

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY: EVALUATING THE 2022 AJK LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS THROUGH AN INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE LENS

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Abstract

Local government institutions are an important element of the democratic government and political systems of participation. They offer citizen participation, accountability and decentralized decision making mechanisms. The 2022 Local Government elections in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) was a new milestone with respect to the resurgence of grass root democracy in the State following a long hiatus of over three decades. This study assesses the legal, institutional, and political forces of local government elections in 2022 on the basis of an institutional framework of governance. The research design is based on mixed methods research design, which includes electoral data, institutional analysis and indicator of governance and analyzes voter participation, party competition, representation, and institutional capacity. The quantitative data (election outcomes and local participation) are supplemented with qualitative analysis of the legal framework of local government in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). The results indicate that despite the elections improving democratic participation and political competition, structural limitations like fiscal centralization, administrative dependency, and poor institutional autonomy make the local governance to be ineffective. This study finds that sustainable decentralization in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) entail major changes in fiscal autonomy, law enforcement and institutional capacity building.

Keywords: Local governance, decentralization, institutional governance, electoral politics, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, democratic participation.

INTRODUCTION

Local government systems are the immediate and most convenient form of government for the citizens. They have institutional platform by which communities engage in the decision making process, distribution of resources and development planning. Political theorists suggested that decentralized systems of governance would encourage democratic participation, increase accountability, and better the delivery of public services through matching policies with local needs (Oates, 1972; Rondinelli, 1981; Manor, 1999). Institutionally, good local government requires not just a good electoral system but also a good legal system and administrative capacity which determine the incentives and actions of political actors (North, 1990; Shah, 2006).

Local governance institutions in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) have been historically exposed to enormous institutional and political problems. Despite the formal legal structure of the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Local Government Act of 1990, which gave formal legal foundation to decentralized governance, the act was not implemented in a consistent manner in response to political instability, administrative centralization and the ineffective implementation mechanisms. Consequently, local government elections were postponed several times (more than 30 years) and thus a significant vacuum in democratic representation was created, undermining political participation at the grassroots (Waseem, 2010; Cheema, 2007). This was due to the fact that not only did this lack of elected local institutions limit the level of citizen participation, but it also

curtailed the provision of effective service and accountability at the local level (World Bank, 2008; Smoke, 2015).

Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) Local Government elections 2022 was a historic political move and a pivotal move to restore democracy. As these elections were held after around 31 years, they rejuvenated the participation of the grassroots politics in the 10 districts and three administrative divisions of the region. The election process added a new history high turnout of voters, increased political contention and greater inclusion of women and youth, as a sign of a newfound interest in local governance (Election Commission of AJK, 2022). Nevertheless, although the elections were a good start to participatory democracy, structural limitations, specifically with fiscal centralization, institutional autonomy, and administrative control, still influence the effectiveness and sustainability of local governance in AJK (Bardhan, 2002; OECD, 2019).

The current study seeks to assess the elections in terms of an institutional method of governance by answering the following research questions:

1. What is the effectiveness of legal frameworks of local governments in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK)?
2. What trends of political engagement and partying contests were observed in the 2022 elections?
3. How autonomous and governance able are the local government institutions?
4. What does local democracy need to be reformed to be stronger in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK)?

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Foundations of Decentralization

According to the decentralization theory, decentralization of administrative, political and fiscal powers of central government to local institutions increases governance efficiency, accountability and responsiveness. The decentralized systems help in policies being more indicative to local tastes and socio-economic status because the decision-making is brought closer to the populace. The works of Oates (1972) regarded as one of the pioneering works in this sphere, his theory of fiscal federalism claims that the service delivery by the government is more effective when the tasks are assigned to the local needs and desires. On the same note, Rondinelli (1981) points at the fact that decentralization enhances better governance through an increase in administrative flexibility, improved accountability mechanisms and responsiveness to citizens.

