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978-1-107-12887-3 - Democratization from Above: The Logic of Local Democracy in the Developing World

Anjali Thomas Bohlken

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I

The Puzzle of “Democratization from Above”

Democracy has the potential to shape the lives of ordinary citizens in important ways. It can help citizens to exercise voice, to hold public officials accountable, and to protect themselves from the arbitrary use of power. In some democratic societies, these rights and privileges that citizens enjoy go all the way down to the grassroots, structuring political relationships at every level of government. However, in much of the developing world, democracy is uneven and shallow. Even if national democratic institutions exist, there is considerable variation in the degree to which democracy permeates down to local levels of government. In some societies, citizens have often been left to rely on unelected officials to address their most pressing local needs. In others, local democracy has been established and citizens have gained a new voice in shaping the local decisions that affect their lives. Curiously, however, rather than emerging organically from below, local democracy has typically been granted “from above” – established and fostered by the actions of government elites at higher levels. This book seeks to understand why and when local democracy emerges in this seemingly unlikely, yet all too common, way.

Some national governments have introduced significant reforms to strengthen democracy at the local level. In China in 1988, the national government significantly increased the political voice of the country’s citizens by passing a law that instituted nationwide elections to village councils for the first time (O’Brien and Li 2000). In 1999 the Indonesian national government passed laws that significantly altered the country’s political landscape below the national level by introducing elections for mayors and district heads and making these leaders accountable to their local legislatures (Silver 2003, p. 426). Yet there are also many government elites who have shown reluctance in establishing elected bodies at the local level. Some have even introduced measures to deliberately undermine the democratic functioning of local governments. For example, in Russia, President Putin decided to eliminate elections for regional governors and the mayors of several cities, who were

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then subsequently appointed by the Kremlin (Slider 2009). In Pakistan between 1993 and 1998, the national government altogether suspended local elected bodies, leaving citizens reliant on unelected local administrators to address their local needs (Cheema, Khwaja, and Qadir 2006). Why do some government elites introduce and strengthen democratic procedures at local levels of government? Why do others neglect, or even actively undermine, local democratic governance? In addressing these questions, the book seeks to shed light on a key channel through which citizens gain a voice in local government.

Gaining such an understanding is important in part because democratic theory has suggested that it is local institutions that often have the greatest potential to influence how ordinary citizens experience democracy in their day-to-day lives. Over a century ago, Tocqueville and Mill argued that local democratic institutions are essential to a democratic society because they “put liberty within the people’s reach” (Tocqueville 1966 [1835], p. 44) and “form a practical part of the political education of a free people” (Mill 2001 [1859], p. 104). In present times, these ideas have been taken to heart by policy-makers and international agencies, who have increasingly viewed the encouragement of local democracy as an integral part of a larger strategy of democracy promotion in the developing world.¹ Local democratization in recent times has also involved the introduction of innovative forms of participatory governance and direct democracy (e.g. Cameron, Hershberg, and Sharpe 2012; Besley, Pande, and Rao 2005a; Abers 2000) – reforms that have garnered substantial attention in policy circles. The World Bank, for example, has taken an active interest in participatory budgeting, stating that it “can be instrumental in making the allocation of public resources more inclusive and equitable,”² and a 2007 World Bank study shows that participatory budgeting has now been implemented in most of the major regions in the developing world and that local democratic institutions have provided an important platform for this reform (Shah 2007).

Yet, despite the intrinsic appeal of local democratization for political theorists and policy-makers, there is – as this book highlights – significant variation across the developing world in the extent to which government elites at higher levels have chosen to bring about democratization at the local level. This book seeks to explain this variation and, in doing so, departs from two common views about local democratization that prevail in the literature. The first is that local democratization is simply an extension of national democratization and that both national and local democratization can be explained as a result of the same underlying factors. The second is that local democratization is just one form of decentralization – a means through which governments at higher tiers transfer power and autonomy to those at lower tiers.

¹ See, for example, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2006; USAID Center for Democracy and Governance 2000.

² World Bank Website. <http://web.worldbank.org>, accessed September 3, 2014.

