



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Local Governance Challenge in Karachi: A Crisis of Authority and Coordination**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research paper examines the structural and political factors contributing to Karachi's governance issues, primarily stemming from an excessive number of bureaucrats and inadequate coordination. Karachi, the largest city and economic centre of Pakistan, is home to almost 20 million people. The city's weak infrastructure and poor governance lead to numerous issues. Despite accounting for nearly 25 per cent of the nation's GDP, the city is poorly managed and has a dysfunctional power structure. Racial politics and continuous power struggles between various political factions within the provincial bureaucracy are the primary reasons why attempts to decentralise government have not resulted in efficient local management. Among the city's many major problems are insufficient public transit, erratic water supply, garbage collection problems, and unbridled urban expansion. These issues show how urgently improved governance is needed.

**KEYWORDS** Local Government, Governance, Decentralisation, Authority, Challenge, Karachi

**Introduction**

Pakistan's largest metropolis and economic centre is Karachi. It also highlights an essential paradox: the local administration faces complex problems because of institutions that do not work well. Because it is home to over 20 million people and accounts for over 25 per cent of the nation's GDP, Karachi is strategically significant (Malik et. al., 2023; Hasan et al., 2015). Deteriorating infrastructure, inefficient government, and unresolved concerns are only a few of the city's many problems. This instance highlights a significant urban issue that arises when various authorities fail to collaborate effectively and have overlapping authority. Power has been decentralised and given to different groups in Karachi, but the process has not been logical. This is very different from many global towns that have worked hard to create local government systems that are accountable and work well together. There are numerous agencies, provincial offices, authorities, cantonment boards, and municipal institutions operating within the city, but they fail to collaborate due to their distinct roles. The broken-up government has made it impossible to create policies that work together. This has made people less trusting of institutions and hurt essential city services like water supply, waste management, public transportation, and basic healthcare (Muzaffar, et. al., 2023; Hasan, 2024).

The political climate in the city exacerbates this problem. Throughout history, ethnic politics, party rivalries, and tensions between regional and local governments have had a significant impact on local government. The provincial government has used several controversial legal strategies to limit the power of elected officials over local government organisations. This goes against the constitutional principle of power devolution (Waseem, 2022; Muzaffar, et. al., 2024). Because of this, power has been centralised in provincial bureaucracies, making it harder for local groups to have the independence they need.

This study examines the political and structural issues that hinder effective governance in Karachi. It focuses on how complicated things are when different institutions have different powers and areas of responsibility that combine. This study examines how these problems hinder the achievement of local government's key objectives, including

urban development, service provision, and citizen accountability. Using comparisons from other megacities, this study will suggest fundamental changes based on decentralisation and governance systems.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical frameworks gauge the effectiveness of institutions, their behaviour in urban settings, and their general efficiency to comprehend the governance issue in a large city like Karachi. The primary focus of this study is urban governance, which encompasses the actions of the government and the interactions between the various stakeholders involved in urban life (Pierre & Peters, 2000, 2006). For organisations with different levels of authority to cooperate, negotiate, and be held accountable, local governance entails the delegation of hierarchical power.

This scenario is best viewed through the lens of institutional division. Policies are inconsistent, and it is more challenging to deliver quality services when several branches of government do not collaborate, which exacerbates the governance issue (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Although municipal, provincial, and federal entities collaborate in Karachi, their roles in city operations are unclear, making it a prime example of institutional fragmentation. This makes deciding who oversees what and coordinating difficult. The concepts of subsidiarity and decentralisation are helpful in the Karachi situation. According to this theory, assigning decision-making authority to the lowest levels is the most efficient way to deal with issues (Oates, 1972). In local democracy, decentralisation is promoted to strengthen local accountability, boost responsiveness, and enhance citizen engagement. In Pakistan, the push for decentralisation is usually cosmetic and motivated by political factors (Cheema et al., 2006).

The impact of ethnic divisions, elite capture, and patronage networks on local governance can be understood through the lens of political economy theories. By employing these various theoretical frameworks, we can better illuminate the structure of urban governance in Karachi, particularly how the interplay between political power and institutional frameworks shapes the city's governance landscape.

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology for this research is to investigate the challenges in local governance in Karachi, with a focus on issues of authority fragmentation and coordination failures among institutions. Drawing from similar studies on urban governance in Pakistan, such as those examining dissolution of local governments or broader governance crises, the approach emphasizes a qualitative design to explore complex socio-political dynamics. This allows for in-depth analysis of historical, institutional, and stakeholder perspectives, while incorporating elements from existing research for robustness.

### **Overview of Karachi's Urban Landscape**

Karachi, as Pakistan's largest and economically significant city, serves as the centre for the nation's industrial, financial, and commercial activities. Karachi, with a population exceeding 20 million, is among the most diverse cities globally, characterised by various ethnicities and socio-economic classes (Hasan, 1999). The administrative and planning capacity of the city has been surpassed by rapid urbanisation, driven not only by natural population growth but also by an influx of refugees and urban migration. Karachi contributes approximately 25 per cent of the national GDP and, with the largest stock exchange and extensive industrial zones, manages 90 per cent of the country's international trade via its ports (The World Bank, 2018; Muzaffar & Choudhary, 2017). Despite this, the area experiences several challenges that its residents must confront. The degradation of the environment, insufficient housing, deteriorating infrastructure, traffic congestion, and a

critical shortage of essential services such as sanitation and clean water represent the daily challenges faced by citizens.