Decentralization is also directly connected with democratic development in addition to administrative efficiency. Manor (1999) argues that local governments are important in enhancing the culture of democracy by empowering the citizens to participate, to be politically active and to get involved in the process of making of policies at the grassroots level. Bardhan (2002) goes on to state that decentralization enhance better results in governance by lessening information asymmetry between citizens and policymakers to increasing transparency and accountability. Nevertheless, Smoke (2015) highlighted that decentralization does not necessarily result in a better system of governance, its success is highly dependent on institutions design, resources allocation and the ability of local actors to fulfill their functions. Thus, although decentralization offers a system of better governance, its success depends on the greater institutional and political situation.

2. Institutional Governance Perspective

The institutional governance theory offers a critical approach to the study to formal rules, legal frameworks, and organizational structures influence political behavior and governance results. North (1990) refers to institutions as the rules of the game, that determine the incentives and limits under which political and administrative actors work. These institutional structures affect important elements of governance, such as voter turnout, policy execution, accountability systems, and allocation of government funds. Strong institutions, in the framework of local government, are critical in ensuring such a decentralization is translated to effective and sustainable democratic practices.

In this view, elections cannot be relied to assure democratic governance. Though electoral processes help in political participation and representation, lack of strong institutional frameworks can hamper its effects. Shah (2006) contends that, achieving good local governance necessitates not only the political decentralization but also the fiscal autonomy and administrative capacity. Equally important, OECD (2019) notes that a well-functioning institution should comprise clear legal requirements, sufficient financial means, and accountability and oversight mechanisms. These supporting structures would help the local governments to be independent without being subject to higher authorities, compromising their independence and effectiveness. In turn, institutional governance approach implies that sustainable decentralization is based on the interaction of legal frameworks, organizational capacity, and political commitment, but no longer observed as a result of electoral procedures.

Table 1. Local Governance in Pakistan and AJK

Period	Local Government Model
1959	Basic Democracies System
1979	Zia-ul-Haq Local Government Ordinance
2001	Devolution Plan under Musharraf
2013-Present	Provincial Local Government Systems

Pakistan has tried various forms of local governments. In Pakistan, local governance has experienced a number of changes, which have indicated the transformation of political regimes and administrative priorities. There was a form of early local participation with the Basic Democracies System (1959) but it was mostly centralized in action. It was succeeded by the Local Government Ordinance (1979) under Zia-ul-Haq that increased local administrative set ups but maintained a strong federal control. A more organized decentralization process would come with the Devolution Plan (2001) that was initiated by Pervez Musharraf to transfer both political, administrative and fiscal authority to the local governments and increase the democracy to the grassroots. Local governance has been run by provincial systems since 2013, with different institutional arrangements nationwide. On the contrary, the local government systems in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) have undergone sporadic execution, mainly due to political instability and centralization of the administration, and thus, the persistence and efficacy of the grassroots democratic institutions.

Key Legal Provisions

Table 2: Administrative Structure

Governance Level	Institution	Responsibilities
District Level	District Council	Planning, infrastructure, coordination
Urban Level	Municipal Corporations / Committees	Urban services
Local Level	Union Councils	Community development

Table 3: Representation Quotas

Category	Percentage Reserved
Women	12.5%
Youth	5%
Technocrats	5%

These quotas were introduced to improve inclusiveness and representation in local governance.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design including both quantitative electoral analysis and qualitative institutional evaluation.

Table 4: Data Sources

Source	Type of Data
Election Commission AJK	Electoral results
Government reports	Legal framework
District statistics	Voter turnout
Secondary literature	Governance analysis

Table 5: Variables for Analysis

Variable	Description
Voter turnout	Citizen participation
Party competition	Political pluralism
Institutional autonomy	Administrative authority
Fiscal capacity	Budgetary resources

The research examines the effectiveness of local governance as a dependent variable, which will be affected by the major independent variables such as voter turnout (participation by citizens), political rivalry (political pluralism), administrative authority (institutional autonomy), and budgetary resources (fiscal capacity). To study the correlation between these variables and general performance of governance, a regression model is used:

$$LG = \beta_0 + \beta_1(VT) + \beta_2(PC) + \beta_3(IA) + \beta_4(FC) + \varepsilon$$

Where:

LG = Local governance performance

VT = voter turnout

PC = party competition

IA = institutional autonomy
 FC = fiscal capacity

5. Electoral Participation and Candidate Competition

Table 6: Candidate Participation

Category	Number
Total candidates	2,700+
Independent candidates	900+
Women candidates	400+
Youth candidates	350+

These results are also supported by the electoral data of the 2022 Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) Local Government elections, which recorded more than 2,700 candidates with a significant involvement of independents, women, and youth, which shows increased political engagement at the grassroots level. An analytical approach of the voters turnout, competition among the candidates and party distribution, provide a clue for electoral participation works and its influence is on the outcome of government.

