

Post-Colonial Politics and Democratic Change in Local Governance in Sri Lanka

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How to cite this paper: Gamlath, S. (2025). Post-Colonial Politics and Democratic Change in Local Governance in Sri Lanka. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 15, 893-902.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2025.154049>

Received: July 4, 2025

Accepted: September 26, 2025

Published: September 29, 2025

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the evolution of local governance in Sri Lanka during the post-colonial period, highlighting the interplay between democratic ideals and centralized political control. Following independence in 1948, successive governments initiated reforms to decentralize authority and enhance grassroots participation. However, these efforts were often undermined by political patronage, elite dominance, and inconsistent policy implementation. The study analyzes key structural reforms, committee recommendations, and the trajectory of local government institutions from independence to the late 1980s. It argues that while early reforms showed promise for participatory democracy, later developments led to the erosion of local autonomy and public trust. The findings underscore the need for genuine political commitment and institutional accountability to revitalize local governance as a foundation for democratic consolidation and equitable development in Sri Lanka.

Keywords

Post-Colonial Politics, Local Governance, Decentralization, Democratic Reform, Sri Lanka, Political Centralization, Grassroots Participation

1. Introduction

The transition from colonial rule to political independence in Sri Lanka marked a significant turning point in the country's administrative and political framework. In particular, the system of local governance underwent profound structural and conceptual transformations. Post-independence, political pluralism emerged, resulting in a variety of political parties that introduced diverse perspectives on governance and public administration. These developments had a direct impact on the evolution and function of local government institutions.

The establishment of the first independent government in 1948 signaled the

beginning of efforts to broaden democratic practices and decentralize power. Among these efforts was the restructuring of local governance to ensure more effective participation and representation at the grassroots level. The empowerment of local authorities was seen as a cornerstone for building a vibrant democratic culture. In this context, scholars such as Tressie Leitan have emphasized the necessity of decentralization for democratic sustainability. Quoting Friedrich Hayek, Leitan notes, “Nowhere has democracy functioned well without a large measure of local self-governance” (Leitan, 2004). Accordingly, the independence of local government institutions became integral to strengthening democracy in Sri Lanka. This paper critically explores the trajectory of local governance reforms in the post-colonial period, focusing on structural changes, committee recommendations, and political interventions from independence to the late 1980s. It also analyzes the challenges and decline of local governance under shifting political priorities, while assessing their implications on democracy and development.

2. Structural Changes and the Local Government System in Post-Independence Sri Lanka

Following independence in 1948, Sri Lanka experienced significant transformations in both national and local governance. These changes were not only structural but also conceptual, influenced heavily by the dynamics of post-colonial politics. The establishment of political independence fostered a competitive multiparty environment, where political parties promoted diverse administrative ideologies and governance models. This context shaped the evolution of local government institutions in profound ways. The discourse on local governance had already begun in the 1930s, gaining momentum in the years following independence. The first government formed after independence initiated steps toward decentralizing power and broadening democratic practices by enhancing local political authority. This development aimed to transfer meaningful decision-making power to locally elected representatives, thereby strengthening participatory governance. An independent local government system is widely regarded as a fundamental pillar of democracy. As Tressie Leitan highlights citing Friedrich Hayek, “Nowhere has democracy functioned well without a large measure of local self-governance” (Leitan, 2004). Accordingly, the Sri Lankan government recognized the need to reconfigure local governance through structural reforms, primarily aimed at decentralization and rural development.

To this end, a separate Ministry of Local Government was established, with Mr. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike appointed as its first minister. The Ministry undertook significant initiatives to invigorate rural development through improved local governance. At the time of independence, local government institutions included three municipal councils, a handful of urban and town councils, and numerous village committees. These bodies covered different geographical areas, with village committees serving most rural regions (Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Local Government Authorities, 1999). However, limitations within this system became

increasingly apparent. There was growing concern among policymakers and politicians regarding the outdated nature and inefficiency of local government structures. Although there was an expansion of administrative bodies, the capacity of local institutions to deliver services remained weak particularly due to financial constraints. Local authorities struggled with inadequate revenue generation, especially in rural areas dominated by subsistence agriculture, where citizens lacked the ability to pay substantial taxes.

