

# YEREL YÖNETİMLER VE DEMOKRASİ<sup>1</sup>

## SEÇİL MİNE TÜRK

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### ÖZ

Yerel yönetimler, demokrasinin temel bir unsuru olarak kabul edilir. Bu yönetimler, belirli bir bölgenin işlerini yerel olarak yönetmek ve halkın katılımını sağlamakla görevlidir. Demokratik bir toplumda, yerel yönetimler genellikle seçimle belirlenir ve bu seçimlerde halkın katılımı büyük önem taşır. Yerel yönetimler, vatandaşların ihtiyaçlarına daha yakından odaklanabilir ve yerel sorunlara daha etkili çözümler bulabilirler. Demokrasi ile yerel yönetimler arasındaki ilişki, halkın doğrudan katılımı ve temsilciler aracılığıyla yapılan seçimler yoluyla gerçekleşir. Yerel yönetimler, demokratik ilkeler doğrultusunda hesap verebilirlik, şeffaflık ve katılımcılık sağlamakla yükümlüdürler. Bu da halkın yönetim süreçlerine aktif olarak katılmasını ve karar alma süreçlerine etki etmesini sağlar. Yerel yönetimlerin demokratik işleyişi, vatandaşların temel hak ve özgürlüklerine saygı gösterilmesini ve adaletin sağlanmasını içerir. Ayrıca, çeşitli toplumsal kesimlerin ve azınlıkların seslerini duyurabilmeleri için fırsat eşitliği ve adaletin sağlanması da önemlidir. Sonuç olarak, yerel yönetimler ve demokrasi arasındaki ilişki, halkın katılımını, hesap verebilirliği ve adil bir yönetimi sağlamak için önemlidir. Bu ilişki, yerel düzeyde etkili ve demokratik bir yönetim sağlayarak toplumsal refahı artırabilir. Bu çalışma yerel yönetimler ve demokrasi arasındaki ilişkiyi yerel demokrasinin temel özellikleri bağlamında incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kent, Yerel yönetim, Yerel demokrasi, Temsil, Katılım.

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## LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND DEMOCRACY

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### ABSTRACT

Local governments are considered a fundamental element of democracy. These governments are assigned with local preservation of a particular area and ensuring public participation. In a democratic society, local governments are generally elected by elections and public participation is of great importance in these elections. Local governments can focus more closely on their countries and provide more effective solutions. The relationship between democracy and local governments is realized through the direct representation of the people and elections held through representatives. Local governments can achieve democratic principles by ensuring accountability, transparency and responsibilities in principle. This enables people to actively participate in management parts and influence decision-making parts. It includes respecting the democratic structure and fundamental rights and freedoms of the local government and ensuring justice. In addition, equality of opportunity and continuity of justice are also important for various social segments and minorities to be able to make their voices heard. As a result, the relationship between local governments and democracy is important to ensure public participation, accountability and fair governance. This relationship can increase social welfare by ensuring effective and democratic governance at the local level. This study examines the relationship between local governments and democracy in the context of the basic features of local democracy.

**Keywords:** City, Local government, Local democracy, Representation, Participation

## Introduction

Local governments, as institutions responsible for urban services, play a crucial role in the development of democracy. They are considered the core of democracy since they are the institutions where democratic values such as freedom, equality, participation and responsibility are implemented. Being the closest administrative units to the people, they are better equipped than other government entities to promote democracy. Local governments serve as institutions that check the state administration's power and uphold democracy by resisting power concentration. They are also regarded as fundamental institutions for political participation, in addition to the central government.

Local governments are indispensable component of democracy, determined through direct participation of the people and elections via representatives. They bear the responsibility of managing the affairs of specific regions, devising effective solutions to local issues, and closely addressing citizens' needs to enhance societal welfare.

The nexus between democracy and local government facilitates public involvement in governance processes and decision-making. Local governments must ensure accountability, transparency, and participation in accordance with democratic principles to bolster public trust and ensure the administration's legitimacy. This also aids in maintaining the balance of power between the central government and local authorities.

