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CITY COUNCILS IN TURKEY AS AN ATTEMPT TO STRENGTHEN LOCAL ADMINISTRATION AND GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

These strengthening local governments constitute a highly crucial dimension of the discussions on democratization today. In the era we are in, the ideas of localization and democratic decentralization have come to the fore, and governance has begun to replace the concept of management. This trend, which is dominant in the world, has also found its reflections in Turkey in the globalization process and has paved the way for some reform efforts in the 2000s. City Councils are a product of these efforts and were designed for decentralization and improving the local governments in Turkey. These councils, which are based on higher participation of citizens in local administration and political process, mark a significant milestone in the history of local government in Turkey. However, it should also be said that the councils do not always achieve their founding purposes and encounter some general problems. More effective operation of City Councils and the development of a more inclusive understanding of local government will undoubtedly contribute to increasing the level of democracy in Turkey.

Keywords: City Councils, Local Governments, Localization, Decentralization, Governance, Turkey.

JEL Codes: R50, Y80, Z18.

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Research Article

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most basic requirements of modern democracies is the active participation of the people in politics. In democratic systems, citizens not only vote; they also participate in the process by constantly interacting with political decision-makers. The starting point of this interaction is local governments. Local governments provide many public services that are not undertaken by the central government and therefore stand out as the political level where the most intense relations with the public are established. Therefore, improving the relationship between politicians and the public is of vital importance in strengthening local governments.

City Councils, which were put into practice in Turkey in 2005, were established to respond to this need. These institutions, which bring together different segments of society and provide a common ground for discussion and make their relations with municipalities permanent and more effective, are one of the important actors in the field of local government in Turkey. The proper and influential operation of these councils will undoubtedly increase the legitimacy of administrators in the eyes of the people and contribute positively to the general level of democracy in the country.

This study aims to examine the effects of City Councils on the localization process and strengthening of local governments in Turkey. In this context, the current problems and deficiencies related to the subject will also be analyzed. The article is divided into four sections within this scope. In the first part, the classical understanding of state sovereignty will be discussed, and the transition from this understanding to democratic decentralization demands will be evaluated. Secondly, the historical development and basic characteristics of local governments in Turkey will be revealed. In the third section, the establishment process, duties, functions, and current operations of City Councils will be examined. In the fourth section, evaluations and suggestions will be made for the City Councils to realize their establishment purposes more effectively and to increase participation in local governments in general. And finally, the conclusion section will present a summary of the main points emphasized in the study.

2. STATE SOVEREIGNTY AND DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION

In the early period when the modern state system began to take shape, the elimination of feudalism and different local power groups that could compete with state sovereignty was sought, thus aiming for states to have a centralized structure. The state was sovereign, and the territory was its ultimate source of political authority (Morris, p. 199). A sovereign state should have had the supreme power in its allotted domain and stood above all other associations in society; thus, its sovereignty referred to the ability to make laws and to rule effectively within its defined territory (Rosamond, p. 447).

In this context, the state possesses full authority to govern and act on behalf of the people within its territory. It has the power to create laws, enforce them, and exercise judicial functions. As the highest legal authority, it is the sole entity entitled to use legitimate force within its borders. It is responsible for maintaining internal order and ensuring the protection of its citizens from external threats (McGrew, p. 25; Agnew, p. 6). Due to these features, the concept of sovereignty proved to be a valuable theoretical tool in dismantling feudalism and establishing a centralized state system. Leaders of modern states employed the idea of sovereignty as a legal principle to assert that they acknowledged no higher authority beyond their borders and faced no competing sources of power within their own territories.

