

Local Governments and Democracy: Impossible or Indispensible Pairs?

Kemal Özden¹

Abstract

Every state in the world has an administrative organization divided as central government (administration) and local government. According to the administrative and political history, geography, demographic structure and other similar factors, the countries either pay more attention to local governments or central government. Actually, they are complementary of each other.

The relationship between local governments/administrations and democracy is interpreted differently by different philosophers, academicians and politicians. There are wide range of thoughts including views about this particular discussion. Firstly, some academicians claim that local administrations are against the idea and practice of democracy. The second type of view believes that local administrations are a necessity of democracy and they are indispensable pairs. And the third group of view claims that there is not any cause and effect relationship between the local governments and democracy. This article will examine the first view about this opposite ideas.

Keywords: *Local Government, Local Democracy, Local Autonomy, Participation, Administrative Reform.*

¹ Fatih University, kemalozden@fatih.edu.tr

Introduction

Establishment of a specific administrative structure for people who have to live together is an inevitable process. This administrative structure should make an organization and division of labor in order to meet the numerous needs of citizens such as health, security, education, culture and justice. Attitude of citizens against presented services will be one of the most significant indicators of administration's success. It must be noticed that the administration, here, is a solely a legitimate instrument in delivering public service. When administration becomes the main mission and target, instead of only an instrument, we meet bureaucracy with a caricatured perception and red tape. In this case, the administration that tries to produce solutions to people's problems may turn into a ball of problems and paradoxes itself.

Necessities of humanity are primarily health, security and education; besides these, it is impossible to list all of the necessities. Moreover, solutions to many problems for which people were primarily responsible for themselves are today expected from governments. For instance, although it was accepted that primary school is compulsory and free, school books were bought by families. But today, school books are given to students by government and it is thought that the government "has to" do this. Significant amount of families think that circumcision of their children is one of the duties of municipalities. In addition to this example, people think that public institutions have to take care of old persons who need health care service at home anymore. There are many more examples of this situation.

In order to present public services more efficiently, some administrative institutions and geographic units were autonomized in presenting services; the aim in this process is to increase the productivity of public services and satisfaction of people who get these services. Functional local government and geographic local government bodies had been established for this purpose. At this point, it is seen that better administration occurs especially when governance and democracy emerge together. While on one hand public services' quality increase with governance, on the other hand, democracy gets more attention in local administrations.

The relationship between local governments/administrations and democracy is interpreted differently by different philosophers, academicians and politicians. There are wide range of thoughts including views about this particular discussion. Firstly, some academicians claim that local administrations are against the idea and practice of democracy. The second type of view believes that local administrations are a necessity of democracy and they are indispensable pairs. And the third group of view claims that there is not any cause and effect relationship between the local

governments and democracy.

In this article, the first of these different views about local administrations and democracy will be discussed. In this context, views defending that local administrations don't comply with democracy and moreover, they are completely against democratic principles, will be analyzed.

The Idea that Local Government doesn't Comply with Democracy

People who put forward the idea that there is not a connection between local governments and democracy can be analyzed in two groups. The first group of these denies the existence of a positive or negative connection between democracy and local administrations. Namely, local administrations have neither contributions or damages on democracy. Emergence of democracy and local administrations at the same period in historical process is completely coincidence and there is not a positive cause and effect relation between them. According to Birgül Ayman Güler, local administrations can have a progressivist or reactionary role during democratization process. There isn't any relationship of opposition between central and local; they are supplementary elements as different constituents of government organizations (Güler 1998, p. 143). So, according to Güler, there is no reciprocal relationship between local governments and democracy.

Although Güler is not prejudiced on this issue, she definitely objects to decentralization policies and she has prejudices about giving freedoms to local administrations and liberalization policies. According to Güler, reform works that was brought to agenda in 2003 and named "the second wave" by Güler and especially Public Administration Basic Draft Law are not local. "Similar with the first wave laws, which weren't developed by governments of that time, plans of the second wave weren't original productions of government. This feature explains how liberalization policies can be applied no matter which is the government. Shortly, behind these reform works that aims at a total change in central and local administrations which tries to empower the local administrations, there is the support of international powers and governments such as USA, IMF, World Bank, OECD and UN" (Güler 2003, p. 4).

