

Decentralization And Grassroots Governance In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Challenges, Opportunities, And Policy Reforms In Pakistan's Local Government System



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Abstract: *The local government system, as a decentralized framework for governance, is central to strengthening grassroots democracy, enhancing civic participation, and improving service delivery. In Pakistan, however, its trajectory has been inconsistent, shaped by oscillations between federal and provincial control, colonial legacies, and military-led top-down interventions. This paper critically examines the local government system in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (kp), situating it within Pakistan's turbulent history of decentralization and power struggles. Despite constitutional commitments under article 140-a of the 18th amendment, local bodies in KP continue to face systemic challenges, including political interference, fiscal dependency, bureaucratic dominance, and weak institutional capacity. Drawing on historical analysis, secondary sources, and primary insights from local officials, the study explores the persistent gaps undermining service delivery, civic trust, and community empowerment. It further identifies opportunities for strengthening governance through fiscal decentralization, stakeholder coordination, and legislative clarity. The paper concludes by proposing a strategic framework for reform aimed at fostering effective, inclusive, and sustainable local governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.*

Keywords: Local government system, Decentralization, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Grassroots democracy, Service delivery, Political interference, Fiscal decentralization

Introduction

The local government system, defined as a decentralized administrative structure operating at sub-national levels to manage public affairs, deliver essential services, and foster civic participation within defined geographic jurisdictions, serves as a cornerstone of grassroots democracy, enables civic participation and tailored problem-solving, yet its implementation in Pakistan—particularly Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)—remains fraught with systemic challenges (Adnan, 2015). Historically, Pakistan's local government framework has oscillated between provincial and federal oversight. From 1947 to 1973, under

the federal structure of the Government of India Act (1935), local governance was constitutionally a provincial subject, though weak institutionalization and centralization under military regimes stifled its autonomy. The 1973 Constitution retained provincial jurisdiction but allowed federal interventions, exemplified by military rulers like Zia Ul Haq (1979 Local Government Ordinance) and Pervez Musharraf (2001 Devolution Plan), who imposed top-down frameworks to consolidate power (Ahmad, Bano, & Rehman, 2017).

Despite sporadic attempts—such as Ayub

Khan's "Basic Democracies" (1959) (Ahmad et al., 2015; Khan, 1967; Soomro & Chandio, 2013) and Bhutto's unimplemented "People's Local Administration"—political governments consistently undermined decentralization (Khan, 2016). Elected regimes, including the ANP (2008–2013) and PTI (2013–2018), delayed local elections, eroding institutional trust (Malik, 2011: 31). In KP, chronic issues like political interference, fiscal constraints, bureaucratic dominance, and legislative gaps persist, hampering service delivery and civic engagement (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa LGEAR, July 2015).

This study examines KP's local governance challenges, contextualized within Pakistan's turbulent history of federal-provincial power struggles. It analyzes systemic flaws—from colonial-era legacies to modern political apathy—and proposes pathways for institutional reform, emphasizing stakeholder coordination, fiscal decentralization, and legislative empowerment to align governance with grassroots needs.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Local governments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) aim to boost civic engagement and community development but face systemic challenges, including political bias, insufficient funding, weak management, and unfair policies. Hindered by limited resources, legislative gaps, and reduced autonomy due to interference from provincial and federal politicians prioritizing power over public service, local bodies struggle to deliver essential services or projects. Resistance to decentralization from officials fearing loss of authority exacerbates inefficiencies, undermining public trust. What are the challenges faced by local governance in achieving effective stakeholder coordination, institutional autonomy, and sustainable development, and what policy reforms can be proposed to address these issues?

1.2 Legal and Constitutional Framework

Pakistan's local government system operates within a contested constitutional landscape. The 1973 Constitution initially omitted explicit provisions for local governance, leaving it a

provincial subject under Article 32 (Principles of Policy). The 18th Amendment (2010) strengthened provincial autonomy, mandating under Article 140-A that provinces establish democratically elected local governments and devolve political, administrative, and financial responsibilities. However, implementation remains inconsistent. Military regimes imposed top-down frameworks—Zia's 1979 Local Government Ordinance and Musharraf's 2001 Devolution Plan—centralizing control under federal oversight. Post-2010, provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa enacted their own laws (e.g., KP Local Government Act, 2013), yet ambiguities in power-sharing, fiscal dependency on provincial grants, and weak enforcement mechanisms perpetuate disconnect between constitutional intent and ground realities, undermining grassroots autonomy.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyze the major challenges hindering the effectiveness of local government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
2. To explore the potential opportunities for improving local governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
3. To propose a strategic framework for strengthening the local governance system in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

1.5 Significance and Scope of the Study

This study critically examines Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's (KP) local government system, analyzing its role in grassroots democracy, service delivery (education, healthcare, infrastructure), and public participation. By identifying systemic challenges—weak institutional capacity, political interference, fiscal shortages, and stakeholder conflicts—the research underscores urgent reforms needed to enhance governance efficiency. The scope prioritizes administrative inefficiencies, rural service gaps, and financial constraints, while exploring opportunities for improvement through data-driven insights. Recommendations emphasize capacity-building for local representatives, inclusive policymaking, and

optimized fiscal management to strengthen service delivery, foster sustainable development, and promote equitable welfare across KP.