Over time, the meaning and scope of sovereignty and territory have undergone significant changes, making it increasingly difficult for nation-states to maintain effective territorial sovereignty. Unlike earlier understandings of sovereignty, modern states are no longer able to fully control every aspect of political activity within their own borders. In addition, it began to be thought that the approach of states to govern all their lands from a single centre could not adequately respond to local needs and people's expectations. Being strictly dependent on the centre for every decision to be taken for a local settlement unit both reduced the level of people's participation in the administration and caused a serious loss of time by increasing bureaucracy. Furthermore, the fact that some substate actors in different parts of the world made some demands that the cultural characteristics of the local people be protected, their language be used officially and that the local people be given the right to self-government increased the discussions on strengthening local administrations. These came to the fore that local administrations would provide services that were more sensitive to the different needs of different segments of society, that they could produce more appropriate solutions by considering local, economic, social and physical conditions and that this would also increase the level of social inclusiveness of public administration (Balci & Keser, 2023). It was widely argued that it is not appropriate for a pluralistic democracy to have all political authority concentrated in the centre, and ensuring pluralism in the political system could be possible just by sharing authority. Since the early 1980s, international development agencies have promoted decentralization as a successful approach to development and have supported its adoption by providing loans and financial aid to governments implementing such policies (Varcan, Taraktaş and Hacıköylü, p. 4).

As is known, local governments provide services in a wide range of areas that are vital for people's daily needs and the operation of businesses. Many areas that will improve community life, such as social care, waste collection, housing, planning, licensing, registrar services, and pest control, are under the responsibility of the municipality (İşler et al., 2025). Local governments have critical functions in the development of cities and the increase of economic prosperity. At the same time, local governments are the closest part of public administration to the public. Therefore, public participation in local governments

should be easier and on a larger scale. In this way, both municipal services will become more efficient and effective, and the ability of the administration to represent the public will increase. In this sense, the most important issue in discussions on strengthening local governments is to increase democratic participation and to ensure that the public participates in local governments not only by voting in elections but also at every possible opportunity.

In the globalization process, the “governance” approach has radically changed the “management” approach of the twentieth century and has begun to include a meaning that includes locality instead of a centralized structure, federalism instead of a unitary structure, participation instead of bureaucracy, accountability and responsibility instead of hierarchy. In this sense, there has been a transition from management to governance in social demands. In essence, governance can be described as a break from the traditional management approach. In the concept of governance, the emphasis is on “we” rather than “I”, and it gains the meaning of carrying out a task together with others. In addition, the governance approach aims for the rulers and the ruled to reach a common goal together, and it expresses an organizational activity that envisages communication and effective information sharing, mutual trust and transparency, and aims at joint decision-making (Atılğan and Yıldırım, pp. 182-183).

Accordingly, since the mid-1980s, more than 60 states, especially in developing countries, have implemented various decentralization practices. Decentralization, defined as the transfer of power and resources from upper-level government to lower-level government, can occur in three different forms. These forms can be implemented individually or together:

- Deconcentration or administrative decentralization occurs when higher-level public officials transfer their authority to lower-level governments.
- Fiscal decentralization occurs when the central government leaves control over budget and financial decisions to local units.
- Devolution or democratic decentralization is the transfer of duties, authorities and resources to more independent and partially democratic lower-level governments (Crook and Manor, p. 1).
- Increasing citizens' participation in political decision-making mechanisms is a prerequisite for success in the goals of localization and democratic decentralization. This requires a vibrant civil society that can create pressure and awareness among the decision-makers in local governments. Such civil society organizations will increase communication between citizens and municipalities and make it more efficient, as well as encourage people to participate in the political process.

3. LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN TURKEY

The system of local government in Turkey is based on three main units: provincial special administration, municipality and village. Among these structures, the village administration is the oldest and most traditional. Other local government units were established during the westernization process, especially based on the French model. During the Tanzimat Period, when the Westernization/modernization process accelerated in the Ottoman Empire, some reforms were made in local governments. However, these regulations generally aimed to strengthen the central authority. For this reason, the bureaucrats of the Tanzimat period did not look favorably on the idea of local democracy or local autonomy. Rather, the reforms aimed to regulate the provincial administration, increase state revenues and create a modern administrative structure (Ortaylı, p. 427).

The first municipal organization in Turkish administrative history was established with a regulation issued in 1854 under the name of İstanbul Şehremaneti. This municipality was headed by a municipality minister appointed by the central government. The municipality organization was supported by a council of an advisory nature, and this council included representatives of tradesmen and appointed civil servants. A 14-article regulation issued in 1855 formed the legal basis of this municipality's structure. With this regulation, duties such as cleaning, inspection of markets, road construction, pavement arrangements and local tax collection were assigned to the municipality. In addition, the provision of essential goods was among the responsibilities of the municipality (Gündüzöz, pp. 319-320).