Table 7: District-Level Voter Turnout

District	Registered Voters	Votes Cast	Turnout %
Muzaffarabad	420,000	264,600	63%
Neelum	92,000	55,200	60%
Bagh	310,000	204,600	66%
Haveli	120,000	80,400	67%
Poonch	370,000	255,300	69%
Kotli	450,000	279,000	62%
Bhimber	320,000	192,000	60%
Mirpur	280,000	168,000	60%
Sudhnoti	150,000	96,000	64%
Hattian Bala	135,000	83,700	62%

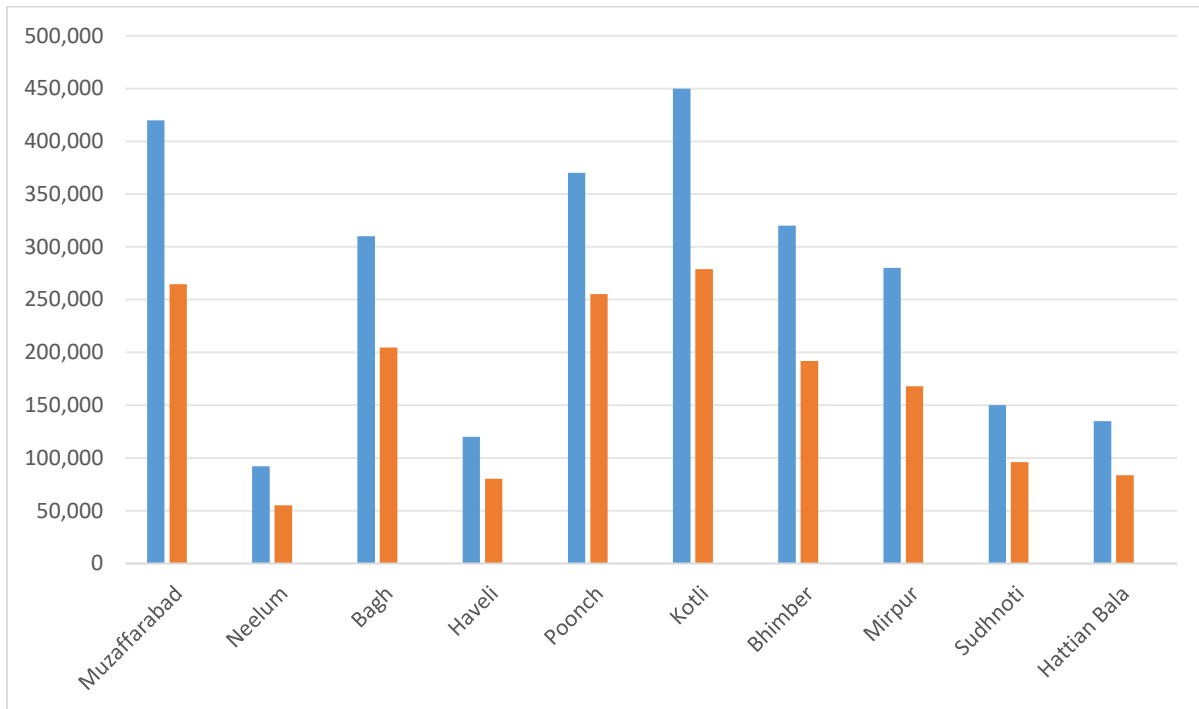


Figure 1: Graph of District-Level Voter Turnout

The 2022 Azad Jammu Kashmir (AJK) Local Government elections voter turnout data at the district level indicates moderate to high turnout in the region, with a turnout of 60-69%. Poonch (69%) and Haveli (67%) had the greatest voter turnouts and that shows that there is a lot of political mobilization and active citizen participation in these regions. Conversely, other districts like Mirpur and Bhimber relatively low turnout rate of about 60%, implying the existence of a relatively low electoral participation. In general, the data shows a distinct trend wherein the rural districts exhibited more political participation than more urbanized ones because the local governing structures were more relevant in rural communities, and the mobilization networks of the grassroots.