1.4 Methodology

The research mostly relies on historical and descriptive data. The data gathering will use both primary and secondary sources. Books addressing local government in Pakistan will be very pertinent among secondary materials for this subject. These documents serve as a reference and provide the foundation for our investigation. This study will include research papers from esteemed publications to enhance comprehension for the author and subsequent academics in the field. Reputable newspapers, journals, and historical records will be used to support the author's perspective. Empirical data will be gathered via interviews with former officials/officers of local government entities across various union councils.

Local Government Elections 2002

The Local Government Elections of 2002 in Pakistan, held under General Pervez Musharraf's military regime, introduced a decentralized governance model through the Devolution Plan. This system established three tiers—district governments, tehsil/town councils, and union councils—headed by elected nazims (mayors). While aiming to empower grassroots democracy, the elections were non-party-based and tightly controlled by military oversight, which stifled genuine political inclusivity. Critics argued the reforms prioritized consolidating central authority under a veneer of decentralization, as provincial powers were curtailed in favor of federally aligned local bodies. Despite claims of enhancing civic participation, the absence of mainstream political parties and allegations of manipulation eroded public trust, leaving a legacy of structural centralization masked as devolution.

Local Government Elections (2015)

Held after a decade-long hiatus under the PTI-led provincial government, the 2015 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) local elections marked a shift toward party-based contests at the tehsil

and district levels, though union council elections remained non-partisan. Conducted under the Local Government Act 2013, these polls aimed to decentralize power but faced allegations of administrative mismanagement, security threats (e.g., attacks on candidates), and delayed results in remote areas. Despite improved voter turnout (~13.4 million), skepticism persisted due to the PTI's earlier allegations of fraud in the 2013 national elections, underscoring tensions between provincial autonomy and centralized oversight.

Local Government Elections (2018)

The 2018 elections, held under PTI's continued provincial dominance, saw heightened security concerns and delimitation disputes, delaying polls in some regions. These elections fully transitioned to a party-based system, consolidating PTI's control in urban centers like Peshawar and Swat. However, rural areas witnessed fragmented outcomes, with JUI-F and independents gaining traction. Criticized for bureaucratic delays and limited grassroots participation, the process highlighted systemic gaps in aligning devolution with constitutional mandates under Article 140-A, perpetuating centralized influence over local bodies.

Local Government Elections (2022)

The 2022 elections unfolded amid Pakistan's national political turmoil, with PTI facing stiff competition from JUI-F and independents. Violence in Abbottabad and South Waziristan, low female voter turnout, and allegations of rigging marred the process, while logistical hurdles (e.g., biometric system failures) delayed results in mountainous regions. PTI retained dominance in Swat and Upper Dir but lost ground in Kurram, reflecting shifting allegiances. These polls underscored the paradox of party-based decentralization: while enhancing political competition, they exposed enduring challenges—security risks, gender disparities, and institutional distrust—that hinder KP's transition to equitable local governance.

Composition of Local Government KPK in 2015

The first Local Government Act, 2013 (LG Act, 2013) was enacted by KPK Government on 7th November 2013 introducing a three-tier local government:

- i. City District Council / District Councils.
- ii. Tehsil / Town Councils.
- iii. Village / Neighbourhood Councils.

Before this system, delimitation of the constituency for previously held elections was done by the Provincial Government which was, in 2013, entrusted to the Election Commission of Pakistan by the Lahore High Court in a writ Petition (Lahore High Court, 2013) Although the Government was seen reluctant to hold elections on an immediate basis, however, after the deadlines given by the Supreme Court of Pakistan the election to the first local government institutions under the current system was held on 30th May 2015 (ECP, 2015).

There is a consensus that Pakistan's current local government structure originates from the 1935 Act, bestowed by the colonial authorities. The nation's leaders continued to focus on the many other difficulties they faced, despite experiencing some early failures. Formulating the nation's constitution, relocating millions of immigrants, managing economic challenges, and confronting a formidable and tenacious adversary constituted these first obstacles. This catastrophic setback has undermined the fundamental principles of local self-governance in Pakistan.

After a decade of anticipation, Ayub instituted the system—not to advance it, but to validate his authority. In 1965, he pursued the president by referencing the electoral college outcomes seen in fundamental democracies. Subsequent civilian and military regimes have shown less regard for the nation's annual provincial and municipal elections. The municipally elected provincial administrations had contempt for the city government, seeing it as a vestige of the military past. The administration was sluggish in its response upon assuming power, and normal elections were never held, all for obvious

political reasons. A significant effect of the ANP and PTI governments is the postponement of the KPK local government elections.

