

Local Government in Punjab: Legal, Institutional and Operational Challenges

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Abstract

Local government (LG) in Punjab represents the most direct interface between the state and its citizens, yet its performance remains hindered by legal ambiguities, institutional weaknesses, and operational constraints. Despite the constitutional mandate under Article 140A, successive provincial governments have failed to institutionalize an empowered LG framework, often dissolving councils prematurely and centralizing authority. This research critically examines the historical evolution, legal structure, and operational challenges of Punjab's LG system, situating it in comparison with other Pakistani provinces and international models, including India's Panchayati Raj, Turkey's metropolitan municipalities, South Africa's three-sphere governance, and Indonesia's regional autonomy. The paper integrates an analysis of major political parties' manifestos (PML-N, PPP, PTI, JUI) to assess policy commitments to decentralization, and explores systemic issues such as fiscal dependency, limited administrative capacity, and the weak position of Union Council chairpersons. The study proposes a reform roadmap emphasizing de jure and de facto empowerment, fiscal decentralization, capacity building, and citizen participation, supported by practical recommendations for institutional safeguards and legislative amendments.

Keywords: Local Government, Decentralization, Article 140A, Fiscal Dependence, Subsidiarity Principle, Political Manifestos, Reform Roadmap.

Introduction

Local governments serve as the foundation of democratic governance by delivering essential services, facilitating grassroots participation, and ensuring political representation at the community level. In Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, LG structures have undergone repeated transformations since independence, often reflecting the political priorities of ruling regimes rather than the consistent needs of citizens.

The constitutional guarantee under Article 140A mandates that "Each Province shall, by law, establish a local government system and devolve political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local governments." However, in practice, Punjab's LG institutions are frequently dissolved or bypassed, with provincial ministries and bureaucracies assuming their functions.

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The focus of this research is on the followings;

1. The historical trajectory of LG in Punjab
2. Legal and institutional frameworks governing LG
3. Structural and operational challenges facing LG institutions
4. Comparative perspectives from other Pakistani provinces and selected international models
5. Political party positions on decentralization
6. A reform roadmap for strengthening LG in Punjab

The central argument advanced is that without genuine fiscal autonomy, political non-interference, and institutional safeguards, Punjab's LG will continue to underperform, undermining democratic deepening and service delivery.

Historical Evolution of Local Government in Punjab

Pre-Independence

Local governance under British colonial rule was primarily administrative, designed to facilitate revenue collection and maintain law and order rather than promote participatory democracy. Municipalities were introduced in urban areas through the Municipal Act of 1850⁴ and later revised in 1884 under Lord Ripon's reforms⁵, which modestly expanded elected representation.

Post-Independence Developments

1959 Basic Democracies Order: General Ayub Khan's system created Basic Democracies (BD) councils, linking local representatives with national electoral processes. While criticized as a controlled democracy, it did institutionalize the idea of elected councils.

1979 Local Government Ordinance: Under General Zia-ul-Haq, the LG structure emphasized rural councils and urban municipal bodies, with increased bureaucratic control.

2001 Devolution Plan: President Pervez Musharraf's Local Government Ordinance 2001 was the most ambitious decentralization effort, eliminating administrative divisions and devolving significant powers to districts, tehsils, and union councils. However, the system lacked constitutional protection, allowing its dismantling by later governments.

Punjab Local Government Act 2013: Introduced by the PML-N government, this act reinstated certain bureaucratic controls and altered electoral structures, diluting the independence of councils.

Punjab Local Government Act 2019: The PTI-led government proposed direct elections for mayors and introduced metropolitan corporations, but the system was never fully operationalized before dissolution in 2022.

Table 1: Structure of Local Government in Punjab (2019 Framework)

Tier	Urban	Rural
Metropolitan Corporation	Lahore, Faisalabad, etc.	N/A
Municipal Corporation	Major urban centers	N/A
Tehsil Council	Semi-urban areas	Semi-urban & rural
Union Council	Ward-based	Village-based

⁴Government of India. (1850). *The Municipal Act, 1850*. Calcutta: Government Press.