## Local Government and Democracy

According to Bal (1989:136), a city is defined as "a type of society in which civil society is organized, the status of those living in the city is defined and the legal system is dominant". In broad terms, a city is a settlement characterized by a high population density, concentration of non-agricultural activities, organization and specialization, hosting diverse ethnic and social groups (Görmez, 1997:10). Cities are areas where inhabitants possess rights and obligations and can demand certain provisions from the political authority. Politics is nurtured, developed and institutionalized in cities in addition to their urban functions.

Cities are the cradle of emergence and evolution of local Governments. They evolve into centers of economic, social and cultural activities during the process of change and development. The city, which instigated the concept and institutionalization of local government in its political-administrative capacities, has also been the originator of this concept and institutional-

ization. In other words, the formation of the idea and institutionalization of local governance alongside becoming an economic, social and cultural hub are two distinct developments that inevitably reinforce each other.

### **Local Government**

Local governments are tasked for providing basic public services in cities. These services can be delegated to public legal entities other than the state, aiming to ensure efficient provision (Çukurçayır, 2000: 91). Established as public legal entities, local governments serve to provide services to the members of the local community living in a certain physical area. They address issues of primary concern to the community due to their shared existence. The decision-making bodies of local governments are elected and they possess special revenues, a district budget and personnel separate from the state budget. Local governments maintain administrative autonomy in their dealings with the central government, as per universal norms (TODAIE, 1991: 1).

UNDP has identified five aspects of sustainability that are directly relevant to the tasks of local government in the 21st century. Empowerment increases opportunities for people to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Human development fosters a sense of belonging that is crucial for personal fulfillment, well-being and a sense of purpose and meaning. Cooperation enables people to collaborate and interact effectively. Increased capabilities and opportunities encompass more than just income. There are three key elements: equality, sustainability, and security. Equality includes an education system that is accessible to all. Sustainability involves meeting the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to avoid poverty and deprivation and to exercise their basic capabilities. Security requires individuals to be free from threats such as disease or oppression, and sudden harmful interruptions in their lives (Sisk, 2001: 27).

Democracy is a form of government characterised by self-governance of the people. It is a culture that ensures public participation in governance, provides representation through elections for parties with different views, and protects fundamental rights and freedoms through the rule of law, separation of powers, and protection of the minority against the majority (Yıldız, 1996: 3). For a long time, city-state democracy was considered a local political order based on direct participation of the people in governance. However, due to

the increase in population, it is no longer feasible to maintain a political order solely reliant on direct participation. Today, the election of administrators to office is an indispensable aspect of democracy. Undoubtedly, democracy is a form of government that cannot be reduced to a set of techniques or systems and explained solely through them. It is a way of life that people must learn by practicing and experimenting on their own, through a certain historical process. Democracy cannot be taught from the top down or imposed by force.

### **Local Democracy**

Local governments are established to address the common needs of the local community and provide local services related to their economic, social, cultural wealth and welfare. A democratic local government fulfills these services under its own responsibility with general authority and for the benefit of the local community, without discrimination. At this stage, local governments should recognize human beings as the cornerstone of local democracy and implement the principles of openness, transparency, human rights, pluralist, and participatory democracy in their operations. A democratic local government is an autonomous and democratic entity with public legal personality, where powers are exercised by units closest to the local community (Bal, 1999:159). The conditions required for the existence of local democracy include the establishment of decision-making bodies, a transparent decision-making process, public participation, the allocation of responsibilities and resources between central and local governments, and the relationship between local and central governments (Görmez, 1997:71).

Local governments are considered the core of democracy because they realize democratic values such as freedom, equality, participation and responsibility. Moreover, as organizations that emerge in smaller units such as urban habitats rather than at the national level, they are institutions that are relatively closer to the individuals they serve. Therefore, they are more suitable organizations for the realization of these values envisaged by democracy. Local governments contribute to the democratization and emancipation of the national system due to their democratic character (Çitçi, 1998: 233). Local government democracy is characterised by the practice of convening people to discuss and elect representatives (Ortaylı, 1998: 107). Additionally, individuals have the opportunity to govern themselves and receive political education by performing their own tasks (Güler, 1998: 136).

