

# Political decentralisation and political-administrative relation in the local councils in Tanzania

Local councils  
in Tanzania

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper analyses the degree of political decentralisation and its relation to the local councils in Tanzania. It explores the institutional and political set-up of the local councils originating from the degree of political decentralisation and how it influences the tension between the bureaucrats and local politicians.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Qualitative approach by a comparative case study is adopted to investigate the phenomenon in two local governments in Tanzania. The data were collected through interviews with 37 senior local government officials and eight focus group discussions with 48 administrators and councillors.

**Findings** – The findings indicate that the two local governments are subjected to a similar political system guided by similar rules and guidelines from the central government bureaucracy for implementing the party manifesto and central government priorities. Thus, the local politicians have little room for negotiation in adopting local agenda to reflect the preferences of the local community. Any attempt to challenge this status quo creates political tensions between bureaucrats and the administrators.

**Originality/value** – The findings provide invaluable insights to different stakeholders such as political scientists, government officials, and policymakers with interests in research or practice of political decentralization and political-administrative relation.

**Keywords** Local council, Political decentralisation, Political-administrative relation, Local government authorities, Tanzania

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The study of political-administrative relation especially in local government has gained more attention in the mainstream literature on public administration. Positive political-administrative relation provides the platform for successful implementation of development programs in the localities. The term political-administrative relation is an intertwined concept representing politics and administration. Politics entails the decision-making on the allocation of public resources (Makinde, 2015) while public administration is responsible for the execution of public policy (Stillman, 2000). The fact that the two sides depend on each other makes their collaboration a necessary condition for effective performance of local government authorities (LGA). Nevertheless, for effective collaboration, the local politicians should have the decision-making power to represent the interest of the local population in the local council, a governing body democratically elected to represent the affairs of the local population in the decision-making. This implies that the local council should have the power to deliberate on the preferences articulated by citizens and the way they can be translated into policies and programs (Schneider, 2003). This power emanates from the degree of political decentralization or an institutional



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reform, which is carried out deliberately to establish the additional sub-national government with decision-making authority. Such reforms include the reorganization of the local council, the installation of sub-councils and the establishment of procedures for authoritative decision-making (Schneider, 2003). Therefore, political decentralization is expected to increase the capacity of sub-national governments by granting them suitable institutional instruments for local government decision-making (Smoke, 2003). This in turn is expected to strengthen representative democracy, which results in the efficient allocation of local public goods and services (Kanyinga, 2016; Misati, 2011).

The history of political decentralization in Tanzania can be traced back to the past two decades when the government embarked on a local government reform program whose goal among others, was to transfer the political power to local councils. In turn, the power transfer was expected to be an impetus to the establishment of a democratic local council that can harmonically engage the administrative staff in the implementation of local policies and programs. Contrary to the expectations, the local councils were not detached from the national level politics. The local election is still conducted concurrently with the national level election and the national-level party leaders decide on the nomination of local leaders (Hulst *et al.*, 2015).

Overall, the local council leaders remain the implementers of the national-level party manifestos approved by the central government. The local administrators, also recruited and promoted by the central government are the implementers of the local council plans and programs (Lameck, 2017; Anosisye, 2017; Lameck and Kinemo, 2022). Although decentralization reforms had a goal to empower local councils to assume the roles, which were previously done by the central government, the central government is still in control of the local political institutions. While some authors argue that the trend of political decentralization reforms has fuelled the misunderstanding and mistrust between the councillors and the officials in Tanzania (Leticia, 2008), others argue that the decentralisation of the local government decision-making authority has undermined the political-administrative relation (Hulst *et al.*, 2015). In addition, in the past ten years, the Tanzania Government has experienced the growth of opposition politics across the country to the extent of overturning the ruling party in some local government councils. The study of how centralized politics and the local councils affect the political-administrative relation in Tanzania has not received much attention.