⁵Metcalfe, C. T. (1884). *Lord Ripon's Resolution on Local Self-Government*. Indian Statutory Reforms, Vol. 2. London: Macmillan.

Constitutional and Legal Framework of Local Government in Punjab

Local Government under Article 32 (Pre-18th Amendment)

Before the insertion of Article 140A through the 18th Amendment (2010), the Constitution of Pakistan only contained a general directive under Article 32, which obligated the State to encourage local government institutions composed of elected representatives. However, this provision lacked enforceability and left the structure and powers of local governments entirely at the discretion of provincial authorities.

Constitutional Mandate (Article 140A)

The constitutional foundation for local government in Pakistan lies in Article 140A of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, inserted through the 18th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2010:

Each Province shall, by law, establish a local government system and devolve political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local governments. The elections to the local governments shall be held by the Election Commission of Pakistan.

This provision has two critical components:

1. **Obligation to Establish Local Government:** The provincial legislature must enact laws to create a functioning local government system.
2. **Devolution of Powers:** Political, administrative, and financial authority must be transferred to local bodies.

However, the language of Article 140A leaves the scope and extent of devolution to the discretion of provincial legislatures. This has allowed provincial governments, including Punjab's, to design local governance systems that are often administratively subordinate and fiscally dependent⁶.

Provincial Legislative Framework in Punjab

Punjab has experimented with multiple legislative frameworks in the post-18th Amendment period:

Punjab Local Government Act 2013 (PLGA 2013)

Enacted by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, PLGA 2013 reintroduced Union Councils, Municipal Committees, and District Councils, but retained significant control in the provincial bureaucracy. Key characteristics included:

- District tier restored but with limited fiscal autonomy.
- Administrator control by provincial civil servants until elections.
- Ward-based elections instead of party-based, diluting political accountability.

Critics argued that the system maintained bureaucratic supremacy and left little room for independent decision-making by elected representatives.

Punjab Local Government Act 2019 (PLGA 2019)

Introduced under Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), PLGA 2019 was more ambitious in decentralization:

- Abolished the district tier, creating Metropolitan Corporations, Tehsil Councils, and Neighborhood Councils.

⁶International Crisis Group. (2013). *Parliamentary and Local Elections in Pakistan*. Asia Report No. 237.

- Proposed direct election of mayors and chairpersons.
- Promised fiscal transfers based on a formula linked to population and needs.

However, the law never became fully functional, elections were delayed, and in 2022 the incoming PML-N coalition repealed it before it could be tested.

Punjab Local Government Act 2022 (PLGA 2022)⁷

The PLGA 2022 reintroduced a district tier while keeping much of the administrative control with the provincial government. While it nominally provides for fiscal decentralization, in practice the Punjab Finance Commission Award, which determines local bodies' share of provincial revenues has not been consistently implemented.

Judicial Interpretation of Article 140A

Judicial enforcement of Article 140A has been pivotal in safeguarding local democracy.

- *Asad Ali Khan v. Province of Punjab (PLD 2021 SC 770)*: The Supreme Court struck down Section 3 of the PLGA 2019, declaring the premature dissolution of Punjab's elected LGs unconstitutional. The Court emphasized that LGs derive their legitimacy from the electorate, not the provincial executive, and ordered restoration of councils until completion of their term on 31 December 2021.
- *MQM-P v. Province of Sindh (PLD 2022 SC 439)*: In a landmark judgment applicable beyond Punjab, the Supreme Court held that Article 140A requires not only the existence of elected LGs but also meaningful devolution of functions, fiscal powers, and administrative authority.

These cases collectively underscore that Article 140A is a substantive constitutional safeguard, not a procedural formality.