The state's endorsement of local entities is the paramount condition. Members of these entities are elected at large by the electorate in the region. Women from historically underprivileged populations, such as the working class and farmers, will constitute a disproportionate segment of these groupings. Several crucial provisions of the landmark 18th amendment—integral to the 1973 constitution—indicate the creation of local governments to decentralize authority to grassroots representatives. The primary objective is to establish a society that is more egalitarian and devoid of issues. Secondly, to customize laws and regulations to the distinct needs of individuals, governments must to promote cooperation across all governmental departments. The act requires the four federating units to create their own local governments to allocate political power, budgetary responsibilities, and administrative functions (Khaliq, 2012).

Despite the 18th Amendment explicitly stating that each province is accountable for its local affairs, the role for supervising municipal elections was assigned to the ECP. The devolution of authority transpired with the conclusion of Pervez Musharraf's presidential term in 2010. All provinces, save Baluchistan, contravened the norms and failed to hold elections. The people attributed the delay to the political establishment's hesitance to transfer power from the provinces to the municipalities. In April 2012, the Supreme Court of Pakistan acknowledged the significant divide between the populace and the government during the "Baluchistan Law and Order" case hearing. Subsequently, the top judge of Pakistan solicited detailed comments from all counties. The provinces were anticipated to inform the Court by May 2012 of their intentions to conduct municipal elections and provide justifications for such actions.

The provinces choose to postpone the enactment of election legislation in lieu of more controversial and time-consuming issues. On

July 2, 2013, the court ordered all provinces to conduct their local government elections while simultaneously adhering to its stipulations. Subsequent to a positive reply from the provincial government of Baluchistan, local body elections were held on December 7, 2013. Kashmir, Punjab, and Sindh were the other three provinces that enacted significant laws in the months subsequent to March 2014, when the Supreme Court mandated elections.

The lower courts reversed the delimitation imposed by the Punjab and Sindh high courts, resulting in the postponement of the election. Before reinstating the process, the Supreme Court should empower the ECP to delineate constituency boundaries. As the high courts did not annul the KP government's delimitation decision, the ECP scheduled the KP election for 30 May 2015 on 4 April 2015. Their veracity was questioned by many because of the extremely tense political climate surrounding the 2013 elections. In response to perceived widespread electoral fraud in 2013, a significant number of individuals protested in the streets. The Public Trust Initiative (PTI) claimed that the 2013 general election was significantly compromised by extensive electoral fraud and demanded the formation of an investigation committee to investigate these allegations (Report, July 2015).

Awami National Party Government and Local Elections

In May 2012, the provincial assembly of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa obtained gubernatorial approval and subsequently adopted the Local Government Act of 2012. It was a rule pertaining to municipal affairs. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province has the jurisdiction to create, manage, and unify Local Councils, in addition to legislating their structures and related matters. The preamble to the Act declares that the establishment of local government institutions, including elected representatives of the citizenry, is essential. There is a need for increased representation of certain groups, including women, minorities, peasants, and workers. Article 140A (1) of Pakistan's 1973 Constitution creates the framework for a local government system, conferring political,

administrative, and financial authority and responsibility to different tiers of government via their representatives. To accomplish this objective, it is essential to examine and enhance the laws pertinent to this organization (LG Act, 2012).

The Act mandates that candidate selection must follow secret balloting based on the concept of universal suffrage. The province may adjust the size of a constituency as necessary for election reasons. A Union Council with several members will be selected. Legislation permits each voter to cast a ballot for a single representative residing in their electoral district. The designated legislation mandated the ANP provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to conduct local body elections; however, this was not fulfilled. Khan (2016) notes that the ANP government failed to implement the Local government Act 2012 because they disregarded demands to hold the province's long-overdue elections.

Local Government Act 2013 and PTI Government

In the 2013 general election, candidates from Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) excelled, obtaining the majority of seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and establishing a coalition government in KPK province. The term "Change" was often used by PTI during the election. The majority Pashtun population had no option but to choose PTI as their saviour in the election. This astonished many and displaced the long-serving MPs who had a strong hold on the province's power. Pervez Khattak was nominated for the position of chief minister by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, their main coalition partner. The governing alliance, with 80 seats, featured Awami Jamhuri Ittehad Pakistan (AJIP), Qaumi Watan Party (QWP), and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) with 26 seats each, and PTI with 56 seats. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam F (JUIF), Awami National Party (ANP), and Pakistan Muslim League N (PML-N) are opposition parties that obtained fifteen provincial seats. The ruling coalition considered decentralisation post-election, emphasising the transfer of power and the restoration of local governance.

The rules governing council operations were still under deliberation at the municipal elections; thus, not all issues were resolved. Numerous notable politicians expressed their perplexity over the function of city councils and their discontent with the prevailing civil servant-oriented framework of district administration during the DRI. The extent to which local authorities would face legal action was another investigation they conducted. The most recent population count was in 1998; hence, no current figures are accessible. Enquiries on the demographic composition arose from speculation about movement patterns prompted by the Afghan war and the dissolution of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). As of mid-2014, the province has a population exceeding 27,933,000, including 5,260,000 individuals in urban areas and 22,673,000 in rural parts. The 1998 census revealed that 74% of the population communicated in Pashto, whilst just 1% used Urdu. The LG Act (2012) states that the literacy rate disparity between genders was 52% for men and 19% for females according to the 1998 census. The Pakistan Economic Survey 2012-2015 indicates that 72% of the male population in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had literacy skills, however just 35% of the female population did. Concerns over security and the possibility of violence during the KP local election campaign were warranted, considering the experiences from the 2013 national elections and the persistent conflict in adjacent FATA.

