**[Local democracy](https://www.dawn.com/news/1719082/local-democracy)**

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THE Sindh government recently informed the ECP of its inability to hold local elections soon, citing the shortage of police personnel as the key reason. In the same vein, amendments to the Sindh Local Government Act were deliberated in the provincial cabinet.

The amendments propose that the Karachi mayor become the chair of the Sindh Solid Waste Management Board and the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board, and lead the governing body of the Karachi Development Authority. But these would be cosmetic reforms. The provincial administration would still retain control of land allotment and development matters, housing, disaster management, urban transportation, law and order, building and zoning control, urban and regional planning, heritage, etc. No elected local tier will have oversight in these matters.

The trust deficit between local political entities and the provincial administration, their competition for the control of development and management initiatives, and the absence of a meaningful dialogue explain this situation.

With the exception of the Jamaat-i-Islami, no political party is actively demanding local elections or calling for resource allocations for local tiers or better local governance. Electoral success may be a means for the JI to gain ground in other government tiers. But despite its efforts, it has not succeeded in making Karachi’s governance a rallying point for the masses.

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The MQM, which once styled itself as the sole arbiter of local government (LG), is reeling from internal crises. The PTI, with its electoral strength in Karachi, has failed to use its popularity to come up with an agenda for reform. Ironically, Sindh’s ruling party may be set to capture the office of mayor with its low-value but high-visibility ventures such as a few public buses and road repair works.

Grassroots democracy requires more than cosmetic reforms.

Despite its significance for local governance, no political party has successfully evolved a charter of local democracy which could appeal to all. In its heyday, the MQM was tagged as the harbinger of LGs but its focus remained on the urban areas. Interestingly, military dictatorships helped instal elected LGs in the country, presumably to project their ‘legitimacy’. In other words, such LGs became a façade for ‘democracy’ and enabled despotic regimes to establish basic engagement with the masses.

Elected federal and provincial governments saw the LG tier as a competitor, not a collaborating arm. Each tier of government uses power and resources to show performance. High-visibility interventions become the battleground for showing progress, with legislators inaugurating street and road works, water supply projects and power supply lines, as well as distributing relief goods to publicly project performance. It is ironic that MNAs, MPAs and senators receive development grants to spend on very rudimentary municipal tasks. One needs to rationalise the role of various tiers of government and also question the allocation of development funds to legislators.

Present-day governance depends largely on contracting essential tasks to commercial enterprises. Procurement of services, management and maintenance tasks, regulatory functions, monitoring and evaluation are important functions where government agencies engage private service providers through public procurement laws.

LG institutions require capacity in small- to medium-scale maintenance and development works. Previously, the departments had sufficient capacity to undertake basic road repairs, clean sewers and local drains, fix local water supply, parking management, allocate spaces for hawkers in public spaces etc. But because of the recruitment of political favourites by different governments and a general decline in administrative capacity, the current structure of local institutions may not deliver even through elected representatives. Be­­si­des the technology of communication, record keeping and routine administration have changed drastically. A complete overhaul is required for existing local institutions to keep pace.

The political equation in Karachi can only be balanced through an open dialogue. Under the leadership of the provincial government, a ‘Karachi Steering Committee’ can be notified. Such a body is recommended in almost all Karachi development plans and can include elected provincial assembly representatives (preferably from various political parties), chief executives of service delivery agencies, academia, civil society, media and autonomous agencies. Action should have mutual consensus. Power and resource sharing among various tiers of government, training and capacity building of councillors, a ‘Greater Karachi Region Plan’ to address present and future needs and a mechanism to address the collective complaints of residents could be a starting point. Many of these issues are vital not only for LGs but also the provincial and federal administrations.

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