



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 01. July-September 2025. Page#. 4477-4488

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

Political Economy of Local Governance in KP: Power, Patronage, and Public Accountability

Saad Khalil

Former Commonwealth Shared Scholar at the University of Strathclyde, UK

saadkhalil.edu.pk@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

This study evaluates critically the political economy of local governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), in Pakistan through the lens of the interactions of power relations, patronage system, and accountability. Although legislative solutions like 18th and 25th Constitutional Amendments have sought to devolve power and to reinstate peripheral regions, in terms of local democratic governance, in view of ingrained informal authority, the practice is still limited by clientelist power politics. Based on theoretical insights and field evidence in the districts of Peshawar, Swat, Bannu, and the merged tribal areas, the paper demonstrates how the mediation of access to state resources is still practiced by the traditional elites (i.e., Maliks and Khans), political parties, and bureaucratic actors. The study points at the continued rent seeking activities, arbitrary allocation of funds, and laxity of supervising agencies that undermine the confidence of citizens and service delivery performance. Moreover, the marginalized communities especially the women and religious minorities are still not conspicuous at the local level when it comes to decision-making. The article provides a political economy perspective on the nature of proposed reform, arguing that it is important to go further than institutional design to structural incentives, elite capture and socio-political context in which governance practices are conducted in practice. It ends in a series of policy recommendations aimed at improving civic education, improving the means of accountability, and protecting local institutions against political intrusion.

Keywords: Political Economy, Local Governance, Power, Patronage, Public Accountability.

Introduction

The history of local governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, is a long process of changes that have occurred since independence, with the author going through the history of colonial rule, military rule, and the various experiments of democracy. Devolved governance in Pakistan has its constitutional basis with the implementation of decentralization reforms and especially after the 18th Amendment to the constitution in 2010 (Nizamani & Sheikh, 2021). In KP, these reforms have been implemented with the help of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act (LGA) 2013 to institutionalize the district as the unit of governance and to streamline decision making to the grass root level. Nonetheless, with these reforms, the province is still experiencing significant problems of governance. These are poor fiscal independence, politically-motivated appointments and doubling of power among political and bureaucratic players (Cheema, Khan, & Myerson, 2010). The social fabric of KP is also very complicated, with urban centers, rural settlements, and newly consolidated tribal districts, making it increasingly difficult to standardize local governance issue over time in the area (Shah, 2014).

The significance of political economy as a theoretical framework to conceive the local governance in KP is its capacity to explain not only the way in which things are designed, but also the forces

that are not usually visible and are socio-political in nature. Political economy is not to study the formal institutions of politics itself- it inquires into the influences of informal norms and elite interests as well as path dependencies to the taking of decisions and the allocation of resources (Keefer & Khemani, 2005). Elected representatives in KP interact with traditional elites like Maliks and Khans, and administrative bureaucracies to describe the degree of co-existence of informal power networks with formal institutions (Bari, 2017). This is especially so during the process of development planning and disbursements of funds where loyalty takes precedence and flaws the goals of transparency and equity that decentralization reforms are all about.

In this backdrop, the current research aims at questioning the structural and political foundations of local governance in KP in terms of political economy. In particular, it pays attention to three decisive dimensions, namely power, patronage, and accountability. The given dimensions offer a consistent explanation as to why decentralization efforts with good intentions do not necessarily lead to actual improvements in the outcomes of governance. The issue of power in the local context of KP is also highly interwoven with electoral politics and traditional systems of power whereby vested individuals use state resources, in order to strengthen their positions (Gazdar, 2011). The allocation of public goods is skewed by the patronage systems which usually work by using kin ties and political loyalties and also fosters poor institutional reputations. In the meantime, accountability mechanisms, including vertical (accountability by citizens to the leaders) and horizontal (mutual checking of state institutions) remain weak because of poor civic awareness, institutional overlap and politicization (International Crisis Group, 2015).

Research Questions

To address these concerns, this article explores the following key research questions:

1. How do power dynamics shape local governance in KP?
2. What role does patronage play in decision-making processes?
3. How effective is public accountability in KP's local governance?

