Ideal *vs* Practice: Narratives on Clientelism, Democracy and Participation in Local Government Authorities in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: This article expands our understanding of the notion of participatory democracy by presenting a case study of public participation in Local Government Authorities (LGA) in Sri Lanka. It analyses what participation means to local populations and how they engage in political decision-making to advance their socio-economic conditions within and outside institutional architecture. It concludes that a normative, self-advancing local community is non-existent in Sri Lanka and participation within the spaces available in LGAs is most effectively felt by the local communities, when it is supplemented by clientelist networks.

Introduction

Democracy sets certain standards of deliberation and governance, which emphasize the inclusion of more public voices, directly or indirectly in decision-making, for greater representation and greater realization of multiple interests. However, evidence in established and emerging democracies suggests a situation where citizens' growing lack of enthusiasm to be part of politics actively prevails (Fuchs, 2006). From low voter turnouts at national elections to citizens' reluctance to participate in decision-making in Local Government Authorities (LGA), these reflect the friction between normative understandings of democracy and actual participation.

If theorizing happens concerning our ideal of democracy and therefore, no theory represents the actual situation, but what we must aspire for as a society, this article expands our understanding of local political participation by illuminating patronage politics and resultant versions of public participation to illustrate how the empirical bases measure against this ideal of democracy.

While many theoretical models exist concerning political participation, practical measures have also been introduced with these models in mind. Local Government (LG) is a crucial component of political participation in modern democracies. Theoretically, it increases mass participation in decision-making by taking democracy to the citizen's doorstep. However, variations exist in how citizens' local participation forms. Even in established Western

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democracies, there are multiple ways in which citizens engage in and outside institutional structures. This article examines realities specific to the Sri Lankan experience, largely relevant to developing societies.

We treat LG as local self-government by a community of citizens sharing common interests and histories (Ilbert, 1898) that incorporates locality-specific responses with some autonomy from the centre (Stoker, 1991). Moreover, local democracy denotes two meanings: First, direct and indirect measures that increase numerical participation of citizens locally (Barber, 2004; Roy, 2018); second, the degree of autonomy in influencing the decision-making process concerning local needs (Habermas, 1996). In Sri Lanka, numerous mechanisms, including appointing members to LGAs to participatory budgeting, participatory planning to public committees, and public galleries to *Praja Mandala* (citizens' forums), were introduced through government ordinances and interventions from non-governmental organizations to make local public participation more effective. However, as practice suggests, participation at the local level is considered most effective and meaningful when patronage networks lubricate these established institutional structures.

We use data gathered through 30 in-depth interviews conducted with elected members and staff of *Pradeshiya Sabhas*,[3] funders of LG projects, and LG capacity building trainers in the Kandy, Moneragala, and Anuradhapura districts from August to October 2019. Additionally, five Focus Group Discussions with 30 participants (two each for Anuradhapura and Moneragala districts and one for Kandy district) were conducted with community leaders and the public. We discuss the idea of participatory democracy from multiple theoretical perspectives and introduce LG as a means which furthers local participatory democracy. Next, the political architecture of public participation concerning LGAs in Sri Lanka is detailed. Finally, evidence gathered through multiple data collection methods shows how participation occurs on the ground largely from the clients' perspectives. This reality is compared with the normative understanding of democracy to highlight the chasm between imagined and lived experiences.

Participatory Democracy and LG

To realise the ideal of democracy, different strands of political theory ascertain the need for participatory democracy. Participation is the cornerstone of meaningful democracy. Ideas of such participation have ranged from minimalist procedural ones restricted to voting at elections to more substantive ideas of citizens engaging actively with political structures to influence decisions concerning themselves (See Torma, 1989; Pateman, 1970; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997).

[3] *Pradeshiya Sabhas*: local assemblies. These are the lowest level of the institutional hierarchy of Sri Lankan LG politics after municipal councils and urban councils, hereafter referred to as LGAs. Our article only reflects opinions aired at the LGA level and, occasionally, Divisional Secretariat (DS) level, the de-concentrated administration of the central government in the provinces.