It is undeniable that a relationship exists between local governments and the democratization process. Local governments not only promote democratic awareness among voters but also provide a platform for the development of political leaders. These organizations have elected decision-making bodies that enable self-governance, and they play a significant role in educating people about democracy. In summary, individuals who participate in local government also receive political education (Yaylı, 1998: 5). This educational function has two aspects: training citizens/voters in democracy and the political process due to limited geography and distance, and training local representatives for their duties at the national level. In this case, both those in positions of power and those who are uneducated and experience through their involvement in local government (Çitçi, 1998: 235). For the establishment of a tradition of democratization, it is crucial to appoint citizens who have been elected in local organizations and have developed themselves from the smallest unit of administration to national level positions. These individuals spread knowledge of the entire society. In modern democratic governments, having a higher education in politics or specializing in a particular field such as economics, politics or the military is not sufficient. It is crucial that individuals who possess a comprehensive understanding of their society, including its intricate details, and who can apply their experience to their knowledge in order to find solutions to problems, occupy administrative positions.

In societies with a centralized administration structure, citizenship awareness, rights, and responsibilities can only be conveyed to individuals through their participation in governance. Local governments serve as social education centers for this purpose (Erten, 1999: 187). Local government not only contributes to the political education of the people but is also recognized as a political institution that helps to raise leaders. Local governments are often referred to as the “primary school of democracy” due to their role in educating citizens and leaders in politics (Keleş, 1995: 232).

Local democracy is a governance model that prioritizes the direct participation and influence of citizens in decision-making and policy-making processes at the local level. It is based on citizens electing leaders and representatives of local governments through direct elections. Local democracy enables citizens to contribute to the governance of their community and defend their interests. It offers a more inclusive and representative model of governance that reflects the cultural, social and economic diversity of local communities. The term “strong local government” refers to a system has a strong local government institution if local governments can exercise administrative autonomy

in making decisions on public services for their regions, finding resources, and implementing decisions through their own organizations and employees (Yalçındağ 1992: 8). Local governments are expected to provide effective and efficient services, possess sufficient financial resources to meet the needs of the people, and maintain a strong financial and democratic structure in order to modernise. It is important to ensure objectivity and avoid biased language when discussing the role of local governments in modernization. According to Geray (2001: 10), local governments should be autonomous, responsible, respectful, and responsive to the needs of the city's inhabitants. They should also be open to public influence and control over decisions, transparent, and democratic, enabling citizens to exercise their right to information.

Local governments have two main functions: increasing efficiency and productivity in the provision of public services. They are considered administrative units capable of providing direct and cost-effective services to the public, while also facilitating public participation. Additionally, they play a crucial role in structuring the democratic process from the bottom up, making them an essential actor in democratic structures (Coşkun-Uzun, 1998:3702). They are also administrative units that fulfill the local-common needs of the people and political units that contribute to the democratization process on a national scale.

Local governments achieve freedom by decentralizing power from the centre to local units and promote equality by providing access to political authorities and local participation opportunities for citizens to direct their own lives. Furthermore, it promotes equality by facilitating political development through activities such as voting, participating in referendums and similar initiatives, forming free associations (such as unions and associations), and providing opportunities to exercise other fundamental rights and freedoms (Yıldırım, 1993: 35). Growing up by participating in voting, local government, and being elected to the municipal or village council of elders can contribute to political education to some extent.

In addition to establishing a robust democratic local government institution, it is crucial to ensure the validity of other democratic institutions and principles. A strong local government alone is not sufficient. The existence of individual rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression, thought, press, and organization, and the openness of their use are crucial for creating a pluralistic, examining, controlling, respectful, and tolerant local community, as well as for the effective functioning of democratic local government (Yalçındağ, 1992: 112).