These questions are designed to reveal the disconnect between formal decentralization policies and their actual implementation, highlighting the ways in which political incentives, elite networks, and institutional weaknesses collectively shape governance outcomes. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical evidence from KP, the study offers a grounded and critical account of why local governance reforms often falter, and what might be done to realign them with democratic principles and developmental goals.

Theoretical Framework

Political economy of governance can be described as a combination of economic and political forces that influence institutions, the decision making process and policies. It examines the distributions of power, resources, and legitimacy among the various actors in a political system and how the distributions determine the outcomes of governance (Hickey & Mohan, 2020). In the perspective of local governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), political economy analysis offers an insightful look at the causes of success or failure of some reforms beyond the formal layout of statutes or rules by taking a closer look at informal arrangements and interactions, patron-client networks, and entrenched institutional legacies that influence governance on the grass root level. The structure of power is one of the major notions of political economy. These may either be formal, e.g. elected representatives, statutory bodies and administrative hierarchies; or informal, e.g. tribal elders, biradari networks, religious elites, and traditional patrons. Both of their forms exist in KP and have a determinant effect on governance. Legally custodial Union and Tehsil

Councils have the mandate to allocate resources and development planning powers, yet many work in the shade of the informal forces, like Maliks or Khans, whose legitimacy rests in the historical and cultural grounds rather than in the authority granted by election (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006). This is the duality that erodes responsibility within institutions and leads to an elite takeover of state resources.

Relationships of patronage and clientelism are part of local government political economy. In these arrangements political actors offer political favors like jobs, contracts, development funds in exchange of political loyalty/ electoral support. Such a transactional character of politics compromises meritocracy and institutionalized service delivery and creates allocative inefficiency and inequity. Research findings indicate that development funds in most of the districts of KP, are diverted by elected officials because of voter affiliation or voter loyalty networks (Keefer & Khemani, 2005). The lack of institutional checks and balances further promotes this kind of rent-seeking behavior since political survival in such a context will depend on the preservation of clientelist networks instead of the political performance or the good of the populace.

The third pillar of this theoretical framework is accountability, and it is the process through which the actions of the public officials are accredited. It can either be in a vertical form, whereby its citizens observe and punish its leaders according to their whims or through the elections or through street demonstrations or the horizontal form whereby there is checking of the government within the government, which entails audits, ombudsman, and judicial control (O'Donnell, 1998). Nevertheless, the two types of accountability are low in KP. Political interference and resource shortage have curtailed the efforts of such bodies as the KP Ehtesab Commission though it was formed to counter the effectiveness of bodies such as the one that was formed. In the meantime, the civil society and media organizations are limited in rural locations where the place of power is strictly dominated by local elites (Bano, 2008).

On the theoretical front, several theories describe these dynamics. Clientelism theory refers to that relationship between the voters and the politicians that is characterized by reciprocity of favors given and favors received (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). In KP, this is the reason why growth is not even and it is usually politically driven and not guided by objective planning. In a similar manner, the rent-seeking theory in the concepts of public choice economy indicates that the officials of a state institution usually exploit the state resources to benefit privately in institutions with no or weak limitations (Krueger, 1974).

Also informing the analysis is the theory of decentralization and subsidiarity. Decentralization is the transfer of power by the central to the local and the principle of subsidiarity, often highlighted in decentralization, is that the decisions should be taken at the lowest possible level so that they are effective and accountable. Nevertheless, in both KP and Pakistan in general, decentralization has been uneven and largely tokenistic, and provincial governments to date have not wanted to cede *de facto* power to local structures (Smoke, 2015). The upshot is the creating of a discontinuity between *de jure* power and *de facto* power, which reduces transformative capacity of local governance. Institutionalism, in particular, historical institutionalism and path dependency theory, contribute further to the comprehension of local governance environment of KP. According to these views, institutions change gradually and they are perceived to be influenced by a history and therefore radical reforming is not easy. The colonial past administrative traditions such as centralization of power and bureaucracy dominance in KP continue to be practiced even after the decentralization initiatives (Mahmood, 2010). A more

recent example of how entrenched norms of institutional resistance to change and opposition by traditional players can impede or prevent reform, further entrenching power asymmetries, is provided by the integration of FATA into KP.