Table 2: Local Government Elections in Punjab (Timeline)

Year	Ruler / Govt	Legal Framework	Nature of Elections
1959	Gen. Ayub Khan	Basic Democracies Order, 1959	First LG elections (Basic Democrats system)
1979	Gen. Zia-ul-Haq	Punjab Local Government Ordinance, 1979	Non-party local govt elections
1983	Gen. Zia-ul-Haq	Same as above	Second round of LG elections
1991	Nawaz Sharif (PML-N)	Punjab LG Ordinance, 1979	Local govt elections
1998	Nawaz Sharif (2nd term)	Same law (1979 Ordinance)	Local govt elections before Musharraf
2001	Gen. Pervez Musharraf	Local Government Plan 2000	First elections under devolution plan
2005	Gen. Pervez Musharraf	Local Government Ordinance, 2001	Second round of devolution plan elections
2013	PML-N Govt (Shahbaz Sharif)	Punjab Local Government Act, 2013	Elections notified but delayed
2015	PML-N Govt	Punjab Local Government Act, 2013	Actual LG elections held in Punjab
2022	PTI Govt (Usman Buzdar)	Punjab LG Act, 2019 (amended 2021)	Elections planned but not completed due to crisis

⁷*Punjab Local Government Act, 2022 (Act XXXIII of 2022), Punjab Gazette, Government of the Punjab.*

Political Party Manifestos and Local Government Commitments

Local governance reform in Punjab and Pakistan at large is not merely a matter of administrative law; it is also a political choice. The manifestos of major political parties reflect differing priorities, degrees of commitment to decentralization, and approaches to fiscal devolution.

Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N)

The PML-N's most recent manifestos (2013, 2018) have treated local government largely as an implementation tool for provincial development policy, rather than an independent political tier.

2013 Manifesto Commitments: Promised “effective local bodies system” for efficient service delivery, but also emphasized provincial supervision of urban planning, utilities, and law enforcement.

2018 Manifesto Commitments: Included a pledge to “ensure timely local government elections” and to strengthen municipal infrastructure, but stopped short of promising fiscal autonomy.

Implementation Record: Under the 2013-2018 tenure in Punjab, LG elections were delayed until 2015, and the councils were dissolved in May 2019 before completing their term⁸.

Critique: Heavy reliance on provincial development authorities, such as LDA and PHA, undermined elected councils' capacity.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)

PTI has consistently framed local governance as central to its reform agenda, emphasizing direct elections for mayors and fiscal empowerment of councils.

2013 Manifesto Commitments: Advocated for a decentralized system with empowered union councils and village councils, inspired by KP's post-2013 LG reforms.

2018 Manifesto Commitments: Pledged to introduce a two-tier LG system in Punjab, with direct election of mayors and transparent fiscal transfers via the Provincial Finance Commission.

Implementation Record: Enacted the Punjab Local Government Act 2019, abolishing the district tier and introducing direct mayoral elections; however, LG elections were repeatedly delayed.

Critique: While structurally innovative, abrupt dissolution of existing councils and delayed polls created governance gaps.

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)

PPP's approach to local government is rooted in constitutional federalism and the spirit of the 18th Amendment, but with a focus on provincial control over LG law.

2013 Manifesto Commitments: Promised to strengthen LG institutions in all provinces, with emphasis on social service delivery in urban slums and rural peripheries.

2018 Manifesto Commitments: Called for “people-centred governance at the grassroots” and better fiscal transfers to LG bodies.

Implementation Record: In Sindh, PPP retained strong provincial control; Karachi's metropolitan functions remained fragmented among multiple agencies⁹.

Critique: The Sindh LG system under PPP has been criticized for limiting mayoral powers and retaining critical services under provincial control.

⁸Punjab Development Statistics 2018, Bureau of Statistics Punjab.

⁹PILDAT. (2021). *Local Governance in Sindh: An Assessment*. Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency.

Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam – Fazl (JUI-F)

JUI-F's manifestos emphasize LG as a vehicle for Islamic welfare governance and community-based dispute resolution rather than as an autonomous political tier.

2013 & 2018 Commitments: Advocated for elected councils at all levels, particularly in rural areas, to support madrassah integration into community education and to encourage local economic self-sufficiency. The rhetoric stressed Islamic values in governance and the importance of justice at the community level.

Implementation Record: While active in KP's LG debates, the party has not held provincial power in Punjab, limiting its direct influence on LG policy. In KP coalition periods, however, JUI-F often pressed for stronger rural councils reflecting religious and community institutions.

