Governance at the Grassroots:
Local Government Structure in Fiji

Mohammad Habibur Rahman, Ph.D.
Faculty of Business, Economics and Policy Studies
University Brunei Darussalam, Brunei
mohammad.rahman@ubd.edu.bn

Sonal Singh
Freelance Writer, Fiji

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this paper is to review the local government structure in Fiji and measure the need for reforms to promote citizen participation in local development. After a brief theoretical review towards understanding the framework of devolved decentralisation at the grassroots, the paper looks at the development of a unique local government system in the multi-ethic Fiji, where the rural–urban divide is visible also with the local authority structure. This structure has shaped and influenced the practice of decentralised local government in Fiji in a diverse manner. The paper also examined the central-local relations and the current local government reform initiative of the military-led government. While it remains to be seen whether this reform initiative is supplemented with required political commitment and bureaucratic will for sustainable local governance in enhancing its role in service delivery, some policy ideas have been advocated to strengthen the local government bodies in terms of political empowerment and administrative capacity.

Introduction

Fiji, endowed with forest, mineral, and fish resources, is one of the most developed of the Pacific island economies, though still with a large subsistence sector. Sugar exports and a growing tourist industry - with 300,000 to 400,000 tourists annually - are the major sources of foreign exchange. Sugar processing makes up one-third of industrial activity. The multicultural society of Fiji has suffered some recent strains, but generally co-exists productively. The problems are mostly economic, social and cultural rather than ethnic and therefore can be resolved with minimum damage to the social fabric of Fiji. The Indo-Fijian people who came as indentured labour the 19th century are said to be individualistic and oriented towards their nuclear and immediate family.
The majority of the Indo-Fijian community is farmers and the rest is engaged in business and professional activities. The indigenous Fijians have communal lifestyle, belonging to tribes and clans, and land owning units known as *mataqali*. The head of the leading *mataqali* is the village chief and the rural Fijians live a partially subsistence lifestyle. They are numerically strong in the civil service and the army is almost hundred per cent Fijian.

Why Decentralization?

Pierre and Peters (2000) support decentralisation by stating that the shifts of state power downwards to regions and localities, upwards to transnational organisations, and sideways to ‘arm’s length’ institutions, far from being irreversible processes of state decline, are in fact indicators of (successful) adaptation to changes in the state’s domestic and international external environments:

Fung and Wright (2001) identify three features of institutional design that seem to stabilise and deepen the practice of governance: the devolution of public decision authority to empowered local units; the creation of formal linkages of responsibility, resource distribution and communication that connect these units to each other, more centralised authorities; and the use and generation of new state institutions to support and guide these decentred problem-solving efforts rather than leaving them as informal or voluntary affairs.

Uphoff (1985) notes that decentralisation is a residual category which encompasses everything that is not centralisation. However, different organisational forms have been identified by scholars which produce several dimensions with different variants. To avoid the use of decentralisation as a blanket term I need to discuss these forms in order to reach an operational version of the concept. The theoretical underpinning of public administration received a boost when two major forms of decentralisation - deconcentration and devolution - were delineated by the United Nations (1962), Maddick (1963), Riggs (1960) and Fesler
Deconcentration indicates the redistribution of administrative powers and responsibilities only within the central government. It is a process which "involves the transfer of functions within the central government hierarchy through the shifting of workload from central ministries to field offices, the creation of field agencies, or the shifting of responsibility to local administrative units that are part of central government structure" (Rondinelli, 1983: 189). However, many of the Asian and African nations such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, Nepal, Thailand, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Kenya and Tanzania have frequently adopted the form of deconcentration during the past decades. (Rondinelli, 1983; Rondinelli and Nellis, 1986; Hyden, 1983).

Maddick (1963: 25) defines devolution as "the legal conferring of powers to discharge specified or residual functions upon formally constituted local authorities". Smith (1985) calls this the 'democratic form of decentralisation'. Rondinelli, McCullough and Johnson (1989) recognise it as an organisational form of local government which should be given autonomy and independence and be clearly perceived of as a separate level over which central authorities exercise little or no direct control.

Arguably, local authorities and other public authorities such as local government have a key role to play in building countervailing power at grassroots level. They could act as anchor organisations in support of labour and community mobilisation. They could act as ‘higher level’ authorities supporting and guiding more local decision making bodies. They could transfer assets of different kinds (land, buildings, staff, budgets, etc) to new institutions (for example, Community Trusts) controlled by local stakeholders. They could facilitate active community participation, joined up service provision, and beneficial use of key local private and voluntary sector skills.
Historical Development of Local Government in Fiji

Demographically, Fiji is located in the South Pacific Ocean between latitude 15 to 22 degrees South and longitude 175 degrees West. Fiji is formed of 330 islands with a total land area 18,272 square kilometers. The two islands Viti Levu and Vanua Levua account for 87 percent of total land area are largest islands and center for economic activities. According to the Bureau of Statistics Fiji Household Survey (2001), the total population of Fiji was estimated to be 880,874 (July 2004 est.) with annual growth rate of 1.41% percent predicted by 2005.

