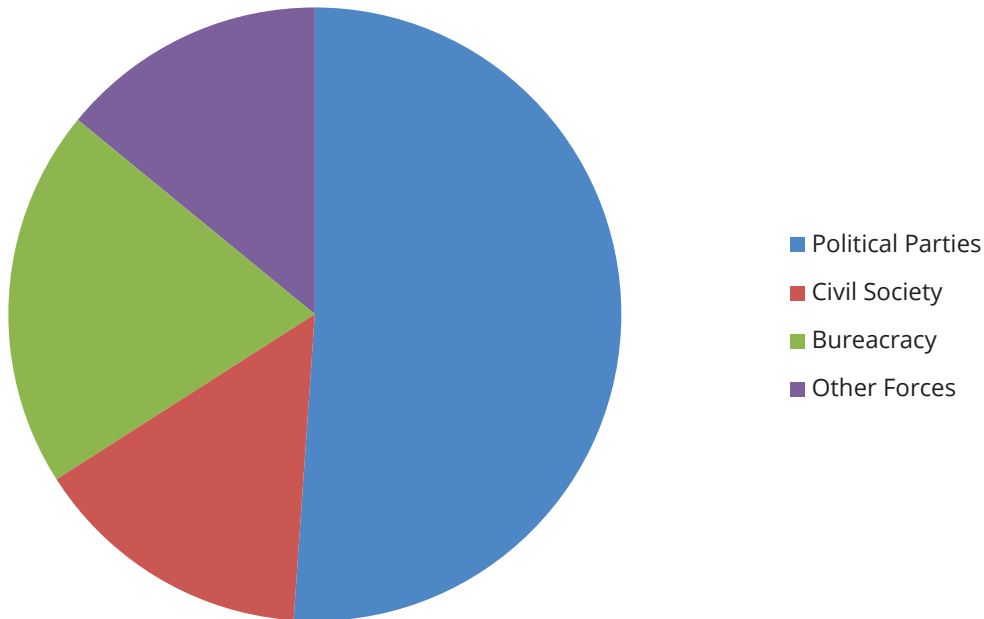
ever, this phenomenon did not last long due to strict regulations and discouraging measures imposed by the government to restrict the functioning of NGOs. One opinion is that the government fears being accused of poor governance and thus, the organizations working on policy issues and governance are prevented from carrying out their work.

It is widely believed that the revival of local government system can pave the way for successful and inclusive democracy in the region which would ultimately improve the governance and accountability system in AJ&K. Undoubtedly, it is a huge challenge to motivate political leadership, particularly the upcoming government (after the 2021 elections) to hold local bodies' elections as most young people surveyed stated that the existing political leadership in the assembly will never be ready to lose or share its power. The youth of AJ&K wants to play an active role in pushing the authorities to hold local bodies elections, and make the necessary changes in laws and procedures of governance to have a better and improved local bodies system. For this reason, open debates between young people and political leaders need to take place on a continuous basis.

Political Parties' Control

The restoration of local bodies has never been a major point on the agenda of the political parties during their election campaigns, or afterwards. More than 51 percent of the young people surveyed hold political parties responsible for not conducting local bodies' elections. A sizeable number of respondents also believe that bureaucracy and other powerful forces deliberately hold back these elections in AJ&K.

In your opinion, who is responsible for not holding the local bodies' elections in AJ&K?



As political parties in AJ&K could not promote fair practices in governance, the result was a breaking away of different factions and groups in politics. Money and baradari-defined¹⁶ politics in AJ&K has sidelined many aspiring young people. Party leadership maintains very strict control over key decisions and leaves less space for the party activists to participate in the decision-making process. Local government is essentially based on a mechanism which promotes decentralization of the decision-making process at grassroots which at the moment is centralized with less space for common masses to make decisions at local level.

Unfortunately, most young people stated during focus group discussions that like money is the key factor enabling a person to contest and win elections, and even attaining a position in a political party in AJ&K in the first place. Additionally, parties are not well-organized and functional at the grassroots level apart from Jamaat-e-Islami which maintains its presence at even the village and ward levels, with a better organizational set up at district level too. PTI has also initiated a grassroots organizational network but it is still at the embryonic stage.