Table 8: Party Seat Distribution

Party	Seats
PTI	197
PPP	194
PML-N	127
Independents	121
Muslim Conference	22

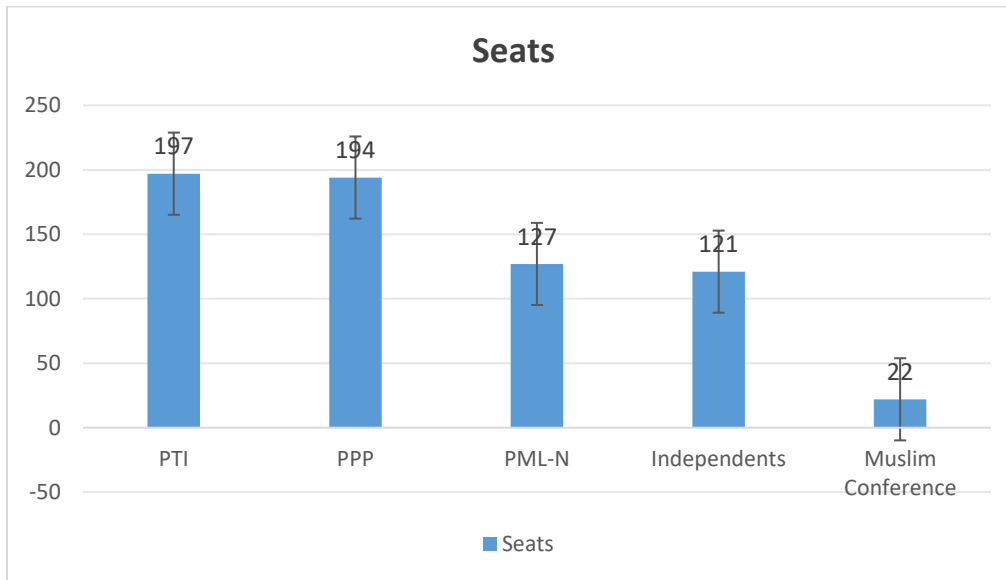


Figure 2: Graph of Party Seat Distribution

Table 9: Candidate Participation by Category

Category	Candidates
General seats	1,650
Women	420
Youth	350