The population categories for 2004 were: Fijian 51% (predominantly Melanesian with a Polynesian admixture), Indian 44%, and European, other Pacific Islanders, overseas Chinese, and others 5%.

Fiji gained its independence from the British colonial rule in 1970. Local Government was established first in Levuka under the Towns Ordinance during the colonial time in 1877. Thus Levuka was the first to become a Town, and 1881 Suva became a town and an urban center. Municipal Institutions Ordinance of 1909 proclaimed Townships and District Officers elected became the Head of the government administration in the districts. Suva and Lautoka were proclaimed as towns under the Local Government (Towns) Ordinance and were administered by elected councilors. Suva became a town in the year 1952 and Lautoka in 1977 Legislation covering municipalities was streamlined with the enactment of the Local Government Act of 1972.

In the pre-independence time, a membership system of government was introduced and the Legislative Council assumed responsibility for special functions of government including local government. After the independence, Local Government Act was enacted in 1972. The Act reflected much of colonial ordinances. Under the Act administration of towns was
transferred to elected councils, and the Act was consolidated and amended in 1980. This has been the case since however the coup of 1987 has had severe ramifications on local government structure in Fiji. In 1987 the Local Government Act governing election of council members was repealed and appointment of members of the council was to be made yearly. However in 1993 new election of council members was made in accordance with the Act. Local Government Act Cap.125 made provisions for the Constitution, by the Minister for Local Government of two classes’ of municipalities: (a) cities, and (b) towns and districts. The two were cities: Suva and Lautoka, and nine towns were: Ba, Lami, Levuka, Nadi, Nausori, Savusavu, Sigatoka and Tavua. The city and town are divided into wards, such as same number of adult inhabitants. The Acts provided for the constitution of a Council for governance of each municipality. Legally each council is a body corporate with perpetual succession and common seal as well as elections.

A Unique Local Government Structure

According to the Ministry of Local Government Functions Manual (2003) there are four distinct systems of sub national governments in Fiji:

- Government administration;
- The Fijian Affairs Board;
- Municipal administration; and
- Rural local authorities

_Government Administration_

Fiji is divided into 14 provinces each comprising a number of Districts. For administrative purposes, the country is divided into four segments; Northern; Eastern; Southern; and Western. Each division comprises of two official groups (a) the Divisional Commissioners who coordinate all governmental services and developmental activities; and (b) the District
Officers who head the divisions and district developmental committees. They are public servants.

*The Fijian Affairs Board*

The Fijian Affairs Board was constituted under Fijian Affairs Act (Cap. 120) to govern all matters regarding native Fijian affairs and to promote Fijian custom services. The Board refers some matter to Great Council of Chiefs constituted by the President. The 14 provinces are administrative units each governed by Provincial Council. The Fijian Affairs Board approves the appointment of the executive heads in Provincial Councils, and approves all rates and by-laws applied by the Provincial Councils.

The Provincial Council was set up to promote the health, welfare, and good government of Fijian residents in the province plus other essential duties assigned by the Minister or Fijian Affairs Board. The members of the Provincial Council hold similar powers as are vested in Municipal Councils, can make by-laws, levy rates, and have control of building construction in the Fijian villages. Each province consists of *tikinas* - administrative sub-units of a province. Out of several *tikinas* one member is elected to represent the province in a Provincial Council of Fiji. Each *tikina* consists of several *koro* (villages). The *koro* is headed by a *Turaga-ni-Koro* elected by the villagers based on chiefly status.

*Municipal Administration*

Major urban centers were proclaimed City or Town under the Local Government Act (Cap.125). Municipal governments are being administered by councils elected by the eligible population residing within the proclaimed boundaries, and controlled by the Ministry of Local Government, Housing and the Environment.
Rural Local Authorities

All areas outside the jurisdiction of proclaimed cities, towns and Fijian villages belong to the jurisdiction of Rural Local Authorities. These include:

The Fijian Affairs Local Government Structure

- **Fijian Affairs Board**
  - Governed by Fijian Affairs Act

- **Provincial Council**
  - One member is elected from a *tikina* to represent the tikinas in the provincial council

- **Tikina Council**
  - Several villages form a tikina (sub-province)

- **Turaga Ni-Koro**
  - Based on Chiefly Status in Villages (Koros)
Public health authorities – constituted under the Public Health Act (Cap. 111) to control public health, building construction, and control other matters governed by the Public Health Act.

Central Board of Health – constituted by the Minister for Health for overall coordination of activities of the rural local authorities. It is vital to understand the local government structure in Fiji before carrying out a stakeholder analysis.

Central and Local Government Linkage

The local government structure in Fiji is a mix of deconcentration and devolution. Two out of four are deconcentrated institutions, namely the Government administration and Rural local authorities. On the other hand, the Fijian Affairs Board and Municipal administration are organisationally devolved.

The central government and has legal and functional relationships with each other. The legal relationships are set out in the Local Government Act as well as some of the other laws under which municipal councils act within certain limits. In terms of financial matters, the Local Government Minister exercises control over municipal councils such as imposition of fees and charges, including revision of these fees, raise overdraft, approval for loans for developmental works or other purposes; approval of budget, and to appoint auditors. Administratively, all by-laws made by a municipality under the provisions of the Local Government Act, or under the provisions of any other law by virtue of which the council is authorized to act, are required to be approved by the Minister.

