

Elections and the Development of Democratic Local Governance

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I. Introduction

The intense scholarly interest in elections and electoral systems that has occurred for a quarter of a century or so continues today, seemingly unabated. Thousands of published works have been dedicated to the analysis of the features and effects of electoral systems and their related representational issues (Farrell 2001, 1–2; Katz 1992). The more recent literature published has further refined the understanding of electoral systems (Ames 1995; Carey and Shugart 1995; Powell 2000; Sartori 1997, for example) and now includes an extensive assessment of the role and impact of international elections assistance to the developing world (Bjornlund 2004). This wealth of scholarly study is a testament to the broad recognition of the profound importance of electoral systems in a democracy and this simple defining fact: electoral rules determine how votes are translated into seats and, in turn, who gets elected.

During this same period, much of the developing world and some industrialized nations have undertaken reform to decentralize the state and enhance the responsiveness and effectiveness of local governance.¹ Decentralization is best defined, when considered within the context of democratization, as an inherently political, multidimensional process of transferring power to popularly elected local government. It is the explicitly political realm of decentralization, electoral systems in particular, that is the core concern of this paper.² Here, *political* decentralization refers to the enhancement of local autonomy through political reform, primarily reform of the electoral or political party system to enhance local political pluralism and the provision of new means of citizen participation.

What does the wealth of literature, then, tell us about the operation and effects of electoral systems at the local level of government? Comparatively few publications, surprisingly, address the local level within the discussion of the national electoral system or examine the relative value of various local electoral reforms. To be sure, there appears to be a growing interest,³ but even today one cannot easily locate, for example, a discussion of intergovernmental political change in the developing world as a result of the choices made around local electoral or related political issues.⁴ This is puzzling given the strong international interest in decentralization and the prominence of local electoral systems in these intergovernmental reform efforts.⁵ Especially in the developing world, it is easy to assume that, because there is often little divergence between levels of government as far as electoral systems are concerned, the local level requires little attention. To the contrary, the specific features of local electoral systems—given their effects on representation, accountability, and intergovernmental politics—require close examination. These institutional features should be viewed not only as fundamental to the

¹ Throughout this paper, the terms “local” and “subnational” refer to any government below the national level and are used interchangeably.

² Administrative and financial decentralization can easily be as “political” as political decentralization, however. “Financial” refers to the authority of local governments to generate their own revenue, the receipt of fiscal transfers, and the expenditure of those resources. Administrative decentralization refers to the assumption by local governments of public and social service functions.

³ Recent publications on elections, local governance, and decentralization include Hopkin 2003; International IDEA 2003, 2004; Montero and Samuels 2004; O’Neill 2005.

⁴ Only a few of the major works in the transitions and democratization literature address decentralization and local government. These include the following: Dahl 1971; Diamond 1999; Diamond et al. 1999.

⁵ However, this may not be terribly surprising given that, until a decade or so ago, empirical studies of the politics of intergovernmental reform or of decentralization within the context of democratic development (as opposed to fiscal federalism and public administration reform, for example) received little consideration in the scholarly community or international financial institutions.

achievement of local political democracy, but also as the primary elements of effective political decentralization.

The first part of the paper--sections two through four--examines the principal issues surrounding local elections in the developing world. The following section reviews the importance of local elections generally and, in particular, during transitions to a political democracy. The third section addresses the general classification of electoral systems and reviews the representational effects of each. The fourth section outlines the major distinctions between the national and local system and examines the impact of decentralization on intergovernmental politics.

The second part of the paper--sections five through seven--examines the relationship between elections and decentralization. It attempts to define the major institutional features of local political democracy in the developing world. Much of the discussion revolves around the local electoral process and the components of local political autonomy. The paper also surveys a series of local systems across five regions of the developing world. By delving into a variety of representational issues and by considering political decentralization as more than simply convening an election, it is hoped that discussion hopes to help generate additional interest in the politics of democratic local governance and intergovernmental political relations.

Section five provides a proposal for the institutional design of a minimally politically autonomous local electoral system. These institutional requirements provide a sufficient political foundation for democratic local governance to flourish. To justify this approach, this section and the following one—section six—attempt to consider the full range of available local institutional variables. Section seven provides, in essence, a check on the preceding discussion through a brief survey of fifteen local electoral systems across five geographic regions of the developing world. Each of the local institutional variables is considered as part of the experience with decentralization in each of the fifteen countries. The final section brings together the principal observations and conclusions of the paper.

II. Local Elections and Democratic Local Governance

Local elections and the local governments that emerge from them should be generally viewed as fundamental to democratic transition and consolidation in the developing world.⁶ In practice, if not in theory (local elections are almost invariably viewed as part of a democratic transition and often follow soon after the national vote), the return of national electoral democracy alone is considered insufficient for democracy. The reasoning behind this view is reflective of the distinctiveness of local elections and the values inherent in the emergence of local electoral democracy or more broadly, democratic local governance.

First, local elections allow for more tailored representation of local interests within each of the hundreds or thousands of politico-administrative units into which the country has been carved. The implication here is that local elections should revolve primarily around the daily concerns that are of nearly exclusive interest to the community and about which the citizens care the most; e.g., school management, park clean-up, or sewage systems. Second, local elections facilitate the representation and inclusion of minority groups in political life—be they former combatants, religious organizations, women, or long- marginalized indigenous people (International IDEA 2003,).

⁶ See, for example, Dahl 1971; Diamond 1999; Lijphart 1999.

A third trait distinguishing local and national elections is that local elections tend to be associated with a close relationship between the elected official and the constituency within the local jurisdiction. In fact, the local official is located physically closer to the constituent and is typically a well-known member of the locality who understands important community issues. The citizen typically has more contact with local government than any other governmental level. Fourth, local elections are intimately tied to the formation and functioning of the national and local party systems. They provide a training ground for a younger generation of party leaders and independents aspiring to higher office. Local elections can help provide for rejuvenation of the party system. Fifth, local electoral competitions serve as a bellwether for developments in the national political system. They indicate important trends and attitudes in the electorate, and in many countries, they are treated as such by the national political establishment.

On the other hand, local elections can have deleterious effects. Some argue, if improperly convened, local elections can result in a weakened or fragmented national party system—or national unity overall. They also can be easily manipulated by religious leaders, wealthy candidates, or other influential figures in the locality. In such cases, the outcome—especially in the poorest and least educated areas of a country—is elite, authoritarian dominance of the local government (International IDEA 2003, 18). Finally, when the ruling party utilizes state resources and manipulates the system to gain local victories, elections can lend legitimacy to a superficially democratic regime.

III. General Classification of Electoral Systems: Where the National and Local Levels Converge

The basic tenets of electoral systems that have been so well defined by election scholars hold at both the national and local levels. The three component parts of every electoral system are district magnitude, ballot structure, and electoral formula. Each of these components comes into consideration at the local level as a country addresses the issue of political decentralization.

District magnitude refers to the number of seats to be filled in an election district. Districts with low magnitudes distribute seats less proportionally than districts with high magnitudes. A magnitude of one produces a two-party system, as it provides the incentive for opposition to coalesce around two positions to win the single seat. Examples include the election of a mayor in a municipality in which the candidate with a plurality of the votes wins or the election of the council in single-member, submunicipal districts or wards. As more seats are available with larger magnitudes, as seen in proportional systems, a larger number of parties emerge (Farrell 2001, 6; Powell 2000, 23–24). An example of this case is the election of a multimember council municipality-wide.

Ballot structure governs how the voters cast their votes. The ballot structure can vary from a single either/or selection to the ability to select from several candidates and rank them in order of preference. At the local level, a common concern is the nature and number of ballots. For example, if the mayor is elected separately from the council, two ballots may be used, one for each office. The appearance on the ballot of individual names and/or candidate photos as opposed to party labels may be an issue, and advocates of the former believe voters should know for whom they are voting so that they are better able to hold them accountable.