## Basis of Local Democracy

Local democracy serves three main purposes. These include encouraging the active participation of local people in solving various issues, fostering mutual responsibilities between local governments and residents facilitating communication at regular intervals, allowing for the identification and acceleration of solutions at a local pace (Pakratova, 2022: 106). At the local government level, the ratios between governments and the governed are lower than at the distant national level, and a genuine election process, as well as effective public control and participation after the election are ensured (Richards, 1983: 167). Among the fundamental policies of local democracy, transparency, accountability, compliance and justice are paramount. These principles enhance the accountability of local governments and encourage community participation.

Local democracy promotes the liberalization of democratic values and acknowledges local communities as more empowered by giving everyone a greater voice in the decisions that affect their daily lives. The principles of election, representation and participation form the foundation for the initial and appropriate steps of activating the local and democratic development potential of local government. The institution of representation is, in principle, subject to three conditions. The first is that elections are held at regular intervals, the second is that the representatives or rulers determined as a result of these elections constitute a representative example of those who elect them - that is, the people, and the third is that the elected individuals feel responsible towards those who elected them. Thus, through the institution of representation, the interests of all citizens or the public will be represented, not the interests of a certain segment (Çitçi, 1998: 235). In other words, the principle of representation is based on the ideal of a conscious voter who will choose among representative candidates defending basic policies in line with their own interests and demands, on the one hand, and a representative who will defend the general interest, on the other hand, based on the small social distance between the represented and those who represent. Additionally, local governments expand the representation base by providing an additional opportunity to those who do not have the opportunity to be represented at the national level. Therefore, representativeness is much higher at the level of local governments (Çitçi, 1996: 6).

The most important difference of local governments from other types of organizations is that the decision-making and executive bodies are determined by the people living in that place. This enables local governments to



be characterized as a democratic form of government, as well as being service-providing units. In addition, the local government institution needs to be provided with qualifications that will help it achieve the same goals. First of all, an election system that will allow realistic representation of the local community in local councils should be introduced. However, choice alone is not enough. In addition, ways, methods and legal regulations that ensure effective control and participation of the public should also be provide. Establishing a structure and order such as “transparent local government”, which applies public relations methods that control the local people and enable them to establish bonds of love and trust with the local community, will also ensure the functioning of the democratic local government institution and the development of local democracy (Yalçındağ, 1992: 113).

Today, in all countries, local governments are viewed as one of the leading democratic institutions, as they are institutions that allow the people to govern through the bodies they have elected. Predicting that these institutions will be formed only through elections without public participation in local governments does not give these institutions a democratic character. Citizen participation, the majority principle, leaders’ giving importance to consultation, and feeling responsible to the voters, which are the main elements of the concept of democracy, are characteristics that should be present both at the national and local scale (Keles, 1998: 56). Participation can be defined as “all actions aimed at taking part in the determination, implementation and supervision of public policies” or influencing the decisions taken by institutions and individuals exercising power. Political participation, in general terms, is understood as “influencing and being influenced by the political power as a political subject, as well as the ability of citizens governed within the state to influence the decisions of those in government and to have a say in making decisions” (Eroğul, 1999: 17).

Governments governed directly by local people can only be found in small local community units. After settlements began to grow in population and area, and urbanization accelerated, representatives came to power through elections. In other words, over time, “direct democracy” has been replaced by “representative democracy”. The understanding of “pluralistic democracy” has developed in response to practices in which some parties, having gained political power by obtaining the majority, abused this power to the extent of undermining democracy by not respecting the rights and freedoms of minorities. In parallel with this, the opportunities and conveniences provided by social change and progress, as well as rapid develop-

ments in the field of communication and technology, have made it both necessary and easier for the public to participate in some decision-making processes, to express their wills and tendencies, or for the public to oppose and react to the decisions of the administration. This has led to pluralistic democracy gaining a new content and meaning through participation, and to the development of the understanding of “participatory democracy” (Geray, 2001: 10-11). Efforts in this direction are concentrated on the search for a new and functional structure in order to ensure closer ties between the local government and the public, to increase the opportunities for direct participation and oversight in administration, and to enhance consultation mechanisms and local democracy and service effectiveness (Emrealp, 1993: 19).