The second group that states opinion about local administrations-democracy claims that local administrations definitely don't comply with democracy. Simultaneous occurrence of local administration and democracy in history is again completely coincidental and it is an exceptional situation. Thinkers and academicians in this group have a very hard line and they oppose to the idea that local administrations

make contributions to democracy; they claim that in order to have democracy nationally with all institutions, central administration should be the only actor. For example, Tolman Smith, think that local administrations are against democratic election principal, so they are unnecessary organizations (Hill 1974, p. 23).

Rousseau and Condercet who claim that local administrations have contradictory attitude to democracy, think that these administration units are instruments for protecting privileged classes' interests; they defend that establishing of a centralist structure would prevent these privileges (Tekeli 1983, p. 59). When Rousseau's statements about "general will-private will" are analyzed, it can be seen that he thought that general will necessitates central administration and local administrations, which are –in a way– reflections of private will are obstacles in front of reaching peace.

The harshest criticism about this issue is that there is neither compliance nor cooperation between local administrations and democracy was made by Georges Langrod. According to Langrod, there appears to be no justification for asserting that there exists an inevitable tie of reciprocal dependence between democracy and local government. Democracy doesn't come into being where local government appears, nor does it cease with the disappearance of the latter (Langrod 1976, p. 5).

Langrod, states that there can be a parallelism in local administrations and democracy's emergence process, but this parallelism doesn't mean that they are completely related with each other. He mentions that emergence of local administrations in Europe in historical process developed with decentralized and anti-authoritarian movements; besides that, development and stabilization of local administrations contributed to democratization of some politic values and local administrations have an educational role in terms of participating public into administration. He says that the general climate of local governments contributes towards the democratization of customs, to the education of the masses and to preparing them in this way for an active participation in public life. Moreover, he claims that often, not always, local government helps to spread by its internal structure, the psychological bases and structural forms of democracy. But he explains that all of these still do not show that democracy and local administrations are identical (Langrod, p. 5).

According to Langrod, when democracy is analyzed in terms of a dynamic perspective, rather than static and historical perspective, it is seen that there is not an identity between these two concepts, on the contrary, there is an opposition. Democracy is by definition is an egalitarian, majority and unitarian system. It tends everywhere and all times to create a social whole, a community which is uniform, leveled and subject to rules. It avoids any splitting up of the governing (and governed)

body, any atomization, any appearance of intermediaries between the whole and the individual. Since democracy moves inevitably and by its very essence towards centralization, local government creates a negation of democracy. He states that, democracy sooner or later will breakaway from the fundamental idea of local government and will demand administrative centralization (Langrod, p. 8-9). It is seen that what Langrod understands from democracy is standardization, uniformity and centralization. Actually, this is not a universal perception of democracy. Democracy is actually, perception of the differences, pluralities in the society. If the administration doesn't notice these differences in the society, then everybody has to enjoy the same kind of tastes, as in the case of the Communist Block of the cold war era. But Langrod believes that local government is a dog collar of democracy.

Langrod thinks that democratic election, that is to say above all universal election, by introducing inevitably into administration the political element (falsified moreover by its local aspect) and the struggle between parties (in the framework of proportional representation), seems less and less to serve the idea of "good administration." Indeed, the more public administration develops (in size), improves (in quality) and becomes more technical, the less place there is for the preponderance of purely political actors; the unforeseeable results of an election risk the destruction of continuity, may deprive local representation of its truly civic character and may set local government in opposition to the true popular will (Langrod, p. 11). There is unfortunately nothing to say against this technocratic understanding of Langrod. Glorifying technocratic understanding instead of changing government through democratic ways is a situation which is possible only in extraordinary economic and social crisis or dictatorial regimes. This technocratic administration is actually a breakaway from the general and usual type of the government. Therefore, any occurrence of technocratic governments, sooner or later will replace with the democratic ones, as in the cases of technocratic governments in some of the members of the European Union (Greece and Italy for example) aftermaths of the economic crises in early 2010.