Finally, the *electoral formula* is the means of translating the votes into seats. Numerous formulas are used, but they also can be divided into three main groupings according to the principles of representation: plurality, majority, and proportion (Farrell 2001, 6). The first two

groupings are characteristic of majoritarian systems. Proportional systems award seats in proportion to the number of votes received. “Mixed” systems utilize elements of both.

Majoritarian systems are distinguished by their aim to produce a majority winner even if the result reflects a disproportion between votes cast and the number of seats won. Examples include the plurality or first-past-the-post system, which is the simplest: the candidate with the most votes, and not necessarily an absolute majority (50% plus 1 vote) of votes, wins. Another example is two-round voting, in which a second vote is held between the top two vote-getters if a candidate fails to receive an absolute majority in the first. Majoritarian systems are associated with single-member district voting and the desire to hold individual representatives directly accountable for their performance; clarity of responsibility is the watchword (International IDEA 2003, 19–20; Powell 2000, 50–51).

At the local level, majoritarian systems are typically characterized by candidates that run at-large municipality-wide or in submunicipal, single-member districts. In systems in which the council chooses the mayor, the question of how they are elected geographically can take center stage. The advantage of at-large election of the mayor is that the elected local official tends to be less parochial and more concerned with the community as a whole. One can argue that the parties want to maximize their electoral base and select candidates from across the municipal jurisdiction, which leads to broad-based representation. A major concern on the other hand, is that at-large candidates will all be drawn from the urban, populated areas of the municipality because most of the votes are in urban centers. These candidates are most likely to best represent the urban areas, if they win, to the detriment of rural, low-income residents.

Submunicipal, single-member district election is used to ensure that all areas of the municipality have a representative on the council. Each ward has a single councilor to turn to, and no area of the municipality can feel entirely left out of the representative process. Some argue, however, that this system results in overrepresentation of rural areas; creates parochial representation as opposed to a common, municipality-wide perspective on local problems; and allows candidates to win with a tiny proportion of the total municipal vote if candidates need only a plurality to be elected and if there are several candidates. For ward elections in multiparty systems, the dispersion of the vote raises the question of how much of a plurality is enough to claim a legitimate victory.

In *proportional representation systems*, the share of the seats won by a party is roughly proportional to the number of votes it received. Proportional systems are meant to reflect the composition (political, ethnic, or otherwise) of the electoral jurisdiction as a whole. They are viewed as allowing a fair representation of the electorate, and they encourage the participation of minority groups. The most popular example is the “list system” in which the parties each present a list of candidates (or may be required to offer only their party label), the party receives the seats according to its share of the vote, and the winning candidates are drawn from the list. Some lists are fixed and therefore cannot be altered by the voters; others are open, which allows the voter to select among candidates according to their preferences.

At the local level, the proportional system provides for the political reflection of the social composition of the municipality, which is especially important when diversity of representation is an issue in large urban areas. A proportional system locally does allow losing and minority parties to be represented and can help socialize anti-system groups. A local council will likely operate on the basis of party coalitions in support of or opposed to the government, often much like a miniature parliament. Support for the mayor could shift with shifting coalitions, making the maintenance of stable governance a concern (though the same or worse

can occur with a majoritarian system). With a proportional local system, the election of the mayor becomes an issue. Will the mayor be the candidate who receives the most votes, a candidate chosen by the winning party from its list, or the choice of a majority of the council? Will the mayor be elected on a ballot separate from the council slate or through some other means? The concern with the former three alternatives is the lack of direct representative link to the executive in the local administration.

A “mixed” or semi-proportional system attempts to combine majoritarian and proportional characteristics; as a result, it can have the best and worst characteristics of both types. Such systems are best designed carefully in accordance with the relevant local factors (International IDEA 2003, 21). Mixed systems can begin as an introduction—a partial reform—to a majoritarian or proportional system, if a country decides it is dissatisfied and wants to change the electoral structure. At all levels, mixed systems can create competition or tension between local officials elected proportionally and those elected by their own constituencies. To the extent that such rivalry provides for checks and balances locally between the mayor, who may have been elected directly, and the council, elected proportionally by party list, it can be a positive development (see the cases of Bulgaria and South Africa below).

IV. Intergovernmental Electoral Politics and Decentralization of the Party System: Where the National and Local Levels Diverge

The features generally found to be common to national and local electoral systems give way when political decentralization makes it onto the policy agenda and the interests of governmental levels immediately diverge. Efforts to enhance the political autonomy of local government, notably through local electoral reform, automatically present likely consequences—positive and negative, depending on perspective—for all levels of government. Concerns are almost invariably rooted in the operation of intergovernmental party politics; that is, in the defining characteristics or structure of the political party system.

Though many factors influence the degree of centralization of an intergovernmental system, one of the most important variables is the degree to which the political party system is centralized. In his seminal study more than 40 years ago, Riker, though he was examining federal systems in the developed and developing world, reached the following conclusion:

The federal relationship is centralized according to the degree to which parties organized to operate the central government control the parties organized to operate the constituent governments. This amounts to the assertion that the proximate cause of variations in the degree of centralization (or peripheralization) in the constitutional structure of a federalism is the variation in the degree of party centralization (Riker 1964, 129).

This relationship—the level of political control exercised by the center over the periphery—is naturally fundamental to any discussion of elections and decentralization or the development of democratic local governance.⁷ Central control is generally exercised through two

⁷ Keep in mind that the “center” may not necessarily be considered the national government in large or federal countries with strong intermediate-level systems. In such cases, the state, region, or other intermediate government entity may be viewed as central.

kinds of relationships: the degree to which the same political party controls both the center and local levels of government and the degree to which each of the political parties at the national level controls its party membership at the local level of government (Riker 1964, 131). Party nomination rules and informal nominating procedures are powerful tools for control because they determine the amount of influence national or local party leaders have over the selection of candidates. To the extent that local party leaders are influential in selecting candidates for the national legislative elections, the system tends to be increasingly decentralized. The intraparty dynamics forces career-minded politicians to be more responsive to local interests, because they help determine who gets on the ballot, when it comes to enacting legislation (Samuels 2000, 241–242; Willis, Garman, and Haggard 1998, 18). The same holds for local party members involved in selecting candidates for local elections; they tend to choose locally focused candidates.

Where the level of national control is strong, local elected officials tend to be *center-oriented* because the success of their administrations and political careers largely depends on respecting the dictates of the national party leadership. In essence, local officials are beholden to their national counterparts. National party involvement at the local level would likely include enforcing the party line in council decision making, using closed party list systems, providing campaign resources, and especially selecting or approving local party candidates for office.⁸ As evidenced in the country cases described below, when national party control is strong enough, local electoral system redesign is going to provide little opportunity for improved representation. Conversely, in more diffuse or relatively weak party systems, where party discipline is weak and candidate selection is more likely to be determined locally, local elected officials can demonstrate a varying measure of independence from higher-level party leaders. These officials tend to be *locality-oriented*, or focused on serving the interests of the local jurisdiction.

Of the many motivations for decentralization in the developing world, one of the most common is a strong reaction against authoritarian regimes, as seen, for example, in Benin, Brazil, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, and Ukraine. Highly centralized, hegemonic party systems or authoritarian regimes eventually begin to loosen up—or fall apart. The problems such a system generates include a sharp narrowing of the range of policy debate as decisions are increasingly made in small, highly exclusive groups. A significant portion of the electorate is marginalized, discontent grows, and the legitimacy of the system begins to crumble. The system also has difficulty responding innovatively to crises; it ossifies as the closed circle of aging national leaders fails to rejuvenate party membership in any way (Ryan 2004, 87). Motivations for political decentralization and party system reform, then, includes a desire to attract new members to the party; a breakdown of social hierarchies that has left party members less willing to accept the decisions imposed on them; the need to mobilize new or underrepresented societal interests; and/or, finally, the importance of being perceived as legitimate (Ware 1996, 266–269).