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This book provides evidence that challenges these two views. First, the book uses an original dataset to show that across the developing world, local democracy does not simply emerge as a by-product of national democracy. Instead, many transitions to democracy at the national level do not give rise to democratic institutions at the local level. Conversely, many authoritarian regimes have sought to introduce democratic procedures at local levels of government. Thus, the variation in local democratization observed across the developing world cannot be adequately explained by the same factors that lead to democratization at the national level. Second, the book highlights that in many cases local democratization is implemented without an accompanying increase in local fiscal autonomy. Thus, local democratization often occurs separately from fiscal or administrative decentralization, suggesting that these different reforms might often have different underlying causes.

This book offers a theory of local democratization that addresses these otherwise puzzling patterns. The key implication of the theory is that rather than being a means of granting *more autonomy* to local actors, local democracy emerges from the need of these government elites to *control* local intermediaries on whom they rely for political support. Thus, the book offers a logic of local democratization that runs counter to the logic of national democratization and to the logic of decentralization.

The book’s argument also runs counter to interpretations of reforms to democratize local institutions that are commonly found in the popular press. In most cases, such reforms are heralded in the popular press as praiseworthy – as reflecting intentions on the part of national rulers to empower local citizens or establish greater overall democracy. For example, the *New York Times* interpreted former Pakistan leader Musharraf’s implementation of local democratization and devolution in 2000 as one of the government’s major accomplishments that was designed to “empower people at the grassroots level.”³ Political leaders also often couch such reforms in lofty terms. For example, when Poland’s government set up locally elected councils across the country in 1990 to replace the existing party structure and its centralized control from Warsaw, Poland’s prime minister Mazowiecki was reported to have justified the reforms saying: “There can be no democratic state without true local democracy.”⁴ This book shows through a wide range of empirical evidence both within and outside the Indian context that these interpretations of local democratization as a means of empowering citizens or of bringing about greater overall democracy are, in many cases, misleading. Instead, this book develops and tests an argument that suggests a less sanguine interpretation of the motives of government elites who implement these local democratization reforms. And, as I discuss later, it is an argument that has

³ Empowering Pakistanis, *The New York Times*, September 4, 2000.

⁴ “Upheaval in the East: Poland Reshaping Its Local Voting,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 1990.

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important implications for how we understand democracy, decentralization, and institutional change more generally in the developing world.

The book’s emphasis on the *political* motivations behind local democratization is important given that evidence on the effects of local democratic institutions on socioeconomic outcomes has been mixed. While some research has uncovered a negative effect of local democratic institutions on public service delivery (e.g. Malesky, Nguyen, and Tran 2014) and in increasing corruption (e.g. Burgess et al. 2011), other research has found that these institutions play an important role in improving the allocation of public goods and the targeting of benefits (Foster and Rosenzweig 2001) and also in improving the targeting of aid under certain conditions (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013). Thus, while one immediate explanation for why governments implement local democratization is its potential to improve citizens’ lives, there is no consensus in the existing literature that local democratization does indeed have these effects.

The evidence on the effects of local democratic institutions on political outcomes also points in different directions. On the one hand, research has shown that local democratic institutions play a significant role in improving democratic accountability, in expanding the reach of democracy to marginalized groups, and in increasing citizen satisfaction with government (e.g. Olken 2010; Weitz-Shapiro 2008; Manion 2006; Hiskey and Bowler 2005; Besley et al. 2005a; Fung and Wright 2001). On the other hand, the potential of local democratic institutions to open up greater possibilities for “elite capture” has been widely emphasized (Platteau 2004; Galasso and Ravallion 2005). Thus, further research is needed to examine when and how local democratic institutions can in fact enhance overall democratic accountability. The book’s argument and findings suggest further avenues for research on these questions that are discussed in the final chapter.

The rest of the present chapter is organized as follows. Section 1.1 defines the concept of local democratization that is used throughout the book. Sections 1.2 and 1.3 highlight the two patterns relating to when and how local democratization occurs that challenge conventional views about the causes of local democratization. Section 1.4 discusses the definition of some key concepts used throughout the book. Section 1.5 describes, in brief, the book’s argument that seeks to address the above-mentioned puzzles, and Section 1.6 goes on to highlight why India presents an ideal context in which to begin exploring the causes of local democratization for both substantive and methodological reasons. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the rest of the book, which focuses on developing, illustrating, and testing the main argument.