While Leo Moulin agrees with Langrod, he says that democracy can not only be expressed with outer indicators (ballot box, election, vote etc.). It is true that these are necessary, but existence of them is not sufficient for democracy. He claims that democracy implies, above all; the active presence of a kind of "ethics", of a certain "public spirit" which in particular involves respect for human rights and for the rights of minorities, fair play, decent methods, tolerance, observing the rules of the game, a sense of humor, and unselfishness. But local administrations protect person-

al benefits instead of public benefits, while national benefits, which are a necessity for democratic ethics, are either overlooked or sacrificed (Moulin 1979, p. 20-22).

Because of the scope of this article, I don't want to mention the opposite ideas which perceive local governments and democracy are indispensable bodies. However, due to the very heavy criticism of above mentioned ideas of Langrod and Moulin, I feel an obligation of expressing at least a few views which uplift and enrich local governments. One of the political thinkers, Tocqueville, pays great attention on the local governments because of their reciprocal relationship with the notion of democracy. He advises to use the "secondary liberties" provided by local governments as primary schools to develop democratic mores. Therefore; train local leaders, multiply the offices that must be held by local residents, set up systems that require the participation of local voters in town elections, run meetings, approve budgets, build trust. Consequently, let residents taste the freedoms in the arena closest to their direct interests (Gannett 2005, p. 722).

Democratic Practices and Local Administrations

The idea that local governments don't comply with democracy misses a very important point. The problem, which commonly occurs in Turkey, is not the situation that local administrations aren't against democracy; it is the fact that democratic practices aren't allowed to be applied in local administrations. Many practices such as transparency, accountability, solutions of common local needs, choosing decision makers with election, financial and administrative autonomy, which are also democratic factors, are interrupted by national administrative organizations beyond local administrations. Results of these negative applications are laid on local administrations and local administrations become both sufferer and guilty.

While explaining this paradigm, Bilal Eryılmaz and M.Lütfi Şen state that, the perception that "democracy is ignored by local administrations" are due to national politicians and national political institutions. While some people discredit elected political and administrative bodies in Turkey, it is a big contradiction that these bodies also discredit each other. The indicator of this contradiction is that government, that is an elected organ, doesn't transfer resources and authority to another chosen organ, local administrations (Eryılmaz and Şen 1994, p. 3) due to the possibility of corruption and distrust.

Nuri Tortop et al. also state a similar contradiction. According to these writers, one of the reasons of the thought that local administrations are against democracy

and they are obstacles to democratic institutions is the understanding of centralist bureaucratic administration. "Although there is a parallelism between local administrations and democracy, it can definitely be said that centralist bureaucratic administration understanding excludes democratic, autonomic and powerful local administrations; i.e. local democracy. The basic reason of this situation is building hegemony on political power and sharing resources; in other words, distrust to local election, local politics, namely local democracy cause this situation. A regime claiming that it runs democracy at national level contradicts with itself; because forming parliamentary at national level and determining executive organ occur at the end of a process based on the same elector, the same politician" (Tortop et al. 2006, p. 23).

Another reason why centralized management and national politicians avoid giving resource and authority to local administrations is to prevent municipalities, which are the parts of dissident political parties, from becoming powerful. While there are not many problems in transferring resource to municipalities that are the parts of government party, there are various problems in transferring resource to municipalities that are parts of opponent political parties, and at the end of this situation, citizens are the ones that end up the only losers. Both electorate and politicians are aware of this situation. This is why, candidates of mayor and municipal assembly "bargain" with the political parties that defend different political views during elections and move from one party to another. There are many examples of such situations in Turkey. Thus, municipalities that are accused of corruption are always the municipalities of dissident parties while –although generally more in number- municipalities of government party are always "innocent."