Under these circumstances, as political decentralization enters the realm of the acceptable, a variety of electoral and other reforms becomes available. Political decentralization becomes a question of matching objectives and means. It also requires balancing the interests of building or preserving a coherent, stable party system with the demand for improved local representation and accountability. The perils of party fragmentation include an inability to resolve problems through collective legislative action (because electoral incentives preclude it), rapid disillusionment with the political system, and increased incentives to enhance executive powers or renewed support for an authoritarian system (Dahl 1971, 225; Willis, Garman, and

⁸ See, for example, Poiré 2000.

Haggard 1999, 56). Some observers have been critical of decentralization generally on the grounds that it will not achieve its democratization goals, whereas others have argued that it has weakened already weak party systems by fragmenting their traditional political support and dispersing it among new parties (Ryan 2004; Sabatini 2003).

Decentralization could conceivably accelerate an ongoing process of party system decomposition and reorganization. It is more likely, however, that the impact of decentralization is too weak to halt the slide in legitimacy of a long-corrupted or illegitimate political party system that is well underway; decentralization does not by itself generate decomposition of the party system. One recommended solution to this dilemma, adopted by Costa Rica and advocated by reformers, is to establish one set of electoral rules to encourage improved representation and increased pluralism at the local level and another set at the national level in an effort to preserve coherence among a few parties nationally (Ryan 2004, and see below).

Electoralist arguments and political–institutional dynamics. In the last few years, a number of so-called electoralist arguments have emerged in an attempt to explain the political logic of decentralization. Generally, these studies highlight how the linkages between national and local politicians affect the leverage of both and help explain reform over a period of time of the intergovernmental system (Montero and Samuels 2004). As noted above, the interests and location of political party brokers—the party leaders who are most influential on politicians’ careers—help explain why some national politicians pay close attention to local officials but others do not. Willis, Garman, and Haggard (1999) argued that the bargaining power of national versus local party leaders is determined by their respective levels of influence over the legislators at the national level who are charged with enacting the reforms. If national legislators and local politicians are elected on the same day, for example, and the legislator relies on local politicians to deliver the votes in his or her district, then the legislator is likely to be responsive to demands for increased authority from local counterparts.

Decentralization itself alters the relative strength of the national legislator vis-à-vis the regional or local elected official. One can expect the political influence of the latter to increase relative to the former as the subnational system becomes stronger. As elections begin to revolve around regional or local issues and as voters begin to vote for regional or local candidates on their own merits, the internal party organization will reflect the shift, and power within the organization will move from the center to the periphery (Hopkin 2003, 230). Depending on the nature and degree of decentralization, one can also expect the emergence of regional or local brokers in a system that was once centralized and dominated by the national brokers.

Electoral calculations may affect the prospects for decentralization in other ways. O’Neill argues that when national elites believe their party allies can be successful in local elections, they will preemptively decentralize in an effort to maximize the gains of office. If party leaders believe their national electoral prospects are diminished, local offices become important to their future and so decentralizing to strengthen those offices becomes appealing (O’Neill 2003). Beer (2004) demonstrates that political competition at the local level in Mexico prompted the local elites to mobilize, win elections, and gain the fiscal transfers that came with local victories.

Elections and Conflict. Decentralization and the development of democratic local governance have long been associated in theory and empirical studies with the question of resolving intrastate conflict. The same holds for local elections, which, by transferring political authority to the local level, are inherently decentralizing.

When considering the impact of local elections, one can view them as politically centripetal or centrifugal, depending on the national context within which they are convened.

Local elections can be considered centripetal if, in a given context, the strengthening of local autonomy primarily promotes national accord or cohesion. Local elections are centrifugal if new local autonomy tends to promote national friction or fragmentation. In countries transitioning from years of war, the distinction can be especially important.

It bears considering, then, how local elections can have potentially opposing effects on a polity. Centripetal elections represent an opportunity for liberalization of an authoritarian regime at lower levels, because, at higher levels, it may be viewed as too risky (Dahl 1971, 226). They create space for the opposition to participate in political life and allow for the socialization of both the government and opposition; the zero-sum politics of the center is diluted. Likewise, the emergence of the official representative–constituent link promotes citizen access and participatory governance. The mere division of power—weakening the relative control of the center and allowing local authorities and their communities to govern more of their own affairs—can be the basis of peace agreements. Local communities can gain direct experience in resolving disputes, which can be a powerful message where ethnic and intercommunal conflict are issues and where populations have long been marginalized by state neglect or absence. Riker (1964), for example, argues that all federal systems emerged following armed conflict. Conflict leads to the emergence of a federal solution that allows the subnational jurisdictions, at least formally, to assume an exclusive set of governing functions, the foremost of which is the ability to govern with political autonomy.

The centrifugal argument is that, under the right conditions, local elections can be a recipe for state fragmentation. This is especially the case where there is a lack of political consensus among national elites and when—for reasons of access to resources and national and political implications, etc.—local competition is fierce. The process of holding an election can generate tremendous mistrust amid allegations of fraud and disputes over the vote count, particularly when, again, one or more competing groups is less than loyal to the system. Newly elected local elites can misappropriate their new-found authority to create their own fiefdoms or separatist movements, and the same can occur in geographically disperse countries. Finally, elections also tend to generate unrealistic public expectations of change, and when the quality of life does not immediately improve, the resulting disillusion can give rise to political conflict if not renewed war.

*V. The Defining Features of Democratic Local Governance: A Proposal for Achieving Political Autonomy*⁹

In the Western liberal tradition, decentralization is the transfer of power from the central government to popularly elected local governments (Lipset 1995, 335).¹⁰ Decentralization may entail only the (re)establishment of local elections or it can involve a shift to the local level of a variety of new functions and financial resources in a country that has regularly convened local elections for decades. Decentralization involves three dimensions that essentially represent the components of power: political, administrative, and financial. Basic progress along each of these dimensions provides local government with sufficient authority for democratic local governance to develop. A local system actually becomes a democracy when elected local officials are expected to respond and be held accountable primarily to their constituents, carry out functions

⁹ The following discussion is drawn from Bland, forthcoming, p. 9-12.

¹⁰ Decentralization has been defined in a multitude of ways and definitional use tends to reflect the academic discipline of the author.

sufficient to challenge the local public's interest, and exercise their legally established authority without being subjected to overriding financial or other constraints from unelected or non-local elected officials.

The development of at least a minimum level of *political autonomy* is a basic component of democratic local governance, and elections are naturally at the center of any reform effort to enhance such autonomy. Political autonomy is not simply a matter of according local officials increased freedom to act as they deem fit. Local officials must also face clear incentives to act on behalf of the residents of the community. The local constituency must be the lead actor in determining who the local leaders will be within a local system that can develop a political identity of its own.

The challenge lies in determining what institutional features or conditions are required to achieve that minimum level of political autonomy. The following six characteristics (see **Exhibit 1**) of a local electoral system are presented that--again, at a minimum--are required to achieve local political autonomy--or political decentralization (as opposed to administrative or fiscal decentralization)--in the developing world. For much of the developing world, it should be noted, these features represent significant change in the way local government electoral systems operate today.

It is important to emphasize that the achievement of local political autonomy, as it is viewed here, is predicated on the existence of a national democratic regime. Current consensus posits eight minimal conditions that define national democracy.¹¹ Though it is conceivable that elected and relatively responsive local officials can govern locally (and citizens can participate in positive ways) in the absence of democratic national institutions, local politics cannot be divorced from the national system. Authoritarian regimes deny the basic rights of citizenship, locally or otherwise.

Exhibit 1. Minimum Local Political Requirements for Achieving Democratic Local Governance in the Developing World

1. Control over local government decision making is constitutionally vested in officials elected by the citizens of the local jurisdiction.
2. Locally elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon.
3. An effective number of locally elected officials is directly elected.
4. The arbitrary removal of locally elected officials is effectively precluded.
5. To achieve their various rights, including those listed here, citizens have a right to form relatively independent local associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups.

