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Search

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Countries

Research

Funding

Blog

Events

About

Home / **Blog** / The role of election...

Authors



[Asad Liaqat](#)

PhD candidate
Harvard University



[Michael Callen](#)

Assistant Professor of Economics and Strategic
Management
University of California - San Diego



[Ali Cheema](#)

Lead Academic
Pakistan Team, Researcher



[Adnan Khan](#)

Research and Policy Director, Lecturer, Co-chair
Commission on State Fragility, Growth and
Development
London School of Economics and Political Science
(LSE)

[Muhammad Farooq Naseer](#)

Assistant Professor
Lahore University of Management Sciences



Jacob Shapiro

Assistant Professor of Politics and International Affairs

Princeton University

Published on: 16 Mar 2017

Countries: Pakistan

Research themes: State

The role of election competition in strengthening Pakistan's fledgling local democracy

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Using results and original survey data from the November 2015 local government elections in the Sargodha District of rural Punjab, Pakistan, insights are offered into the institutional and organisational responses that can help strengthen local democracy. These results form part of a larger research project being conducted by the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (IDEAS), which examines how voters make choices broadly. It explores the relative weight voters give to party performance vs. candidates' political and bureaucratic connections. It

highlights the need for reporting, debate and a rule-based separation of functions and finances to strengthen local democracy in Pakistan.

Building a strong democracy through local elections

The strength of local democracy depends on the stability and coherence of party structures as well as on the institutional framework within which parties operate and elections take place. Party based local elections under a democratically elected government were held for the first time in Punjab in late 2015. The elections saw [high voter turnout](#), with 61 percent of eligible voters casting a ballot (an increase from 58 percent in the 2013 national government elections).

While many argue that the very strength of democratic institutions comes from repeated cycles of stable elections and transfers of power, it is worth examining the direction local democracy in Pakistan is headed in. This can help to inform what actions parties and other institutions can take to bring about desirable outcomes.

Strong opposition as a democratic safeguard

One of the fundamental constitutive elements of a well-functioning democracy is the existence of meaningful competition among parties for elected positions. If strong opposition parties exist and maintain links with voters, they can keep the incumbent party in check by incentivizing them to perform better through the threat of electoral defeat in subsequent elections.



REUTERS/Jerry Lampen (PAKISTAN)

Short falls in the Sargodha District ensuring meaningful election competition:

1) Opposition parties' failure to field candidates

In Sargodha, the main opposition party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), could only field candidates for the office of union council (UC) chairperson (directly elected local government office) in 64 out of the 164 rural UCs that comprise the district council. Other opposition parties failed even more miserably: Pakistan People's Party fielded candidates in a mere 8 union councils, and PML-Q and Jamaat-e-Islami only fielded two candidates each.

2) Lacklustre performance of opposition parties at local elections

Among the union councils where PTI did field a candidate, it managed a vote share higher than 30 percent in only half of them, winning a total of 12 union council chairman seats. The only other opposition party that won any seats was the PPP, which succeeded in four out of the eight seats that it contested. In total, opposition parties only won 16 out of the 164 union council chairman seats in Sargodha. Opposition parties held less than 10 percent of the seats in the district council of Sargodha at the time of these elections.

3) Independent candidates emerging to fill the vacuum of a viable opposition

In a staggering 84 percent of union councils, at least one independent candidate contested. Independents won the chairman position in 68 out of 164 union councils. Put differently, independents won 49 percent of the seats where at least one independent was contesting. This phenomenon represents a corrosion of party-based accountability, weakens the relationship between local and national democracy, and reduces political ownership of the system among opposition parties.

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Strengthening local democracy:

1) Selecting honest, competent and motivated candidates

A key element of a well-functioning democracy is the ability of political parties to select the “right” candidates. Democratic theorists, such as James Madison, have emphasized the critical role parties play in vetting potential elected officials. Sargodha's local government election, with its weak opposition parties, presents an ideal setting for analysing the robustness of candidate selection of the provincial ruling party, PML-N. PML-N party officials clearly played this gate-keeping role. Field observations suggests that the majority of candidates who ran as independents were jockeying vigorously for endorsement by the ruling party prior to the allocation of tickets.

Evidence suggests that the selection process of the ruling party isn't extremely robust. In one-third of union councils where there was intra-party consensus over the endorsement, voters rejected the ruling party candidate in favour of an independent. The current process of candidate selection, which is influenced by district level caucuses, may work for party bosses but it isn't getting selection right in the eyes of the voters. A strength of local elections is that it reveals this disconnect.

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2) Local politicians are critical

Union council positions are clearly valuable, but why? In Punjab, the provincial government wields considerable authority in the assignment of functions and finances to local governments. Local politicians are therefore an important node of mediation between citizens and higher tier politicians. Local politicians, in other words, have tremendous scope to connect people to their government and ensure their needs are represented.

3) Reporting, debate and rules

Clearly, much work needs to be done at multiple levels to strengthen the local democratic project in Pakistan. A good starting point would be a public report on the state of local democracy, performed by the Election Commission. A rating needs to be conducted on the strength of democracy using defined metrics across Pakistan's different rural and urban local councils and governments. The report should point out failures at the level of the ruling and

opposition parties in order to generate public pressure on these organisations. Modernising election processes, such as selection, and taking actions to field candidates, will help build the foundations of a strong local democracy.

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At the legislative level, the issue of independents needs to be seriously debated. It is misleading to call a system party-based if the main opposition party is only able to field candidates in a fraction of constituencies. The current system is subject to accusations of political capture by opposition parties, which is likely to weaken political ownership.

There is also a need to create a rule-based separation of functions and finances between local and provincial governments that are enforced through bipartisan institutions. The recent action by the Government of Punjab in announcing a rule-based fiscal transfer award for local governments (the PFC Award) is a step in the right direction.

4) Local level political accountability

Finally, it is important for the provincial government to recognize that weak political accountability at the local level creates real risks for poor service delivery and corruption. These problems are likely to damage its reputation in the 2018 General Election. Given weak party-based competition and the resulting weak performance incentives for local politicians, it is critically important to enforce the Punjab PFC's recommendation of instituting administrative accountability mechanisms such as third-party and citizen audits. This is important to ensure that local governments deliver to voters.

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