Local Autonomy and Democracy

While analyzing the relation between local administrations and democracy, one of the references used in Turkey is "local autonomy". There are two basic resources of the thought that local administrations don't comply with democracy. The first is the claim of "*secular-nationalist (ulusalci*²)" thought or movement; according to this thought, autonomy of local administrations is dangerous for national unity and should be limited as much as possible. Increasing autonomy in local administrations, as

² Within last decade, in Turkey, a new political movement called "ulusalci" (nationalist) has appeared. This movement (or ideology) is very peculiar to Turkey and it shares some sides of nationalism, etatism, secularism, Kemalism and socialism. Therefore, this ideology has supporters from right wing MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), left wing-Marxist İP (Workers Party), and as well as center-left CHP (Republican Peoples Party). Since I couldn't find a convenient translation of "ulusalci" (nationalist) in the terminology, I preferred to translate it as "secular-nationalist".

mentioned by Güler, is imposed by foreign forces who want to prevent Turkey from becoming powerful, and it is a very dangerous process which can end in separation and collapse of Turkish Republic.

The other thought about autonomy is the ideas supported by Peace and Democracy Party –BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*) that has a completely opposite view to the first one. According to this, local administrations in Turkey are under an authoritarian control and local autonomy should be empowered even to the extent which changes the administrative structure of the country from unitary state to the federal one. Of course, this kind of radical ideas strengthens the views of the first “secular-nationalist” group.

So, what should be the measure of autonomy that local administrations should have? Who is true in Turkey; secular-nationalists or BDP. It can be said that, above mentioned two completely opposite views represent extreme ends. Understanding how local autonomy is perceived in the world can create a solution to these discussions. Therefore, it is better to study the universal understanding of local autonomy in the international texts. The most favorite and most widely accepted definition of local autonomy is given in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which is also signed by Turkey in 1992.

Article 3 of the Charter defines what local autonomy is. The concept of local self-government can be defined as;

1. Local self-government denotes the right and ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial proportion of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population.

2. This right shall be exercised by councils or assemblies composed of members freely elected by secret ballot on the basis of direct, equal, universal suffrage, and which may possess executive organs responsible to them. This provision shall in no way affect recourse to assemblies of citizens, referendums or any other form of direct citizen participation where it is permitted by statute (European Charter of Local Self-Government, Article 3).

Later, Article 4 explains the scope of this autonomy as;

1. The basic powers and responsibilities of local authorities shall be prescribed by the constitution or by statute. However, this provision shall not prevent the attribution to local authorities of power and responsibilities for specific purposes in accordance with the law.

2. Local authorities shall, within the limits of the law, have full discretion to exer-

cise their initiative with regard to any matter which is not excluded from their competence nor assigned to any other authority.

3. Public responsibilities shall generally be exercised, in preference, by those authorities which are closest to the citizen. Allocation of responsibility to another authority should weigh up the extent and nature of the task and requirements of efficiency and economy.

4. Powers given to local authorities shall normally be full and exclusive. They may not be undermined or limited by another, central or regional, authority except as provided for by under the law.

5. Where powers are delegated to them by central or regional authority, local authorities shall, insofar as possible, be allowed discretion in adapting their exercise to local conditions.

6. Local authorities shall be consulted, insofar as possible, in due time and in an appropriate way in the planning and decision-making processes for all matters which concern them directly (European Charter of Local Self-Government, Article 4).

When this definition and scope of the local autonomy, or self-government is studied carefully, it is clear that both of the above mentioned discussions (secular-nationalists' and BDP's perceptions) of the local autonomy has no academic and scientific grounds. The legal texts in Turkish local government laws and their application in practice are the reasonable examples of a good local autonomy.

Conclusion

As mentioned in previous sections, while Langrod mentions the aspects of democracy, he states that it is an egalitarian, majority and unitarian system, and adds that in opposition to these, local administrations have the aspects of differentiation, individualization and disintegration. Statements such as struggle of minority against majority, cultural and economic territorialization, which are seen as negative aspects by local parliamentary, are represented by local administrations. The meaning of this is that, centralized government has all of the features of good governance and they can be seen in practice. But when the application process is analyzed, it can be seen that there are very strong centralized structures in socialist countries that have the most centralized structures and in many underdeveloped capitalist countries. With its huge bureaucracy, this centralized structure shifts economic development to some specific parts of the country; some parts are deliberately ignored in order to

ensure that they need the rest of the country.