Historical Context of Local Governance in KP

During the colonial rule British strategic interests influenced the governance structures in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (then North-West Frontier Province) especially to govern the turbulent tribal belt bordering Afghanistan. Another part of the British system was based on the indirect rule with tribal elders (Maliks) and political agents (the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) established a form of governance that was unlike the rest of British India (International Crisis Group, 2009). It gave more weight to control more than development and reduced the level of democratic contributions and local governmental institutional arrangements. The administrative bifurcation of the "settled" and the tribal areas formed an inheritance of long-term governance issues that persisted even after independence (Yousaf & Kaka, 2021). The centralization of bureaucracy created by the colonial government, which also involved the all-mighty Deputy Commissioner system, did not vanish after 1947 and burrowed within hierarchical governance systems at the local level throughout KP. Post-Independence absence of consultative systems and participatory governance mechanisms and institutionalization of the same that were lacking during the colonial times led to weak premises of democratic decentralization.

The local governance systems also experienced mixed development and alternated between the military-driven devolution and democratic centralization since the independence of Pakistan. The first military ruler of Pakistan Ayub Khan initiated the Basic Democracies in 1959 that had little to do with the actual decentralization and instead the development of the controlled political base was just in question (Cheema et al., 2006). General Zia-ul-Haq did the same when he introduced the 1979 Local Government Ordinances, which redefined local bodies as tools of legitimacy as opposed to empowerment. The most ambitious plan was the devolution plan that the then General Musharraf had ushered in under Local Government Ordinance 2001 and transferred the administrative and financial powers to the district governments (Niaz, 2010). Such reforms were however compromised by poor institutional backing, no political ownership and reversal during the later civilian regimes. The similarity between these periods was that local governments have been used as political engineering instruments, usually divorced of democratic imperatives and long-term sustainability. In KP this resulted in disunified and uneven application of local government systems.

In 2010, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution signaled a paradigm shift in the federal set up in Pakistan which changed the functions of the federation and provincial government. Article 140-A required provinces to create local governments having devolved political, administrative and financial power. One of the responses to this was enactment of Local Government Act (LGA) 2013, which instituted elected local governments at the district, tehsil, and village levels in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Shah, 2014). Although heralded as a move towards grass-root democracy, the reality of its operationalization was full of problems of delayed elections, administrative overlaps, and no fiscal devolution (PILDAT, 2017). In addition, there was selective eagerness demonstrated by the political elite in KP in empowering local governments, which would be reversed or put on hold to gain strategic advantages. In as much as the 18th Amendment established a legal framework of decentralization, its selective and uneven

application was influenced by the provincial political economy. This has created a difference between constitutional dream and administrative reality.

The 2018 25th Constitutional Amendment was also a turning point since it has consolidated the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and applied the provincial legal framework and governance to these formerly semi-autonomous entities. It was aimed at offering region equal rights, legal protection, and institutional building (Khan et al., 2020). The integration process has however been slow and politically perilous especially in the expansion of the local government institutions. Most tribal districts do not have the basic infrastructure, administrative presence or clarity in jurisdiction and it has not been conducive to the implementation of the local governance systems. Moreover, formal governance is still accompanied by the traditional norms of governance which include the power of the elders in the tribe and the use of Jirgas, which makes the system of governance hybrid and contradictory (Yousaf, 2021). These contradictions have ensured that the mechanisms of accountability are weak and uneven and the populations at the local levels are not convinced about the efficiency of the state apparatus. Accordingly, the legal unification has taken place, but the substantive transformation of the governance is not complete.