1.1 DEFINITION OF LOCAL DEMOCRATIZATION

Although there are a multitude of ways to conceptualize democracy, this book adopts a minimalist view in which competitive elections form a crucial basis

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of democracy.⁵ As discussed earlier, the key interest is in explaining why government elites at higher levels bring about democracy at *the local level*, where “local” refers to any and all tiers of government below the provincial or state level.

I define the *implementation of local democratization* as a set of actions taken by government elites at the national (or sometimes state) level that establish, or increase, the ability of citizens to select members of local governments through popular elections or to hold them accountable. This definition of local democratization corresponds in part to definitions of decentralization used in previous works. For example, Rodden (2004) refers to the existence of elected governments at the lower level as “political decentralization,” while Treisman (2007, p. 24) refers to this as “appointment decentralization.” At a basic level, the implementation of local democratization could entail replacing administrative structures with elected government at the local level or it could entail introducing elections to lower levels of government in which positions were previously filled by appointment.⁶ However, the implementation of local democratization could also involve reforms to existing elected government such as measures to ensure the regularity of these elections, measures to decrease the role of higher-level governments, in the process of appointing members of lower-level governments, and measures to formally introduce participatory budgeting or other similar procedures at the local level.⁷ Section 1.2 describes how this phenomenon of local democratization relates to national democratization.

1.2 COMMON VIEW 1: LOCAL DEMOCRATIZATION AS AN EXTENSION OF NATIONAL DEMOCRATIZATION

Given its theoretical and practical importance, this question of why democracy emerges and survives has invoked the fascination of students of politics for many decades. There is indeed an abundance of research focused on explaining the occurrence and consolidation of democracy *at the national level* (e.g. Ansell and Samuels 2014; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Boix and Stokes

⁵ Indeed, competitive elections form the basis of many influential ways of conceptualizing democracy at the national level (Schumpeter 1947; Przeworski et al. 2000).

⁶ By “government” here I mean councils as well as executives.

⁷ Conversely, I define the reversal of local democratization as a set of actions taken by government elites that undermine or decrease the ability of citizens to select members of lower-level governments through popular elections or to hold them accountable. Reversals of local democratization could entail not only suspending elected local governments, but also letting the terms of elected bodies lapse for significant periods or increasing the role of higher-level government officials in the process of appointing members of government at the local level. Note that the actions taken by government elites to implement or reverse local democratization could involve introducing or passing constitutional amendments or laws but they could also involve executive decisions in the form of ordinances or decrees or even executive decisions to implement, or fail to implement, an existing law.

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2003; Przeworski et al. 2000; Huntington 1993; Moore 1967), which has greatly increased our understanding of when and why citizens have gained the right to freely choose their national governments and to hold these governments accountable. Can this vast body of work shed light on the factors driving *local* democratization? Indeed, the most obvious explanation for the variation in local democracy and local democratization across the developing world is that it is simply a reflection of changes in regime type at the national level.

However, a new original dataset on local democracy and democratization casts doubt on this conventional view. It shows instead that the patterns of local democratization observed across the developing world remain puzzling despite our increased understanding of the factors that drive changes in regime type at the national level. The dataset contains information on local government structure and reforms in all countries in the developing world with a population size of over 10 million from 1945 to 2010.⁸ In this group of large countries, questions of democratization below the national level are likely to be especially important and pertinent. Yet, as described in the following sections, there are significant variations in local democracy across space and over time even within this set of countries. More importantly, the data reveal that these variations cannot be adequately explained by variations in regime type at the national level.