Providing a critique of the democratic-elitist thesis, Pateman (1970) recognizes a more participatory understanding of democracy as contained in the ideas of classical theorists such as J.S. Mill and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For Rousseau, participation went beyond an institutional set-up and embraced the idea of a self-governing society in which individuals share a high degree of connectedness with their society, and therefore are in a better position to accept collective decisions (Rousseau as summarized in Torma, 1989 and Pateman, 1970). Developing Rousseau's idea, Mill emphasized the importance of practising local democracy on a limited scale to practise it at a larger scale (Mill as summarized in Torma, 1989).

Concerning guild socialism at the workplace, Cole (1920, as summarized in Pateman, 1970), opines that will and not force must be the basis of social and political organization and self-government is attainable only when individuals can participate in collective decision-making in associations that are 'free to control their own affairs' (Cole as summarized in Pateman, 1970, p. 36). Cole stresses the importance of participation locally in all associations that concern an individual for the educative function of learning democracy.

Participatory democracy became prominent in the 1960s and '70s' terminology. Participatory democracy generally suggests that;

> ... Increasing participation in a range of institutions--such as workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and city organizations-is likely to produce individuals with democratic dispositions. Such individuals would be more tolerant of difference, more sensitive to reciprocity, better able to engage in moral discourse and judgment, and more prone to examine their own preferences-all qualities conducive to the success of democracy as a way of making decisions (Warren, 1993, p. 209).

Succeeding this was a debate on deliberative democracy in the 1980s that suggests 'a decision-making procedure [that] is founded on the exchange of reasons and arguments and democratic in so far as it is inclusive (i.e., involves all those who are affected by a public issue and have 'a say' in it)' (Elster, 1998 as quoted in Floridia, 2013, p. 2).

For Barber (2004), participatory democracy is a 'strong democracy' that distinguishes itself from thin or representative democracy that does not involve the 'politics of zookeeping', i.e., a government assuming a protective role, guarding individuals' rights from one another. A strong democracy assumes a more positive picture of individuals not removed from their social milieu, with a desire for self-government with community interests in mind. It is characterized by political talk identifying common issues, political judgment for community approval for decisions that affect all, and political action involving monitoring by citizens even at the implementation stage (Barber, 1984 as summarized in Torma, 1989). Barber (2004) emphasises the importance of attaining these conditions at the local level to better practise civic competence.

Presenting a discursive model of democracy, Habermas (1985; 1989; 1996) does not consider democracy to be restricted to the institutional milieu; instead, it has a far greater function (communication). His deliberative democracy model is thus premised on a communicative

process of political opinion and will formation adequately institutionalized through law[4] (Habermas as summarized in Vitale, 2006). Accordingly, the law should consider the informal flow of public opinion and what the institutions say. As opposed to coercive authority, a discretion-mediated consensus is the cornerstone of Habermas' idea of democracy. Such consensus is achieved through deliberations at the public sphere—a site for judgment and decision—separate from the institutions these judgments try to influence (Warren, 1993). Discourse, therefore, is vital for understanding as opposed to coordinating action. This goes beyond mere participation as expected in participatory democracy and also emphasizes the dialogical aspect. The public sphere is thus the site where individual autonomy and collective will converge (Warren, 1993).

Despite differences in origin, and participatory democracy's emphasis on direct models of participation in state and non-state structures, and deliberative democracy's emphasis on collective will formation through dialogue and communication and the subsequent institutionalization of same (Vitale, 2006), we treat these as forms of participatory democracy models. Both strands aim to increase citizens' meaningful participation in political processes, thereby democratising such processes to reflect the will of the concerned communities.