In ex Soviet Union, the centralized structure supported and developed the places where there were mostly Russians ethnic groups and a deliberate economic, cultural and industrial centre was created. It formed the regions where people who weren't Russian were living, as the centre of non-industrial and non-economic activities. While automotive and other heavy industries were placed around Moscow, Middle Asia and Caucasian countries became the centers of agriculture. Countries that had petrol and natural gas had no platforms for processing these very precious raw materials, so they were processed in regions where Russians were the majority. In the long term, these countries deliberately became dependent on Russia.

Similar situations occurred in countries where centralized administrations are very strong. Surely, the cases of maladministration such as favoritism, corruption, parochialism and discrimination can exist in local administrations too; but the important point in here and the significant duty of political scientists and administrations is to have principles of transparency and accountability and to try to improve local administrations. Especially the role of political scientists is not to complain from administrative problems, but to produce solutions. For example a doctor's anger to a cancer cell and his effort to crumble it with hammer is very meaningless; similarly, a political scientist's effort to destroy local administrations because of their problems is meaningless. What a doctor should do is to try to cure the cancer cell by analyzing it, and similarly what a political scientist should do is to try to find solutions to political problems.

It shouldn't be underestimated that local administrations are political education instruments and local politics have some educational features for national politics. Producing local solutions to local social, political, economic and cultural problems besides substructure problems, which are the most basic duties of local administrations, and being models will ensure experience for similar national problems. It is obvious that local problems of a small town cannot be compared with national problems in terms of scale, but experiences and instructiveness of them shouldn't be underestimated.

Saying that local administrations are open to corruption -in a way- justifies centralized administration. But as Lord Acton stated; "*Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely*". In this respect, it is necessary to see that centralized administrations' corruption potential is greater than this potential in local administrations.

Even if the claim that local administrations are a significant part of democratic life is not agreed completely, possible contributions of local administrations to de-

mocracy should be investigated. Surely, the thought that local administrations is the only way to reach democracy can be incorrect, but it can be accepted that local administrations is one of the organizations that contribute to democracy at a great extent.

References

Eryılmaz, Bilal and M. Lütfi ŞEN.1994. 2000'li Yıllara Doğru Türkiye'de Yerel Yönetimler, *MÜSİAD Research Reports 5*.

Gannett Robert T., Jr. 2005. "Tocqueville and Local Government: Distinguishing Democracy's Second Track", *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 67, Issue 4, September.

Güler Birgül Ayman. 2003. "İkinci Dalga: Siyasal ve Yönetimsel Liberalizasyon (Kamu Yönetimi Temel Kanunu)", *AÜSBF Dergisi*, No: 59, November.

Güler Birgül Ayman. 1998. "Küreselleşme Döneminde Yerel Yönetimler", *Sivil Toplum için "Kent, Yerel Siyaset ve Demokrasi" Seminerleri*, WALD, İstanbul.

Hill Dilys M., 1997. *Democratic Theory and Local Government*, London 1974, within Kemal Görmez, *Yerel Demokrasi ve Türkiye*, Vadi Yayınları, Ankara.

Langrod Georges. 1976. "Local Government and Democracy", *Politics & Government in Urban Canada*, (edit.: Lionel D. Feldman and Michael D. Goldrick), 3. Pub., Methuen Publications, Toronto .

Moulin Leo. 1976. "Local Self- Government as a Basis for Democracy: A Further Comment", *Politics & Government in Urban Canada*, (edit.: Lionel D. Feldman and Michael D. Goldrick), Third publ., Methuen Publications, Toronto.

Tekeli İlhan. 2006. "Yerel Yönetimlerde Demokrasi ve Türkiye'de Belediyelerin Gelişimi", *Amme İdaresi Dergisi*, Vol.. 16, No: 2, 1983, within Nuri Tortop et al, *Mahalli İdareler*, Nobel Yayın Dağıtım, Ankara.

Tortop Nuri et al. 2006. *Mahalli İdareler*, Nobel Yayınları, Ankara.

European Charter of Local Self-Government.