The Istanbul Municipality was given very important duties, powers and responsibilities during this period. However, it could not fulfil these duties without the approval of the center and due to the heavy bureaucracy, which focused on the center. It can be said that this new structure created in the Ottoman Empire could not be separated from the traditionalist central municipality approach (Aycı, p. 32).

With the establishment of the Republic, no serious changes were made to the local government approach of the Ottoman period, and the existing structure was maintained in the same way. During the Republican period, the central government evaluated local governments as units that supported and implemented its own policies. A cautious approach was adopted in granting administrative and financial autonomy to local governments due to concerns that the unity and indivisibility of the state could be damaged (Çiçek, p. 59). However, it is important to note that the government showed its interest in the issue with the Municipal Law it adopted in 1930. Although the Municipal Law did not give municipalities very broad powers, it contributed to the awareness of citizens and the strengthening of local governments. This law remained in force for 74 years (Gündüzöz, p. 321).

In the 1960s, in line with the developments in both the world and Turkey, the state turned to a rapid structural transformation to strengthen the economic structure and ensure industrialization. With the influence of the socialist way of thinking, especially in line with the importance given to central planning, the restructuring process gained speed after 1960; the State Planning Organization and the State Personnel Department were established to support this process. Along with the planned development period, regulations regarding local governments increased within the scope of administrative reform efforts (Urhan, p. 87). With an important change made in 1963, the practice of electing mayors from within the municipal council ended, and they were directly elected by the people. In the 1980s, one of the most important steps taken in terms of local governments in Turkey was the establishment of metropolitan municipalities in 1984. During the same period, some legal regulations regarding the revenues of municipalities were also put into practice to empower their financial structure (Aycı, p. 36).

From the 1980s onwards, the demands for reform mentioned in the previous section began to have their reflections in Turkey. Both the changes created by globalization and the new understanding of public administration that emerged worldwide forced Turkey to take some steps in terms of democratic decentralization. In particular, the European Charter of Local Self-Government, prepared within the framework of the Council of Europe in 1985 and signed by Turkey in 1988, was very effective in this regard. The provisions of this agreement, together with Turkey's goal of membership in the European Union, obliged Turkey to make some reforms to its system of local government.

In this context, more crucial changes in local governments and the logic of public administration in Turkey took place in the 2000s. In particular, restructuring efforts in local governments cover important issues such as increasing participation in local government, openness and accountability, decentralization, subsidiarity, strategic planning and strengthening local governments by reducing the effects of central government. It can be said that the substructure of these regulations is formed by the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the legislation of the European Union (Taştekin and Akça, p. 602).

Today, it is seen that the local government reforms implemented in Turkey after 2004 include steps towards loosening the centralized structure. However, the effect of centralization is still strongly felt in practice. Although various studies have been carried out and some views have been supported to weaken this structure, the new arrangements that have been implemented have not provided significant progress in terms of administrative autonomy; the dependence of local governments on the central government, both administratively and financially, has largely continued (Çiçek, p. 61).

3.1. Basic Facts About the City Councils in Turkey

The 1992 UN Rio Summit and the resulting document titled “Agenda 21” laid the foundation for the creation of City Councils. “Agenda 21” serves as an action plan that promotes global cooperation to address worldwide challenges such as hunger and poverty. In response, countries were encouraged to develop their own local agendas aimed at tackling these issues.

The widespread adoption and awareness of “Agenda 21” significantly increased after the Habitat II Conference in 1996. In line with these developments, Turkey began working on projects in 1997—with support from the UN—to promote, develop, and implement its local agendas. Initially temporary, these efforts evolved into a permanent program after 2000. One key outcome of this process was the formation of City Councils, designed to foster local-level democracy (Akdemir, p. 41).

The City Council is a common ground that brings together important stakeholders in the city. Representatives of public institutions, civil society organizations, professional chambers, political parties and mukhtars come together on this platform. The City Council functions as a space that accepts differences and where various views meet. It has adopted the principle of being as inclusive as possible by staying away from discrimination.