The urbanisation of Karachi is largely unregulated, with approximately 60 per cent of the city's population residing in sprawling slums (Hasan & Raza, 2013). The proliferation of mushrooms and unplanned urbanisation has exacerbated the urban crisis in the city, significantly impacting service delivery. The complexity of the administrative and governance structure, which divides jurisdictions among multiple government agencies without a coordination mechanism, adversely impacts the policymaking and planning processes. The governance challenges in Karachi are exacerbated by its political history, characterised by ethnic tensions and fluctuating local government regimes. This results in a city as large and significant as Karachi remaining dysfunctional and unable to meet the needs of its citizens.

### **Fragmentation and Jurisdictional Overlap**

The primary obstacle to successful governance in the city arises from a disjointed administrative framework, characterised by multiple governmental institutions functioning within overlapping jurisdictions. Various authorities govern Karachi, each possessing distinct areas of jurisdiction that are frequently disputed. The Karachi Metropolitan Corporation influences the governance of the city, including many Cantonment Boards, Federal Agencies, Sindh Government Authorities, and the Defence Housing Authority. This intricate, multi-faceted system engenders confusion in domains such as land utilisation, infrastructure advancement, waste management, and water provision, resulting in significant inefficiencies and deficiencies in service delivery (Anwar, 2014; Qureshi & Li, 2023).

Land ownership in the city is fragmented between a minimum of 20 distinct bodies, hindering regulation and development (Hasan & Raza, 2013). The Sindh government oversees critical services such as water supply and solid waste disposal, whilst local entities are tasked with administration but frequently lack the requisite fiscal and administrative authority. The dispersion of authority not only diminishes accountability but also fosters competition among authorities, obstructing responsiveness to the city's demands.

### **Case Studies of Failure**

Karachi's government's inability to provide basic services to its people is clear proof of the problems caused by its disorganised management. Non-solid garbage management, which is the job of the Sindh Solid Waste Management Board (which is controlled by the province), is an example of this problem. Still, many groups, including municipal corporations, cantonment boards, and unofficial private trash collectors, are working on it at the same time, showing a lack of reasonable oversight or organisation. As a result, trash doesn't get picked up for long periods of time, which poses health and environmental risks and makes the already overloaded sewage system even worse (Hasan, 2023).

These actions lead to a blame game between the involved agencies, marked by a lack of accountability and a refusal to take responsibility. Governance problems have a significant effect on the water supply and sanitation business. The Karachi Water and Sewerage Board, which is part of the state government, oversees the delivery of water to cities. At the moment, it doesn't have the means or capacity to meet the city's growing water needs (Janjua et al., 2021).

The city's public transportation system is either insufficient or inefficient, which suggests that the organisations in charge of it are not operating as intended. Conflicts between the federal and state governments, local governments, and Pakistan Railways over who is responsible for what have caused numerous delays in the Karachi Circular Railway's

repair. The Green Line Bus project was started with assistance from the federal government, but because of inadequate planning and coordination, it is still not connected to other city transportation systems (Ghaznavi et al., 2020).

These illustrations show that without a comprehensive and well-coordinated framework for municipal governance, public services are less effective and efficient.

### **Political Economy of Urban Governance in Karachi**

To comprehend Karachi's urban governance issue, one must examine the political economy of the city, which plays a significant role in the dysfunction of its institutions. The government issue in Karachi is not merely a technical one. Institutional capture, racial conflicts, and long-standing political interests bring it on. Local organisations like the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which has had a lasting effect on urban Sindh, and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which governs Sindh province, have fought each other throughout the city throughout history (Batool, et. al., 2023; Gayer, 2014).

Because of the conflict, the provincial government has had to pass laws that try to centralise power. These laws often limit the freedom of local governments when rival groups are in charge at the local level (Effendi & Hussain, 2018; Siddiqi, 2012). People have said that the Sindh Local Government Acts of 2013 and 2021 are flawed because they give local groups duties without giving them enough money or management power. As a result, these legal frameworks have allowed provincial governments to retain control over essential services, thus reducing elected representatives to mere figures lacking authentic authority or control (Cheema et al., 2024).

Moreover, influential unelected bodies such as cantonment boards, the Port Trust Authority, and the Defence Housing Authority play significant roles in the city's governance. However, they operate independently and lack civilian elected oversight (Hasan & Raza, 2013). Political parties and various stakeholders often exploit institutions for political patronage, which undermines their ability to deliver services effectively. This political economy of Karachi perpetuates a cycle of limited accountability, poor service delivery, and weak governance. For meaningful reform to take root in Karachi, it must tackle not only the structural flaws in governance but also the underlying political dynamics that enable these issues to persist.