Source: Bland, forthcoming, 7. The framework is based on Dahl 1971, 1982. See also Molina and Hernández 1998; Nickson 1995.

First (covering the first, second, and third criteria), constituent-oriented local representation requires not only regular, *constitutionally guaranteed, free and fair local elections*, but also *an effective degree of direct election* (which in practice typically means the direct election of the local executive or at least a majority of the local deliberative body). Direct election means a popular election in which (1) voters are entirely free to choose among

¹¹ The eight conditions comprise the “expanded procedural minimum” definition of democracy (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 443) developed by Dahl (1971, 1982) and others (see Schmitter and Karl 1991, 81–82). They include government decision making constitutionally vested in elected officials; free and fair elections; adult suffrage; freedom of adults to run for elective office; freedom of expression; free access to alternative information; freedom of association, including independent parties and interest groups; and effective power to govern.

individual candidates exclusively (i.e., an open party list) according to the particular office the candidate would assume if elected; and (2) the voters' choice is not subject to intermediation by a third party (i.e., an electoral college, council vote).¹² Thus, direct election accords the local elected official a fundamental measure of independent authority, not only vis-à-vis the local public, but also with respect to higher-level governmental authorities and his or her own political party. Local politicians have a stronger incentive to cultivate a personal reputation as opposed to a party reputation (Carey and Shugart 1995, 420–422).

Likewise, the locality benefits from increased clarity of responsibility. Popular elections that do not entail a significant measure of direct election, on the other hand, accord primacy in selecting candidates for local office to the political party and thus place in the parties' hands predominant influence over who represents the locality. Local elected officials who must rely on the party to get on the ballot are ultimately more responsive to the interests of their party leaders than to those of the community.¹³

Second, *arbitrary removal of elected local officials* (the fourth condition) violates the expressed will of the locality. Yet, many local government systems contain formal (i.e., a vote of the town council; a minister's discretion) or informal means for pressuring or legally removing local officials from office, absent of any public input, for purely political reasons. This is not to say that legitimate processes for removing corrupt and incompetent officials (public referenda, formal financial reviews, etc.) cannot be developed and effectively implemented; indeed, these are fairly common and are generally bulwarks of good governance. Because local and other pertinent institutions are weak and the level of politicization is high, such mechanisms for insuring good governance can be used as fronts for the political manipulation of local administrations by party leaders or non-local interests.

In an electoral democracy, nationally, the general thrust of the fifth condition—*local associational freedom*—can be expected to hold. Political party organizing, civil society activity, and the formation of associations of one kind or another are usually conducted without much restriction. Even so, in such environments there is often an effective or outright prohibition on creating local parties or on presenting independent candidates in local elections; such limitations present an obstacle to the emergence of democratic local institutions. The established national parties typically do not want to cede their control over the local authorities by allowing more competition and more options for prospective candidates at the local level.

Allowing the participation of independents or the establishment of local political organizations,¹⁴ however, provides a strong inducement for pluralistic politics and competitive local elections; this competition puts pressure on all political organizations, at the national level or otherwise, to respect local interests to win local office. Providing an opening for local parties and new political leaders—indeed, merely their potential emergence—softens central party control, engenders decentralization of the party system, and encourages a more decentralized central government (Riker 1964, 129–131).

¹² Direct election can be seen in both majoritarian and proportional representation systems. In the former, for example, mayors are directly elected on a separate ballot or town councilors can be chosen in single-member districts. In the latter, open-list voting for town council provides direct election, even if the council then selects the mayor.

¹³ This is not to argue that individual representative accountability should be pursued at the expense of the cohesion of the party system.

¹⁴ This refers to electoral systems that provide locally based standards for the formation of local parties or independent candidacies. Or, if the system establishes standards based on national or other higher-level politico-administrative units, the practical barriers to entry are so minimal that the formation of local parties is common.

VI. Important Secondary Conditions for Local Political Autonomy

Although the specific characteristics described in the previous section are proposed as the minimum required for establishing political autonomy, several additional characteristics of the system affect the quality of democratic local governance. Probably the most important is the *separation of national, especially presidential, and local elections*. Sufficiently separate election of national and local leaders (to be politically significant, most likely at least one year's separation) allows local concerns to predominate during the local electoral cycle.¹⁵ Separation raises the profile of local government, allows local leadership to function more independently of higher authorities, and further strengthens the tacit contract between the local elected official and the voter. When national and local elections coincide or nearly coincide, on the other hand, local issues are invariably submerged and local candidates tend to respond to national party priorities.

The *length of the term* of office can be too short or too long to benefit democratic growth. A primary consideration is the time elected local officials need to develop a coherent team and plan of action and implement it, without continually having to worry about electoral politics. If a new mayor will need a year or so to get the administration going reasonably well, and at least the final 6 months will be largely driven, if not consumed, by the upcoming election, then a 2 or 3-year term is too short. On the other hand, a 5- or more-year term, especially if unlimited reelection is permitted, may be an invitation for local bossism. Too much time between elections could reduce the local officials' sense of accountability to the electorate or become a temptation to abuse the power of incumbency to remain in office indefinitely.

The permission of reelection is another consideration. Is it valid to deny a popular official with a strong record of performance the chance to continue serving the community? Is it warranted to deny the locality the opportunity to choose from among all individuals? Does a ban on *reelection* liberate local officeholders to pursue the public good without being tempted to abuse public power to remain in office, or does it invite the use of public office for maximum personal gain because a major performance incentive—the possibility of being reelected—has been removed? Should reelection be allowed without limit?

Formal *procedures for direct democracy* remain popular. Though not strictly an electoral issue, such mechanisms do allow the public to circumvent their elected officials, depending on the situation, and may involve going back to the polls. Local communities can participate directly in municipal decision making through referenda, petitions, oversight committees, plebiscites, and other vehicles. The success of such efforts remains an open question.

It is also important that any electoral system be considered in its totality. Other factors that are not directly related to accountability or representation can have important influences on the outcome of local elections. The general conduct of an election is often at issue. Campaign financing rules, which are often viewed in isolation from the electoral system, may favor large, centralized parties and make it more difficult for local candidates or new parties to compete (see cases below). As noted above, a powerful mechanism of national party control over local elected officials is the candidate nomination process. Control over spending or lack thereof can have a tremendous impact on local electoral outcomes: wealthy parties and candidates have a great advantage over the ordinary candidate. The same can be said for media access, as candidates can receive unfair advantage through questionable contacts or influence peddling.

¹⁵ In countries with separate elections, for mathematical reasons, the local and presidential electoral cycles may occasionally coincide. The same can be said for staggered elections (e.g., Mexico).

VII. Achieving Local Political Autonomy and Decentralization in the Developing World

This section seeks to test some of the issues discussed above and to allow some comparing and contrasting across local (in this case, municipal) systems in the developing world. Three countries have been selected from each of the five major regions. Such a small sample and fairly limited discussion of intergovernmental politics in each case does not allow for firm conclusions. Nevertheless, one can develop a good sense of the import of these electoral variables and perhaps some idea of the commonalities across regions.

Asia (see **Exhibit 2**). *Indonesia* is one of the two Asian nations—along with the Philippines—to push through a major and rapid intergovernmental reform in direct response to the fall of a discredited, highly centralized authoritarian regime. In the wake of Suharto’s 32-year reign, local democracy became one of the primary motives for passing two major laws (Laws 22 and 29) in 1999, the implementation of which began in 2001. A real fear of national disintegration was another major concern, as provincial leaders and separatist movements threatened to breakaway unless their longstanding demands for greater autonomy were addressed (Hidayat and Antlöv 2004, 270–271). The two decentralization laws, which were amended and renumbered (Laws 32 and 33), defined significant new social service responsibilities for districts and municipalities. They also provided for a new intergovernmental fiscal framework that includes substantial subnational transfers. Thirty-two percent of government expenditures now occur subnationally (White and Smoke 2005, 10).