### Literature review

#### *Political-administrative relation and the power of decision-making by local councils*

Literatures on political-administrative relation in political science have attempted to conceptualize the term political-administrative relation in different ways. Some argue that political-administrative relation emanates from political administration dichotomy, whose theory constructs the boundaries of public administration and asserts the normative relationship between the elected officials and the administrators in a democratic society (Brans, 2003; Njunwa, 2021). Others define political-administrative relation as the working relationship between politicians on the one hand and the bureaucrats on the other. This relationship reflects two important elements that constitute its meaning: the first element is the allocation of tasks that covers the entire process of formulating and implementing the policy (Schreurs *et al.*, 2011; Njunwa, 2021). In this regard, the Weberian bureaucratic dichotomy form assumes that policies are developed by politicians and implemented by civil servants and that the relationship operates under strict separation of tasks without overlapping in the functions while in more hybrid working relationships, the roles of bureaucrats and politicians are interlinked rather than separated (Aberbach *et al.*, 1981). The mainstream literature in political sciences shows that the political-administrative relation can also be affected by the power of the local council in decision-making (Hulst *et al.*, 2015; Njunwa, 2021). Largely, this power emanates from the degree of political decentralization, which implies the distribution of decision-making authority with respect to political institutional arrangements including the institutions for

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representative government and the organization of local council and executive government (Schneider, 2003).

Furthermore, the decision-making power is considered more centralized if local elections are conducted concurrently with national elections and if local governments are not allowed to set priorities which reflect their electoral context. Besides, the system is considered more centralized if partisan's actors at the local level are insufficiently independent of their national level counterparts, and leaders at the national level decide on the nomination of candidates and the use of party labels (Eaton and Schroeder, 2010). However, if local communities themselves can decide when to hold local elections, and if there are no formal impediments to the establishment of local political parties that want to focus on local issues, the system is considered more decentralized. However, if the national party interferes with the autonomy of local leaders who are also subordinate to the national leaders of their party, the system is considered more centralized.

The relationship between politicians and administrators can be explained in three models: the classical model, village model, and adversarial model. First, the classical model assumes a clear distinction between politicians and administrators. The decision-making power falls in the domain of politicians. For example, agenda, proposals, decisions, and control over the implementation of policies are not based on legitimacy and loyalty, but political resources, competence to hire and fire administrators and grassroots support (James, 1998; Schreurs *et al.*, 2011; Njunwa, 2021). This model depicts a situation in which low degrees of intervention and interaction go hand in hand with a low number of conflicts between politicians and administrators. Second, the village model assumes that both politicians and administrators work together and use their competencies and powers to realize better implementation of their plans and programs. This means that, although politicians have legitimate power given by formal laws and regulations, they still find it difficult to dominate the bureaucrats who have technical power. As a result, this model assumes that the jurisdiction of the two parties overlaps and that their values and trust are shared (Hood and Lodge, 2006). It assumes that high degrees of interaction and intervention result in low degrees of conflict between the two parties. Finally, the adversarial model assumes that politicians and administrators are structurally engaged in a power struggle. Both politicians and administrators try to gain or keep control over the policy sector (Schreurs *et al.*, 2011). This model portrays low degrees of interaction and high degrees of intervention which results in relatively high levels of conflict. The politicians believe that the power base is absolutely on their side while the administrators are expected to be critical to the policy lines of the political executives. They have to act on what is politically acceptable and administratively feasible (Nalbandian, 2006).

The effective relationship between the two parties can be also moderated by trust and loyalty between them. The parties cannot work together unless trust exists in their interaction. Trust is important as it builds on what someone perceives to be right, and it is a very fundamental phenomenon in power bargain and decision-making process (Schreurs *et al.*, 2011). In connection to this is power resource and bargaining which imply the capacity of one party to dominate the other due to its influence, power, size or status (Hood and Lodge, 2006). Thus, the administrators assume power in low political control and high administrative independence. The amounts of decision-making power disposed to politicians can influence the relationship between the two parties. This power emanates from the degree of political decentralization. The assumption is that decentralization brings government close to the people. If decision-making authority is transferred to local government, it is assumed to have a positive impact on the functioning of local democracy as the local council will be disposed of decision-making powers with respect to policies and services which directly affect the lives of the members of the local community (Mollel, 2010).