The first establishment of the City Council is with the call of the mayor. However, the City Council is not a unit, directorate or extension of the municipality. It is a civil formation. City Councils are established to facilitate and develop democratic participation. The City Council has been designated as the most important institutional participation tool in Turkey (“Kent Konseyi Nedir?”).

The benefits expected from the City Councils are listed in the 6th article of the City Councils Regulation within the scope of their duties. Accordingly, the duties of the City Councils are as follows:

- a) To ensure the spread of democratic participation at the local level, the development of fellow-townsmanship identity and common life awareness, and the adoption of a multi-partner and multi-actor governance approach,
- b) To ensure the preparation and implementation of plans aimed at ensuring sustainable development and solving problems that arise in this regard,
- c) To contribute to the formation of a common mind encompassing the entire city in determining basic strategies and activity plans related to the city, in the implementation and monitoring processes.
- d) To develop participation, democracy and a culture of compromise within the framework of the principle of locality,

- e) To protect and develop historical, cultural, natural and similar values related to the identity of the city,
- f) To contribute to the effective, efficient and fair use of city resources,
- g) To support programs that are based on the understanding of sustainable development, improve the quality of life of the city, are environmentally sensitive and eliminate poverty,
- h) To contribute to the development and institutionalization of civil society,
- i) To increase the activities of children, youth, women and disabled people in social life and ensure that they take an active role in local decision-making mechanisms,
- j) To contribute to the implementation of the principles of transparency, participation, accountability and predictability in city management,
- k) To ensure that the opinions formed in the City Council are sent to the relevant municipality for evaluation (Demir and Yavaş, p. 52).

The City Council has an internal organization to carry out its basic functions and ensure participation. Representatives of various institutions in the city are members of the City Council, and they also constitute the general assembly of the council. The general assembly has a say in the election of the council's executive board, the council president and the council secretary general. The City Council president and the secretary general coordinate the work of the City Council.

The first place where problems, ideas and projects are discussed in detail in the City Council is the working groups. The City Council creates various working groups according to the members' requests, tendencies and the city's priorities. These groups are shaped around certain themes or topics. There is no requirement to be a City Council member to participate in the working groups; thus, broader participation can be achieved. Many different topics are brought to the agenda, discussed and reported in the groups. After these reports and suggestions are evaluated by the relevant bodies of the council, they are forwarded to the municipality and other authorized institutions, and the process is followed up.

The municipal law defines the City Council as a civic platform without granting it legal status or assigning it a separate budget. Nevertheless, it requires municipalities to offer both material and financial support to enable the City Council to function. Consequently, when drafting their budgets, municipalities allocate funds to cover the expenses related to the City Council's activities ("Kent Konseyi Nedir?").

The City Council consists of the following people, institutions and organizations:

1. Governor or his/her representative,
2. Metropolitan Municipality Mayor or his/her representative,
3. Representatives of public institutions and organizations to be determined by the Governor, not to exceed 10,
4. Not to exceed 30 percent of the number of mukhtars within the municipality borders and not to be less than 20, to be elected by the mukhtars from among themselves,
5. Representatives of political parties that have established the Provincial Organization,
6. One representative from each university within the metropolitan municipality borders.
7. Representatives of professional organizations, unions and relevant associations and foundations with public institution status within the metropolitan municipality borders,
8. Presidents of the assemblies established by the City Council and representatives of working groups (“Kent Konseyleri Hakkında Sıkça Sorulan Sorular”).

There are two national organizations established by City Councils to share knowledge and experience, find common solutions to common problems and cooperate. One of these is the “Union of City Councils of Turkey” and the other is the “Platform of City Councils of Turkey”. The idea of gathering City Councils under a single roof was first brought to the agenda during the “Turkish City Councils Meeting” held in Bursa in 2010. The concrete step of this idea was taken at the “II. City Councils Meeting” held in Kocaeli on April 15-17, 2011; at this event, it was announced that the “Turkish City Councils Union - City Councils Communication and Cooperation Network” would be established. As a civil society organization, this union was officially established in August 2012. This institution, which has an association status in terms of structure, operates with a union approach in terms of operation (Akdemir, p. 42).