The EU said in its 2013 assessment that "Baluchistan and KP endured significant hardship due to these numerous assaults," noting that "attacks on political campaigns, candidates, party supporters, party premises, and electoral sites increased markedly as the election date neared." The LGA, 2013 (LG Act, 2012) indicates that the province government of KP conducted local elections on May 30, 2015, after a decade-long hiatus. The elections were supervised by Pakistan's governing party, the Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

Legislative Bodies Classified by Location The authority to administer elections for provincial and municipal positions in Pakistan was granted

to the Election Commission of Pakistan according to Article 140A of the 1973 Constitution. The Supreme Court of Pakistan mandated the federal government to empower the Election Commission of Pakistan to delineate electoral boundaries in a ruling dated March 20, 2014, in Civil Appeal Nos. 38 to 45/2014 and C.P. No. 297 of 2014. Notwithstanding the PTI-led provincial administration's commitment to conduct elections within 90 days, they have not yet occurred. The PTI, the principal opposition party of the provincial government, has been contesting many policies put forward by the Punjab Assembly. They want to avoid political meddling in the next Punjab municipal elections (Report, July 2015). Its coalition partner, Jamat-e-Islami, has inadvertently facilitated the implementation of a policy in KPK province similar to that of Punjab. Ijaz Ahmad Chaudhry, president of the Punjab PTI, said, "We will not permit the Punjab government to enact this 'objectionable' bill, and we will oppose the scheduling of elections based on non-party affiliation." Mian Shahid Latif, a member of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in the national parliament, responded to Ijaz Ahmad Chaudhry's remarks, urging the PTI to resolve their conflicts and focus on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Ijaz Chaudhry promptly denied the allegation and said that the KPK was conspiring to create a separate village council and a three-tier voting system for the next elections. The party coalition and its partner, JI, have not endorsed any candidate for the provincial union council post. The ruling party in KPK insists that all political factions participate in voting, regardless of the contentiousness of the topic. The Express Tribune states that the KPK minister in charge of local government informed coalition partners beforehand about the potential for holding non-partisan provincial elections at the union council level. The Pakistani Supreme Court has ordered both the federal and provincial administrations to provide written answers over the decision to defer the local body elections until September. The Punjab provincial election is set on December 4. Nevertheless, the research conducted in July 2015 highlighted other

concerns that the KPK administration has not yet resolved. Included are its intentions about the many constitutional principles it has overlooked and its will to continue disregarding the

Supreme Court's orders.

Comparative Analysis of Local Election in KP

Table 1: Political Party Performance in 2022 KP Local Elections

Political Party	Tehsil Chairmen/Mayors Won	Stronghold Areas	Comparison with 1st Phase (Dec 2021)
PTI	22	Swat, Upper Dir, Mansehra	Improved performance from 18 wins
JUI-F	7	Kurram, Swat, Lower Dir	Declined from 23 wins
Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)	6	Lower Dir, Upper Dir	Increased influence
Independent	5	Various tehsils	Remained consistent
PPP	3	Upper Dir, Malakand	Slight improvement
PML-N	2	Limited influence	Similar performance
ANP	2	Limited influence	Slightly weaker
Others	3	Scattered wins	Marginal impact

Table 1 provides an overview of the political party performance in the 2022 KP local elections. The table highlights the number of Tehsil Chairmen/Mayors won by each political party, their stronghold areas, and the comparison with their performance in the first phase of elections in December 2021. PTI showed an improved performance, winning 22 seats, up from 18 in the previous phase, with strongholds in Swat, Upper Dir, and Mansehra. JUI-F, however, saw a decline, winning only 7 seats, a drop from 23 in the previous elections, with

strongholds in Kurram, Swat, and Lower Dir. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) gained influence, winning 6 seats primarily in Lower and Upper Dir. Independent candidates maintained consistency with 5 wins across various tehsils. PPP showed slight improvement, securing 3 seats in Upper Dir and Malakand. PML-N and ANP both had limited influence, winning 2 seats each, with ANP performing slightly weaker than before. The "Others" category had a marginal impact, securing 3 scattered wins in various areas.

Table 2: Key Issues and Challenges in 2022 Local Elections

Category	Description
Violence & Security	Clashes in Abbottabad, Torgar, and South Waziristan resulted in deaths and injuries. Kidnappings and ballot box theft reported.
Women's Participation	No votes cast in certain female polling stations, highlighting gender-based electoral barriers.
Communication Gaps	Inaccessible mountainous regions delayed results of 15 tehsils.
Electoral Integrity	Reports of rigging, ballot burning, and voting irregularities in some areas.