Chatterjee (2001), using India, highlights how the civil society in postcolonial states contain an element not captured by our traditional understanding of civil society based on 'equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision-making, recognized rights and duties of members, and other such principles' (p. 172). He terms this 'political society' (Chatterjee, 2001, p. 176), including groups who violate the law (squatters, defaulters of taxes, etc.) and continue to make claims on the developmental state's welfare as a matter of collective rights on behalf of the communities they represent. The state and non-governmental organizations treat these groups not as civil society but as groups eligible for welfare. Chatterjee (2001, p. 177) states:

> The degree to which they will be so recognized depends entirely on the pressure they are able to exert on those state and non-state agencies through their strategic manoeuvres in political society - by making connections with other marginal groups, with more dominant groups, with political parties and leaders, etc. The effect of these strategic moves within political society is only conjunctural, and may increase or decrease or even vanish entirely if the strategic configuration of (usually) local political forces change.

Adopting an agnostic approach to politics that helps step beyond binaries[5] associated with the traditional understanding of democracy, Roy (2018) considers myriad ways collective identities

[4] The autonomous public sphere is hardly institutionalized through law. Habermas therefore, emphasizes the importance of political culture in attaining the autonomy of the public sphere (Fuchs, 2006).

[5] Includes ideas such as citizenship and clientelism, improvement and preservation, modernity and tradition (Roy, 2018).

are formed and negotiated. Drawing insights from empirical studies that capture realities specific to this agnostic view in a broad spectrum of countries,[6] he concludes that the political negotiations of poor people are shaped by the spaces available, and the means they employ to advance their conditions are situated at the intersection of citizenship and clientelism. This is characterized by a quest to gain autonomy and an appeal to their stated custodians for support. Accordingly, even if said negotiations are remotely situated from the professed ideal of democracy, participation occurs organically and prudently, which assists these groups to further their interests maximally.

Using the local politics of Ghana as a case study, MacLean (2014) discusses how local conceptions of politics are dissimilar from normative theories but carry equal legitimacy given their everyday importance. The Ghanaian experience is evidence of a marriage between clientelism and democratic citizenship. These Ghanaian villagers find local-level politics mediated through the traditional workings of chieftains to be more effective compared to the institutions established by the state nationally. Auyero (1999) discusses how the urban poor in Buenos Aires' neighbourhoods use clientelist networks that, from the client's perspective, are not always favours done by the politician in anticipation of votes. Auyero (1999) explains how these exchanges are viewed in manifold ways (e.g., manipulation versus caring, interested action versus friendship) by the client and can contrast to the outsider's understanding of clientelism. Auyero (1999) concludes that conditions of destitution must be considered in any analysis of democratic participation.

Viewing patronage as an agent of political participation and social mobilization stemming from the inequalities persistent in South Asia, Piliavsky's (2014) edited volume considers patronage a way of life and a distinct form of exercising people's will as practised in South Asia. The volume does not treat patronage's content to be constant. Rather, patronage in South Asia is a process of continuous negotiations between ever-changing actors. Michelutti (2007), studying the Yadav caste in North India, discusses the idea of vernacularization of democratic politics, the manners in which local societies and their practices interpret democratic norms. Comaroff and Comaroff's (1997) account on Botswana's call for substantive democracy by returning to the traditionally conceived idea of 'public sphere' (agitation for a one-party system) also indicates the myriad different ways societies come to understand participation. Their non-adherence to political theory's idea of participation thus does not make them less important but expands our understanding of various ways in which democratic participation occurs.

Clientelism, as understood in conventional political theory, denotes an overwhelmingly negative understanding of democracy. It means 'the proffering of material goods in return for electoral support, where the criterion of distribution that the patron uses is simply: did you (will you) support me?' (Stokes, 2011, p. 649). Roniger and Eisenstadt (1984) describe political clientelism as a relationship characterized by vertical hierarchies between two parties that are unequal in power and includes exchanging resources for the promise of reciprocity of loyalty or

[6] Including Robins (2008); Jansen (2014); MacLean (2014); Gutmann (2002); Auyero (1999).

solidarity. Landé (1983), considering variations that exist in relationships characterized as clientelist, acknowledges that such 'dyadic relationships play a significant part in the structures and processes of the politics of the developing nations and at least some part in strategically important sectors of the political systems of advanced industrial countries' (p. 450). Auyero (1999) enhances this picture by concluding that clients' views locally prove that political clientelism as traditionally understood in theory is an 'externalist and remote perspective' (p. 327) shrouding a host of cultural representations and lasting relations such practices forge.