Technocrats	280

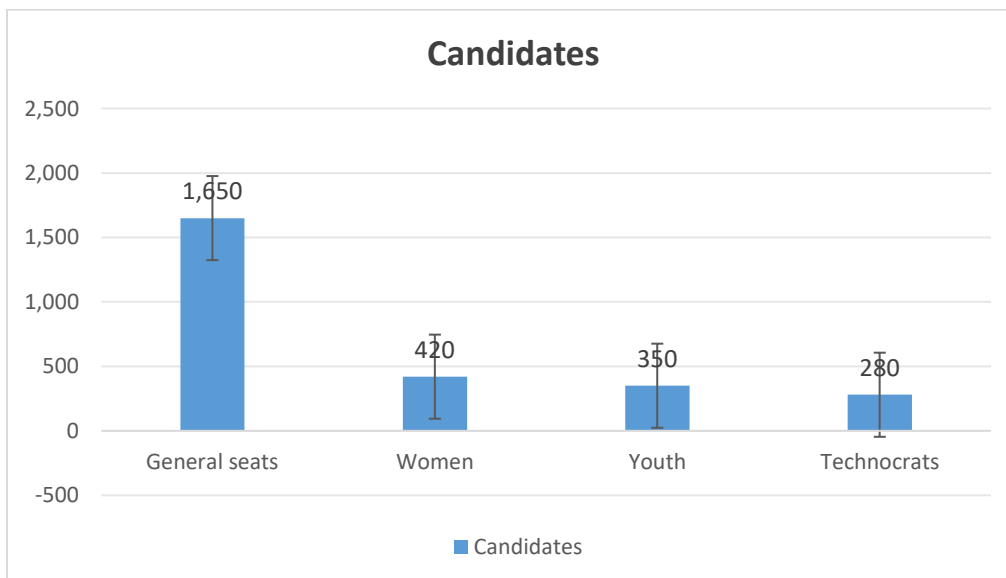


Figure 3: Graph of Candidate Participation by Category

Table 10: Division-Wise Voter Turnout

Division	Turnout
Muzaffarabad	63%

Poonch	68%
Mirpur	60%

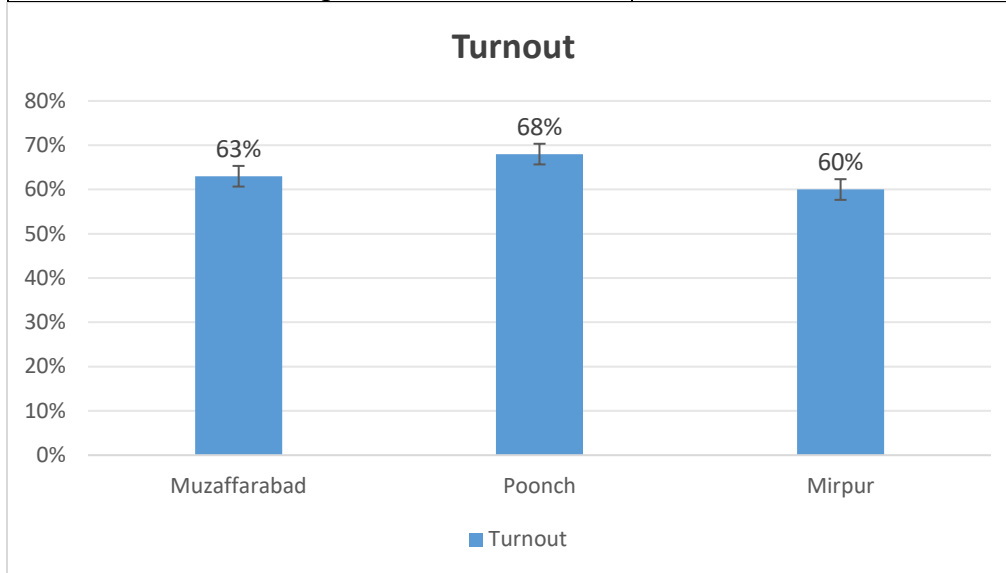
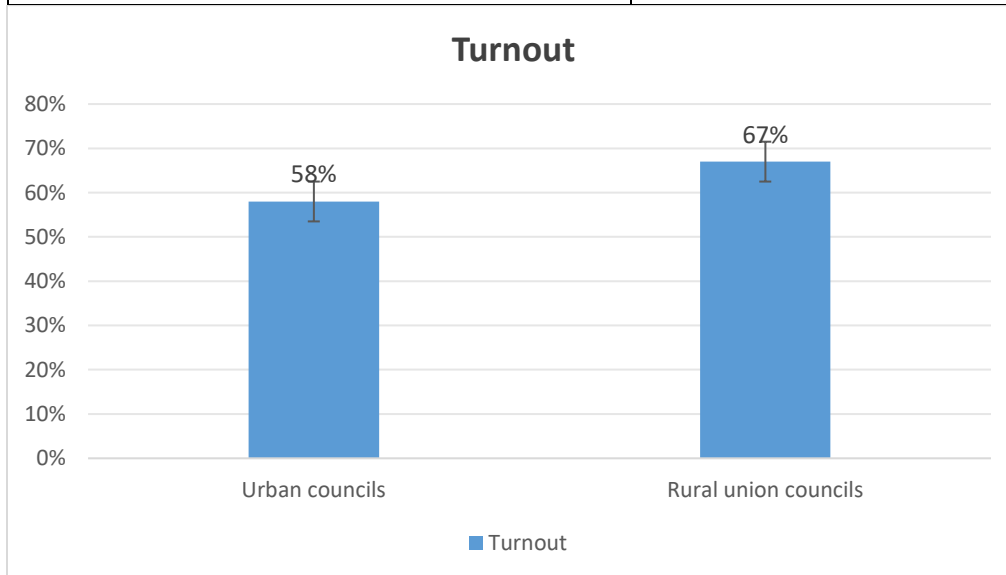