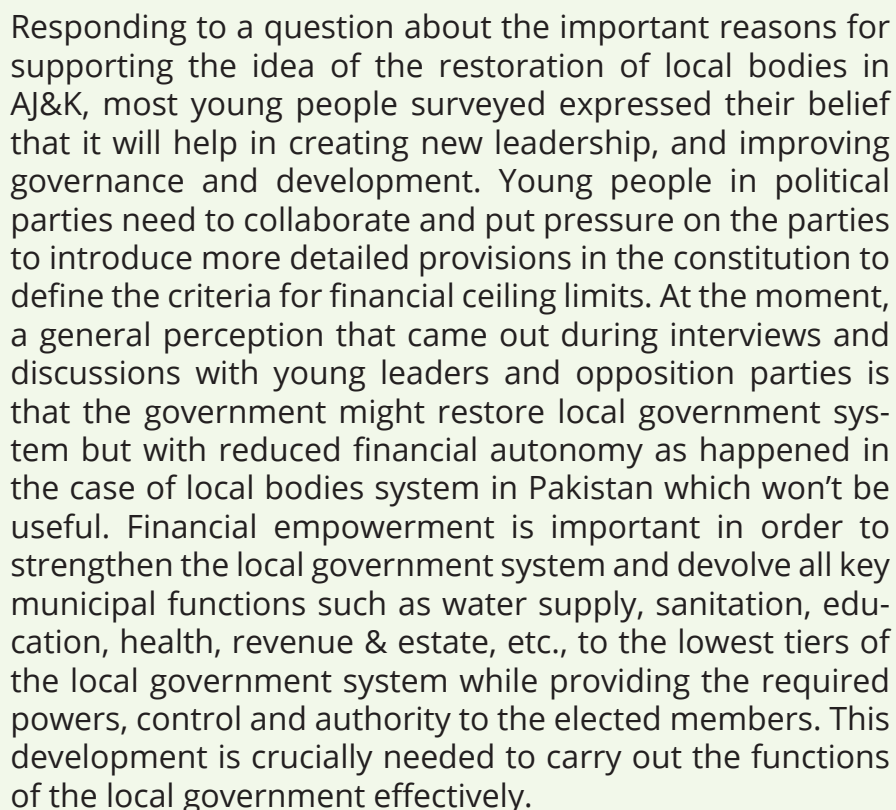
The political leadership of AJ&K tends to marginalize the local governments. There is a perception amongst young people that

¹⁶ People who associate with same clan/caste are informally categorized in local language as Baradari. It is also an association and sharing of common characteristics by an individual being a part of a particular group descended of the same ancestor.

the empowered upper class strives against the idea of distributing power. The government of AJ&K has been functioning without an elected local government structure for more than two decades. In a democratic society, the axis of power at district level should be connected with the elected representatives of the people. They should have control over funds, allocation of functions and powers (both municipal and fiscal), and should be empowered to hold the district administration accountable for its performance.

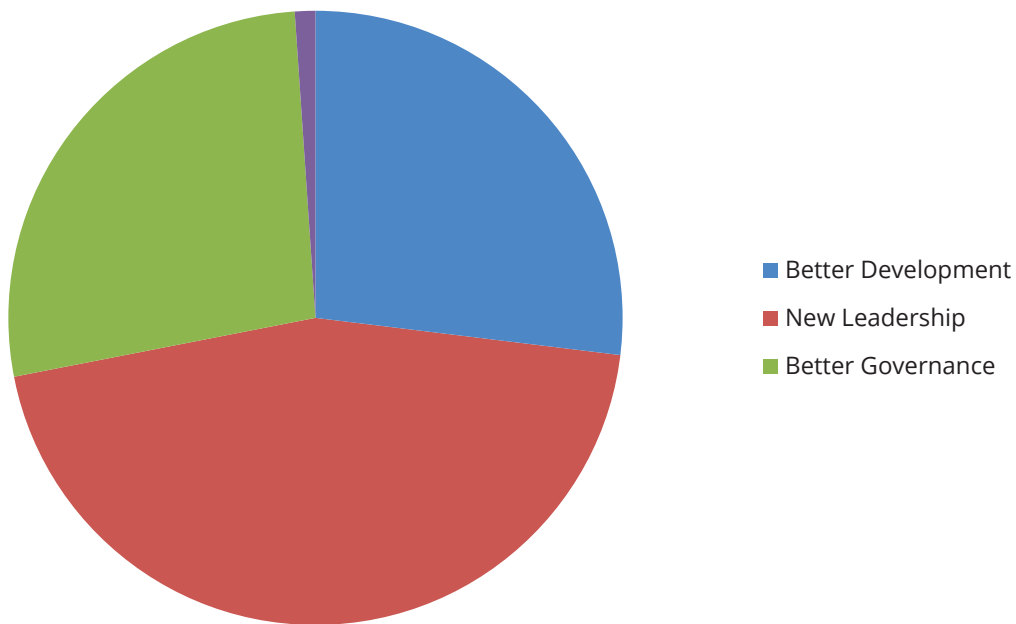
The population and the districts in AJ&K have grown in number. New tehsils, wards, and union councils were created and most recently, the process of delimitation was

carried out for these divisions. Although the Government of AJ&K included the idea of the establishment of local bodies in the 13th Amendment of the AJ&K Constitution, these laws need to be revised in the context of modern governance systems. In order to fully achieve a functional local government system, a new law has to be introduced, offering a fair level of autonomy and the elimination of arbitrary powers assigned to the district bureaucracy for decision-making at local level. A more fiscally and administratively empowered local government, with the inclusion of youth and women, can serve as the best system to manage local affairs and address public issues at the grassroots level.