Having established the normative fundamentals of participatory democracy and its emphasis on local practice and multiple different means used to achieve such participation, we now turn to one mechanism introduced at the local level to attain democratic goals, namely LG.[7]

LG comes to denote two ideas: 1. Delivery of services at the local level, and 2. Representation of local political will (Haqu, 2012). Stoker (1991),[8] states that LG from a localist perspective is an attack on the arbitrary use of powers of the centre and aims to diffuse power by incorporating diverse responses that allow local choice attuned to local needs. Detailing issues on cross-national comparisons of LG, Ashford (1975) opines that if LG has a theory, its focus must be on the interdependence between 'local-national relative capacity to alter budgets and local-national relative to representativeness' (p. 103). For Gomme (1898, as reviewed by Ilbert, 1898), LG is essentially a sub-level of the government but is independent in the election of authority. Such authority is decided locally by communities that share common interests and histories. These definitions highlight four important elements of LG:

1. Priorities must be decided locally;
2. Priorities must reflect local needs;
3. Local communities are the most important actors; and
4. Certain autonomy from the centre is required for LG's effective functioning.

The discussion thus suggests that LG is supposed to be the sphere where local actors will decide local needs with some autonomy from the centre. The political architecture of LG in Sri Lanka is useful for understanding the mechanisms Sri Lanka has to achieve the goals of local participatory democracy.

Devolution and LG in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has a long history of LG. However, the current framework in place that dictates the functioning of LGAs emerged from the 13th amendment to the constitution, primarily

[7] Note that the article considers LG within a unitary framework, the most applicable to the Sri Lankan context.

[8] Stoker (1991) discusses three other models of local government. Here, only the localist view will be detailed.

introduced to find a durable solution to the ethnic conflict. We will briefly sketch the political and institutional architecture that increases citizens' participation at the LGA level. The current LG system became a devolved[9] subject falling under provincial councils due to the 13th amendment (*Local Authorities*, n.d.). Thus, a three-level government structure with the central government holding national legislative powers, 9 provincial councils holding regional powers, and LG (sub-divisions of local power within 25 districts) holding local powers exist. According to the State Ministry of Provincial Councils and Local Government Affairs, the 13th amendment tasked provincial councils with control and supervision of LGAs. Simultaneously, the central government retained powers related to formation, structure, and national policy on LGAs (*Local Authorities*, n.d.). The powers retained by the central government continue to give the central government dominance over matters concerning LG institutions. The constitution states that provincial councils can confer additional powers on LG but not take away their powers (CLGF, n.d.). However, there is no evidence of provincial councils conferring any additional power on LG institutions (Skanthakumar, 2018a). The current LG system has a three-tier structure with municipal councils, urban councils, and *Pradeshiya Sabhas* as the constituent parts. Sri Lanka has 24 municipal councils, 41 urban councils, and 276 *Pradeshiya Sabhas*[10] (CLGF, n.d.).

LG falls under the devolved subjects of provincial councils. In this article, devolved denotes a power-sharing arrangement where the constitution establishes powers of the centre and units, and the units exercise a certain amount of autonomy and independence devoid of direct control from the centre (Rondinelli, 1980 as summarized in Mahamamadachchi, 2011). This includes provincial councils and LG institutions. De-concentrated does not denote autonomy in decision-making; instead, it transfers implementation powers to central government agents stationed in the periphery and is appointed by the centre (Mahamamadachchi, 2011). DS serves this function that reflects a chain of command that originates from the central government in Colombo and goes down to the smallest units of administration known as *Grama Niladhari* (GN) divisions (Skanthakumar, 2018a).