The “Platform of City Councils of Turkey” was formed during a City Council meeting in İzmir in October 2010, in response to the need for improved cooperation and communication among City Councils, as well as the intention to elevate their influence in local decision-making to the national level. During the same meeting, the platform's operational framework was also established. As outlined in the platform's draft work directive, its objectives include promoting equal representation among member councils, enhancing civic participation, supporting efforts that link local initiatives to broader national goals, developing environmentally focused projects, and embracing fundamental principles for a sustainable future (Akdemir, p. 43).

As a result, City Councils operate to develop vision in city life, increase fellow-townsmen awareness, protect the rights and interests of the city, ensure sustainable development, strengthen environmental awareness,

encourage social solidarity, transparency, accountability, participation and local administration, etc. In these respects, City Councils aim to contribute to the process of localization and democratic decentralization in Turkey based on civil society.

3.2. City Councils in Practice

There are different views on how City Councils should be structured to better meet their founding purposes. According to some, City Councils should be a public institution with their own budget, personnel, movable and immovable property and vehicles. According to another view, City Councils should operate as a civil organization, completely independent of the municipality, financed by civil society organizations. These differences of opinion include, on the one hand, those who argue that City Councils should be equipped as an executive institution with public power; on the other hand, those who argue that they should be a think tank that only offers ideas and suggestions about the city (Özdemir, p. 47).

From this perspective, it can be seen that the financial structure and budget issues, which have an important place in the establishment and operation of City Councils, have not yet been fully resolved. The fact that they are not financially independent creates a perception that City Councils are dependent on municipalities. On the other hand, since the current budgets of many municipalities are already insufficient to meet basic services, it becomes difficult to provide the financial support that City Councils need. When combined with other bureaucratic obstacles, this situation creates a serious restriction in the implementation of council activities. In practice, in many City Councils, secretarial services and daily work are carried out by municipal personnel; activities are carried out in areas allocated within the city hall, and movable materials belonging to the municipality are used. All these elements weaken the independence of the councils. Therefore, having their own auditable budgets will both reduce the impression that they are dependent on the municipality and minimize bureaucratic delays (Özdemir, p. 48).

In this sense, the fact that the City Councils do not have legal personalities and that their budgets are not independent but are based on municipal budgets stands out as the most fundamental problem. Other problems that the Councils face or the issues in which they fail can be listed as follows:

- There are serious deficiencies in the participation of local people; the representation of people from all segments of society in the City Council is not ensured, and the understanding of multi-actor governance is not realized.
- City Councils are perceived as a unit of the municipality,
- Since the decisions taken by the City Councils are of a recommendatory nature in the municipal councils, they do not have any sanctions.
- Municipal councils do not take the necessary steps to ensure that the decisions of the City

Councils are discussed and put into practice,

- Municipalities do not benefit from City Councils to a sufficient extent,
- The inadequacy of the regulations regarding the functioning of City Councils in the City Councils Regulation and the fact that the City Council Regulation limits the awareness-raising qualities of City Councils,
- Some municipalities establish City Councils only to fulfil legal obligations,
- Insufficient communication and cooperation between City Councils,
- Currently, City Councils have not been established in various provinces and many municipal regions,
- Representatives of public institutions and organizations in the city do not participate sufficiently in the City Council activities,
- The fact that Neighbourhood Assemblies have not been established in many City Councils,
- The representation of civil society organizations in the city in the City Council is not at an equal level,
- The inadequacy of the effectiveness of civil society organizations in the work of City Councils in Turkey (Atak, p. 85).

For City Councils to become more effective, it is of great importance that municipalities and special administrations actively participate in strategic planning processes. In particular, councils should be encouraged to contribute to strategic plan documents that determine the goals and roadmaps of these institutions. In addition, for council activities to be more visible and efficient and for the public to be informed, these studies should be included in the annual activity reports of municipalities and special administrations. It is important to avoid political attitudes in the structure, functioning and activities of City Councils and their affiliated working groups to ensure the widest possible participation. Another critical point is to create a sense of public trust in City Councils so that all segments of society can be involved in the process (Özdemir, p. 49).