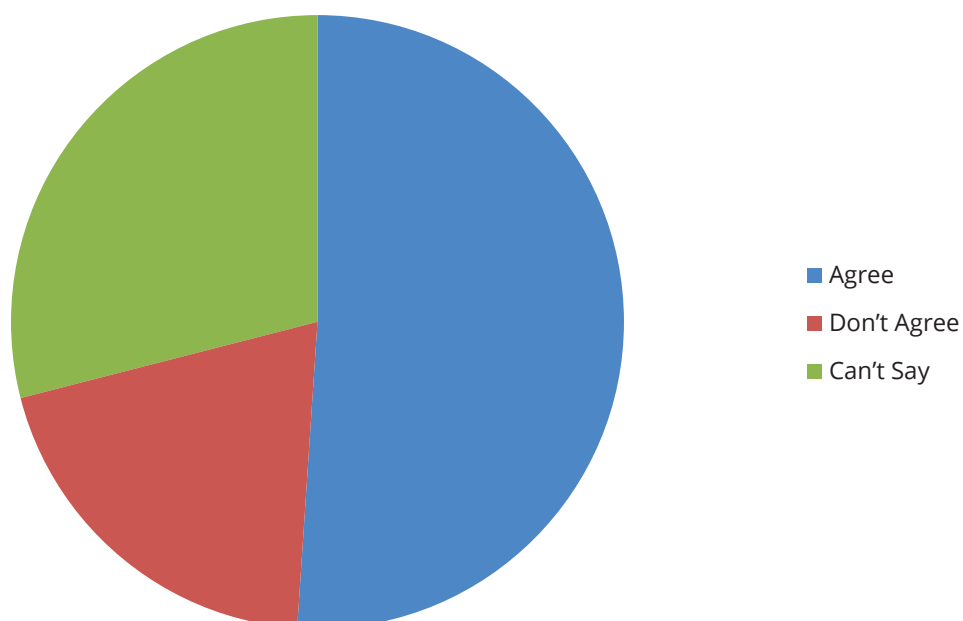


Responding to a question about the important reasons for supporting the idea of the restoration of local bodies in AJ&K, most young people surveyed expressed their belief that it will help in creating new leadership, and improving governance and development. Young people in political parties need to collaborate and put pressure on the parties to introduce more detailed provisions in the constitution to define the criteria for financial ceiling limits. At the moment, a general perception that came out during interviews and discussions with young leaders and opposition parties is that the government might restore local government system but with reduced financial autonomy as happened in the case of local bodies system in Pakistan which won't be useful. Financial empowerment is important in order to strengthen the local government system and devolve all key municipal functions such as water supply, sanitation, education, health, revenue & estate, etc., to the lowest tiers of the local government system while providing the required powers, control and authority to the elected members. This development is crucially needed to carry out the functions of the local government effectively.

Why do you support local bodies' elections in AJ&K?