Exhibit 2. Local (Municipal or Municipal-Equivalent) Electoral Features for Asia: Indonesia, Philippines, and Cambodia

Country	National Political Democracy	Elected Local Officials	Free and Fair Local Elections	Degree of Direct Election	Arbitrary Removal Precluded	Local Assoc. Autonomy	Separate Elections	Term of Office	Reelection Permitted	Direct Democracy Provisions
Indonesia	1999	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No*	5	No	No
Philippines	1986	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	3	Yes	Yes
Cambodia	1993	Yes	Yes**	No	No	No	Yes	5	Yes	No

* Local executives are elected separately. ** Preelection violence and intimidation raised serious concerns about democracy in the 2002 vote.

Electoral reform has been a central component of Indonesia’s decentralization as well, and reforms in 2003 and 2004 created open-list proportional representation and direct election of local executives as of 2005. Despite these gains in local responsiveness and accountability, local authorities remain subject to control by central committees of the national political parties, which must approve all local candidates. Independent candidacies and local parties remain prohibited, for example (allowing independents remains a major issue for the forthcoming Aceh elections, following the 2005 peace agreement); council elections are held in conjunction with national votes; reelection is not permitted; and local elected officials are subject to removal for political reasons.¹⁶

The 1991 enactment of the Local Government Code remains the seminal decentralizing event in the *Philippines*. A dramatic reform, that law was primarily a reaction to 14 years of central control of the Marcos dictatorship, which came to an end in 1986 with the rise of “people power” under President Aquino. The Code was aimed not only at involving local authorities in a range of new functions and providing substantial unconditional fiscal transfers, it was also

¹⁶ E-mail communication, Alan Wall, Democracy International, April 10, 2006; interview May 29, 2006.

designed to bring civil society into the process of governing and provide avenues for public participation, such as the recall and citizen initiative (Angeles and Magno 2004, 227–233).

Given the heavily personalistic and clientelistic nature of the political system, local elections in the Philippines are wide open affairs: it is perhaps the only country that requires voters to write-in their preferred candidates for every electoral office. Central political control is relatively weak, naturally (though national and local elections occur simultaneously and so local preferences are partially obscured by national political trends). Local political autonomy is considerable. There is some politicization of local governance such that local elected officials are subject to removal, but this is not extensive.¹⁷

Decentralization in *Cambodia* is in its infancy, and the motive for reform has been primarily political—a desire to increase state presence outside the capital and promote local democratic legitimacy. The enactment of the Commune Law in 2001, and especially the February 2002 elections (soon to be followed by another local vote in 2007), were the major reform efforts. The Commune Law provides a regulatory framework for communal government and establishes a broad mandate for social and economic development, including participatory planning. It does not provide, however, specific responsibilities for service delivery or significant fiscal resources. Government interest in further intergovernmental reform appears limited (Romeo and Spycerelle 2004, 7–9)

In a country with such a traumatic history and a checkered, violent transition to democracy, competitive communal elections (the second elections are scheduled for 2007) assume considerable importance for the emergence of democratic local governance. Yet, as one would expect, the local electoral system reflects the lack of local political autonomy. A closed-list system in which local parties and independents are precluded allows the three major parties—the governing party in particular—to remain dominant. In 2002, the Cambodia People’s Party won 68.4% of the commune seats; FUNCINPEC won 19.6%; and the Sam Rainsy Party took 12.0% (Romeo and Spycerelle 2004, 8). The failure to encourage independent candidates is viewed by reformers as a missed opportunity to promote local groups, encourage citizens to participate in the political process, and help ensure that elected officials are more constituent-focused than party-oriented. Elected officials also face expulsion for not following the party line (COMFREL 2006, 1–2).

Africa (see **Exhibit 3**). Decentralization is now beginning in *Zambia*, a system that remains centralized in all dimensions. A National Decentralization Policy was launched in 2004 and its implementation will require continued reform. Local government—the district councils—have taxing authority and therefore the ability to generate their own revenue. The central government provides grants to local governments—all transfers are provided on an ad hoc basis—to assist in covering water and sanitation, roads, and health care, among other services. Government policy is to eventually devolve a set of service delivery functions to the local level as capacity increases (Commonwealth Local Government Forum, 2005).

Exhibit 3. Local (Municipal or Municipal-Equivalent) Electoral Features for Africa: Zambia, South Africa, and Benin

Country	National Political Democracy	Elected Local Officials	Free and Fair Local Elections	Degree of Direct Election	Arbitrary Removal Precluded	Local Assoc. Autonomy	Separate Elections	Term of Office	Reelection Permitted	Direct Democracy Provisions
Zambia	1992	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	5	Yes	No
South Africa	1994	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	Yes	Yes

¹⁷ Interview, Steven Rood, Asia Foundation, Manila, July 9, 2006.

Benin	1990	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	Yes	No
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Weak political autonomy further demonstrates the lack of progress toward subnational reform. The multiparty system is dominated by the ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy, which controls the government machinery and assets. Councilors are elected by wards—a first-past-the-post system that tends to favor the ruling party—and those members select the mayor, whose party affiliation is the primary consideration in the choice. Direct election of the local executive is another apparent objective of the government’s policy (International IDEA 2004, 40–46).

It is extraordinary that the minister of local government has the authority to suspend councils (or individual councilors) and replace them with local administrations; such action has been taken. Moreover, members of parliament who represent the local district also sit on the local council. Given these controls, it is not all that surprising that independent candidates and local political parties are allowed, and local political party leaders do have a lead role in selecting local candidates for office (Commonwealth Local Government Forum, 2005).

In *South Africa*, passage of the 1996 constitution providing for comprehensive decentralization, enactment of a series of legislative reforms covering all intergovernmental dimensions, and the institution of municipal elections every 4 years reflect a strong commitment to the development of a local democratic system in the wake of apartheid. The extensive 1998 White Paper for Local Governments emphasizes the importance of local democracy. In 1999, the Municipal Structures Act established three types of municipalities based on size, allocated functions among the three types, and put in place local electoral rules. Various functions have been decentralized and local governments have significant taxing, borrowing, and revenue-generating authority.

South Africa’s local electoral rules provide for considerable local political autonomy. South Africa uses a mixed system: at least half of the municipal councils (metropolitan, local, and district) are elected by proportional representation through closed party lists and half are elected directly in single-member wards. National and local elections are separated; local officials cannot be removed, and independent candidates are permitted (Hendrickse 2005, 1–3).

The African National Congress (ANC) won the historic elections of 1994 and has since been the dominant political force in leading not only the national government, but most municipalities as well. The local political dominance of the ANC and of the national parties generally—coupled with the enforcement of the party line within the councils—has undermined local autonomy. So far, the country’s local elections demonstrate that it will be some time before independent candidates—or officials who can freely represent their constituents’ interests—become entrenched (Friedman and Kihato 2004, 177).

Benin’s National Conference, convened in February 1990, opened the door to the successful transformation of the country from a Marxist-inspired, state-centered regime to a multiparty democracy with a market-based economy. In part a reaction to the previous system, decentralization—the free administration of communes by elected councilors—was a major recommendation of the National Conference. By the late 1990s through 2001, decentralization laws were enacted, including new electoral provisions, for the transfer of authority to the commune level.

Benin’s communes are accorded a series of significant local functions, including responsibilities in health, education, water, and sanitation. They are also responsible for public infrastructure and the management of natural resources. Capacity needs and a lack of resources from the central government, despite the communal efforts to mobilize their own revenue, are

major limitations. Decentralization remains a slow, gradual process in a system that remains fairly centralized.