According to the afore-mentioned dataset, a country is described as having *elected local government* only if its local governments at each tier of government below the state or province are popularly elected in most parts of the country where they exist. If any tier of local government below the state or province is not elected in most parts of the country where it exists, local government in the country is considered to be not elected.⁹ Of course, the presence of elected local government does not imply the presence of local democracy. However, by most definitions, the presence of elected local government is a minimal requirement for the presence of local democracy. Figure 1.1 shows that while the presence of elected local government in the developing world has generally been increasing, there is a significant proportion of countries, even in the recent period, that do not have even this basic prerequisite of local democracy. This pattern suggests that there is significant variation across the developing world in the presence of local democracy.

In order to capture how variations in local democracy map onto variations in national-level patterns of democracy, I combine the above-mentioned dataset of local government structure and reforms with an existing dataset that captures the level of “democracy” at the national level in a given country-year.

⁸ The Data Appendix in Chapter 10 contains a full description of the list of the countries in the dataset and coding procedures.

⁹ The Data Appendix in Chapter 10 provides a more detailed description of this variable.

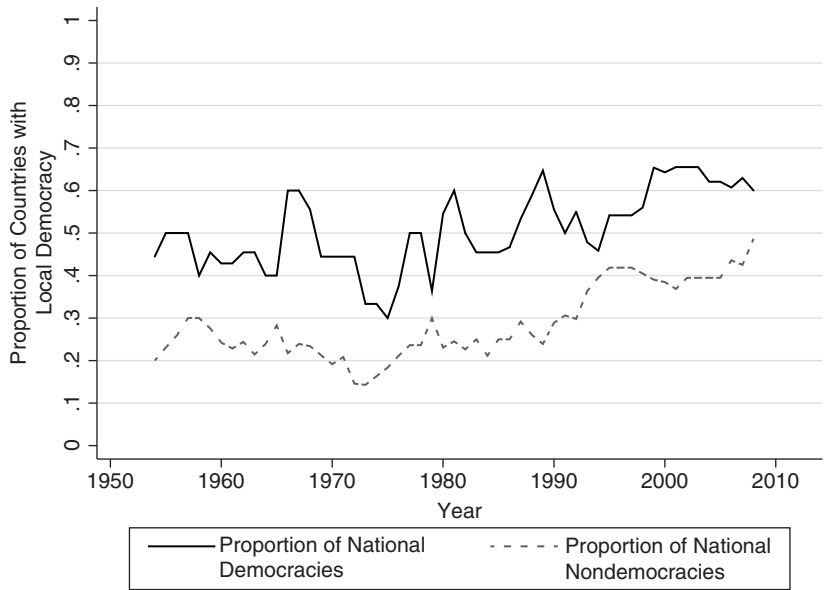


FIGURE 1.1 Patterns of Local Democracy in the Developing World

The dataset was coded by Przeworski et al. (2000) and extended and modified by Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) (henceforth CGV).¹⁰ Figure 1.1 relies on the combined dataset to gain an understanding of how the patterns of local democracy across the developing world vary by national regime type. The figure shows that for the entire period, national democracies were more likely to have elected local government than national nondemocracies. However, while there does appear to be a relationship between national and local regime type, there are also significant variations in the presence of elected local government that cannot be explained by national regime type. In particular, a significant proportion of nationally democratic regimes in each year do not even have this basic prerequisite of local democracy. Similarly, many nationally authoritarian regimes have elected local government. The pattern suggests

¹⁰ According to these researchers, democracy is a dichotomous concept and is defined as a regime “in which governmental offices are filled as a consequence of contested elections” (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010, p. 6). They operationalize this definition of democracy by examining whether national-level institutions – the chief executive and the legislature – are popularly elected, whether there is more than one party competing in the elections, and whether an alternation in power under electoral rules identical to the ones that brought the incumbent to office took place. Although measures of democracy across various researchers are highly correlated in practice, the CGV dataset is more well suited to the task at hand since the coding criteria are clearly and transparently based on national institutions. The POLITY coding is less suited to the task since it relies on more subjective assessments that may incorporate information on local institutions.