Power Dynamics in KP's Local Governance

The local government system of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) exists in the highly interactive environment of official institutional and non-official power structures. Although the elected representatives are constitutional bodies to monitor development planning and distribution of resources at the district and tehsil level, the traditional elites (Maliks and Khans) still have quite a big say especially in the rural and tribal regions. The result of this duality is that it provides a landscape of fragmented governance, whereby formal decision-making procedures are frequently obscured by informal negotiations and elite brokerage. Khan (2020) explains that in KP, the existence of traditional sources of power can be partly attributed to the historical legitimacy of traditional leaders and their access to patronage networks that tend to enable them to broker between the state and communities. These informal actors may also be beyond the scope of the legal norms, which makes it difficult to institutionalize the practices of inclusive and accountable governance. Also, asymmetry in power between the bureaucrats and the elected local officials further undermines the democratic control particularly when the district administrators are not answerable to elected units but are appointed by the provincial government (Cheema et al., 2006).

The political parties like Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Awami National Party (ANP), and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) have played a critical role in the development of the grassroots politics in KP. Those parties organize electorates, present candidates and are usually an intermediary between people and the government. But they do not necessarily have constructive influence. To take one case in point, there is always the issue of the party patronage surpassing the merit-based decisions made and funds allocated to developments as well as jobs in the public sector being given to reward those loyal to the party instead of need in the community (Shah, 2014). In KP, the centralization of most local functions to provincial governments as a result of the prominence of PTI in the 2013 and 2018 elections contradicted the spirit of devolution. In addition, there is always an incidence of intra party squabbles and competition which may emanate to local organizations halting development projects. The local representatives with electoral mandates have problems with exercising autonomy, especially by political interference of top-tier

party leaderships. In this respect, party-centrism political culture in KP speeds and hinders local democracy based on the internal practices and decentralization agendas of the parties in command.

There is low involvement of women in local governance of KP with regard to socio-cultural barriers, poor institutional backing and patriarchal values. Although there are constitutional guarantees and reserved seats of women in the Local Government Acts, the female councilors are usually faced with difficulties in claiming their roles. They are often left out of the main decision-making activities, and assigned the roles of being mere representation or powerless (Zia & Bari, 2021). In most rural regions, female representatives who were elected in various regions are either chosen by the men in their families or attendance to the council meetings are prohibited. According to a study conducted by the Aurat Foundation in 2018, the voter turnout of women in the number of districts was lower than 10% as a result of active social boycotts and threats (Aurat Foundation, 2018). This omission does not only restrict gender-friendly policymaking but also strengthens pre-existing hierarchies in the local governance. However, in some cases women have proved to be good leaders, especially in the urban centers such as Peshawar and Mardan, which demonstrates that institutional changes and civic education can help address these obstacles partially provided with the help of local governments and civil society.

The local personnel hold the structural marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities in KP that include Christians and members of Hindu, Sikh, and Kalash groups. Although provisions are made in the local bodies to reserve seats to minorities yet such seats are usually filled without electoral competition and such representation does not amount to substantive representation. Limited access to development funds and marginal role in the decision-making in the council was caused by the report of the minority representative which was often tokenistic and without political backing (ICG, 2019). The issue is further aggravated in tribal and conflict areas where the security issue and conservative religious settings do not provide any room to the minority players. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2020) has noted instances when the minority councillors were not allowed to speak or were not included in deliberations on how the community should be developed. This increases their disenfranchisement and weakens the concept of participatory democracy. With power relations in KP changing dynamically even after the merger of FATA, the vital question is how to ensure the substantive representation of minorities, which cannot only be ensured through legal protection, but also through the political will and capacity building programs.

Patronage and Clientelism in Local Governance

Patronage politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) still defines the parameters of local governance through its effects on the allocation of development projects, jobs and other administrative benefits. Those in political office can utilise their office to distribute discretionary development schemes with the aim of shoring up loyalty and fixing the electorate. Such patronage allows elected officials to direct certain benefits, including water schemes, road infrastructure, and school upgrades, towards particular factions of voters or constituency and avoid the planning based on merit or need (Cheema, 2023). Even the rewards of employment in the public sector are quite often given by non-transparent means with political affiliation being a stronger determinant than qualification. The likes of administrative considerations exerted in the forms of fast-tracking files, appointment of loyalists in important posts at the levels of tehsils and unions, also provide good examples of the informal ways in which power is exercised.