The issues and challenges during the 2022 local elections are outlined in Table 2. Violence and security remained a serious concern, with the election marred in places like Abbottabad, Torgar and South Waziristan by clashes that killed and injured scores of people as well

reports of kidnappings and ballot box thefts. Women's participation was another major issue, with no votes being cast in some female polling stations, indicating gender-based barriers to the electoral process. Further delays in the election were incurred due to communication gaps,

particularly in the inaccessible mountainous parts of the region, which delayed announcement of results from 15 tehsils. Finally, electoral integrity was at stake, with

reports of rigging, burning of ballots and other voting irregularities in some regions, leading some to question how fair the elections were.

Table 3: Comparison of 2002, 2015, 2018, and 2022 Local Elections in KP

Aspect	2002 Elections	2015 Elections	2018 Elections	2022 Elections
Ruling Party	Military Government (Musharraf)	PTI	PTI	PTI
Voter Turnout	Moderate (state-controlled)	13.4 million voters	High	Moderate
Key Issues	Military oversight, introduction of devolution plan	Administrative mismanagement, violence	Security concerns, delimitation delays	Security threats, rigging allegations
Electoral System	Non-party (military-backed)	Non-party (local), party-based (tehsil/district)	Party-based	Party-based
Outcome	Establishment of Musharraf's LG system	PTI consolidated power	PTI retained dominance	Mixed outcome

The comparison of the local elections of KP of the 2002, 2015, 2018, and 2022 is given in the table below (Table 3). The ruling party in all three elections was PTI, which still holds dominance in the region. General election voter-turnout hovered around 13.4 million voters in 2015, was up significantly in 2018 and settled back to moderate levels in 2022. Central issues evolved over time: the 2015 elections were predicated on administrative mismanagement and violence, whereas the 2018 elections were hindered due to security concerns and delays affixed in the underpinning process

of delimitation. In the 2022 elections these challenges included threats against the security of elections and accusations of electoral fraud. (1) On the electoral system, the 2015 elections partly involved non-party (local) and party-based (tehsil/district) elections, whereas all 2018 and 2022 elections were party-based. The elections had different results as well: PTI consolidated power in 2015, retained its dominance in 2018, but the final results in 2022 were more mixed, with a different set of winners and challenges on the cards.

Table 4: Local Government Acts and Governance in KP

Local Govt. Ordinance 2001 (Musharraf Regime)	Introduced devolution plan, district governments, nazim system, union councils.	Restructured local governance but criticized for top-down military control and lack of political inclusivity.
Local Government Act 2012 (ANP Govt.)	Secret balloting, local governance structure reforms.	Strengthened local representation but implementation was slow.
Local Government Act 2013 (PTI Govt.)	Direct elections, devolution of power.	Ensured stronger local government structure under PTI.

Local Government System in 2022	Party-based elections at tehsil and district levels.	PTI faced tough competition due to national political crisis.
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Table 4, show the various local government acts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and their implications on local elections. The 2002 (Musharraf Regime) Introduced devolution plan, district governments, nazim system, union councils. The 2012 Local Government Act introduced by the ANP government provided for secret balloting and alterations in the local government structure meant to enhance local political representation. Its effect on the elections was limited though, as the implementing rules was issued only recently. Under the PTI government, the Local Government Act of 2013 established direct elections and the devolution of power, strengthened the local government system and ensured political stability during PTI's tenure in government. Unlike the Local Government System of 2022 where party-based elections were introduced at the tehsil and district level, PTI found itself up against much stronger competition in the national political crisis, denting its dominance, resulting in a more balanced election outcome.

These tables do keep taking us through a breakdown of the 2022 local election in kp, what we got politically, what we lost ma... If you need any tweaks, just let me know!

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) local elections are the culmination of a long, complex journey, replete with delays, political tensions, and challenges in devolving power in Pakistan. Introduction: Background: However, the implementation of the Local Government Acts of 2012 and 2013 posed challenges for the region, and the elections in 2015 were marred by widespread electoral fraud, mismanagement, and security challenges that compromised the success of the elections. As PTI came into power, the public was hoping to see a different Pakistan that would have less centralization of power and more horizontalism in the system, however, the results of the 2018 and 2022 elections were mixed, characterised by

fragmentation and accusations of rigging and violence. However, the shift to party-based elections in 2022 also illustrated the reality of the evolving political competition and the continued legacy of national crises. However, KPK's local government system, if genuinely representative, could pave the way for more inclusive governance, provided the region overcomes security challenges, restores the integrity of the electoral process, and ensures representation of marginalized communities. This brings an expectation that the future of local government in KPK is dependent on the removal of these obstacles in order to enable better and more responsive local governance.

Challenges to Local Government Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

1. Economic Challenges

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's 131 Tehsil Local Governments (TLGs) face severe fiscal instability, with 99 nearing fiscal default and struggling to meet basic obligations like salaries, pensions, and utility bills, crippling administrative efficiency and public service delivery. The crisis intensifies in 25 Tehsil Municipal Administrations (TMAs) of the Newly Merged Districts (ex-FATA), where 24 lack self-generated revenue, relying entirely on precarious provincial grants. Chronic budgetary constraints—in both developmental (infrastructure, social services) and non-developmental (administrative costs) sectors—fuel inefficient, inequitable resource allocation, reflecting flawed prioritization over mere fund shortages. Compounding these challenges, political patronage undermines transparency, as councils often rubber-stamp decisions favoring chairpersons/mayors, eroding institutional integrity and public trust. Addressing KP's TLG crisis demands integrated reforms: fiscal autonomy, capacity-building, and governance overhauls to ensure equitable service delivery and sustainable local administration.