The first local elections were held in December 2002. As a national party-driven system, Benin’s commune councilors are elected by closed party list in a vote separate from the national elections, and the winning councilors select the mayor by majority vote. Coalitions of parties and independents are able to participate. A major concern is the weakness of public participation in local decision making. Councils hold public sessions, but the agenda is rarely published in advance, and citizens do not have the right to address the meetings.¹⁸

Latin America (see **Exhibit 4**). Despite the 1982 return to democratically elected government, *Bolivia* was the only country in Latin America that did not have a nationwide municipal system. The landmark 1994 Popular Participation Law (PPL) then established 311 municipalities across the national territory, and the following year elections were held in all of them. This law extended municipal jurisdiction to a wide variety of new service areas and accorded municipal governments the authority to set rates and collect property taxes. The PPL also established “vigilance committees” for civic control over municipal investment decisions and increased from 10 to 20% the amount of national income transferred to municipal governments each year. Another major reform allowed the participation of indigenous and citizens groups, for the first time, in the 2004 municipal elections. Local pluralism increased dramatically.

Exhibit 4. Local (Municipal or Municipal-Equivalent) Electoral Features for Latin America: Bolivia, Colombia, and Costa Rica

Country	National Political Democracy	Elected Local Officials	Free and Fair Local Elections	Degree of Direct Election	Arbitrary Removal Precluded	Local Assoc. Autonomy	Separate Elections	Term of Office	Reelection Permitted	Direct Democracy Provisions
Bolivia	1982	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	4	Yes	Yes
Colombia	1958	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	Yes	Yes
Costa Rica	1952	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	4	Yes	Yes

Despite this progress, however, Bolivian municipal government faces limitations on political autonomy. National party leaders continue to exercise considerable control over their local counterparts; closed party lists are used municipal elections. One of the more striking features of the municipal system is the degree of elected official turnover created by a constitutional provision allowing removal and replacement of mayors via a three-fifths council vote (Bland 2000, 75), though use of the provision has been somewhat restricted. The procedure also allows national political parties and other outside interests to manipulate the operation of municipal government.

Beginning in 1983 and continuing to the present, *Colombia* has transformed itself from a highly centralized country into one of the most decentralized in Latin America. One of the major rationales for the reform was a desire by successive governments and demands by civil society to open up the democratic system and allow Colombians—and guerilla groups—to participate in public decision making of consequence, and thereby bring an end to the conflict.

Under new legislation, previously appointed mayors were directly elected for the first time in 1988. Decentralization in Colombia provided new mechanisms for community participation that include a popular referendum on the mayor’s continuance in office, but elected municipal officials are not subject to arbitrary removal from power. As the decentralization process was in part an effort to open up the political system to former guerillas and other

¹⁸ This review is largely based on an e-mail communication with Omar Touré, RTI International, April 13, 2006.

community actors, the 1991 constitution provides for the participation of social movements and citizen groups in politics, including municipal elections.

During the 1990s, nontraditional parties and coalitions made considerable municipal electoral gains at the expense of the Liberal and especially Conservative parties (Querubín, Sánchez, and Kure 1998, 129–131; see Hommes 1996). In addition, through a series of laws, decrees, and constitutional reforms, Colombia has substantially increased financial transfers to the municipal level and mandated the transfer of primary health care, education, water, agricultural extension services, and other functions to municipal governments.

Costa Rica quietly enacted a constitutional reform in 2001 that provided for innovative and significant political decentralization. The country is a long-established democracy—the oldest in Latin America—but one that has been highly centralized under the control of two major political parties. This legacy of centralization has produced increasing decomposition of the party system, eroding systemic legitimacy (low voter turnout and electoral gains by new parties), and little public confidence in the abilities of weak municipal government.

The 2001 reform was most interesting in what it accomplished on the political side. In addition to providing for a gradual transfer of fiscal resources and functions to the municipal level, the new municipal code includes the following: direct election of the mayor (and various other municipal positions), staggered local elections to be convened 10 months after the national vote; allowance of independent parties to compete only in municipal elections; and several new mechanisms for direct democracy locally, such as plebiscites, referenda, and open municipal meetings (Bland, forthcoming). The intergovernmental tensions created by the reform were reflected in the comments of a traditional party member, who remarked, “It is totally unjust and irrational. It’s not designed to give representation to the minority parties, but to take it away from the majority parties” (Ryan 2004, 82).

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (see **Exhibit 5**). In this region, national political democracy does not exist in many countries and intractable centralization continues to be common. In some cases, however, there have been significant advances through the (re)introduction of democratic processes at the local level.

Exhibit 5. Local (Municipal or Municipal-Equivalent) Electoral Features for Middle East and North Africa: Morocco, Jordan, and Lebanon

Country	National Political Democracy	Elected Local Officials	Free and Fair Local Elections	Degree of Direct Election	Arbitrary Removal Precluded	Local Assoc. Autonomy	Separate Elections	Term of Office	Reelection Permitted	Direct Democracy Provisions
Morocco	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	6	Yes	No
Jordan	No	No	No*	NA	No	No	NA	4	NA	No
Lebanon	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	4	Yes	No

* Half of the local councils are elected; these elections are held separately from the national vote; and reelection of those who are elected is permitted.

Morocco is a constitutional monarchy that has progressively pursued decentralization and subnational reform over decades. Though ultimate authority always rests with the king, Morocco can lay claim to a considerably open local political system when viewed within the regional context. Current law contains requirements for making local council deliberations and decisions public—and there appears to be increasing awareness of the importance of accountability—but citizen participation remains limited.

The local system is characterized by a variety of political parties operating within an environment—and on a council—characterized by shifting loyalties. Council election is by party list (direct election does not occur), and then the council selects the mayor by majority vote. The

1976 Law on Municipal Organization (Municipal or Commune Charter) provides for the removal of the mayor after 2 years by a two-thirds vote of the council. In a system with a long 6-year term, this provision has been used as a political tool and promoted instability in local leadership. Consequently, there has been interest in enhancing representation through reform to directly elect the mayor or otherwise provide stability to the executive position (World Bank 2001, 6). It also bears mentioning that just one Islamic party was permitted to participate in the latest, 2003 local vote (and performed well).

Local governments are accorded appropriate local responsibilities in a series of public service areas, though their capacity to govern is seriously constrained by the *tutelle*—or the Ministry of Interior. Under the Charter, the Ministry must approve council decisions in a wide range of areas before they can go forward. Such central control is extensive and has a significant impact on the management of budget resources and execution of development projects. Local accountability is diluted; the attribution of accountability overall suffers (World Bank 2001, 7).¹⁹

Jordan, another constitutional monarchy, is not one of the region's examples of progressive local democratic reform. Actual decentralization—as opposed to deconcentration—has minimal support within the central government, and the royal commission appointed in 2005 to study and make recommendations on decentralization is replete with conservatives who are unlikely to propose conclusive reforms. Jordan takes a technocratic approach in seeking to build the capacity of newly amalgamated local governments, based on the belief that the localities do not yet have the ability to take a leading administrative and developmental role.

Jordan's local governments have seen a continual erosion of their political autonomy and functions since the passage of the 1955 local government law. The 1955 law gave municipalities responsibility for all service delivery and provided for the direct elections of mayors and councils. Today, the intergovernmental system remains highly centralized, and the major functions of local governments are as follows: waste collection and street cleaning; street and road maintenance and repair; public lighting; and culture and sports. As of 1999, under the temporary law for municipal governments, mayors and up to half of the councils are appointed—concern about the potential local emergence of Islamic movements has played a role here. Such lack of representation locally undermines the already weak tradition of public participation in local decision making.²⁰

The fragile democratization of *Lebanon* faces continuing hazards today, and the absence of a nationally independent democratic regime obviously constrains the prospects for municipal government.²¹ After 15 years of political instability (1975–1991), the Taif Agreement (1989) that brought an end to the civil war became the basis for progress at the local level. The Agreement included a commitment to strengthening municipalities, and the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs was created in 1993 to address municipal concerns and support the development of local governments (Atallah 1998, 4).