The central government, through the Ministry of Local Government, exercised substantial control over local authorities. While this oversight allowed for some administrative streamlining and the introduction of a dedicated Department of Local Government (established in 1946), it also diminished the autonomy of local institutions. According to Laksiri Fernando, the Minister held extensive powers, including the creation and upgrading of local bodies through bylaws and gazette notifications (Fernando, 2006). Although these reforms brought about technical and administrative improvements, they often came at the expense of local self-governance. Crucially, local authorities lacked fiscal independence. They depended heavily on grants and subsidies from the central government, limiting their capacity to respond to local needs effectively. While the Ministry provided professional support through its appointed commissioners and officers, the centralized control hampered responsiveness and innovation at the local level. In summary, the post-independence era marked a critical phase of local governance reform in Sri Lanka. While efforts were made to expand and modernize the local government system, the dominance of central government authority and lack of financial autonomy posed significant obstacles to achieving genuine decentralization and participatory democracy.

3. Committee Recommendations and the Implementation of Local Government Reforms

Since gaining independence, successive Sri Lankan governments have recognized the need to reform and strengthen the local government system. To this end, several committees were appointed to study the existing structures and provide recommendations aimed at enhancing the administrative and financial capacity of local authorities particularly in support of equitable socioeconomic development at the grassroots level.

The post-independence political leadership understood the importance of local governance in nation-building and democratic consolidation. A key aspect of this realization was the emphasis on citizen participation in decision-making and politics. It was broadly acknowledged that local governments could serve as vital instruments for accelerating rural development and improving the quality of life among marginalized communities. As such, the need for stronger, more autonomous local institutions became a recurring theme in reform proposals. In the early 1950s, a new political vision emerged one that sought to transform local authorities into partners in national development. According to Parakum Wijesinghe, the

government aimed to increase the powers and financial resources of local bodies to enable more effective service delivery and governance (Wijesinghe, n.d.). The idea was to establish a two-tier political system comprising central and local governments, where local authorities would be empowered to address the specific needs of their constituencies.

One of the earliest major changes came in 1955, with the introduction of the District Development Committee (DDC) system. This model aimed to coordinate district level development through a committee chaired by the Government Agent (GA). The committee included local departmental heads, Members of Parliament, and representatives from various local government bodies (Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Local Government Authorities, 1999). However, despite its intent to harmonize efforts across government entities, the DDC system had the unintended consequence of marginalizing local authorities. The centralized structure could not effectively respond to the nuanced and localized demands of diverse communities. Moreover, it reflected a top-down administrative culture that often prioritized political expediency over expert input or community needs. Recognizing the inadequacies of the existing system, the government continued to appoint expert committees to recommend viable reforms. The Choksy Commission (1955) notably proposed the establishment of Regional Committees to absorb various functions of central departments and to serve as upper-tier coordinating bodies for local governance (Leitan, 2004). In 1957, based on these recommendations, the then Minister of Local Government, Mr. Bandaranaike, introduced a bill aimed at creating a robust Regional Council system. These proposed councils were to oversee public utilities, agriculture, land development, and colonization, among other key sectors.

This period also saw the beginning of a legal framework for electing representatives to local bodies, with Act No. 53 enabling the electoral process for local government authorities. Importantly, the strengthening of local governance during this time was not driven by a singular objective but rather by a broader aspiration to transition from a centralized colonial legacy to a participatory democratic model. Nevertheless, the influence of centralism remained entrenched in Sri Lanka's political fabric. The colonial administrative system was highly centralized and hierarchical, with development programs driven almost exclusively by central authorities. Post-independence reforms sought to redirect development toward rural areas, but many of these efforts remained constrained by a lack of autonomy at the local level. As Asoka Gunawardana explains, the administrative impetus for reform intensified after the 1956 electoral shift, which emphasized rural development and community-based participation. Local institutions were seen not just as service providers but as extensions of central departments thus introducing a new dimension to sub-national governance (Gunawardana, 2003). Despite these intentions, the dominance of elite political actors both at national and local levels compromised the democratic integrity of the local governance system. Selected privileges people who had considerable wealth and social status could contest elec-

tion and be appointed as representatives for these institutions. Nepotism and friendship were started in politics from this point. These elites were done works on their necessity but not concerned about people requirements (Gamlath, 2016). Policy decision regarding development activities taken by them without concerns of the people aspirations who selected them for the institutions.