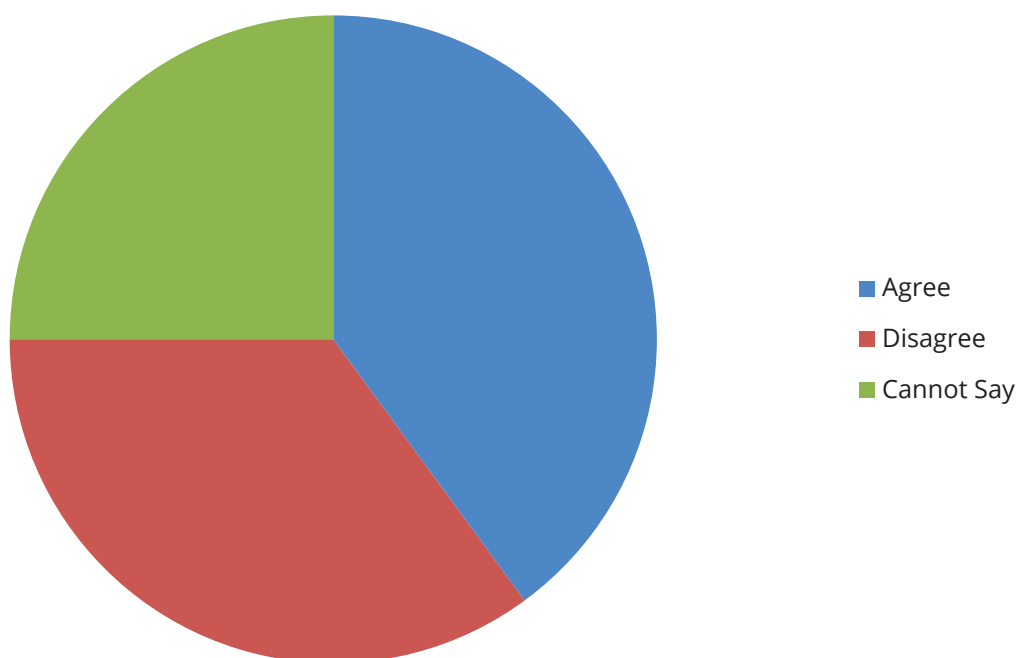


As a young person, do you believe local government can bring change in the economic development of your district?



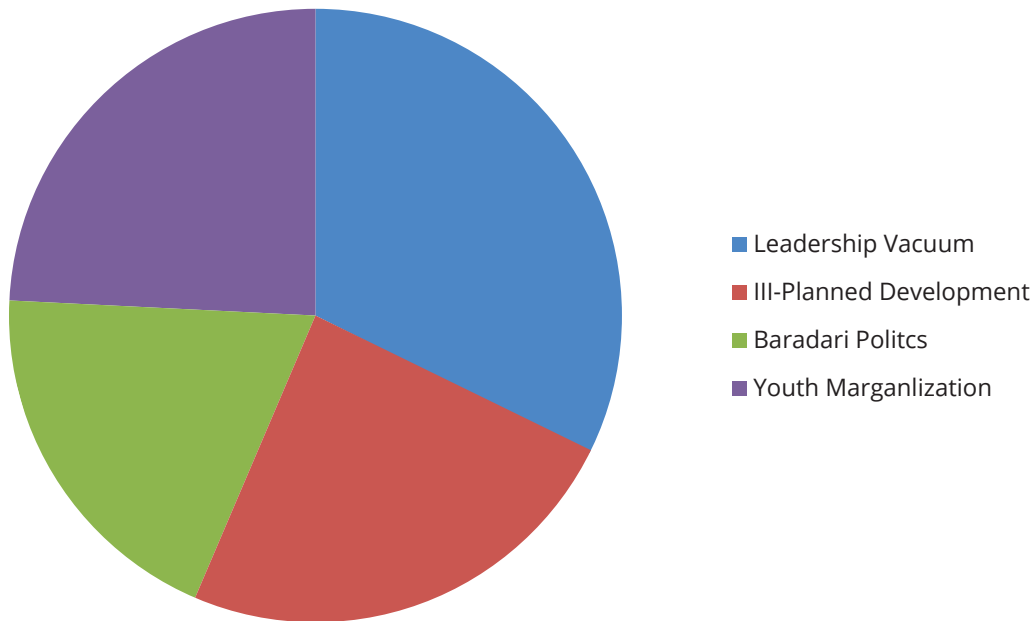
The majority of the young people surveyed (51 percent) believe that local bodies can ensure economic development in their respective districts.

As a political worker, do you believe your party will offer you space to contest elections at local level?



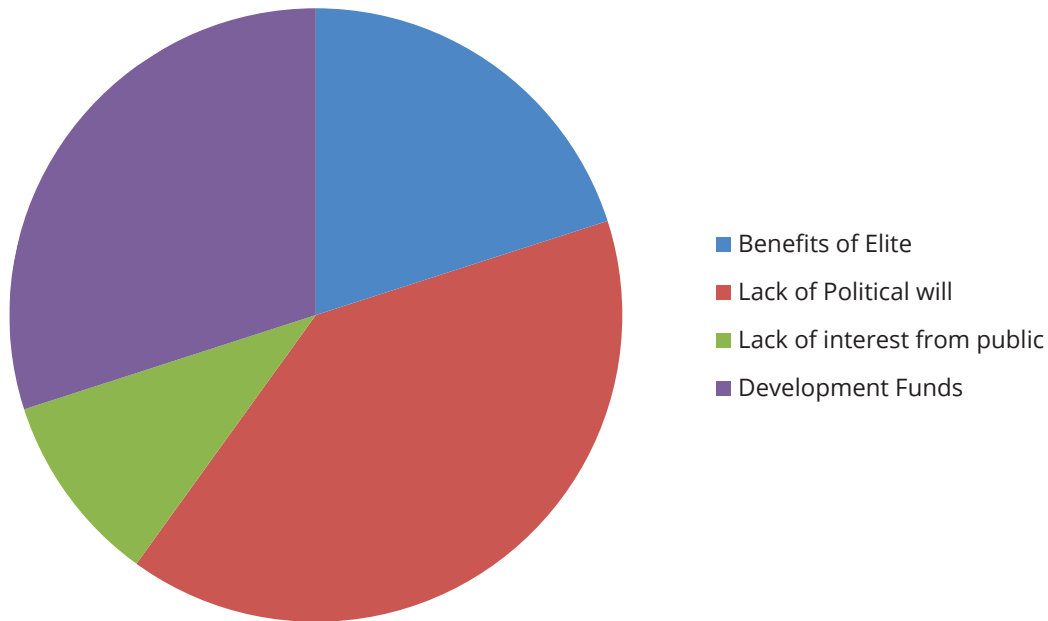
Around 40 percent of the young people surveyed have no hope to get the party tickets while around 35 percent participants of the survey are hopeful that they may get nominated to contest elections at the local level while almost the same proportion of the respondents were undecided.