The case studies conducted in the districts of Swat and Peshawar explain that the political actors often allocate public funds in the districts where the stakes are high or in the areas that have a strong voter base. As an example, in cases where there is an overwhelming majority in union councils, it is likely to be allocated more development funds than opposition constituencies (Yousaf, 2022). This does not only distort the fair sharing of resources, but it also institutionalizes the vote-buying process in the name of local development. In addition to that, the local councilors have been identified to offer municipal employment, sanitation contracts or road works on the basis of giving political support during elections. These kinds of transactional politics also consolidate clientelism especially in rural KP since the dependence on state resources is high and few providers of other services are available.

This patronage-based system is a serious setback in terms of the quality and fairness of delivery of public services. Developmental activities are also distorted in favor of politically affiliated regions at the expense of deprived populations. Public officials, who are usually hired based on political ties and not on merit, are neither competent nor have the freedom to impose regulations or develop a plan (Khan & Hussain, 2023). Innovation and accountability in the bureaucracy are put off by the lack of performance based incentive and the threat of political punishment. As a result, such services as education, supply of water, and waste disposal are uneven and below standard and particularly in the peripheral districts and former tribal regions.

Finally, patronage and clientelism not only help to strengthen the position of political elites but also deprive people of the trust in formal institutions. The participation of citizens through participatory mechanisms is weakened by the citizenry who may regard local governments as a means through which their elite can enrich themselves instead of serving the people. The cycle is also continued by the fact that political actors, who have gained a benefit out of such networks, oppose reforms that would create transparency or would decentralize power to technocratic institutions. It is therefore not just a matter of repairing the way KP is run through legal fixes but rather a matter of restructuring political incentives, civic education and reinforcement in institutional checks and balances to transform the logic of governance in KP into one that is based on legality rather than on loyalty.

Public Accountability Mechanisms

The aim of public accountability mechanisms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is to make the local governance transparent and the public interest driven. Local councils are one of the formal mechanisms that help to check on development action, approve budgets and present the issues of citizens to the government by the elected leaders. Besides, setting up of oversight institutions like the KP Ehtesab Commission (KPEC) which is planned as a free standing anti-corruption authority, was also a significant move towards institutionalization of accountability. Likewise, the audit systems facilitated by the Auditor General of Pakistan and the internal audit departments are required to inspect the spending and detect the occurrence of financial anomalies within the local bodies (Shah, 2020). Nevertheless, these formal mechanisms are usually affected by low autonomy, political manipulation and insufficiency of funds, thus limiting their effectiveness in their operation.

Informal channels of accountability have become very pronounced along with institutional mechanisms. Not only has the media, traditional as well as electronic, been useful as a watchdog by exposing corruption scandals, it has also raised concern over mismanagement and increased the grievances of citizens. Civil society organizations (CSOs) especially in urban KP have also used

their mobilizing ability to lobby the citizens to demand better service delivery, conduct social auditing as well as lobbying reforms. Moreover, local government performance is grass-rooted-checked by populist organisations (e.g. protests against poor local government services or discrimination) (Siddiqui, 2023). Such bottom-up pressures are crucial, particularly where formal monitoring is lax or corrupted, but they are much less effective depending on political environment, civil space and access to information.

Even with such accountability mechanisms in place, structural problems still persist to affect their success. The failure to enforce the existing policies is one of the most serious problems as even the detected wrongdoing is not followed by punitive measures in relation to politically influential actors very often. Corruption also prevails and it is sometimes obscured by bureaucracy, or is shielded by informal systems. The lack of transparency is further rooted in the lack of widespread access to financial data and decision-making, and in many local bodies, outdated information on the budgets or development plans is not kept, or not published (Ahmed & Bano, 2021). Elite capture - domination of the local institutions by strong people results in corruption of accountability, hijacking of formal practices and exclusion of citizenry. Enhancing accountability in KP thus demands institutional reforms that not only entail the enhancement of institutional capacity/independence, but also accords citizens the capacity and the tools with which to keep their representatives accountable.