Although village councils remained operational until the 1980s, they were largely controlled by socio-political elites. While members were elected, they often came from privileged backgrounds and served voluntarily without financial compensation. Known as “Member Mahatmaya” among rural communities, they were driven more by social prestige than democratic accountability. As a result, genuine political participation by the broader population was limited, and the electoral process itself became heavily influenced by wealth, caste, and family ties. The persistent gap between the ideal of participatory democracy and the reality of elite dominance meant that the transformative potential of local government reforms remained largely unrealized. Though some improvements in service delivery were observed, especially in closely-knit rural settings, the system continued to struggle with financial constraints, limited institutional capacity, and growing public expectations.

In response, the government continued to appoint numerous national and ministerial-level committees between 1948 and 1987 to study and propose reforms for the local governance system. These included:

1948: Committee headed by Mr. V.C. Jayasuriya to examine taxation and revenue collection.

1970: Committee of investigation into local governance, again led by Jayasuriya.

1975: Committee on local government finance chaired by Mr. Sittampalam.

1979: Committee chaired by Mr. Moragoda on delimitation for rural councils.

1980: Presidential Commission on District Councils led by Mr. Victor Thennakoon.

1980: Cabinet-appointed committee chaired by Dr. H.A.P. Abeywardana on people’s participation.

1986: Ministerial sub-committee on organizational reform for participatory governance.

1987: Wanasinghe Committee on administrative reforms following devolution.

1996: Asoka Gunawardana Committee to review Provincial Councils.

Of particular note is the Moragoda Committee, which addressed the long-standing issue of geographic delimitation. In 1978, over 642 village councils were active across 25 districts. The committee proposed the creation of 269 rural councils, aligned with each Divisional Secretariat, to improve the administrative reach and efficiency of local governance. Despite these well-intentioned recommendations, most proposals were only partially implemented or entirely ignored. Political interests frequently overrode expert advice, leading to a lack of consistency and continuity in the reform process. Ultimately, while local government institutions became increasingly important in the political landscape, they also became contested

sites of power. They served both as platforms for future politicians and as administrative organs closely connected to the people. However, recurring structural changes and limited autonomy continued to undermine their potential.

4. Challenges and the Decline of the Local Government System in the 1980s

The 1980s were a particularly turbulent period for local governance in Sri Lanka. Although a series of reforms were introduced under the banner of decentralization, many of these were poorly conceptualized, politically driven, and inadequately implemented. Rather than strengthening local democracy, these changes often led to the erosion of grassroots institutions and curtailed public participation. One of the most significant developments was the passage of the Development Councils Act No. 35 of 1980, which introduced Development Councils (DCs) and District Ministers at the district level. These councils were later supplemented by Pradeshiya Mandalas and Gramodaya Mandalas (Village Awakening Councils) in 1981 through amendments to the Act. The councils were vested with responsibility for 15 key subjects, including agriculture, rural development, education, health, housing, fisheries, and cooperative services (Leitan, 2004). While Municipal and Urban Councils remained intact, the Town and Village Councils were abolished, thus dismantling the foundational institutions of grassroots democracy.

This structural overhaul was introduced at a time of growing ethnic tensions and increasing demands for power-sharing among minority communities. The government justified the reforms as part of a national strategy to devolve authority and foster inclusive development. However, in practice, these changes did not enhance local autonomy. Instead, they enabled tighter central government control over local affairs. The *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Local Government Authorities (1999)* notes that on 1st July 1981, 83 Town Councils and 549 Village Councils were formally dissolved, and their functions were transferred to 24 District Development Councils. As a result, 7,980 elected representatives lost their positions. These individuals had been democratically elected by their respective communities, and their removal effectively nullified grassroots representation in many areas. This move had two major consequences:

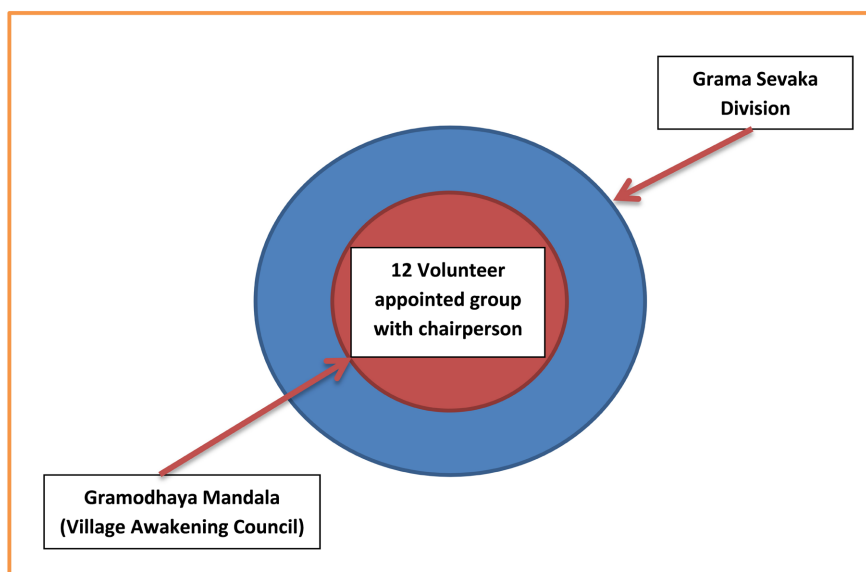
It severely curtailed the voting rights and democratic engagement of rural populations.

It led to a decline in service delivery and development activity at the local level.

Public participation is the cornerstone of democratic local governance was fundamentally undermined. Rural communities, which had previously maintained close relationships with their elected representatives, found themselves disconnected from decision-making processes. The abolition of local elections and representative councils created a democratic vacuum, weakening citizens' influence over policy and service provision. Moreover, the reform process lacked scientific rigor. It was not guided by evidence-based assessments or stakeholder consultations but instead shaped by the political imperatives of the ruling government. Although the Gramodhaya Man-

dalas were intended as community-oriented institutions, their composition and leadership were heavily politicized. Chairpersons were often selected based on political loyalty rather than community representation, and Grama Niladhari officer's central government appointees served as secretaries. This arrangement effectively transformed these bodies into instruments of central political control rather than channels for grassroots empowerment.

The intended structure of the Gramodhaya Mandala was as follows:



Grama Sevaka Division → 12 voluntarily appointed members + Chairperson
 Chaired by a nominated civil society member, with Grama Niladhari as Secretary.

While designed to incorporate civil society, in practice, the selection of members and leaders was manipulated by upper-level political actors. Most chairpersons acted as political proxies for the ruling party, prioritizing the interests of party loyalists over the broader public. Transparency and accountability were virtually absent, and the system failed to generate meaningful community participation. Furthermore, socio-economic disparities across rural areas presented significant challenges. In many regions, genuine civil society organizations did not exist, and the few that did were often aligned with dominant political factions. As a result, the Gramodhaya Mandala system failed to deliver the services and development initiatives expected of it. Although these bodies were granted statutory status through amendments to the District Development Councils Law, their performance remained dismal from inception (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Local Government Authorities, 1999*).

Between 1981 and 1987, there was minimal progress in terms of local development or democratic reform. Notably, no local government elections were held during this period. The 1981 (DDC) district development council elections, marred by violence and ethnic conflict, marked a particularly dark moment in the country's electoral history. This further eroded the legitimacy and functionality of local

governance structures. Under the 1978 Constitution, financial powers were centralized, but post-1977 reforms vested disproportionate financial authority in the hands of local council chairpersons. This lack of oversight encouraged corruption and financial mismanagement. There were no designated financial officers within local authorities, making it impossible to ensure accountability. The concentration of fiscal authority in a single individual undermined transparency and enabled widespread misuse of public funds.