According to you, what was the impact of the absence of an elected local government system in AJ&K?



The young people surveyed identified the leadership vacuum, ill-planned development, and Baradari politics as key issues that emerged out of the discontinued local government system in AJ&K.

Why do you think the local government system has not been restored in AJ&K?



Most of the young people surveyed (40 percent) believe that a lack of political will and thirty percent of the surveyed people stated that development funds provided by government to each MLA or Ministers are the key hurdles in the restoration of local bodies in AJ&K.

Rapid Urbanization without Consultation

The urban population of AJ&K has grown exponentially over time as according to the Planning & Development Department, Muzaffarabad; the urban population of the re-

gion has jumped swiftly from a single digit to 17 percent of the total population of AJ&K.¹⁷ According to the 1998 census, only 12 percent population of AJ&K was urban.¹⁸ The phenomenon of urbanization in AJ&K is largely a post-earthquake development wherein people from villages moved towards cities for better health and livelihood opportunities. A primary motive for many families to move was getting opportunities for their children to have better education. After the earthquake in 2005, many international organizations participated in relief and rescue work, creating a huge job market for the local people. This also improved their financial situation and helped them

¹⁷ Statistical Year Book 2019, AJ&K Bureau of Statistics, Planning and Development Department, retrieved from <https://www.pndajk.gov.pk/uploadfiles/downloads/AJ&K%20Statistical%20Year%20Book%202019.pdf>

¹⁸ Statistical Year Book 2019, AJ&K Bureau of Statistics, Planning and Development Department, retrieved from <https://www.pndajk.gov.pk/uploadfiles/downloads/AJ&K%20STATISTICAL%20YEAR%20BOOK%201998.pdf>

move to major cities for prospects of better life for their children. Major cities have comparatively better education and health systems which is a major motivational factor for the parents to move to cities.

Urbanization can be a beneficial phenomenon but it seems that it happened without a long-term physical planning for the people of AJ&K, neglecting their needs. Although there was a golden opportunity for the leadership of AJ&K to plan and develop cities in a more professional and organized manner in the years after the earthquake, yet almost all the cities have issues resulting from poor planning in the areas of land development, housing, water supply, sewers and roads. Furthermore, buildings in the private sector were constructed without following the approved Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The public offices largely failed to

ensure the fulfillment of proper regulatory duties for planning and management of the cities. There was no means of direct public accountability which resulted in the mis-managed urbanization. It resulted in poor housing and construction all across AJ&K. Despite having prescribed SOPs issued by the government after the earthquake of 2005, most buildings constructed do not fulfill the required construction criteria.

Water and sanitation problems pose another key challenge to the cities. The district governments are unable to provide piped water to the majority of people in cities. During the local government system, the key areas of work were facilitating piped water and road networks. The table below shows the situation of the availability of piped water for the urban population of AJ&K.

District	Percentage of housing with piped, running water facilities
Muzaffarabad	54%
Neelum	31%
Jhelum Valley	36%
Bagh	20%
Haveli	27%
Poonch	05%
Sudhnoti	19%
Kotli	55%
Mirpur	73%
Bhimber	39%

Planning & Development Department, Muzaffarabad

In most of the districts, water is supplied only for a limited period of time daily. Some of the water schemes contain unclean water as there is no process of effective solid waste management, resulting in the contamination of the drinking water. It causes many diseases and other hygiene issues.