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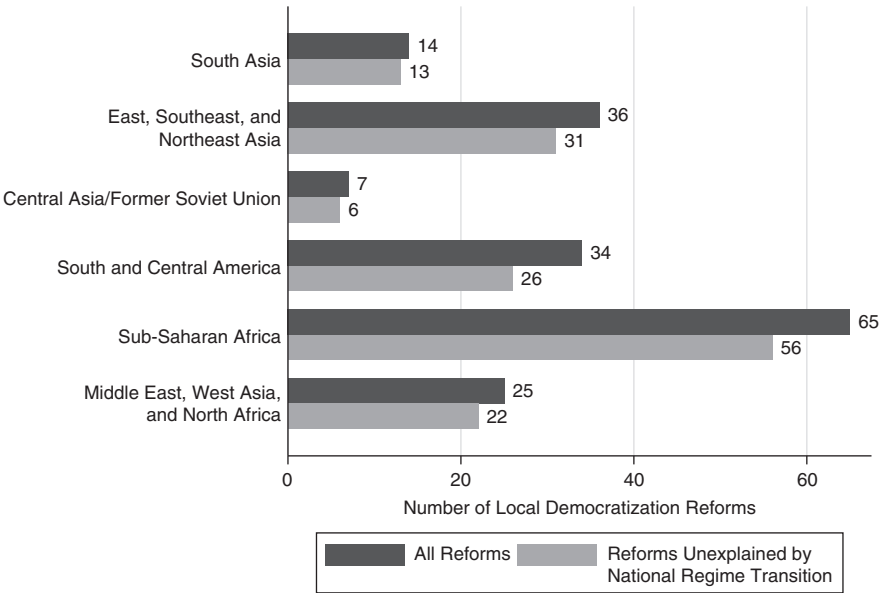


FIGURE 1.2 Local Democratization Reforms in the Developing World, 1945–2010

that there is significant variation in the presence of elected local government that cannot be easily explained by the presence or absence of democratic institutions at the national level.

Another way of discerning the links between national and local democracy is to examine whether instances of local democratization reforms or reversals can be explained by changes in democracy at the national level. In accordance with the definition provided earlier, I operationalize *local democratization reforms* as measures implemented by national governments that establish, or increase, the ability of citizens to select members of local governments through popular elections or to hold them accountable.¹¹ By “local” government, I mean again those tiers of government below the state or province. While the previous literature has paid little attention to explaining democratization reforms at this level, Figure 1.2 shows that these reforms have been commonplace in all major regions in the developing world. This pattern itself points to the importance of explaining this phenomenon.

¹¹ The appendix in Chapter 10 provides a complete list of the changes categorized as reforms. While the cross-national dataset focuses on changes made by the national government, India represents a fairly atypical case in which governments at the state level had significant discretion over the implementation of local democratization. Thus, in the Indian context, the implementation of local democratization is operationalized at both the national and state levels.

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To what extent can these local democratization reforms be explained by transitions to democracy at the national level? To address this question, I examine which of these reforms took place within a two-year period after a transition to democracy at the national level as defined by CGV.¹² The gray bars in the figure show the number of reforms that took place outside the time frame of a transition to democracy. We observe that while local democratization reforms do sometimes coincide with transitions to democracy at the national level, there are a substantial number of instances of these reforms in each of the regions that cannot be explained by changes in democracy at the national level.¹³

Similar patterns are observed with regard to reversals in local democratization. A *reversal of local democratization* is a measure implemented by a national government that results in elected government at a level of government below the state or province being removed or replaced with appointed government or that increases the role of higher-level governments in appointing local government officials.¹⁴ As described later, a number of influential arguments in the existing literature – mostly focused on a specific set of countries in Latin America – have based their arguments on the assumption that the establishment and strengthening of local institutions is a path-dependent process that cannot be easily reversed (e.g. O'Neill 2003; Falletti 2010). However, looking at the developing world more broadly, Figure 1.3 shows that reversals of local democratization are rather common place in every region of the developing world. The gray bars in the figure show the number of reversals that took place *outside* of a two-year period after a transition away from democracy at the national level as defined by CGV. The figure demonstrates that, across all the major regions of the developing world, there are a substantial number of these reversals in local democratization that cannot be explained by reversals in democracy at the national level.¹⁵

The data described earlier have shown that local democratization reforms and reversals leave us with important puzzles that cannot be explained as extensions of processes of democratization or reversals at the national level. While the book's argument is largely developed to explain variations in local democratization in the Indian context, Chapter 8 of the book shows that the argument also helps make sense of these patterns observed across the globe. In particular, it shows how the argument supplies a unifying logic of local democratization that can account for why rulers in both national democracies

¹² CGV code a transition to democracy as occurring in a year in which a regime changes from being non-democratic to democratic and a transition to autocracy is coded for a change in the opposite direction.