Critique: JUI-F's approach remains more ideological than institutional, focusing on Islamic welfare objectives rather than structural LG reforms or fiscal empowerment.

Table 3: Party's Commitments and their Implementation

Party	Key Commitments	Implementation in Punjab	Observed Gaps
PML-N	Effective LG under provincial oversight	Delayed polls, early dissolution	Weak fiscal autonomy
PTI	Direct elections, 2-tier model	PLGA 2019, but election delays	Governance gaps during transition
PPP	People-centered LG, fiscal transfers	Limited in Punjab; active in Sindh	Fragmented powers in Sindh
JUI-F	Rural focus, Islamic welfare councils	Minimal role in Punjab	No practical implementation

International Comparisons – Lessons for Punjab

A robust analysis of Punjab's local government system must be contextualized within global best practices, particularly in federations and developing democracies that share comparable socio-political contexts.

India: Panchayati Raj System

India's Panchayati Raj system, constitutionally mandated under the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, operates on a three-tier rural structure¹⁰:

1. Gram Panchayat (village level)
2. Panchayat Samiti (block level)
3. Zila Parishad (district level)

Key features include

Constitutional Backing: Clear functions in the 11th Schedule; State Finance Commissions mandated to review fiscal transfers every five years.

Reserved Representation: One-third of all seats reserved for women; proportionate reservations for Scheduled Castes/Tribes.

Lessons for Punjab: Punjab could benefit from embedding LG functions in a constitutional schedule, ensuring protection from arbitrary dissolution, and mandating periodic finance commission reviews.

¹⁰Mathew, G. (2000). *Panchayati Raj in India: An Overview*. New Delhi: Institute of Social Sciences.

Turkey: Metropolitan Municipality Model

Turkey's Metropolitan Municipality Law (No. 5216) governs large cities:

Two-Tier Urban LG: Metropolitan municipality covers citywide services; district municipalities handle neighborhood functions.

Direct Mayoral Elections: Strong executive mayors with independent budget powers.

Lessons for Punjab: Directly elected, fiscally empowered mayors could improve urban service delivery, but require safeguards against politicized removals.

South Africa: Constitutional Entrenchment

South Africa's Constitution, 1996 explicitly defines LG as a distinct sphere of government, not merely a provincial arm.

Three Categories: Metropolitan municipalities; Local Municipalities; District Municipalities.

Guaranteed Revenue Streams: Equitable Share of National Revenue ensures baseline funding for LGs.

Lessons for Punjab: Constitutional entrenchment and guaranteed fiscal transfers could protect Punjab LG from provincial interference.

Indonesia Village Autonomy Law

Indonesia's Village Law, 2014 grants significant autonomy to village governments:

Annual Direct Transfers: Villages receive direct central grants based on population, poverty rate, and geography¹¹.

Participatory Planning: Musyawarah Desa (village assemblies) approve budgets and plans.

Lessons for Punjab: Structured participatory planning and direct fiscal transfers to UCs could enhance local responsiveness.

Table 4: Comparative LG Autonomy

Country	Fiscal Autonomy	Legal Protection	Citizen Participation
India	High	High	High
Turkey	Moderate	Moderate	Medium
South Africa	High	High	High
Indonesia	High	Moderate	High
Punjab (Pakistan)	Low	Low	Medium

Critical Analysis of Local Government in Punjab

The local government (LG) framework in Punjab has historically oscillated between centralization and decentralization, reflecting shifts in political regimes, constitutional interpretation, and administrative preferences. Despite successive laws, the Punjab Local Government Ordinance (PLGO) 2001, Punjab Local Government Act PLGA 2013, and PLGA 2019, the system remains fragile, with operational challenges rooted in legal ambiguity, fiscal dependence, and administrative capture.

Legal Ambiguities and Constitutional Position

Although Article 140A of the Constitution mandates provinces to establish LG systems with political, administrative, and financial responsibility, the absence of explicit constitutional protection for the tenure and powers of LG institutions has allowed provincial governments to:

¹¹World Bank. (2018). *Village Governance and Service Delivery in Indonesia*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.