Likewise, problems in areas like transportation in AJ&K, within cities or outside, also emerged as a key issue for the people living in villages and travelling to cities. Most transport vehicle owners do not follow SOPs and public sector vehicles on the roads are mostly in a dilapidated condition. AJ&K has almost 3000 registered vehicles in the public sector, using a road network spread over an area of around 7,469 km.¹⁹ During the period of the restored local government system, transportation was managed and regulated by the local elected representatives. Similarly, areas like education and healthcare are the key components of the local government system in AJ&K. These sectors also suffered deterioration at various levels in the absence of the local government. Rapid urbanization in AJ&K also posed serious challenges to public access to health and education facilities as these sectors were not improved and updated with the expansion of the cities.

At present, AJ&K has almost 47 Rural Health Centers (RHCs), 229 Basic Health Units (BHUs) and 81 Dispensaries functioning without any public supervision²⁰ through local government. They could have been functioning better with direct supervision through empowered local bodies where both the communities and these offices

could work in collaboration to improve service delivery. In local bodies system, there is a direct and deeper engagement of the local communities through institutions at district, tehsil, union council and ward levels which warrants better supervision and accountability mechanisms. The central government neither has resources nor the capacity to monitor and supervise service delivery at grassroots level. At the moment, these are bureaucratically controlled areas without any structured feedback mechanism for the people. These governmental functions require constant monitoring and public supervision at the grassroots level.

Land management is another area which was dealt with in consultation with the local elected councilors during the local government era but over a period of time; land use and regulation measures, building codes, land record systems and data on land use were not updated which resulted in poor urban land management. Elected representatives of the city corporations, town councils and other related bodies could play an important role in establishing a system of monitoring and accountability in different areas of land management. Most of the expansion happened without the active participation of the local community. Therefore, there were no local level institutions to build connectivity with regulatory bodies which are run by bureaucracy. Major cities in AJ&K were developed and evolved without any sound planning. Consequently, cities are rife with ill-planned buildings and poor infrastructure.

Responding to Disasters

¹⁹ AJ&K Statistics Book 2018

²⁰ Bureau of Statistics, P&DD, Azad Govt. of The State of Jammu & Kashmir, Muzaffarabad

The earthquake in 2005 caused heavy material and human losses in AJ&K. Economic losses of almost 125.203 billion PKR worth were reported in both public and private sectors during this catastrophe (SERRA, Muzaffarabad). Health infrastructure, educational buildings and road networks were badly damaged. Education in the public sector suffered a loss worth around 28.239 billion PKR while public sector health services received a loss worth 5.926 billion PKR in the wake of the earthquake in 2005.²¹ Though massive donations were promised by various international developmental organizations and the international community, most of them failed to fulfill their promises. Master plans of the cities were designed with massive programs for community development and uplift. But the successful implementation of the post-earthquake development plans remained a dream that could never be materialized for several political and bureaucratic reasons. One of the prime reasons and a main obstacle hindering the development projects was the lack of local government structures at grassroots level in AJ&K.

At the time of the emergency, the response of the people and institutions was not well coordinated. More precisely, coordination of the response was problematic due to the absence of the local leadership. Many NGOs, local groups and international donors rushed to help and carry out emergency relief and rescue operations, without the presence and guidance of any locally-elected structures. The distribution of relief aid and even the reconstruction of educational institutions and other governmental infrastructures were carried out without consul-

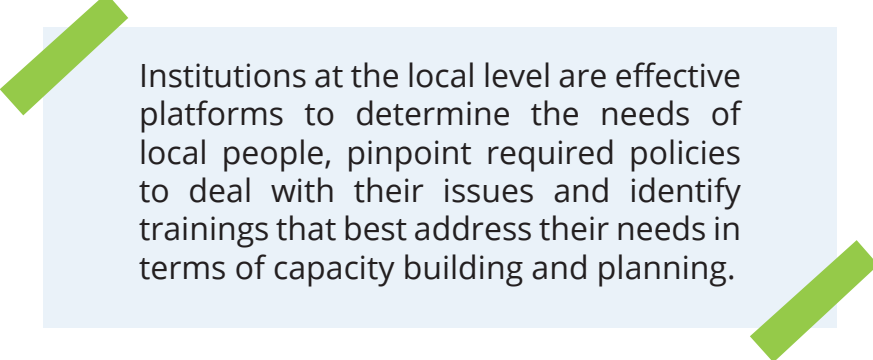
tation within the communities. The process of consultation was lacking again due to the absence of the locally-elected governments. Communities would have reacted and responded in a more effective and organized manner in the presence of locally-elected structures. The absence of these structures resulted in an uneven development as many of the areas with better road access and communication networks received more funds whereas some remote areas with relatively difficult access remained deprived. If channeled through a local government system; the local leadership, contrary to the NGOs and other bodies, would have been more accessible to the rescue teams and donors, and the response to the disastrous earthquake and the relief operations could be done in accordance with the concerns and needs of the local people. Given the continued presence of the local leaders, greater level of transparency and accountability in the relief operations could also be ensured.