The degree of political decentralization can be also explained by the formal systems. Crook and Manor (1998) argue that in systems with directly elected and powerful mayors or chief executives, these executives do not feel a need to account for their decisions to the local

council and are not prone to consult the population in between elections. The councillors, although elected by the community, are in no position to impose their preferences on the executive. This undermines their credibility in the eyes of the community.

### Methodology

This paper aims to answer two research questions: How do centralized politics and local council affect the local political-administrative relation in Tanzania? How do the perception, trust, and bargaining power between local politicians and the administrators moderate this relationship? The study adopted qualitative approach based on the nature of the research questions. Two councils were selected as the case: Kinondoni Municipal Council (KMC) in Dar es Salaam and Tunduma Town Council (TTC) in Songwe region. KMC was selected because it is one of the biggest municipalities in Dar es Salaam. The relationship between administrators and the bureaucrats has been in harmony over the years. This is in contrast to TTC that serves a small town. The comparison between the two councils has a significant reflection of the status of the existing political-administrative relation in the local government authorities in Tanzania.

The sample of this research includes councillors, district commissioners, heads of department, and technical staff of the councils. These respondents were selected purposively. The sample size was determined by the adequacy of the data obtained; in that, it is rich enough and covers sufficiently the dimensions of interest (Hennink *et al.*, 2011). The saturation of data was based on the adequacy of data concerning the decision-making power of the local council and the interaction between politicians and administrators.

The research began with the review of important documents such as the minutes of the committees and the council meetings to obtain clear deliberations and interaction on the political agenda between politicians and administrators. This was followed by in-depth interviews with each respondent, which took one hour. The interviewees provided views and opinions concerning the practice of political-administrative relation. The interviews were also used to seek bureaucrats and councillors' personal experiences in daily functioning of the council. To this end, 37 participants were interviewed, that is, 19 politicians and 18 bureaucrats between 2019 and 2021. Both English and Swahili languages were used for the interview dependent on the preference of the interviewees.

Moreover, to interact directly with respondents and provide opportunities to clarify the responses and ask follow-up questions, the researcher conducted eight focus group discussions (FGD) (Krueger, 1994). The groups constitute 48 participants including 12 councillors and 12 administrators from TTC and KMC respectively. The discussion guide includes questions on the way the administrators and politicians communicate, their power and obstacles encountered during their interaction.

Data were collected and analysed separately using case analysis. A cross-case analysis was then adopted to compare the two cases. Verbal data (interviews and FGD) were written into text and grouped according to the themes and analysed using content analysis. The analysis involved steps such as transcribing verbal data into text, developing codes analytically or inductively, identifying codes from the data, transforming codes into themes and categorizing materials. In addition, similar phrases and relationships were identified and sorted to identify meaningful patterns of data. The degree of political decentralization and the power of the local councillors was measured based on the extent the council can address the preferences of the local population without interference from the central government or bureaucrats employed in the council.

### Findings

#### *The political power of local politicians and administrators in decision-making*

Concerning political power, the findings show that in Tanzania, the local councils are expected to derive decision-making power from the policy paper of 1998 and local

government laws that devolved decision-making power to the local councils and grant power to install their local council and decide on local priorities (URT, 1998). It shows that although the two local governments are empowered by the existing legal framework to make political decisions, their decision-making power with respect to the local government plans and budget allocation is limited. The national political party decides on local priorities through national election and from time to time issues directives to the local government. For example, the interviews with local politicians in both councils show that the local councils do not have the autonomy to decide on the issues related to local revenue collection and spending.