- Dissolve councils prematurely (e.g., Punjab LG dissolved in 2019 despite an ongoing term)¹².
 - Delay elections without legal consequence.
 - Amend LG laws to recentralize functions under provincial departments or authorities.
- Comparative Insight: In India, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments constitutionally protect LG terms, making arbitrary dissolution more difficult, while in South Africa, LG is recognized as an independent sphere of government.

Fiscal Dependence and Weak Provincial Finance Commission

Punjab's LG bodies rely heavily on provincial transfers rather than local revenue generation.

- Provincial Finance Commission (PFC): Although mandated, it has not been regularly constituted; transfers are often made ad hoc, limiting planning capacity.
- Own-source revenue: Union councils and municipal corporations collect minimal local taxes (e.g., signage tax, water rates), insufficient for meaningful development.

Impact: Fiscal dependence erodes autonomy and leaves councils vulnerable to political manipulation, funds can be withheld or redirected.

Administrative Overlap and Bureaucratic Dominance

While LG laws vest executive authority in elected representatives (e.g., mayors, chairmen), bureaucrats, notably Deputy Commissioners and Chief Officers retain significant control over:

- Development project approval.
- Budget execution.
- Service delivery agencies (e.g., WASAs, Development Authorities) operating outside LG purview.

This dual control results in policy paralysis and demoralizes elected LG officials.

Operational Gaps in Urban vs. Rural Governance

Punjab's LG model treats urban and rural councils differently, with urban municipal corporations focusing on infrastructure and rural union councils handling basic services. However:

- Urban LGs face fragmentation e.g., Lahore Development Authority (LDA) operates independently of Lahore Metropolitan Corporation.
- Rural LGs often lack technical expertise, depending entirely on provincial line departments for service provision.

Political Will and Partisan Considerations

The survival and empowerment of LG in Punjab has often depended on the political calculus of ruling parties:

- Parties in provincial power tend to limit LG powers when opposition parties control councils.
- Dissolutions have often coincided with political transitions (e.g., post-2018 shift from PML-N to PTI).
- Election delays (2017–2015, 2019–2022) deprive citizens of representation.

¹² *Asad Ali Khan v. Province of Punjab*, PLD 2021 SC 770.

Table 5: Key Structural Weaknesses in Punjab LG

Issue	Cause	Impact	Comparative Lesson
Legal insecurity	Absence of constitutional entrenchment	Arbitrary dissolution, delays	India's 73rd/74th Amendments
Fiscal dependence	Weak PFC, limited local revenue	Low autonomy, political manipulation	South Africa's equitable share
Bureaucratic dominance	Dual administrative control	Delayed projects, disempowered LGs	Turkey's empowered mayors
Urban-rural fragmentation	Parallel authorities, weak integration	Overlap & inefficiency	Indonesia's integrated planning
Political partisanship	Power struggles	Governance instability	Brazil's fixed LG cycles

Comparative Analysis Across Pakistani Provinces

While Punjab is the most populous province of Pakistan, its local government trajectory shares many commonalities and notable differences with Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and Balochistan. Understanding these differences is crucial for identifying reform opportunities.

Sindh

The local government in Sindh operates under the Sindh Local Government Act, 2013 (amended in 2022). The structure includes Metropolitan Corporations in Karachi and Hyderabad, along with Municipal Committees, Town Committees, and Union Committees.

However, the system suffers from severe fragmentation of authority. In Karachi, critical functions remain divided between the provincial government, Karachi Metropolitan Corporation, cantonment boards, and federal agencies such as Karachi Port Trust and Pakistan Railways. This has undermined the mayor's ability to effectively govern. Moreover, provincial control over water supply, waste management, and transport has further curtailed municipal autonomy. Elections have also been a recurring issue. In many cases, local body elections in Sindh were delayed and only conducted under the explicit directions of the Supreme Court of Pakistan.