A democratically-elected local structure could have been a useful platform not only for responding to the earthquake but also for more accurate identification of local issues and development needs at large at that time. The locally elected leaders, as active members of their respective communities, could play an instrumental role in creating coordination among various circles of the society for the distribution of incoming aid and addressing local conflicts. From documenting damages to identifying those most in need and bringing aid to places that had received less timely attention; they could

²¹ State Earthquake Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Authority (SERRA), Muzaffarabad.

negotiate better with the government and donors. “Disaster Risk Management (DRM) practices involve mainly the identification, processing and analysis of threats due to hazards; assessment of resilience of the communities; and developing strategies for future risk reduction”.²² All these practices have very strong connection with the effective local government system. According to UNISDR, the active commitment and leadership of a local government system is important for the implementation of any local disaster risk reduction measures. Its role is important in coordination, engagement of local communities on DRM and links their concerns with government priorities, build community capacity and devise and implement innovative tools and technique.²³ Elected representatives at local level can play a vibrant role in improving communities’ awareness of disasters and their potential impacts as well as management at the societal level. They also have the capacity

to coordinate communication and coordination plans between different tiers of government, and help in developing effective information-sharing plans and channels for future responses. This is important in clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of all relevant stakeholders, ahead of disasters, for better future disaster response. One of the key challenges after the 2005 earthquake was the random and haphazard response of various governmental and non-governmental departments due to the unclear identification of their roles and responsibilities, and a lack of preparedness.



Institutions at the local level are effective platforms to determine the needs of local people, pinpoint required policies to deal with their issues and identify trainings that best address their needs in terms of capacity building and planning.

²² Encyclopedia of Natural Hazards, 2013 ISBN : 978-90-481-8699-0 N. Nirupama

²³ Local Governments and Disaster Risk Reduction Good Practices and Lessons Learned A contribution to the “Making Cities Resilient” Campaign 2010, United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been formulated by analyzing 400 questionnaires, 30 interviews and the data collected through various focus group discussions and consultations with young leaders, politicians, government officials and members of the civil society, over a time period of two years.

1. The Government of AJ&K should immediately hold party-based local government elections to fulfill its constitutional obligations.
2. As promised by the leadership of AJ&K, the young people of each gender should be given at least a 25 percent quota in political parties for contesting elections at the local level. As per the Local Government Act, 1990 and the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Local Government Election Rules, 1983; the number of women should be at least 10 percent of the total number of members in the local bodies.
3. The minimum age for contesting local bodies elections should be reduced from 21 to 18 years to give more space to the views of young people.
4. Local bodies should have the same tenure of government as that of the legislative assembly and their elections should be held simultaneously with the legislative assembly elections.
5. The Government of AJ&K should establish a local government academy for the administrative and fiscal capacity building of the elected leadership at the local level. This should also involve comprehensive training programs for administrative staff of the local government department across AJ&K.
6. A course of rural development and community work should be introduced in the educational sector in AJ&K at the primary level to make future generations civically-aware and empowered.
7. The Government should address all concerns of the political parties regarding the delimitation of constituencies.²⁴ The delimitation of administrative units should be carried out with a rationale and 'Ward-bandi'²⁵ should be based on the division of population.
8. All development work being carried out by MLAs/ Ministers should be ceased and the developmental role of the Kashmir Council should be abolished.

²⁴ Councils were created haphazardly which according to opposition parties divided their voters and put them in disadvantaged positions for coming elections. New administrative units like union councils/wards were created which were contested by opposition parties as according to them such division should be based on set criteria of population. They believe that recent administrative units were created to benefit ruling party MLAs and set criteria were neglected.

²⁵ Ward is the smallest administrative unit at district level. A district is split into Ward, Union Council, Tehsil and District Council

9. There should not be any duplication of schemes and projects in AJ&K.
10. All political parties should introduce a comprehensive program of training and capacity-building of their members relevant to the local government system.
11. The government of AJ&K, along with all the political parties, should introduce a local government law which should explicitly define and explain the functions, duties and powers related to the local government system.
12. All planning and designing of the development work at the district level should originate at the local level through the involvement of local communities and people.
13. Local governments should be given financial and administrative powers. Many participants of the survey suggested that the model of the local government functioning in the Punjab province or other provinces of Pakistan should not be replicated in AJ&K as those are just symbolic in nature, and have not devolved financial and administrative powers to the grassroots level.
14. There should be a separate budget for local governments and this budget should be channeled through a proper planning and development department.
15. The government AJ&K should establish infrastructure for offices and make other necessary arrangements required by the local government officials to fulfill their duties and offer material support to the offices of the elected local government.
16. The role of the legislative assembly should be limited to legislative functions in AJ&K. All the development work should be strictly carried out by local bodies representatives.
17. Reforms are needed for different institutions in the society. The district administration should be reformed and made accountable to the local leadership. The existing system of district administration confers huge power and authority to the Deputy Commissioners. So, they should be accountable to locally elected bodies at district level.
18. All districts in AJ&K should have a district planning and development department working under the supervision of the District Chairman.
19. Funding must be allocated for capacity-building of the members of local civil society organizations and community networks working on local development and livelihoods since these CSOs and networks are support mechanisms for the local government.
20. The government of AJ&K should promote self-sufficiency of the people by involving and integrating at the local government level some important communities and departments like poultry, agriculture, livestock etc.
21. A "Vision 2030" for local development in AJ&K should be established, keeping sustainable development goals in the backdrop.