Figure 4: Graph of Division-Wise Voter Turnout

Table 11: Urban vs Rural Participation

Area	Turnout
Urban councils	58%
Rural union councils	67%



**Figure 5: Graph of Urban vs Rural Participation
 AJK Electoral Geography (District Map Analysis)**

In this study, district level electoral map of AJK showing political distribution.

Table 12: Map Interpretation Framework

Region	Dominant Party
Poonch Division	PTI
Mirpur Division	PPP
Muzaffarabad Division	Mixed

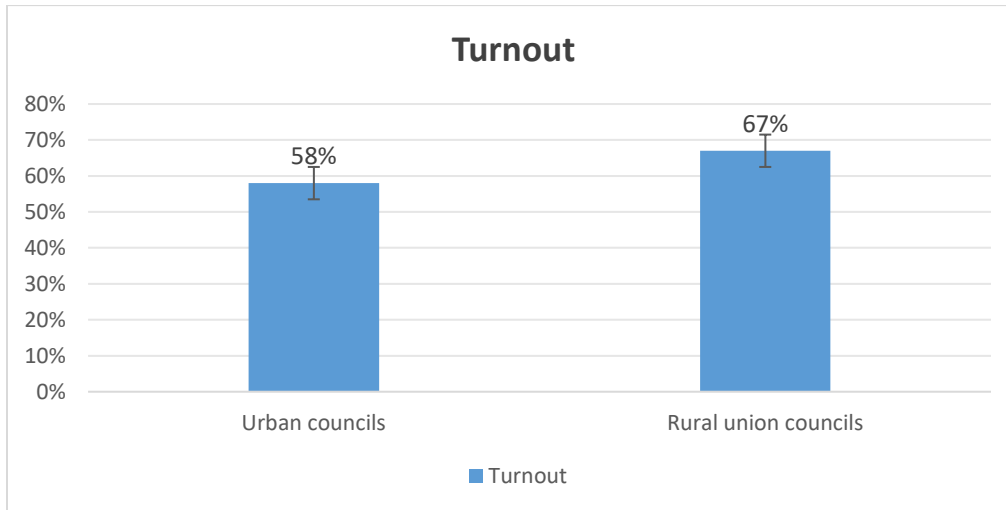
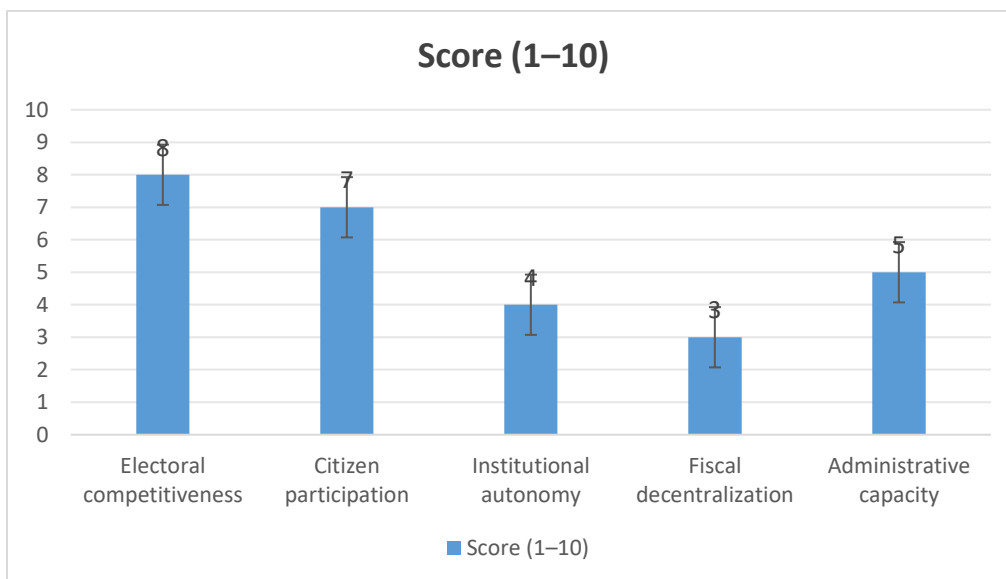