Lesson for Punjab: Sindh demonstrates that when parallel institutions proliferate and the provincial government retains control over key services, local governments become ceremonial rather than functional. Punjab must therefore avoid excessive centralization and integrate service delivery under elected local representatives.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act, 2013 (amended in 2019 and 2022) created one of the most ambitious LG systems in Pakistan. It introduced City, Tehsil, and Village/Neighborhood Councils, with significant devolution compared to other provinces.

One of its strengths was the system of direct elections for tehsil chairmen and mayors, which gave citizens a stronger role in selecting their local leadership. Importantly, Village and Neighborhood Councils received direct transfers from the provincial divisible pool, bypassing bureaucratic hurdles and ensuring grassroots fiscal autonomy.

Yet, subsequent amendments in 2019 diluted village-level representation by abolishing certain council tiers, weakening participatory inclusivity. In addition, post-2022 election delays undermined continuity and created governance gaps, echoing Punjab's pattern of LG instability.

Lesson for Punjab: KP shows that direct fiscal transfers and grassroots councils can enhance participation and service delivery, but frequent legal changes and election delays erode these gains. Punjab must therefore prioritize continuity and stability in its LG laws.

Balochistan

The Balochistan Local Government Act, 2010 (amended 2022) establishes Union Councils, Municipal Committees, and District Councils. However, unlike Punjab or KP, Balochistan's geography and demography pose unique challenges: vast territory, low population density, and weak infrastructure make service delivery expensive and logistically difficult.

Moreover, LGs in Balochistan have a narrow fiscal base. Heavy reliance on provincial transfers has constrained local autonomy, while weak administrative capacity has further hindered effective governance. Political instability and security concerns in several districts have also disrupted council functioning, making LGs fragile in practice.

Lesson for Punjab: The Balochistan experience highlights that LG design must be sensitive to local realities. Punjab, with its dense population and developed infrastructure, cannot replicate a one-size-fits-all model but must instead design systems suited to its socio-economic and geographic context.

Table 6: Comparative LG Features in Pakistan

Province	Current Law	Fiscal Transfers	Mayoral Powers	Election Regularity
Punjab	PLGA 2019	Ad hoc, PFC inactive	Weak, bureaucratic dominance	Irregular
Sindh	SLGA 2013	Provincial control	Weak, multiple agencies	Court-driven
KP	KPLGA 2013	Direct to councils	Moderate, better than Punjab	Moderate
Balochistan	BLGA 2010	Highly dependent	Weak	Irregular

Recommendations: Reform Roadmap

Guarantee Tenure Security for Local Governments

Amendments to Article 140A are urgently required to provide constitutional protection for the tenure of elected local governments. Under the present system, provincial governments exercise unchecked authority to dissolve councils prematurely, often for political expediency. This has resulted in repeated disruptions of the democratic process, depriving citizens of grassroots representation. In *Asad Ali Khan v. Province of Punjab (PLD 2021 SC 770)*, the Supreme Court categorically held that premature dissolution of LG bodies was unconstitutional.

To safeguard continuity, Article 140A should explicitly fix a five-year tenure for local governments, with dissolution permitted only under judicial supervision in exceptional circumstances, such as proven corruption, systemic collapse, or force majeure. International practice shows this is possible: India's 73rd Constitutional Amendment entrenches the five-year tenure of Panchayati Raj institutions, while South Africa's 1996 Constitution protects municipalities as an independent sphere of government.

Conduct Local Government Elections on a Fixed Schedule

The recurring delays in local government elections in Punjab reflect the absence of binding timelines. Elections scheduled under the PLGA 2013 were delayed until 2015, while those under

PLGA 2019 were never held before repeal. Such postponements deny citizens their right to representation and weaken the institutional credibility of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). In multiple cases, the Supreme Court has directed timely elections, including MQM v. Province of Sindh (PLD 2022 SC 439), where the Court emphasized the ECP's duty to ensure timely polls.

To prevent such violations, Article 140A should mandate that the ECP conduct local government elections within 90 days of term completion, paralleling the framework applied to national and provincial assemblies under Article 224 of the Constitution. Additionally, penalties should be introduced for provincial executives that attempt to bypass or delay the electoral schedule. Punjab can draw lessons from Brazil, where municipal elections are constitutionally synchronized with fixed cycles, thereby ensuring predictability.