One major concern noted by the two local governments was the transfer of some sources of revenue from local government authorities to the central government, for example, property tax, billboards, and land rent as quoted below:

Recently, we have witnessed Central Government taking away some key sources of revenue such as property tax and land rent. (Interview, KMC Municipal Mayor)

Furthermore, the decision to transfer the property tax to the central government had varied opinions between the two local governments. For example, the participants from KMC reported that the decision limited their autonomy to address their priorities in local government spending. This was supported by the response to an interview question that sought to find out the effect of such a decision because LGAs depend largely on their sources of revenue for funding local priorities as indicated below:

The property tax has been taken to central government and now more than 80% of the LGAs budget is financed by central government but this fund comes with condition. (Interview, KMC Municipal Director)

The findings show that in TTC, the situation was even worse. Besides the reality that the council had limited powers, the district commissioner representing the central government hijacked the council and decided on the plans and budgets of the local government as this extract indicates:

The councillors are aware that for them to work effectively they need the local council to facilitate the accomplishment of their responsibilities. But the District Commissioner from the central government has taken the position of the council. (FGD, TTC Councillors)

The second indicator of a low level of political decentralisation was the excessive political directives from the central government to local councils. The interviews with local politicians and administrators revealed that despite the existing institutional frameworks, LGAs follow directives from the central government for their day-to-day operations. It was further reported that the amount of directives from the central government has recently increased significantly. The respondents argued that the directives have been detrimental to the smooth running of the council. Some of the directives particularly those prohibiting the collection of money from local communities as contributions to service delivery were ranked high in limiting the autonomy of local government in the implementation of plans and programs. The FGD with ward executive officers and councillors in KMC informed the researcher that the central government's directives had negative repercussions on the implementation of primary schools development plans as shown below:

The Government directive which prohibits teachers from collecting financial contributions from parents has affected the implementations of school plans and hence undermining school development. (FGD, KMC Ward Executive Officers and Councillors)

A similar observation was made by one of the head of departments at TTC who, despite agreeing with most of the concerns with regard to the impact of the directives on the delivery

of education in TTC, he reported that the directive was misconceived by parents, bureaucrats, and local politicians.

The fact that Tunduma is a rapidly growing urban setting with limited resources, there was no exception that these directives led to stagnation of development plans and programs. (Interview, TTC Town Executive Director)

These findings indicate that the two local governments cannot establish their priorities. The setting of their priorities is interfered by the central government through a ruling political party, which also determines the priorities of local elections in Tanzania. The legal framework and the policy paper grant the decision-making power to the two local governments in line with their local priorities. However, because the local elections, where local priorities are discussed, are held concurrently with the national election, the national priorities crafted from the ruling political party would dominate the election agenda. Additionally, the central government is the major local sources of revenue. These findings are consistent with the findings of [Eaton and Schroeder \(2010\)](#) who revealed that if local government elections are conducted concurrently with national elections and these local governments are not allowed to set priorities and if partisan's actors at the local level are insufficiently independent of their national level counterparts, the system is considered highly centralized.

#### *Political-administrative relation in KMC and TTC*

This section is dedicated to getting more insights into the impact of a centralized political system on the political-administrative relation in the two councils. The document review indicates that the legal framework in Tanzania gives the mandates to politicians with policymaking, and administrators with the implementation of the policies and plans. The mandates assign the politicians (councillors) with the roles of formulating, coordinating and supervising the implementation of the council's economic, commercial, industrial and social development plans. The councillors are also assigned the roles of monitoring and controlling the performance of departmental bureaucrats who are the key implementers of the council decisions. As representatives of the people, the councillors are expected to have internal and external relations with the staff, the people they represent, the Members of Parliament, and the private sector ([URT, 2000](#)). On the other hand, the bureaucrats are mandated to advise councillors when making council and committee decisions and to carry out the council's day-to-day functions in accordance with the strategies and decisions of the council. With respect to the two local governments involved in this research, the political-administrative relation was analysed based on their interaction, trust, and bargaining power.