The Fiji Local Government Association is of the opinion that the Minister's powers to appoint auditors and investigate into a council's affairs provide sufficient authority to the Minister to
oversee the efficiency of municipal administration and that all other controls should be removed in order to make municipal councils autonomous in handling municipal affairs. The Fiji Local Government Association is a member of International Union of Local Authorities. Under the Town Planning Act the Minister approves all development during the interim period prior to final approval of a planning scheme, approval of provisional schemes, consideration of objections to provisional schemes and approval of final planning schemes.

Current Reform Initiatives

Fiji experienced the third military coup on December 5 2006 [the two previous ones were in 1987 (Rabuka who replaced elected PM Ratu Mara) and 2000 (George Speight who ousted elected PM Mahendra Chowdhury)]. The 2006 coup came about as a result of conflict between the then Laisenia Qarase Government and the military. The general unrest was attributed largely by the Reconciliation Tolerance and Unity Bill that intended to offer pardons to some of the people who had participated in the 2000 coup. Commodore Frank Bainimarama, who seized power as the country’s interim president, stated that the primary objective of the Interim Military Government is to take the country towards good governance and fight corruption. Alongside, an anti-corruption scheme, the military-led government has also set up a three-member Review/Reform Committee to review the functions of Municipal Councils on delivery of services, improve efficiency, incorporate greater accountability mechanisms and to provide the necessary amenities, infrastructure and facilities for the ratepayers and residents of each respective municipality. The review will also ensure that each municipal council has the administrative capacity as well as the necessary financial resources to be able to properly discharge its duties (Fiji Times, July 1, 2008). It remains to be seen whether this reform initiative is supplemented with required political commitment and bureaucratic will for sustainable local governance in enhancing its role in service delivery.
Citizen Participation in Local Government
The citizens are somewhat involved in the intense political process for the election of
councillors, based on wards within the municipality. Legal provision for participation by
people and civil society groups in the various activities undertaken by municipalities is
included in a number of legislation. In the Local Government Act there is a statutory
provision for publicizing all proposals for boundary revisions to lodge objections to specific
or all proposals and make verbal and written presentations at public hearings organized by the
Local Government Committee. On financial matters all councils are required to publish the
financial balance sheet of the Council as well as a summarized statement of the incomes and
expenditures together with a report by the auditor in a local newspaper.

Some Policy Thoughts

The research based on empirical material, mainly from Fiji context, has established the kinds
of changes needed to realize practicable and sustainable forms of empowered participatory
governance. These forms, while exhibiting possibly infinite variation, nevertheless appear to
have a number of common characteristics, in particular a complex multi-levelled combination
of ‘primary’ grassroots democratic organizations (of women and urban and rural citizens) and
‘secondary’ supportive and regulative governance structures. The current forms of local
(urban or rural) democratic governance in Fiji are very far away from embodying such forms
of participatory governance, but local authorities of some kind may still be capable of playing
a major role as secondary institutions in relation to primary grassroots organizations.

In Fiji, few local government operate in this way, and even these are generally reluctant to
transfer assets. Using Leach and Percy-Smith’s (2001) criteria for assessing the health of
local democracy (namely, effectiveness of accountability, representativeness, opportunities
for participation, and responsiveness to local needs, concerns and interests), local government in the Fiji is not adequately effective. Although elected local government appears generally more democratic than non-elected local bodies, accountability mechanisms are extremely weak in all types of public authorities (Leach and Percy-Smith 2000, pp.104-105). Decision makers are representative of their constituencies in neither a legal nor a statistical sense (being neither mandated to perform specific acts nor broadly resembling their constituents in terms of sex, age, class, race, etc). Participation opportunities are clearly inadequate since about half the population think local taxpayers do not have enough influence over local authority decision making.

Need for Empowered Governance in Local Governments
The importance of developing democratic institutions based on direct citizen participation, within a strategic framework of wider institutional support is crucial for local government transformations in Fiji. This development is known, following Fung and Wright (2003), as empowered participatory governance. Up to now, EPG has been described largely in terms of isolated ‘experiments’ in different parts of the world. The research has been an attempt to see how it could be ‘mainstreamed’ so that it becomes part and parcel of the everyday practice of governance everywhere.

Local Government Capacity Building
In spite of the not inconsiderable defects of local authorities at present, some form of local authority governance regime (radically transformed from the present one), while far from being a privileged site for transformative political action, may turn out to be essential in order to provide the strategic connectedness through which grassroots democratic institutions at neighbourhood level can survive and thrive in the long term. Similarly, it could be argued that some form of governance regime at a national (or possibly regional) level is required to define a strategic enabling framework for local authority governance, and maybe some form
of global governance (for example, as envisaged by Monbiot, 2003) is necessary to ensure the long-term survival of national governance. The level of governance is democratically controlled by those affected by it, and is institutionally embedded within each level above it, which itself is directly accountable for its decisions to the levels below it.

References


*Fiji Times*, 1 July 2008.