In mid-1998, for the first time in 35 years and after multiple postponements, municipal elections were successfully convened (and are now held every 4 years). Local electoral lists are fairly informal collections of family affiliations. Political parties do not control the process from the center, but rather establish alliances with influential local families and attempt to effectively

¹⁹ This review of Morocco is also based on an interview with Christian Arandel, RTI International, July 20, 2006.

²⁰ Interviews, RTI International staff and consultants, June 2006.

²¹ Political democracy requires the elected national government's holding a monopoly on the use of force. Only in 2005 did the "Cedar Revolution" lead to the removal of the Syrian military presence in Lebanon; Hezbollah continues to control the southern region of the country.

manage their local ties (the mayor is chosen by a vote of the council). Despite the limitations on representation, the electoral process is viewed as important to social and political stability.²²

The weakness of local government and the sector's fairly insignificant influence on national politics partially explain the fair amount of autonomy they hold. The small country is fragmented into more than 700 municipalities, and the large majority of them have too little financial or administrative capacity to collect revenue or provide services, so they depend on central government transfer. A series of laws and decrees beginning in 1977 delineates municipal functions, and own-revenue sources either have been too restrictive, remain unimplemented, or have not produced much additional income. Many municipal projects have been taken over by the central government or private sector; indeed, in this sense the trend is toward further centralization (UNDP 2006, 3).

Eastern Europe and Eurasia (see **Exhibit 6**). *Armenia* has a fairly solid basis for the establishment of democratic local governance, including the eventual development of fairly effective administrations for the provision of important public services. The Constitution, adopted in 1995, 4 years after the achievement of independence, provides for the functioning and development of local self-governance. Local elections were held in 1996, 1999, and 2000, and now occur every 4 years. Decentralization reform, which was initially a result of pressure to comply with the European Charter for Local Self-Government, has produced a series of laws outlining local functions for social policy, local tax collection, urban transport, and other areas (Gimishyan and Manoukyan 2003, 38–43).

Exhibit 6. Local (Municipal or Municipal-Equivalent) Electoral Features for Eastern Europe and Eurasia: Armenia, Bulgaria, and Ukraine

Country	National Political Democracy	Elected Local Officials	Free and Fair Local Elections	Degree of Direct Election	Arbitrary Removal Precluded	Local Assoc. Autonomy	Separate Elections	Term of Office	Reelection Permitted	Direct Democracy Provisions
Armenia	1996	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes	No*	Yes	4	Yes	Yes**
Bulgaria	1990	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	4	Yes	Yes
Ukraine	1991	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	4	Yes	No

* The point that Armenia's local elections are free and fair is debatable. Armenia has a tradition of arbitrarily removing elected officials; although a recent reform formally prohibits removal, the practice likely continues to occur. ** Recall legislation does exist, but is so arcane as to be ineffective.

Armenia is also a classic case, however, of the gap that can exist between the enactment of legislation and actual implementation of reform. The new laws have not been enforced, and the political will to move forward appears to be lacking. Some responsibilities newly assumed by local government have been reclaimed by the national level (Gimishyan and Manoukyan 2003, 39).

In addition, despite having a system with virtually all of the institutional features of open local elections, political autonomy is considerably restricted by undemocratic practices and the political control exercised by the central government. Pressure from the ruling party through the use of state resources, direct intimidation of opponents, widespread vote-buying, and electoral fraud raise the question of the degree to which local elections are free and fair. Only recent amendments to the governing law on local government have precluded the common practice of impeaching mayors who ran afoul of the government. This is an important advance, though removal probably continues to occur. A few powerful families tend to be the powerbrokers in the

²² Interview, Paul Salem, Carnegie Endowment, Beirut, July 7, 2006.

local system. A growing concern is the emergence of oligarchs whose resources and influence with the government allow them to win local elections.²³

Bulgaria has experienced the emergence of a municipal government movement that began in 1991 as the country has instituted decentralizing reforms and sought to achieve European-level standards for local self-government. The movement reflects the progress of decentralization to the municipal level, which has included transfers of public services, considerable European Union funding for infrastructure investment, and, recently, a financial decentralization program. Though municipalities do not have tax powers, the program increased own-source local revenue from nearly one fourth of total revenue in 2002 to nearly one third 2 years later (Ivanov 2005, 1).

The local system has become much more politically diverse and autonomous and has allowed mayors an increasing presence within the national political life. Former mayors are amply represented in the national parliament—local government has become a path to a national political career, in competition with members of parliament.

Since 1991, as *Bulgaria* has transitioned from communism to democracy, local elections have been successfully convened every 4 years. Mayors are elected directly by the municipality at-large, but the council is elected by closed party list. The two branches are consequently somewhat competitive; mayors claim to better represent the local public. As of the late 1990s, the council elections began to produce fewer party majorities and larger numbers of small parties. In elections 4 years later, as voter discontent with conventional politics increased, these trends were reinforced. Many parties and large numbers of independents won local representation, and local issues—not national party politics—dominated the campaign.²⁴

Following a series of halting steps toward local democratic reform in the early 1990s, the 1996 Constitution of *Ukraine* recognized and guaranteed the establishment of local self-government. Building on this framework, *Ukraine* ratified the European Charter on self-government the next year and, subsequently, a series of laws establishing the functions and financial basis for local (and regional) government. The 2001 Budget Code Reform, for example, allocated fiscal transfers by transparent formulas to 700 cities and provided the foundation for continued progress in the system of intergovernmental finance. Own-source revenue generation remains quite weak, however.

Constitutional reform agreed to in 2004—and implemented with the March 2006 parliamentary and local elections—transformed *Ukraine* from a presidential to a parliamentary system in which the elected president shares powers with the prime minister. Mayors continue to be elected directly by a plurality vote, but council elections in the large cities are run on a party-list system (small cities and villages elect councils in submunicipal districts via plurality vote). The party system includes some 120 parties, the effect of which is to make the local votes pluralistic (though under the new system independents are no longer allowed to participate without joining a party). In the past, selective application of the criminal code has been used to remove elected executives from office, though this appears to be uncommon today.

The Orange Revolution and the new government that emerged from it represented the promise of democratic reform in *Ukraine*. Local government became a major focus, and by the fall of 2005, a draft package of reform of four local government laws was introduced. However,

²³ This review of *Armenia* is also drawn from an interview with Sam Coxson, RTI International, June 27, 2006.

²⁴ Interview, Henry Minis, RTI International, April 15, 2006.

the initiative became caught up in delaying tactics and a power struggle between the presidency and parliament, and it remains on hold.²⁵

Summary Results. This review of the local political features of 15 countries across the five major regions indicates a broad international consensus in favor of local political democracy—or democratic local governance (see **Exhibit 7**). In the developing world, local democracy is typically a major feature or objective of transitional or consolidating national democratic systems. In each of the 12 political democracies in this sample, local democratic elections have followed fairly soon after the transition or after consolidating reforms. Only in the three MENA region cases is national political democracy not achieved. Even within these national constraints, only one of the three countries (Jordan) does not have popularly elected local officials (the mayor and half of the council are appointed).

Exhibit 7. Totals of the Local (Municipal or Municipal-Equivalent) Electoral Features for the Fifteen Country Cases in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, and Eastern Europe and Eurasia

	National Political Democracy	Elected Local Officials	Free and Fair Local Elections	Degree of Direct Election	Arbitrary Removal Precluded	Local Assoc. Autonomy	Separate Elections	Term of Office	Reelection Permitted	Direct Democracy Provisions
Totals	12/15	14/15	14/15	9/15	7/15	12/15	10/15	8/15: 4 years 5/15: 5 years	13/15	7/15

About two thirds of the country cases provide for a measure of direct election (as defined here). As seen above, direct election is often viewed as a means to strengthen representation of the local constituency and improve the accountability of the elected officials to the public. It should be noted, however, that open party-list systems can be designed in ways to preserve the control of the major national parties. In Indonesia, for example, national parties have considerable leeway to determine who from their list of party candidates receives a council seat; it is not necessarily the candidate that received the most votes. Moreover, as seen in Zambia, single-district plurality (or ward) systems can benefit a dominant party determined to ensure its monopoly over the system. The dominant party often has advantageous access to state resources and simply needs to garner the most votes in a jurisdiction to win a seat.