Establish a Permanent Punjab Finance Commission (PFC)

A key obstacle to functional local government in Punjab is fiscal dependence on the provincial government. Although the Punjab Local Government Acts of 2013, 2019, and 2022 all envisage a Provincial Finance Commission (PFC), in practice, the PFC has either remained inactive or issued ad hoc awards. As a result, financial transfers are irregular and politically manipulated, depriving local governments of predictable funding.

To overcome this, Punjab should institutionalize a permanent and statutory PFC, with representation from local government chairpersons, independent economists, and civil society. Awards must be binding, formula-based, and publicly disclosed, following the model of India's State Finance Commissions. Additionally, the PFC should be required to announce awards every five years, ahead of the provincial budget, so that local governments can plan development projects effectively.

Introduce Direct Fiscal Transfers to Union Councils

At present, most fiscal transfers flow through provincial departments, allowing bureaucratic bottlenecks and political interference to undermine service delivery. Union councils (UCs), being the lowest tier of governance, are often left underfunded and unable to address citizens' immediate concerns. Direct fiscal transfers can strengthen UC chairpersons by enabling them to function as genuine decision-makers rather than ceremonial heads.

Punjab can adopt elements from Indonesia's Village Autonomy Law, 2014, under which villages receive annual direct transfers from the central government based on objective indicators such as population size, poverty rates, and geography. This model not only ensures financial empowerment but also enhances accountability, since communities can directly monitor how funds are spent. If adopted in Punjab, this mechanism would enable UCs to respond more quickly to local needs while reducing dependence on provincial discretion.

Integrate Urban Service Agencies under Municipal Control

Urban governance in Punjab suffers from fragmentation, with parallel institutions such as the Lahore Development Authority (LDA), Water and Sanitation Agencies (WASA), and Waste Management Companies operating independently of elected metropolitan governments. This arrangement sidelines elected mayors and reduces accountability to the public.

A comprehensive reform would require transferring these agencies under the direct authority of municipal corporations, thereby ensuring a single command structure. Turkey's Metropolitan Municipality Model offers a useful precedent, where metropolitan mayors are empowered with

control over transport, sanitation, and development planning. By consolidating urban services under elected local governments, Punjab can reduce duplication, cut administrative costs, and increase responsiveness to citizen demands.

Enhance Administrative Capacity through Training Programs

Even when empowered through law, local governments in Punjab often fail to deliver because of weak administrative capacity at the union and municipal levels. Elected representatives, especially at the UC tier, are frequently first-time officeholders with limited understanding of budgeting, planning, and service delivery. Similarly, secretaries and municipal officers lack specialized training in governance, law, and financial management. This gap creates overdependence on provincial bureaucracy, which then reasserts control.

A permanent Punjab Local Government Academy should be established to provide structured and continuous training to both elected representatives and civil servants working within LG institutions. The curriculum should include modules on local government law, participatory planning, project management, fiscal responsibility, and dispute resolution. Comparative experience shows this can yield measurable results: South Africa's Local Government SETA (Sector Education and Training Authority) has significantly enhanced municipal performance, while India's State Institutes of Rural Development regularly train Panchayat leaders. Such capacity-building would enable Punjab's councils to function as effective agents of local democracy rather than symbolic forums.

Empower Union Council (UC) Chairpersons as Local Executives

Union councils form the backbone of Punjab's local government structure, yet UC chairpersons remain weak due to fiscal dependence, bureaucratic dominance, and lack of legal authority. Instead of functioning as local executives, they are often relegated to advisory roles, with real control exercised by provincial departments or deputy commissioners. This undermines grassroots responsiveness and alienates citizens from their elected representatives.