Case Studies

The provincial capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) at Peshawar has shown both the progressive steps as well as the challenges in local governance. The use of citizen facilitation centers in the digitization process of the KP government can be termed as one of its success stories as one of its goals was to eliminate bureaucratic red tape and enhance service delivery. Khan and Ahmad (2022) note that these centers increased transparency and the satisfaction of citizens with access to municipality-related services, especially the access to birth certificates and land records. But on the other hand, local councils across Peshawar were found to have complained of lack of fiscal autonomy and delay in the release of funds thus delaying the efficient use of funds released to execute development related work. Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI, 2023) conducted interviews that revealed that the political interference of provincial legislators would often supersede the will of the local representatives, and the distinction between the devolved authority and centralized control was becoming increasingly imprecise.

On the contrary, other districts that are Swat and Bannu give a mixed picture. In Swat, Community mobilization and social audit have been carried out through the active participation of the civil society organizations. As an illustration, the Centre of Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI, 2021) observed that local NGOs in Swat active in budget transparency initiatives forced tehsil municipal administrations to post annual budgets online as well as hold public hearings. This model of participatory governance made the locals more accountable and produced a platform where citizens could challenge spending decisions. But in Bannu clientelism had not been overcome. In the case of southern KP, development schemes and job opportunities used to be diverted to support bases by local political elites as was reported in the study by Ahmed et al. (2021). As a result, meritocratic service provision was affected where infrastructure projects were delayed or implemented below quality level as a result of nepotistic procurement of contractors. Even more structural issues are established in the newly merged tribal areas (previously FATA) in the governance. Though the 25th Constitutional Amendment of 2018 vowed to include the areas

in the local system of governance of the province of KP, field reports indicate that the process has been very slow and inconsistent. A 2022 field survey by the FATA Research Centre listed the absence of administrative capacity, poor jurisdictional clarity, and the lack of elected local bodies as key limitations on effective governance by local administrators in Khyber and Bajaur. Maliks and informal jirga systems continue to control dispute resolution and resource distribution disregarding the formal institutions (Yousaf, 2022). There is also a situation of deficiency of budgetary transparency and citizen involvement in the processes of planning as shown in the public finance tracking reports. As an example, the Accountability Lab Pakistan (2023) wrote that the health and education budget in the Mohmand district were either late or misappropriated without comment and this increased the development divide and disillusionment among the citizens.

Policy Recommendations

In an attempt to maximize on the workability of local governance in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), one of the primary recommendations would be that of institutionalization of reforms that would entrench local autonomy. Although the 18th Amendment provides such devolution, the provincial governments have significant influence over fiscal transfers and administrative appointments which is detrimental to the local capacity (Cheema, Khan, & Myerson, 2022). Amendments to legislature must promise fiscal transfers that are guaranteed and on time, a more definite granting of jurisdiction to tehsil and union councils and immunity of local government against arbitrary dissolution. Empowering KP Local Government Commission by giving it the powers to monitor, dispute resolution, and performance appraisal would also facilitate the institutionalization of this autonomy of the local bodies. Moreover, it is possible to imbed the multi-year development planning on the district level and align it with provincial planning to foster the continuity and decrease the budgets politicization (Ali, 2023).

To restore merit based governance it is important to deal with patronage and clientelism. An acceptable approach is the institutionalization of merit hiring via district-level public service commissions, consistent tests, and digital score cards. Hussain and Safi (2021) observe that hiring in the municipal personnel on merciless grounds considerably damages capacity and the morale particularly in the regions of southern KP. Likewise, the elite capture can be limited by participatory budgeting wherein the money is allocated according to the needs assessment, not according to the political affiliations. Programs such as the Pakistan Public Financial Management Reform Strategy (PFMRS) when localized may be able to give the frameworks of transparent use of funds. The development plans should be evaluated through needs-based assessments and third-party checks, so that resources are never skewed towards the political strongholds, as it has been the case repeatedly in Bannu, Dir, Kohat (International Budget Partnership, 2022).