The findings suggest that the two local councils operate under a similar political-administrative set-up with a full council elected by citizens and the bureaucrats hired as permanent staff in the council. In both local governments, the council makes decisions through the committees and the bureaucrats advise the councillors. Unlike KMC, the mistrust, which fuelled the political-administrative tensions, was noted in TTC, which was led by political parties from the opposition. The genesis of the growing tension in the council was the District Commissioner's (DC) interference with the affairs of the council to protect the interest of the central government and the ruling party. The conflict later extended to involve councillors against bureaucrats. By the time of data collection, this council was operating without councillors. The tensions started as a conflict between the DC and councillors on the issue of street vendors. The DC ordered that vendors should be removed from the streets. The Councillors, on the other hand, contested the order saying that the DC made a decision without consulting them. Furthermore, there were no preparations as to where the vendors would go after their eviction from the streets, as indicated below:

The DC's office directed the removal of the street vendors by force, destroying their property while the councillors were not consulted. (FGD, TTC Councillors)

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The tensions were further fuelled by political affiliations where members of the council tend to align with their political parties on decision making even for matters of public interest, as depicted below:

Yes, those who are in one political party support each other and before they go for the council meeting they conduct an internal meeting. (Interview, TTC Municipal Mayor)

The political tension in KMC was less than that in TTC. The findings show that the Council was led by councillors from the opposition and the ruling party. Although some tensions were reported in the past five years, this tension did not cause serious clashes between the two parties. This is because, in KMC, the number of councillors from the opposition was low as compared to the number of councillors in TTC where ninety percent of the councillors were from the opposition. The big number of councillors in KMC from the ruling party created a shared understanding that councillors and the administrators report to the same central government under the same political party that provides guidelines for local planning through the party manifesto. Another minor tension was the misunderstanding in the council concerning the role of the councillors. The councillors tend to undermine the role of administrators resulting to a conflict as the administrators think they have knowledge, which the councillors do not have. These findings are consistent with the findings of [Njunwa \(2021\)](#) revealing that the elected and administrative officials had negative attitudes towards each other, which seriously constrained the implementation of development projects. [Ntwenya \(2020\)](#) reveals that politicians and administrators experience serious tension especially when they undermine the role of each other.

## Discussions

### *Political decentralization in the two local governments*

The research shows that in both local councils, political decentralization legitimized pluralist politics through the creation of local political institutions and democratization of local politics. These grant citizens in the local government political power of democratically electing their representatives. As argued by [King and Pierre \(1990\)](#), representative democracy is considered necessary for enhanced local government autonomy. In this respect, the two local governments have similar formal political systems for decision-making on policies and programs. Nevertheless, the created political institutions and democratization process do not function well as the central government intervenes with excessive rules on how politics is conducted. In this respect, both of these hold their election concurrently with the national election and their priorities are fused in the national level political priorities. The concurrent election undermines the power of the local council to address local priorities in the two local councils. These findings are consistent with the findings of [Mango \(2020\)](#) who argues that despite the good intention of political decentralization, the national governments in different countries retain the power of decision-making which in turn constrains the power of local government to translate policies into the preferences of the local population.

In these two cases, the decision-making is retained by the executive who reports directly to the central government. These findings are consistent with the findings by [Crook and Manor \(1998\)](#) who revealed that in the system of strong executives, the executive does not feel a need to account for its decisions to the local council. On the other hand, the council, although elected by the community, is not in a position to impose its preferences on the executive. In Tanzanian context and in this study, the local government executive gains his/her strength from the institutional set-up. The set-up allows hiring and firing of local government staff by the central government through its recruitment secretariat and promoting and rewarding local government staff through the Ministry of Regional Administration and Local Government. Similar observations are reported in a study by [Hulst et al. \(2015\)](#). This creates a conviction that the local government executive is accountable to the central government and not to the local council, which is a representative of the local population.