¹³ While the two-year time frame is an arbitrary choice, a similar pattern is observed if we use a three or four year window.

¹⁴ The appendix in Chapter 10 provides a complete list of the changes categorized as reversals.

¹⁵ The data do show, however, that national democracies are less likely to experience local democratic reversals than national non-democracies.

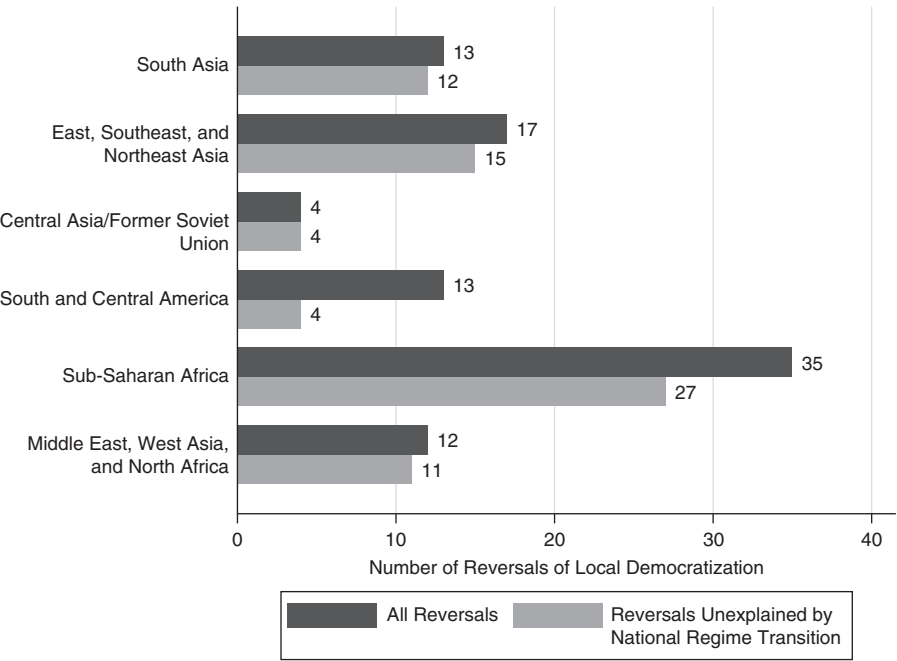


FIGURE 1.3 Reversals of Local Democratization in the Developing World, 1945–2010

and national non-democracies might have an interest in implementing local democratization. The chapter shows in particular how the book’s argument can explain at least a part of the variation in the implementation of local democratization across authoritarian regimes. This is important since much of the previous literature on decentralization emphasizes factors such as electoral risk at the national level (O’Neill 2003) and decentralized party structures (Garman, Haggard, and Willis 2001) that are more likely to be salient in democratic contexts.

The book’s focus on the variation in the implementation of local democratization both across and within regime types complements the literature on subnational authoritarianism. This literature seeks to understand why particular provincial rulers within a country establish, or fail to establish, democratic rule in their provinces (e.g. Sidel 2014; Mickey 2013; Gervasoni 2010; Gibson 2005; Hagopian 1996; Fox 1994). For example, Gibson (2005) describes how subnational democratization can occur as a result of a failure of provincial leaders to maintain authoritarian control over their provinces. Gervasoni (2010) argues that the extent of subnational authoritarianism in a province is to a large extent determined by the magnitude and origin of its fiscal resources. Mickey (2013), on the other hand, argues that the degree of elite cohesion and centralization of political authority of the states in the US South determined their future path of democratization. In contrast with the present research, this