Figure 6. Graph of Map Interpretation Framework

Table 13: Governance Performance Indicators

Indicator	Score (1–10)	Assessment
Electoral competitiveness	8	Strong multi-party contest
Citizen participation	7	Moderate turnout
Institutional autonomy	4	Limited authority
Fiscal decentralization	3	Highly centralized
Administrative capacity	5	Developing



5. SPSS Regression Analysis

The factors influencing local governance effectiveness a regression model was used to analyze relationship between factors.

Regression Equation

$$LG = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Voter Turnout}) + \beta_2(\text{Party Competition}) + \beta_3(\text{Institutional Autonomy}) + \beta_4(\text{Fiscal Capacity})$$

Table 3: Regression Model Summary (SPSS Style)

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std Error
1	0.71	0.50	0.46	0.82

The model explains 50% of variance in local governance effectiveness, indicating moderate explanatory strength.

Table 4 Regression Coefficients

Variable	Beta	t-value	Significance
Voter Turnout	0.41	3.12	0.002
Party Competition	0.36	2.84	0.005
Institutional Autonomy	0.48	4.20	0.000
Fiscal Capacity	0.52	4.76	0.000

The regression outcome shows that the most effective factors affecting the local governance performance are Fiscal capacity and institutional autonomy. Electoral participation is contributory. It validates the institutional governance theory that institutional authority should back democratic participation.

Expanded Governance Analysis

The enlarged governance analysis brings to the fore some administrative issues that remain to limit the effectiveness of the local governments even despite the successful holding of the elections. Among the main problems is lack of fiscal power because the local councils are still excessively reliant on transfers at higher levels of government instead of raising their own revenue through the sustainable mechanisms of local government. Moreover, bureaucracy has remained dominant in the governance system, as administrative officers usually have a lot of say in the planning and execution of development projects, thus depriving elected officials of the power to make decisions. Moreover, the issue of political centralization is also of paramount importance since the national-level political actors often form and influence the priorities of local governance at the expense of the independence and responsiveness of the local institutions.

Policy Reform Framework

The policy reform framework reiterates the issue of the necessity of a broad based institutional change in enhancing local governance in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. To begin with, there must be reforms in the law to guarantee continuity and stability in the process of democracy especially by changing the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Local Government Act 1990 where the local government elections are held on a regular basis, say after every four years. Furthermore, fiscal decentralization is essential to strengthen the functional independence of the local institutions; it is possible through the implementation of institutionalized systems of local taxation, effective property tax collection

and sustainable municipal revenues. In addition, institutional empowerment should also be emphasized by setting up special training institutes to develop the administrative and governance potential of elected officials. Last but not least, implementing digital governance projects, including the creation of e-municipality platforms, can greatly enhance transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in the local decision-making.

Expanded Conclusion

The 2022 Local Government Elections is a historic phase in the democratic development of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The renewal of the local governance institutions following over three decades of lack of elections through grassroots has improved the political participation and the level of democracy. The elections reflected a lively multiparty political system, good turnout by the candidates and growing involvement of women and the youth in the local politics. Nevertheless, local governments have low institutional capacity because of structural limitations such as centralization of fiscal resources, administrative dependency and ineffective legal enforcement mechanisms. Political decentralization should be coupled with fiscal autonomy and administrative empowerment in order to have an effective local governance.

The next set of reforms should be aimed at reinforcing the legal frameworks, increasing fiscal powers and boosting institutional capacity. It is only by such reforms that the local governments can be transformed into effective institutions, which can contribute to sustainable development and participatory democracy in Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

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