Participatory democracy is defined as “the active participation of citizens in various ways in making all decisions affecting them, and this participation occurs through a high degree of decentralization in all sectors of society” (Sarıbay, 1996: 71). In terms of defining the concept of decentralization, the literature distinguishes between three main forms. These are concentration, delegation and devolution of authority (Bergh, 2004: 781). Decentralization is the process by which the central government allocates responsibilities for certain services to its regional branches without requiring any delegation of authority to lower levels of government. This is generally considered the weakest form of decentralization. Devolution refers to the situation where the central government delegates responsibility for decision-making and management of public functions to local governments or semi-autonomous organizations that are not fully controlled by the central government but are ultimately accountable to it.

While the executive duty in administrative matters is carried out by parties and interest groups, participation and control can be carried out directly in participatory democracy (Held, 1993:260). A genuine engagement process must occur before decisions are made. For democratic participation to be effective, greater participation by more people is required. Therefore, participation should take place not only in the political sphere, but also in other areas of life such as the workplace. In this context, the main features of participatory democracy include granting individuals the right to participate in decisions, using options other than elections to make joint decisions, and providing individuals with education on this subject through participation (Çukurçayır, 2000: 17).

Public participation in local governments involves the more effective use of human resources, material and physical power, for the benefit of society. A permanent and real solution to the major problems in city management can only be found with the active participation and oversight of the public. The primary reason for this is the belief that those who experience the problem can more easily find the solution to this problem. In order to develop human resources, it is possible to develop public participation in democratic societies that are organized from the bottom up and can use all their resources, including manpower, in line with their own needs (Bozkına, 1992: 58).

The first reason that necessitates local governments to cooperate with city residents in fulfilling their duties and providing services is related to the democratic aspect of the administration, and the second is related to the efficiency and effectiveness of the administration. In order to improve governance in democratic countries, the relations between the central government and the people necessitates a democratic structure, wherein the people play a significant role in decision-making and implementation. In a democratic system, the public exerts various positive or negative influences on both the general and local governance in conducting public affairs and making decisions. This influence can manifest as either co-directional, where it aligns with management decisions, or dichotomous, where it opposes managerial views (Yavuz, 1978: 449). Such effects can occur unilaterally, such as citizens forming an Association and collecting donations for a kindergarten, or in different directions, such as people gathering signatures and organizing resistance meetings against municipal decisions like increasing the prices of bread or public transportation (Göymen, 1997: 156- 157). In both scenarios, the public actively engages in issues that concern them, exerting a positive or negative influence and control mechanisms over their living environment or decisions that affect them.

Participation at the local level is not seen as an end in itself but as a tool to achieve other goals, such as enhancing higher-level management institutions. Additionally, participation serves not only to influence decisions, but also to accomplish objectives such as ensuring that local services are delivered more effectively, efficiently and affordably, improving the public's education in democracy, enhancing the political culture of the country and strengthening local democracy. Moreover, since the public is directly involved in the decision-making process, it assumes full responsibility in implementing these decisions, leading to a sense of self-confidence and bridging the gap between the public and the administration. Consequently, both citizens and city admin-

istrations have a better opportunity to express their preferences. This eliminates the obligation of city administrations to be accountable to the public only during election periods and fosters a culture of continuous accountability. As a result, the “principle of transparency” is maintained in governance (Keleş, 1993: 21). Since local democracy can only flourish if participation channels remain open outside election periods, the right to participate must be institutionalized at the local level. The conditions necessary for the institutionalization of participation include defining the areas of participation, ensuring that the public can easily obtain information about local services and decisions, , involving voluntary organizations in the provision of some local services, and including various societal groups in decision-making processes (TOKİ, 1992: 31-32). The expected benefits all the local level include the integration of citizens into society and the assumption of social responsibility the emphasis on the cooperative aspect of social relations networks, an increase in the quality of life, positive changes in the social atmosphere, the creation of an environment for the development of alternative ideas, and their utilization for the benefit of society (Çukurçayır, 2000: 109).