Enhancing accountability tools is still the focus of a sustainable reform. Online facilities where the citizen can track his/her budget in real-time, address his grievances, and register complaints, like the KP Citizen Portal, ought to be extended particularly in underrepresented districts. Shah and Yasin (2022) confirm that these tools have increased the service delivery feedback loops by a significant margin in Peshawar and in Abbottabad. The citizen oversight committees have to be institutionalized in the form of a local bylaw so that a uniform feedback mechanism is ensured by it and more so a feedback by the women and the minorities. Participatory planning and participatory governance ought to be promoted through civic education and social mobilisation

at the grassroots levels. Awareness of the role played by citizens in local development can be constructed through school curricula, media campaigns and CSO partnerships. In the end, it will be necessary to reinforce the democratic culture of local government by harmonizing institutions, incentives, and citizen demands in a coherent and citizen-oriented system of governance.

Conclusion

The political economy of local governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa indicates a multi-layered picture of formal arrangements, informal powers as well as competing interests that influence the actual governance outcomes. Although subsequent reforms, in particular after the 18th Amendment had led to extension of the decentralization and the participatory governance framework, the results thereof are also not quite satisfactory. The spirit of devolution has been watered down with traditional power elites, administrative legacies and poor enforcement of institutions. Informal power structures like tribal groups and politically well-connected families continue to co-exist alongside elected officials and this dual power hierarchy makes it difficult to deliver service and implement policies. Consequently, democratic practices within KP tend to be unable to reach into further socio-political stratifications and result in selective governance, elite appropriation and uneven accountability.

The essence of this struggle is that patronage and clientelist webs that involve the utilisation of office and development programs in political entrenchment is deep-rooted. Rather than benefiting inclusiveness and need-based governance, resources are often directed at loyal political groups or individuals who might have personal relations with the decision-makers. This vitiates meritocratic conventions, skews public priorities and exacerbates inequality between districts and communities. Also, politicization of appointments and expenditure on funding makes the local institutions less efficient and less credible, and restricts the capability of officials or citizens with real motivation to affect the outcome. Although pockets of success have been achieved, especially in those areas where civil society and media has advocated so as to achieve transparency, the victories are isolated rather than systemic.

To achieve the democratic potential of its local governance, the current attention on the development of institutional frameworks should change in the sense that more should be done to change the incentive structure around local politics. Reforms should see to it that formal mechanisms of accountability are not subjected to political manipulation and yet, there is the necessary awakening of the grassroots and the ideals of citizenship. Transparent community empowerment and eliminating the informal manipulation space may be achieved with digital governance, participatory planning models, and citizen feedback loops. Above all, the political will to embrace devolution should not be merely rhetoric and the provincial and national players should appreciate that strengthening the local governments is not a move to compromise the central governments but a pre-requisite to sustainable and inclusive growth. The holistic and politically based approach is the only way that local governance in KP can shift away the symbolic form of decentralization to effective democratic process.

References

Ahmed, S., & Bano, M. (2021). *Corruption and Transparency in Local Bodies in Pakistan*. Islamabad: CERP.