### **Lessons from Other Megacities**

The urban governance challenges encountered by Karachi are not unique; they mirror those faced by numerous megacities worldwide. Fragmented institutions, political interference, and rapid urban expansion have resulted in prevalent issues. Analysing other cities can yield valuable insights to improve governance in Karachi. These instances underscore the need for coordinated planning, clear institutional directives, and effective decentralisation.

Mumbai is the business centre of India. The 74th Amendment to the Indian Constitution gave the city's local governments constitutional security. This amendment required the creation of local authorities with financial and planning independence (Biswas, 2020; Siddiqi, 2013). This set of laws makes sure that local governments stay in power and are held accountable. Istanbul is an interesting case study. The different districts demonstrate a strong approach for many towns to collaborate in providing services. The creation of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and its large degree of budgetary and planning autonomy have made building and transportation projects run smoothly (Demirkaya, 2018). From a political perspective, centralising local government has made it easier to provide services and plan cities.

These cases show how important it is for local governments to have legal and constitutional support. They also show how vital political will is for making these changes possible. Karachi can use these ideas to improve its city government, creating a system that is effective, accountable, and committed to delivering quality services to its people.

### **Recent Reforms and Proposals**

As a result of ongoing problems in urban governance, the provincial government of Sindh has made changes to improve agency communication and boost the power of local governments. A change made to the Sindh Local Government Act in 2023 significantly strengthened the mayor's role in Karachi, making the chairman the official head of many city groups in the city. According to Lu et al. (2024) and Siddiqui (2023), this change allows the mayor to nominate individuals to serve as CEOs of these bodies.

Because of the changes, local governments now have control over some services that used to be overseen by the provinces, like healthcare and education. The Karachi Metropolitan Corporation has been given the power to collect various city taxes. These changes have also given the province some financial freedom by changing how the Provincial Finance Commission, which is in charge of allocating funds in the province, works (Government of Sindh, 2019; Karachi Metropolitan Corporation Local Body, 2025). Allegations of political motives and expedited procedures in the passage of these amendments exist; however, they have received backing from academics and civil society, notably through the support of Transparency International. This support suggests a conviction that the reforms will strengthen governance, increase accountability, and enhance service delivery (Transparency International Pakistan, 2025). The city council's expansion and the appointment of property inspectors have significantly decreased unauthorised developments and enhanced property oversight (Majid, 2023).

These reforms represent notable advancements in the decentralisation of power within urban governance; however, critics contend that they may lack depth without substantial initiatives to involve citizens, establish accountability mechanisms, and enhance capacity building.

### **Conclusion**

Karachi's urban governance problem is primarily caused by inefficient administration, which stems from broken authority, overlapping jurisdictions, and a persistent lack of coordination. These problems are caused by the city's complicated political and economic difficulties. Institutional power is disorganised, which is made worse by racial tensions and political manoeuvring. This makes it harder for the city government to provide basic public services. All over Karachi, problems such as inadequate public transportation, insufficient water, increasing trash, and uncontrolled urban sprawl are clear signs of a failing urban government system. These problems are all signs of systemic decline. This research paper argues that the absence of apparent authority for a democratically accountable urban entity has made it difficult to determine the duties and responsibilities, leading to less responsible government institutions and eroded public trust in them. Recent changes to the law have given mayors more power by giving them control over key metropolitan authorities and agencies. However, these changes have not resulted in significant improvements. The deficit is primarily attributed to insufficient financial freedom, inadequate investment in skill development, and the absence of a robust accountability system that includes political oversight.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Karachi's problems with the government can only be fixed by implementing a range of policy options. Karachi should establish a unified metropolitan body, like Istanbul's,

which would grant significant power and autonomy. This authority, which an elected mayor will run, should include constitutional protections like those in India. This will protect the city government from sudden political changes. Critical public services, including water supply, cleaning, solid waste management, and public transportation, will be supervised.

To avoid duplication, it is important to make precise lines of authority. Legally defining the powers of different organisations is essential to eliminate ambiguity and clarify roles and responsibilities. To make a unified urban governance policy, you need a coordination method that works well.

To give local governments more power, they need to be able to handle their own finances. Without the ability to do their jobs well, local governments cannot make sure that services are delivered effectively. To become financially independent, local governments need to be able to charge local taxes and make sure that provincial funds are distributed fairly through a fair Provincial Finance Commission.

It is also essential to stress the importance of local organisations building their skills. It is crucial to update the system of government, train local officials, and establish a process for appointing people based on their abilities. At the neighbourhood level, these steps will improve planning and service provision.

It is essential to find more ways for people to be involved in local government. Getting people in the area involved in government is vital to improving political oversight and restoring trust in local governments.

To reach these goals, there must be genuine political will and the ability to agree. Without these traits, it is not possible to make big changes. For significant changes that empower local communities, both the national government and provincial governments must genuinely commit to them. If people do not commit to these changes, the chances of them working are much lower.

Even though Karachi has a lot of problems with its government, there are workable answers. To achieve financial independence, a reform plan that focuses on sustainability and comprehensiveness is necessary, integrating institutions, establishing accountability systems, and engaging more people. A plan like this could help Karachi develop an effective city management strategy that meets the people's needs and works well.

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