2. Political Involvement

Elected representatives (e.g., Chief Ministers, MNAs, MPAs) routinely pressure officials to bypass legal protocols, prioritizing personal or partisan gains. Such interference—through threats of punitive transfers, postings, or fabricated disciplinary actions—undermines administrative autonomy, forcing officers to prioritize political agendas over ethical mandates. This culture of coercion fosters systemic corruption, institutionalizes malpractice, and erodes public trust, as governance succumbs to patronage networks over merit-based professionalism. Decision-making becomes subservient to political expediency, sidelining transparency and accountability, thereby crippling the emergence of an impartial bureaucratic framework essential for equitable governance.

3. Law and Order

The 1973 Pakistani Constitution (Articles 32, 37(i), and 140-A) mandates decentralized local governance to empower grassroots democracy through political, administrative, and fiscal devolution. However, successive governments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) have systematically undermined these principles, centralizing power at provincial/federal levels, withholding financial autonomy, and enabling political interference—resulting in ineffective, cash-strapped local bodies incapable of delivering basic services or fostering development. Chronic underfunding, bureaucratic obstruction, and patronage-driven decision-making have eroded institutional integrity, contravening constitutional ideals of participatory democracy. Reforms must prioritize fiscal decentralization, capacity-building, and legal safeguards to curb political manipulation, alongside collaborative efforts by the state, judiciary, and civil society to realign governance with constitutional commitments to the rule of law, transparency, and equitable local empowerment.

4. Bureaucratic Obstruction

Modern bureaucracies, fixated on hierarchical control, routinely overstep their mandates by encroaching on elected officials' roles, driven by

a zero-sum view of power that resists shared authority. This overreach stifles local governance—particularly in municipal and social services—resulting in inefficiencies, accountability gaps, and delayed public service delivery. Citizens bear the brunt through diminished resource access and eroding trust, exacerbating the disconnect between governance systems and the populace they are meant to serve.

5. Insufficient Expertise of Local Government Officers

Local governments are undermined by illegal recruitment favoring political connections over merit, eroding administrative competence. This nepotism cripples service delivery—sanitation, water supply, and infrastructure maintenance deteriorate, degrading public welfare. Compounded by resource shortages, outdated technology, and untrained staff, institutions lack the capacity to design or monitor development projects effectively. These systemic flaws perpetuate a cycle of inefficiency, leaving local bodies unable to fulfill their mandates.

6. Lack of Engagement with these things as Fundamentally Human

Local governments struggle to attract and retain talent due to systemic issues: low motivation (perceived career stagnation vs. private sector growth opportunities), absent incentives (lack of performance recognition), and excessive scrutiny (overzealous anti-corruption measures fostering fear over accountability). Additional deterrents include bureaucratic rigidity, political interference, pay gaps, and outdated technology, which alienate skilled professionals.

7. Limited Autonomy

Local governments face autonomy deprivation due to centralized governance, where higher authorities control core policies and finances. Limited revenue-raising powers and budget dependency stifle timely, innovative solutions to local issues, hampering efficiency. This financial and operational subordination demotivates officials and disenfranchises communities, eroding governance effectiveness, responsiveness, and accountability.

8. Environmental Challenges

Local governments, as frontline responders to climate change, confront rising sea levels, extreme weather, and shifting ecosystems that strain resources, disrupt infrastructure, and threaten public safety. Effective mitigation requires reducing emissions, adapting infrastructure (transport, energy grids) for resilience, and sustainably managing water, forests, and land. By integrating policy, community engagement, and innovation, they balance economic growth with environmental stewardship to build sustainable, disaster-resilient communities.

9. Technical Constraints

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's local governments grapple with obsolete technology and inefficient data systems, crippling service delivery and transparency. Outdated administrative tools hinder integration and decision-making, while poor cybersecurity infrastructure—lacking protocols, trained staff, and basic IT safeguards—exposes sensitive data to breaches, ransomware, and phishing. These vulnerabilities erode public trust and institutional integrity, necessitating urgent reforms: modernizing technology, deploying robust cybersecurity measures, and investing in capacity-building to ensure secure, efficient governance.

10. Openness and Corruption Challenges

Opaque governance and inaccessible information fuel distrust, as bureaucratic inefficiencies and fragmented data systems obscure policy decisions, spending priorities, and accountability. Coupled with corruption—misuse of public funds for personal/political gain—this breeds public disillusionment. Strengthening anti-corruption frameworks, enforcing transparency protocols, and fostering citizen oversight are critical to restoring trust and integrity in local governance.

