

## Chapter 16

# Challenges in Institutionalizing Democratic Governance via Popularly Elected Mayor: The Case of Jamaica

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### ABSTRACT

*The presumption underlying current policy discourse in the Caribbean – that local government represents a “convenient” political realm for the practice of democratic governance – resurrects a long-standing debate about the proximity of local government and democracy, and highlights the difficulty facing local governments in the region to “vindicate their democratic credentials,” especially given a pervasive view that local governments are the final frontiers of populism and patronage. This chapter employs a constructivist framework to analyze the extent to which popularly elected mayor, introduced in Jamaica in 2003, achieves a balance between democratic governance, populism, and patronage. Apart from its theorized democratic role, local government performs other subsidiary but critical functions dictated by the nature of the political environment. If democratic values are to predominate, innovations such as popularly elected mayor and the process of municipalization require sustained institutional support to minimize competition between old and new politico-administrative values.*

### INTRODUCTION

“Democratic local government is widely taken, largely as an act of faith, to be a prerequisite of national democracy” (Smith, 1998, pp.85–86). Though used in reference to an assessment of empirical studies on the relationship between local government and democracy in central Europe, Thailand, Vietnam and Mexico, this statement could easily be associated with policymakers in the Caribbean who have at every opportunity expressed their belief in local democracy as a central pillar of sustainable development and local government as the foundation of local democracy. Caribbean governments have displayed strong

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commitment to reshaping the institutional arrangements necessary to facilitate the growth of democracy at the subnational level. One can hardly ignore how the transnationalization of ideas and practices within the context of globalization has influenced domestic policies. Indeed, the subnational level has been accorded primacy of place in negotiations concerning development aid, and local government, in particular, has emerged at the center of certain institutional imperatives, such as a shift from purely central-local relations to more robust intergovernmental relations; incorporation of “third sector” participation into local policy and political processes; and pursuit of a process of substantive decentralization. The policy imperatives of democratic governance that require, among other things, “participation, transparency and accountability in decision-making” (CEPA, n.d., p.1) are reiterated in, for example, Cheema, Shabbir, and Rondinelli (2007), Grindle (2007), Manor (1999), the World Bank (1997; 2004; 2008), and Yilmaz, Beris, and Serrano-Berthet (2008). These ideas have been marked in aid practice, with technical assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Governance and Institutional Development Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, among other international technical bureaux (ITB) that have helped to advance the process of decentralization in the region. Through its regional symposia the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) has kept subnational issues on the policy agendas of Caribbean governments.

The objective realities of the practice of democracy in the Caribbean have also influenced renewed perspectives on the value of the subnational level in the quest for “good” governance. For instance, commentators have noted an increase in the level of disaffection among citizens, particularly the youth, with the quality of leadership and local political institutions. The view is that neither can produce solutions that meet adequately the challenges that confront them. As a consequence a significant proportion of the citizenry has become apathetic showing little interest in participating in community activities or performing civic duties such as voting. The West Indian Commission (1992) made a similar observation. “Good” local governance is thus equated with democratic governance which, in turn, is facilitated through a process of decentralization.

Not only have decentralizing reforms evolved from a simple focus on deconcentration to arrangements that are concerned with political power sharing (see, e.g., Cheema et al., 2007), but the outcomes of these reforms have been mixed, opening local governments in some environments to “elite capture” on account of being incapacitated by weak financial bases (see, e.g., Prud’homme, 1994). Deverajan, Khemani, and Shah (2007) introduced the concept of “partial decentralisation” to describe the absence of discretion that local governments have over their budgets. Partial decentralization legitimizes central government’s involvement in local service delivery and makes it difficult to assign responsibility for performance, whether “good” or “bad.” According to Deverajan et al. (2007), partial decentralization ushers in “governance traps” that are embodied in “perverse, self-reinforcing incentives” (p. 7) that make “local politics more likely to be dominated by ‘clientelist’ provision of private benefits to a few citizens, at the expense of broad public services simultaneously benefiting many” (p. 7). While there is a high level of anxiety about the potential for decentralization to increase opportunities for clientelism defined as “a mode of social stratification” (Gordin, 2002, p. 514), as well as “the tendency of leaders to get themselves elected by using networks of clients to whom they show inordinate favouritism once in office” (Manor, 1999, p. 65), it is the concept of partial decentralization that places political patronage at the center of clientelist networks in local government. Political patronage is a tool of local political leadership that thrives in a political framework where leadership adopts a populist orientation. Populism reinforces traditional political values and leadership orientation as communities are mobilized around what is pitched as a common interest, which permits the elected representative to employ patronage as

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