*Political-administrative relation and the political tensions*

The research shows that the two local councils involved in this research experience tension in political-administrative relation but to a varying degree. TTC experiences relatively high tension and strong opposition politics as compared to KMC. It is therefore fair to argue that the political tensions were very high in TTC as compared to KMC because the council was led by opposition politics. The tension was further complicated by the interference of the District Commissioner's office in the council affairs.

On the other hand, the findings show that in Kinondoni Municipality, the tension was relatively low the main cause being a fight for scarce resources between politicians and the administrators. The administrators believe that they have the power to allocate the budget according to government rules and guidelines while the politicians think that they have the power to instruct the bureaucrats to allocate the budget according to the priorities of the local population. Therefore, although political tension was reported in the two local governments, largely the political tension was relatively higher in TTC due to a lack of political power for the councillors. These findings are consistent with the findings of other studies (Venugopal and Yilmaz, 2010; Schreurs *et al.*, 2011) who argue that local government lacks autonomy. In addition, both politicians and administrators are often locked in a persistent political tension fuelled by power struggle and an adversarial model, which assumes that politicians and administrators are structurally engaged in a struggle for power. Both politicians and administrators try to gain or keep control over the policy sector. Various factors attributing to this include a lack of trust and bargaining power of local politicians and administrators and excessive directives from the central government.

**Conclusion**

Overall, it can be concluded that political decentralization in Tanzania is considered a major tenet and necessary condition for effective sub-national decision-making and service delivery. This is confirmed by Tanzania's Local Government Reform program and Local Government Policy Paper of 1998. Both local government legislation and the local government reform agenda elaborate political decentralization and the decision-making power of the LGAs.

Nevertheless, in practice, the national-level politicians especially from the ruling party control the local level decision-making. The local councils have become rubber stamps rather than decision-making bodies. In general, the councillors who represent peoples' needs at the local level have limited authority at the council level due to a lack of decision-making power on revenue collection and its expenditure. Although local political leaders are given the mandate to make decisions on various local development and service delivery issues, their decision-making power is compromised with overlapping directives to local LGAs. Even though LGAs are governed by elected councils, they do not demonstrate a sense of political decentralization because their decision-making power is limited by excessive rules and guidelines from the central government.

Therefore, the existence of the institutional set-up, which advocates centralization of local priorities limits the power of the local politicians to make decisions which reflect the interest of the local population and hence fuel the tension between the local politicians and the administrators. Consequently, centralization of local priorities and excessive central government directives on local government have significantly compromised the decision making autonomy of the local politicians to make decisions which are in line with the preferences of the local population. Apart from that, this formal set-up influences the trust, loyalty, and power to bargain between local politicians and the administrators, which functions as a basis for an effective relationship between them.



## Recommendation

The research identifies that the political system in Tanzania is decentralized in theory and has an institutional framework that substantially promotes the decentralization of political power to local government. However, in practice, the political system remains highly centralized thus limiting the power of local politicians in decision-making and fuelling the tension between politicians and the administrators. Therefore, first, the government should revisit and comply with the existing institutional framework for decentralization which articulates and grant substantial political autonomy to local government. Second, the national government should modify the way politics is conducted at the sub-national level. The local government should be allowed to prepare and include in the local election, their local government agenda that reflects the priorities of the local population. Third, the government should allow the formulation of local political parties in different localities and to protect the unit, the national level government must establish guidelines to regulate their conduct. Fourth, the national level government should avoid unnecessary interference with local government politics, which causes tension between the politicians and the administrators. Fifth, the government should organize training to educate the politicians and the administrators on their roles and functions and the dangers of misperception of their roles. Finally, the central government should revise the power of local government in hiring, firing, and promoting local government staff to create a sense of accountability of local bureaucrats to the local council.

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