This sample also illustrates a fairly strong desire for local associational autonomy--permitting independent candidacies, local political parties, and an open political system. Considerable value--as seen in four-fifths of the cases--is placed on the development of local political pluralism.

That more than half of the countries engage in the arbitrary removal from office of elected local officials is the clearest sign of the progress that remains for local political autonomy. Allowing local officials to exercise the authority vested in them by the community is at the heart of democracy, yet many local systems are lacking in this regard.

Four additional, facilitating features of a local democracy were also surveyed in the 15 cases. Two-thirds of the countries provide for the separation of the national and local vote, thereby allowing local politics and issues some opportunity to develop an identity apart from the national political scene. The cases further indicate that either a 4- or 5-year term of office is the

²⁵ This review of Ukraine is based on interviews with Bohdan Radejko, Indiana University Parliamentary Development Project (IUPDP), July 14, 2006; Robert Bodo, RTI International, July 18, 2006; and Edward Rakhimkulov, IUPDP, July 24, 2006.

ideal for democratic representation and accountability: two thirds of the countries have chosen one of these two options as the length of term for their local officeholders. The 3-year term of Colombia and the 6-year term in Morocco are unique among the 15 and can be considered less than ideal for democratic local governance. The former is probably too short for a stable local political system; the latter allows incumbents tremendous advantage and, because elections are so widely spaced, poses a risk to electoral accountability. The reelection of local officials appears to be widely accepted. In 13 of the 15 country cases (the exceptions are Indonesia and Jordan), voters are given the ability to reward or punish their local officials on election day. Direct democracy provisions are much less popular, however, and seem to appear in the more progressive, participatory reform efforts at decentralization.

VIII. Conclusion

Taking on a broad range of issues involving local elections, decentralization, and the democratization of local governance, this paper argues that local political autonomy—of which the local election system is naturally a central feature—can enhance the quality of local representation and accountability and promote national democratic development. The provision of a minimum measure of political decentralization, which allows for sufficient local political autonomy, is a core component for the achievement of democratic local governance. Democratic development can occur because these reforms provide the opportunity for better representation of local interests, effective inclusion of minority groups in political life, closer ties between the local official and the community, development of the national and local political party systems, and national regime transition and consolidation.

This paper has made clear the importance of the three basic features of electoral systems—district magnitude, ballot structure, and electoral formula—when applied at the local level. It covered how those three features combine to produce the three major types of election systems. Majoritarian systems look to produce a single winner who can be held more directly accountable to the electorate. Proportional systems aim to reflect the political composition of the electoral jurisdiction as a whole, and they better allow for minority representation. Mixed systems combine features of both types. Each type creates a series of incentives for elected leaders that significantly influence the nature of local politics, accountability, and representation.

The nature of the political party system is the prominent consideration in any examination of the progress of political decentralization and decentralization overall. The stronger the party system—the stronger its desire and ability to control local party representatives—the weaker decentralization tends to be. A weak, fragmented party regime is not the objective, but a healthy system does allow for an important measure of local political pluralism and autonomy. The location of party brokers shapes the intergovernmental political relationships, and electoral and political–institutional dynamics are decidedly important considerations in explaining the motivations for decentralization reform.

This paper attempts to define the local electoral and other requirements that constitute the minimum requirements for political decentralization. It addresses a fundamental question: What are the institutions of local political democracy and how many of them need to be present (i.e., decentralized) to accord a local system sufficient political autonomy? The above presentation makes three assertions. First, building on the work of Dahl and others, it says that one can identify a fairly objective set of requirements for electoral systems that define political decentralization. The five requirements are

1. Elected local officials;
2. Free and fair local elections;
3. A degree of direct election of local officials;
4. Local elected officials not removed arbitrarily; and
5. Local associational autonomy.

Where these five conditions hold within a democratic national regime, the local system can be classified as politically decentralized. As such, local citizens have the generally unimpaired opportunity to present their preferences to local government, local government officials have a fundamental incentive to weigh those preferences, and the local constituency has the ability to hold those officials accountable for their decisions (Dahl 1971, 1–3). As each country operates within its own complex institutions of intergovernmental interaction and control, political decentralization entails more than voting. It requires according localities enough political autonomy to allow local government and its citizens to eventually move beyond the procedural and become habituated to the practice of democracy.

Second, this definitional model posits that the achievement of local political democracy, or a process of local democratization, is tantamount to a minimum level of political decentralization. These five requirements, each treated with equal weight in terms of impact, provide for a fundamental level of political autonomy: together they allow for, but do not guarantee the presence of, the plural expression of local citizen interests and work to ensure that local elected officials respond to those interests. A small group of secondary criteria, particularly the separation of national and local elections, has also been examined in this study. These features are not required for the development of political democracy, but do provide facilitate its achievement when present.

Third, the model allows a general assessment of the movement toward political decentralization in the developing world, and one would expect it to apply well. Indeed, the results allow for the development of a typology for the classification of systems according to the level of political autonomy found locally (see **Exhibit 8**). Fifteen countries’ municipal (or municipal-level equivalent) systems, randomly selected across five geographic regions, are addressed here. Five countries—Bulgaria, Colombia, the Philippines, South Africa, and Ukraine—meet all five criteria and can be considered politically decentralized today.

Exhibit 8. A Typology of Progress toward Political Decentralization Based on Fifteen Country Cases

	Non-Autonomous	Restricted Autonomy	Open System	Politically Decentralized
Country Cases	<i>Jordan</i>	<i>Bolivia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lebanon, Morocco</i>	<i>Armenia, Benin, Costa Rica, Zambia</i>	<i>Bulgaria, Colombia, Philippines, South Africa Ukraine</i>

Four of the countries have what one can consider “open” systems, cases that allow for a high degree of local pluralism and are nearly politically decentralized (meeting four of the five criteria). “Restricted autonomy” includes those countries with clear restrictions on the development of local political democracy (failing to meet two or more of the criteria), such as

heavy political party or ministerial control, and considerable reform remains to be achieved. In the cases of Lebanon and Morocco, the absence of national democracy is a major limitation. Finally, Jordan, which does not elect more than half of its local government representatives, is the sole representative of the “non-autonomous” category, which would include any country that does not elect its local officials and fails to meet most of the criteria. There is ample room for additional research along these lines in many other developing countries, which would further test the value of such an institutional approach. One finding that requires additional investigation is the impact when the local electoral system is distinct from the national system, as seen to varying degrees in South Africa, Costa Rica, and Ukraine. Further research on the strength of the relationship between party nomination procedures and decentralization is also necessary.

As just five of fifteen cases presented here are politically decentralized, this survey reflects the continuing legacy of centralized government in all parts of the developing world. Patches of progress can be found, and it bears noting that the group of four “open” systems is close to achieving it. A surprising number of the country cases, however--more than half--do not protect their local elected officials from arbitrary removal from office. The absence of direct elections and the lack of local political parties or independents are also issues for reform.

Local political democracy is a local government system that is almost completely responsive to all local citizens. It requires faith in the superiority of consensus-building over authoritarianism or open conflict as a means of resolving disagreement in local affairs. The local institutionalization of this process of compromise is achieved through agreement on the rules of the game, the application of those rules, and their continued operation over a long period of time.²⁶ In this sense, local political democracy is no different from its national counterpart. There is one strategic difference, however. The establishment of political democracy also requires the cession of real power to the local level by central decision makers²⁷—be they aging dictators or reformist democrats. It is the contention of this paper that unless fairly specific local political–institutional features, including significant electoral reform, are put into operation, the local system that emerges will be less than democratic.

²⁶ On democracy as consensus building, see Rustow 1970, 362–363.

²⁷ In the federal systems especially, the intermediate level policymakers also must relinquish some authority.

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