Reform should focus on transforming UC chairpersons into genuine local executives with clear powers over budgeting, service delivery, and community-level development. For instance, they should be given authority to allocate a fixed proportion of development funds, approve local service contracts, and supervise primary health and education facilities. Lessons can be drawn from Indonesia's Village Heads, who exercise executive authority over budgets and development plans, and from India's Sarpanch system, where village council heads play a pivotal role in governance. Strengthening UC chairpersons in this way would provide citizens with an accessible and accountable local authority, bridging the gap between government and community.

Strengthen Citizen Participation Mechanisms

A central weakness of Punjab's local government framework has been the absence of structured citizen participation in decision-making. Although laws provide for ward committees, citizen oversight, and participatory planning, in practice these provisions are rarely implemented. Without direct accountability to citizens, councils risk becoming another extension of provincial politics rather than a platform for grassroots democracy.

To address this, Punjab should institutionalize mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, ward committees, public hearings, and social audits at the UC and Tehsil levels. Participatory budgeting, pioneered in Porto Alegre, Brazil, allows citizens to directly influence local budget allocations and has been replicated worldwide as a model of democratic accountability. Similarly, public hearings

and ward-level forums can provide ordinary citizens with a voice in development planning, while social audits already piloted in India's Andhra Pradesh can ensure transparency in service delivery. If implemented systematically, these tools would transform local government from a top-down administrative apparatus into a genuinely people-centred governance structure.

Ensure Inter-Provincial Learning and Policy Convergence

Punjab has often approached local government reform in isolation, overlooking valuable lessons from other provinces. In contrast, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has made significant strides with its direct elections of mayors and empowered village councils, while Sindh has experimented with strong metropolitan corporations, albeit with limited success in Karachi. Balochistan's model, despite its weaknesses, demonstrates the importance of tailoring governance frameworks to geographic and demographic realities.

Punjab should adopt a model of inter-provincial policy learning, institutionalizing platforms for exchanging best practices through the Council of Common Interests (CCI) and provincial assemblies. For instance, KP's formula of direct fiscal transfers to village/neighbourhood councils could be adapted to Punjab's UCs; Sindh's experience with party-based elections could inform Punjab's debate on political accountability; and Balochistan's rural service delivery models could inspire reforms for Punjab's underdeveloped districts. By drawing on inter-provincial experiences, Punjab can avoid repeating past mistakes and create a more balanced and resilient LG framework.

Secure a Cross-Party Political Pact on Local Government

Finally, no reform can succeed without political consensus. The fate of local government in Punjab has historically been tied to partisan calculations: councils established under one ruling party are frequently dissolved by the next, while elections are delayed when outcomes seem politically inconvenient. This cycle has undermined institutional stability and prevented the development of durable grassroots democracy.

A cross-party political pact is essential to secure the continuity of local government irrespective of which party holds power at the provincial level. Such a pact could be formalized through a parliamentary resolution or incorporated into election manifestos. It should commit major parties including PML-N, PTI, PPP, and JUI-F, to respect the tenure of local governments, refrain from arbitrary dissolutions, and strengthen fiscal devolution. This approach mirrors South Africa, where inter-party agreements underpinned the post-apartheid municipal system, and Brazil, where fixed municipal cycles are respected across political transitions. Only by removing partisan incentives to undermine LG can Punjab hope to create a truly democratic, stable, and citizen-responsive system.

Conclusion

Punjab's local government journey demonstrates that decentralization in law does not automatically translate into empowerment in practice. The recurring cycles of dissolution, delayed elections, and weak fiscal design reveal that the system has been treated more as a political tool than as a genuine democratic tier.

This research highlights that the future of local government in Punjab depends less on drafting new statutes and more on ensuring that constitutional promises are translated into reality. Tenure security, predictable finance, and functional clarity must be prioritized if local institutions are to serve citizens effectively. Equally important is the need to strengthen leadership at the grassroots,

particularly Union Council chairmen, and to unify service delivery under elected representatives rather than fragmented provincial authorities.

Ultimately, Punjab's local government will succeed only when it is seen not as a threat to provincial control but as an indispensable partner in governance. A system grounded in constitutional security, financial autonomy, administrative integration, and citizen participation is the only path to transforming local government from a temporary experiment into a permanent pillar of democracy.

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