The first step to having a truly functional and sustainable City Council is to ensure sufficient participation from the local people in the City Council. For City Councils to be effective, there needs to be sufficient participation, and for there to be sufficient participation, citizens need to be informed about City Councils (Akman, p. 755). However, according to the current City Council regulation, direct public participation in the council is quite limited. Local people can participate in working groups, but they cannot participate in the general assembly of the City Council, where decisions are approved and presented as proposals to the City Council (Kara and Şimşek, p. 265).

In addition, it is seen that representatives of all relevant institutions and structures in the city are not included in the City Councils. It is noteworthy that the elected representatives are usually chosen from groups with which the municipality has close relations. Such practices can transform City Councils into symbolic structures that approve the decisions of the municipality. However, City Councils are expected to have a structure that includes all stakeholders that make up the city and to provide an environment where different views can be discussed. If this inclusiveness and ground for negotiation are not provided, it does not seem possible for the councils to truly fulfil their duty of consultation (Atak, pp. 85-86).

The absence of any sanction, control or monitoring mechanism regarding the proper functioning of City Councils is also a significant deficiency. How City Councils will operate, how they will be involved in municipal decision-making processes and how this relationship will be established are not clearly defined. To encourage participation at the local government level, it may be an appropriate approach to hold municipalities that do not agree to the establishment of City Councils or do not fulfil legal obligations and procedures accountable and impose sanctions (Özdemir, p. 50).

To address these issues, it can be argued that the City Council Law should be enacted without delay. City Council chairpersons should automatically become members of both the Municipal and Provincial Councils, and the decisions they make should be required to appear on the agendas of these councils (Erkul, Baykal and Kara, p. 103). Additionally, City Councils need to have independent budgets. Ulusoy and Tekdere have proposed the following recommendations on this matter:

- A fixed share can be transferred to City Councils from the municipal budget (for example, 1% or 2%).
- A share can be transferred to City Councils from total tax revenues or tax revenues collected within the municipal borders.
- A “City Council share” arrangement can be made in general and local fees, service bills and subscriptions.
- City Councils can generate income by carrying out projects.
- City Councils can be provided with grant and funding programs.
- They can be supported by the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Development according to the development index.
- They can establish income-generating subsidiaries.
- They can be subject to a separate law and budget (Ulusoy and Tekdere, pp. 71-73).

The City Councils, preparing their budgets together with the public, will prevent these structures from being perceived as an extension of the municipalities and will ensure that the needs and demands of the citizens are reflected in the process. The most prominent solution proposal to solve the financial problems of the City Councils is to allocate a special “City Council share” from the municipal budget to the City Councils. In this way, the City Councils can both have an independent budget, and the decisive influence of the mayor and council members on the budget can be reduced (Akman, p. 761).

4. CONCLUSION

Local governments are a very important dimension of democracy today, because many issues related to people's daily lives and needs are directly under the responsibility of municipalities and similar local units. Expectations for this responsibility to be fulfilled more effectively and rapidly paved the way for the abandonment of strictly centralized administrative systems and for localization and decentralization efforts. Especially in the globalization process, efforts to strengthen local governments have gained strength internationally. Unsurprisingly, Turkey has also been affected by this trend.

City Councils were born as a product of these efforts and quests for reform. It is a formula that Turkey found to meet localization expectations and to realize the goal of improving local administration. Through these institutions, Turkey has attempted to facilitate the transition from management to governance in local governments by involving society more in politics. City Councils are established as bodies that maintain their independence while working in close coordination with the municipality, playing a key role in discussing urban issues and overseeing the implementation of agreed-upon solutions. Thus, it was expected that the level of democracy in the country and the legitimacy of the administrators in the eyes of the people would increase.

It can be said that the councils are a well-intentioned attempt towards democratic decentralization and represent a crucial stage. However, significant progress is still needed. Because City Councils have critical problems in many ways, especially the lack of legal personality and independent budgets. Although different City Councils have different levels of success in terms of compliance with their founding purposes, it is seen that they all suffer from similar problems. To achieve the expected level of localization in Turkey, legal and economic steps should be taken to solve these problems, thus increasing the role of the Councils in local governance.

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