In recent history, Pro-nationalistic ideology and patriotism is one of the strongest challenges of third world countries including Sri Lanka when they are entering to economic and political reforms in their socio, economic and political sphere. Specifically, Sri Lanka is one of the Democratic countries in South Asia that has been enjoying democratic principles and privileges since their independence (Gamlath, 2016). But, problem was their democratic culture could not avoid nationalistic ideology and patriotism which has created during the colonial period which was against imperialism and colonialism (Gamlath, 2016).

Additionally, the demographic and ethnic diversity of Sri Lanka compounded the difficulties of centralized administration. Minority communities particularly Tamils and Muslims in peripheral regions experienced systemic disadvantages. As Laksiri Fernando observes, "Local councils dominated by Tamil or Muslim communities were disadvantaged not necessarily due to ethnicity, but due to political partisanship and budgetary discrimination" (Fernando, 2006). Rather than fostering decentralization, these reforms led to a recentralization of power, disguised under the rhetoric of development. The new institutions particularly the Gramodhaya Mandalas operated more as political arms of the ruling party than as democratic, community-based councils. Consequently, the link between voters and representatives weakened, and governance at the grassroots level became increasingly oligarchic and exclusionary. Highly politicized system has been decline provide their service delivery for the ordinary people. Nepotism and friendship has been rise up of the governing system. General will of the ordinary people was declined of the ruling party. In sum, the 1980s represent a declining phase in the history of local governance in Sri Lanka. While new structures were introduced, they failed to uphold the principles of democratic participation, accountability, and responsiveness. The period was characterized by lost opportunities, weakened institutions, and deepening public disillusionment with local governance.

In 1987 with introducing of the provincial council system as a solution for the ongoing ethnic conflict that local government institutions subjected to the provincial councils system. One of the purposes of the provincial council system was speed up social, economic development at the peripherals areas. Pradeshiya Saba was established with keeping various expectations of the general public (Gamlath, 2016).

Mainly, enhancement of public utility and social welfare as well as the promotion of the democratic practices and elaborate a democratic culture at the grass-root was main given targets of the modern Pradeshiya Saba system in Sri Lanka. It was established through the parliament passing Pradeshiya Saba Act No. 15 1987.

All the decision making, implementations power, authorities and functions and activities have been legally given through this Act. Finally, securing and sustain of the system and achieving of the targets and objectives on given powers and responsibilities were main responsibilities behalf of the parliament and general public of the country (Gamlath, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The evolution of local governance in post-colonial Sri Lanka reflects a complex interplay between democratic ideals and centralized state control. While the early post-independence period showed promise for deepening participatory democracy through local institutions, the trajectory of reform in subsequent decades was uneven and often politically motivated. Efforts to decentralize authority through structural reforms such as the establishment of District Development Councils, Pradeshiya Mandalas, and Gramodhaya Mandalas were frequently undermined by a lack of political will, administrative coherence, and genuine commitment to grassroots empowerment. Instead of enhancing the autonomy and capacity of local government institutions, these reforms often served to reinforce central control and strengthen the influence of ruling party elites. The failure to institutionalize effective mechanisms for citizen participation, financial accountability, and democratic representation led to the weakening of local bodies as credible platforms for governance and development. Particularly in rural areas, communities became increasingly disillusioned with institutions that were once intended to reflect their aspirations and address their needs.

A recurring issue was the dominance of political patronage and elite capture in the nomination, operation, and control of local institutions. This eroded public trust and restricted the development of inclusive, transparent, and responsive governance systems. Furthermore, the lack of consistent implementation of committee recommendations despite decades of inquiry and consultation—reveals the gap between policy rhetoric and practical commitment to democratic reform. As Sri Lanka continues to confront challenges of political decentralization, ethnic pluralism, and equitable development, the lessons from the post-independence period remain highly relevant. Strengthening local governance requires not only institutional restructuring but also the political courage to embrace democratic values in both policy and practice. Genuine empowerment of local bodies must be rooted in principles of accountability, inclusiveness, and meaningful public participation. Only then can local government serve its intended role as the foundation of a vibrant, participatory democracy.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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