All individuals residing in a certain area should actively participate in municipalities, higher-level regional councils, or lower-level headmen’s offices and neighborhood committees. Implementing direct democracy in densely population areas is neither feasible nor conducive to effective administration. Therefore, participatory democracy should be implemented in such areas instead of direct democracy. In small settlements, management should be overseen by neighborhood committees established in each neighborhood. These measures lead to a decision-making process based on the public opinions, ensuring democratization and ownership of the decisions made (Erten, 1999: 188).

The healthy functioning and development of pluralistic and participatory democracy rely on members of the local community taking a keen interest in local affairs, recognizing themselves as the true owners of local governance, supporting positive decisions and initiatives of the administration, and having recourse to judicial bodies against decisions and practices contrary to the public interest. Elected local representatives should maintain open avenues for consulting with their constituents on specific issues at regular intervals. Conditions facilitating this oversight include measures such as ensuring that local residents can easily and efficiently access information and documents regarding administrative transactions and decisions, providing in-

formation through public relations techniques, convening local government councils through citizen initiatives, and enabling citizens to observe council meetings (Presidential State Supervisory Board Presidency, 1996: 63).

## Conclusion

Developments in local politics and local democracy and advancements in general politics are two processes that run parallel to each other. From this perspective, establishing and sustaining democracy at the local level is impossible without democracy itself. To foster, expedite and deepen democratization at the national level in a country, it is essential to bolster local governments and local democracy (Keleş, 1999: 120). On one hand, the democratization process of local governments is inevitably influenced by the democratization process of the country, on the other hand, the level of democratization of local governments is crucial for accelerating and advancing the democratization process in the country. If democracy is construed in its broadest sense as the ability to participate in politics and administration and to enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms equally, the most vital institutions facilitating this participation are local governments.

In addition to serving as institutions that broaden channels for political and administrative participation, local governments provide a spread in political life. They achieve this by channeling demands for political participation, typically concentrated on the central government and national parliament, to the local level to some extent. In doing so, local governments significantly contribute to the legitimacy of the political system. Local democracy serves as a tool to strengthen democratic values empowering communities to exert greater control over their affairs and participate more effectively in political processes. It emphasizes the direct involvement of local communities in government decisions and policies, transcending the scope of central government. The first fundamental element of local democracy is decentralization, granting local governments the capacity to tailor decision-making processes to better suit the needs of their constituents. Each region faces unique challenges, and local governments are better positioned to devise tailored solutions to address these issues, showcasing their efficacy. Secondly, participation is very important. Local governments facilitate closer and more effective citizen engagement in political processes. Through local elections and decision-making procedures, citizens can voice their opinions and actively participate in governance. Direct involvement in local governance fosters awareness and respect for democratic values among citizens. Thirdly, local

democracy, within a framework of pluralism, embraces diverse cultures, beliefs, and perspectives. Representation of various communities promotes inclusive and equitable governance. Fourthly, local governments must ensure transparency in their decision-making processes, with officials being held accountable for their actions and resource allocation. This fosters trust within the community. Lastly, by acknowledging the differences among cultures and communities, local governments uphold diversity in democratic governance and can effectively address local needs. Local democracy embraces and respects various cultures, ethnicities, beliefs, and viewpoints, fostering a system where all members of the community feel represented.

One of the primary purposes of local governments is political in nature. Democracy entails safeguarding citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms within a legal framework, representing a mutual contract between the state and society. Through their interaction with local governments, citizens learn how to assert their fundamental rights and participate in decision-making processes, thereby fulfilling their obligations under this societal contract. Consequently, the existence and strength of local governments are crucial prerequisites for the formation of a democratic society. Local governments actively contribute to the preservation of democratic principles and serve as effective mechanisms for restraining state power and upholding the rule of law (Görmez, 1995: 328). From this point, local governments also serve as educational institutions. Similar to schools, local governments should be established and organized to provide citizens with opportunities to learn, evolve, and implement their knowledge through deliberation and practice. They serve as platforms where citizens can engage in discussions and acquire new insights.

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