Farzana Yaqoob
Former Minister for Social Welfare and Women Development. AJ&K

A well-researched and well written report by Dr. Waqas who has always been at the forefront of advocacy for research based decision making. This report not only highlights the importance of having a robust local governance system but also shows that citizen centric development leads to ownership by the people and responsible attitudes. Primary data based research is hard to find in Kashmir and, Dr. Waqas' effort is commendable. There is no denying the fact that local government is very important, and I hope all political parties will make it part of their election manifestos and put in the effort of having local government elections. Presence of elected local government will take away the pressure on MLAs. They will be able to give complete attention to legislation. This will bring an improvement in the quality of legislation

Javed Ahmed Malik
Country Representative - Democracy Reporting International



I consider Dr. Waqas report on local government for Centre for peace, development, and reforms really timely and relevant. It is also probably first on the subject for Azad Kashmir which is a remarkable achievement. There is ample evidence that local governments develop local ground up institutions, make the public sector spending really impactful and can kick start local manufacturing and economic growth. The socio-economic indicators in Azad Kashmir are better than most other districts in Pakistan and its proud and great people are linked with global economies through family ties. However, lack of local governments could not translate these gains into development of advanced tourism industry, improved social services, local growth. I hope that political parties would put local government system as a priority on their agenda in Azad Kashmir.



Dr. Rashid Aftab (Director)
Riphah Institute of Public Policy
Riphah International University. Islamabad. Pakistan

I am pleased to read this report entitled "The Local Government System in Azad Jammu and Kashmir: A Background, Evaluation & Way Forward" and congratulate Dr. Waqas Ali on writing on important area. This report covers the historical perspective of Local Gov't (LG) system of AJ&K as well as the aspects pertaining to; challenges, role of Leadership, advantages, participation/ inclusiveness, youth role, new trends and responds to number of issues within the framework of LG system in AJ&K as well as policy recommendations as way forward. This report has added value in terms of the need of LG system in AJ&K as Local government elections are important for the participatory democracy and the system surely enables ordinary citizens to become responsible for the financial and administrative affairs of their areas and the create ownership of local populace due to the fact that problem-solving mechanism is available in their respective areas. This is a valuable contribution which is useful for; academicians, policy practitioners, gov't, NGOs and Development actors, International agencies, students and research scholars.



This study is an in-depth analysis of the genesis, exponential growth and eventual dysfunctionality of the Local Bodies System (LBS) in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K).

Taking a holistic approach, it examines the significance of the LBS for a conflict-ridden region such as AJ&K, and its vital role to mitigate and transform the intra-societal conflicts through a localized mechanism.

Introduced in the early 1960s, LBS provided a solid base for grassroots level politics and development in AJ&K and kept serving the purpose until it was put in abeyance by some vested forces under one pretext or the other.

Consequently, the absence of LBS disempowered the local communities and disenchanting a large number of young people from the political system that has become a lone domain of traditional political families or business tycoons.

In this background, the author makes a convincing argument for the immediate restoration of the system to create space for the people of AJ&K, particularly the youth to become a vibrant part of the decision-making process in AJ&K. Grassroots politics, socio-economic development and good governance would remain a figment of imagination until LBS is given due place in the body politics of AJ&K.

I hope that the Government of AJ&K and political parties would duly benefit from this study and get their act together for the immediate restoration of the Local Bodies System in the region.

Ershad Mahmud, Executive Director Centre for Peace, Development and Reforms (CPDR)



About the Author

Dr. Waqas Ali specializes in Governance & Peace-building and has been working on youth empowerment, and participatory governance since 2010. He is SUSI Scholar on American Political Development at University of Massachusetts USA, and also recipient of Commonwealth Professional Fellow on gender and peace-building. He has authored several policy papers and survey reports on governance issues, conflict resolution and youth empowerment in the context of AJ&K.



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