- Ahmed, T., Yousaf, F., & Wazir, S. (2021). *Patronage Politics in Southern KP: A District-Level Analysis*. Peshawar: Research Society for Governance.
- Ali, S. (2023). *Bridging Provincial-Local Gaps in Pakistan's Development Planning*. Islamabad: Sustainable Development Review.
- Aurat Foundation. (2018). *Women's Political Participation in KP: Challenges and Opportunities*. Islamabad.
- Bano, M. (2008). *Contesting Ideologies and Struggle for Authority: State–Madrasa Engagement in Pakistan*. *IDS Bulletin*, 39(5), 80–87.
- Bari, F. (2017). *Gender and Power in Pakistan's Local Government Systems*. UN Women.
- Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI). (2021). *Social Audits in Local Governance: Case Studies from KP*. Islamabad.
- Cheema, A., Khan, A., & Myerson, R. (2010). *Breaking the Countercyclical Pattern of Local Democracy in Pakistan*. International Growth Centre.
- Cheema, A., Khan, A., & Myerson, R. (2022). *Revitalizing Local Government in Pakistan: What Will It Take?* LUMS Policy Review.
- Cheema, A., Khwaja, A. I., & Qadir, A. (2006). *Local Government Reform in Pakistan: Context, Content and Causes*. Harvard University Working Paper.
- Cheema, M. (2023). *Discretionary Politics in KP's Development Spending*. PIDE Policy Brief.
- FATA Research Centre. (2022). *Post-Merger Governance in Former FATA: A District-Level Study*. Islamabad.
- Gazdar, H. (2011). *Social Protection in Pakistan: In the Midst of a Paradigm Shift?* *IDS Bulletin*, 42(2), 53–58.
- Hickey, S., & Mohan, G. (2020). *Relocating Political Economy: The Promise of a New Approach to Development*. *World Development*, 127, 104807.
- Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. (2020). *State of Human Rights in Pakistan 2019*. Lahore.
- Hussain, M., & Safi, K. (2021). *Municipal Human Resource Deficits in Southern KP*. Policy Forum KP.
- International Budget Partnership. (2022). *Pakistan Budget Transparency Report*. Washington, DC.
- International Crisis Group. (2009). *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA*. Asia Report No. 178.
- International Crisis Group. (2015). *Revisiting Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Pakistan: Opportunities and Pitfalls*. Asia Report No. 271.
- International Crisis Group. (2019). *Women, Violence and Local Governance in Pakistan*. Asia Briefing No. 158.
- Keefer, P., & Khemani, S. (2005). *Democracy, Public Expenditures, and the Poor: Understanding Political Incentives for Providing Public Services*. World Bank Research Working Paper.
- Khan, M. (2020). *The Political Marketplace of KP's District Politics*. Policy Research Collective.
- Khan, R., Ahmad, M. (2022). *Digitization and Local Governance in KP: A Case Study of Citizen Facilitation Centers*. *Journal of E-Governance Studies*, 18(1), 45–62.
- Khan, T., Wazir, A., & Afridi, M. (2020). *The FATA Merger: Issues and Challenges*. PIPS Policy Paper.
- Kitschelt, H., & Wilkinson, S. I. (2007). *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*. Cambridge University Press.

- Krueger, A. O. (1974). *The Political Economy of the Rent-Seeking Society*. *American Economic Review*, 64(3), 291–303.
- Mahmood, K. (2010). *Administrative Culture in Pakistan*. *Pakistan Development Review*, 49(4), 995–1010.
- Niaz, I. (2010). *The Culture of Power and Governance of Pakistan 1947–2008*. Oxford University Press.
- Nizamani, H., & Sheikh, A. (2021). *Post-18th Amendment Decentralization in Pakistan: Progress and Pitfalls*. IDS Working Paper Series.
- O'Donnell, G. (1998). *Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies*. *Journal of Democracy*, 9(3), 112–126.
- PILDAT. (2017). *Assessment of the Quality of Democracy in Pakistan: 2016*. Islamabad.
- Shah, A. (2014). *The Centralization-Decentralization Cycle in Pakistan*. In: J. J. Ong & C. Holbig (Eds.), *Decentralization in Asia*. Routledge.
- Shah, M. (2020). *Auditing the Local: Institutional Constraints in Pakistan's Oversight Architecture*. Governance Watch Report.
- Shah, N., & Yasin, T. (2022). *Citizen Portals and Digital Accountability in KP: Lessons from Abbottabad and Peshawar*. *Tech & Governance Quarterly*, 3(2), 11–28.
- Siddiqui, H. (2023). *Civil Society, Public Protest, and Local Accountability in Pakistan*. *IDS Bulletin*, 54(2), 66–80.
- Smoke, P. (2015). *Rethinking Decentralization: Assessing the Evidence and the Implications*. In: Martinez-Vazquez, J. & Vaillancourt, F. (Eds.), *Decentralization in Developing Countries*. Edward Elgar.
- Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). (2023). *Provincial-Local Coordination in KP: Challenges and Innovations*. Islamabad.
- Yousaf, F. (2021). *The Hybrid Governance Model in Post-Merger FATA: Challenges and Opportunities*. *South Asian Studies*, 36(1), 73–91.
- Yousaf, F. (2022). *Vote Banks and Budget Allocations: A Study of KP Local Politics*. *Pakistan Governance Review*, 5(1), 27–44.
- Yousaf, F., & Kaka, S. (2021). *Colonial Governance Legacies in KP: Continuities and Disjunctures*. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 34(3), 415–432.