11. Forgetting to Foster Growth and Development

Section 110 of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act (2013) mandates training for local government staff and elected representatives to enhance governance skills,

service delivery, and evidence-based decision-making. However, implementation remains inadequate due to budgetary constraints and a lack of structured programs, leaving officials underprepared for their roles. This gap fuels bureaucratic inefficiency, weak accountability, and poor public service outcomes. Without ongoing professional development—particularly for elected representatives unfamiliar with governance processes—the LGA-2013's objectives remain unmet. Addressing this requires prioritized investment in tailored training initiatives to align capacity with legislative intent.

Opportunities to strengthening Local Government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

The local government system offers several avenues for enhancing governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including:

Economic and Financial Opportunities

The Local Government Act (2013) enshrines fiscal autonomy for municipalities under Section 42 and the Third Schedule, empowering them to generate revenue via taxes, fees, and charges. This self-reliance reduces dependence on central funds, enabling tailored service delivery (health, education, infrastructure) aligned with community priorities. Direct linkage between local taxation and service provision fosters accountability, strengthens governance, and builds a sustainable economic base for responsive, autonomous governance.

Social Opportunities

Tehsil Local Governments (TLGs) and Village/Neighborhood Councils (VCs/NCs) provide essential services tailored to community needs. TLGs oversee broader responsibilities like infrastructure, education, sanitation, and water supply, while VCs/NCs address grassroots issues such as street lighting and community activities. Their proximity to citizens enables responsive governance, bridging local grievances with broader initiatives, leveraging local insights for swift solutions, and enhancing living standards through civic engagement.

Environmental Opportunities

Local governments drive natural resource stewardship through community-based strategies, leveraging local ecosystem knowledge to craft targeted policies that engage stakeholders in sustainable practices like waste management and conservation. Proximity enables effective monitoring, regulation enforcement, and grassroots conservation initiatives, fostering communal environmental ownership. By safeguarding biodiversity, air/water quality, and climate resilience, they align local actions with global sustainable development goals.

Institutional Opportunities

Section 110 of the LGA 2013 mandates accountability for elected representatives and local officials through transparency, fostering public trust via open decision-making. Citizen participation cultivates ownership and curbs corruption, while equipping officials with tools for informed governance. This framework enhances service delivery and community development by ensuring responsible, responsive local governance.

Political Opportunities

Local governments bolster grassroots democracy by enabling citizen agency in daily governance, acting as an incubator for democratic values through direct public-representative engagement. Their agility ensures responsive, locally-aligned policies, while Pakistan's constitutional decentralization (Article 140-A) empowers participatory governance, fostering civic ownership and prioritized development.

Participation and Decision Making

Tehsil and village councils ensure inclusive representation of marginalized groups (women, minorities, youth), empowering equitable decision-making. Committees (Accounts, Finance, Monitoring) enforce transparency and accountability, while collaborative resource and expertise pooling fosters community ownership. This participatory model strengthens governance efficacy, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Good Governance through Institutional Reforms

Reforms enhancing public service delivery are central to good governance, with local governments pivotal through decentralized administration. Their agile, community-tailored approach—bolstered by streamlined processes, budget transparency, and accountability—improves service efficiency. Technology adoption reduces administrative barriers, while citizen engagement in decision-making builds trust and equity, ensuring policies reflect local needs.

Access to Basic Information

Citizens gain streamlined access to essential services (birth/marriage/divorce certificates) via transparent, data-driven systems, fostering public participation and governance accountability.

Transparency and Rule of Law

Robust internal audits identify financial mismanagement, while public audits ensure transparency and equitable resource distribution, reinforcing trust and social justice in local governance.

Frontline Role in SDGs

Pakistan's SDG commitments rely on Village/Neighborhood Councils (VCs/NCs) to collect localized data on poverty, education, and health, enabling targeted interventions aligned with community needs.

Framing of Bye-laws

Section 113 of the LGA 2013 empowers Tehsil governments and VCs/NCs to enact context-specific bye-laws, ensuring swift, tailored solutions to local issues and enhancing public welfare through responsive governance.

Pathways to Sustainable Development in Local Government

1 Economic Development

Local governments drive sustainable growth via revenue generation (LGA Section 42, Taxation Rules 2016), funding infrastructure, job creation, and climate-resilient initiatives like renewable energy, while balancing economic,

social, and environmental goals.

2 Supporting Vulnerable Segments

Tailored social welfare programs (education, healthcare, economic support) for women, minorities, and IDPs, paired with robust public financial management (PFM), ensure inclusive service delivery and equitable resource allocation.

3 Environmental Sustainability

LGA-2013 empowers local councils to enforce waste management, recycling, and disaster risk reduction (e.g., early warning systems), aligning local actions with national environmental goals.

4 Digital and E-Governance

E-governance tools (e-portals, RTI platforms, data analytics) in KP enhance transparency, streamline services, and enable evidence-based policymaking, reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies.

5 Human Resource Development

Established in 2008, the LGS trains officials in administrative and leadership skills, offering diplomas and targeted programs to professionalize local governance and adapt to emerging challenges.

6 Strengthening Collaboration with Civil Society

Collaboration with NGOs and CSOs leverages sectoral expertise (health, education) and grants to address community needs, enhancing sustainable service delivery through capacity-building.

7 Promoting Youth and Women Development

In KP (62% literacy), local governments prioritize youth/women via education, jobs, and gender-responsive policies, dismantling barriers through community engagement and advocacy.

8 Aligning Local Governance with SDGs

Decentralized governance aligns local solutions (poverty, health, environment) with SDGs, using grassroots data for monitoring and fostering community ownership of sustainable

development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

1 Conclusion

There are challenges and opportunities in strengthening local government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Political opposition to delimitation, the biometric system and lack of cooperation between the Election Commission of Pakistan and the provincial authorities are some of the issues delaying the elections. However, tackling these barriers also presents opportunities for impactful change, which in turn would promote financial independence, increase community wellness by enabling benefit matching and aligned programming, and improve environmental sustainability. This will ensure a more transparent and accountable local administration which is able to act quickly in meeting its people's needs. It can promote a more inclusive and responsive governance system by allowing local bodies to manage their own resources, make local decisions, and create byelaws that best suit their communities. Through the integration of marginalized groups, the establishment in providing access to vital information and the commitment to social justice, and the rule of law, where local governments can play a leading role in advancing equality, and the sustainability of their policies with the Pillars of the United Nations, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Local governments can effectively and inclusively address community needs through smart initiatives that provide assistance to vulnerable populations, promote digital governance, and develop human resources. Improving the well-being of people by empowering youth, women, and marginalized groups will lead to holistic development of the province. Local governments play a crucial role in either facilitating or inhibiting citizen engagement in governance. This is essential for promoting economic growth, social equity, and environmental sustainability, as it helps create resilient communities and guarantee long-term prosperity. Working together, finding new solutions, and prioritizing inclusive

development, local authorities can help realize sustainable development goals, making the world a more equitable and prosperous place.

2 Recommendations

Following this analysis on the path forward for local government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, this forum presents a series of critical recommendations to address these challenges and improve governance. Their recommendations include decentralizing authority to local governments, advancing transparency through technology, encouraging inclusionary practices, and steering development toward environmental sustainability. Implementing these steps can pave the way for more responsive, efficient, and accountable local administration in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, ultimately leading to a more effective provincial governance structure that better caters to its citizen's needs while contributing to the province's sustainable development.

2.1 Advocate for Inclusive Governance

Ensure the participation of marginalized groups in local government is active and not only for show, particularly women, youth and minorities. This will lead to a fairer and more inclusive governance system.

2.2 Build Systems with Transparency and Accountability

Strengthen transparency and accountability by enacting open budgeting, public disclosure of budget implementation and audit reports, among others, at the local government level to promote trust and reduce corruption.

2.3 Enhance Local Financial Autonomy

It will allow municipalities to keep more revenue generated through local taxes and services and not rely too much on province or federal government. Bills of exchange are a new credit line that allows people to not only improve their financial autonomy, decision-making flexibility.

2.4 Strengthen Inter-Agency Cooperation

Facilitate the governmental and administrative

process at provincial levels by collaborating with the Election Commission of Pakistan and resolving the delimitation issue whereby ensuring most responsible execution of electoral reforms.

2.5 Grant More Autonomy to Local Governments

Give local bodies increased power over decisions, resource management and bye-law development. This would create flexibility and agility in meeting the needs of the community.

2.6 Fifth, Reform Electoral and Biometric Systems

Work on resolving the technical and logistical challenges surrounding the biometric voter registration system and the electoral process and to thereby ensure that elections are fair, transparent and inclusive.

2.7 Promote Digital Governance

Point #9: Digital Investments: This will ensure local governance is efficient, easily accessible and transparent.

2.8 Capacity Building for Local Officials in Watershed Management

Consider providing supplementary training and professional development resources to local government officials in order to promote best practices in management, public administration, and service delivery.

2.9 Encourage Community Engagement and Citizen Participation

Create mechanisms for ongoing engagement and consultation with the public. This is to make sure that local governments are guided by the interests and issues that matter most to the people in their communities and promote civic engagement.

2.10 Ensure that ALL policies are gender-equal

These policies should address the unique needs of women and girls and ensure that they have equal access to the services, opportunities, and decision-making processes governed by the local government.

2.11 Concentrate on our Sustainable Development

A regulate local governance policies and services in a manner that aligns local development activity with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to ensure that local development efforts further the global aims of advancing economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

2.12 Enhance Infrastructure & Service Delivery

To improve citizen quality of life: Invest in the essential infrastructure (including roads, health care and schools). Delivery systems for these services should be efficient and access should be equitable for all.

2.13 Support Local Economic Growth

Promote programs and incentives to strengthen local businesses, entrepreneurship and job creation. This will promote economic development in the communities, alleviating unemployment and poverty.

2.14 Enhance Environmental Sustainability

Promote local environmental sustainability practices: such as waste management programs, sustainable development projects, renewable energy projects, conservation initiatives, etc.

2.15 Streamline Partnerships with Civil Society and NGOs

Scale up collaborations with NGOs and civil society for development projects to fill vulnerabilities in the communities for overall community welfare.

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