Having discussed this constitutionally expected notion of the autonomy of LG institutions, we now consider areas that fall under *Pradeshiya Sabhas*. These include 'regulation, control and administration of all matters relating to public health, public utility services and public thoroughfares and generally with the protection and promotion of the comfort, convenience and welfare of the people and all amenities within such area' (Pradeshiya Sabhas Act, No. 15 of 1987). Additionally, certain development activities such as livelihood development programmes and entrepreneurship programmes are expected to be conducted by *Pradeshiya Sabhas* (Skanthakumar, 2018a). However, as Skanthakumar (2018a, p. 69) states, there is a 'deliberate policy of starving other tiers of government of revenues and making these tiers dependent on central government for their operations.' Additionally, 'central government agencies have, over the course of time, assumed responsibility for some local government functions' (Skanthakumar, 2018a, p. 69).

[9] See Bandaranayake (1986) for the legal aspect that defines centre-LG relations of this devolution package.

[10] See Pilapitiya (n.d.) for a detailed presentation on the structure of LG in Sri Lanka.

Peiris (2018), discussing non-participation at the LG level, details participatory governance enhancing initiatives introduced by non-governmental organizations to complement existing local mechanisms. These include 'forming Citizens Forums (CF's), training for in-house staff in capacity building—specifically developing alternative budget proposals and monitoring the Pradeshiya Sabha (PS) through the public gallery and standing committees—and petitioning' (p. 29). Despite the prevalence of many such initiatives, local participation is still largely limited to elections (Uyangoda, 2011). Peiris (2018) attributes this trend of decreasing local level participation to a lack of political discourse among citizens outside elections, the shrinking scope of LGAs through jurisdictional restrictions and thereby diminishing their capacity to deliver and legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens, institutional and political dominance of the centre, and the prevalence of patronage networks that make local politicians henchmen of national-level politicians and not true representatives of people (pp. 30-33). While acknowledging the merits of all these arguments, we now consider what participation means to the client locally.

Patronage Politics, LG, and Public Participation in Sri Lankan LGAs

Data for this article were collected between August and October 2019, a period reflective of a distinct experience at the national political level of Sri Lanka. This period was characterized by an episode of political power being divided between two parties: the United National Party (UNP) holding the power of the centre and the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA)[11] holding the power of the LGAs. This arrangement came with friction that impacted the type of democracy practised locally. The findings pertain to the meaning of democracy as it is reflected in deliberative and more participatory processes such as citizens' participation in budgeting and planning of LGA development projects and their involvement in LGA decision-making forums such as the *Praja Mandalas* (citizens' forums). LGAs as basic service providers of solid waste management, street lighting, etcetera were not considered in the analysis. The data reveals three main findings, each elaborated in more detail in the succeeding paragraphs.[12]

Other Players have replaced LGAs as Institutions of Local Democracy

The first major finding revealed that other players had replaced LGAs as the primary site of local democracy. There are multiple angles to this claim. First, while LGAs as institutions are supposed to be the conduit between state and local level politics, the role of the LGAs has been diluted during the period under investigation, since through formal and informal means, the central

[11] UPFA pledged its support to the Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna (SLPP) headed by former president Mahinda Rajapaksa whose party won the presidential elections in November 2019. Accordingly, by November 2018, the SLPP had de-facto control over 2/3 of local councils (Skanthakumar, 2018b).

[12] Note that for anonymity, we will only be indicating the districts and not the specific names of LGAs and DSs within a particular district.

government exercised democracy at the doorstep, replacing the LGAs. Findings suggest increased, varied encroachment of LG by the centre, particularly when the ruling party loses LGA elections.

Regarding difficulties faced in implementing meaningful LG development projects, a project implementer/funder from the Moneragala district stated:

> When the LGAs are run by a different party than the one that is in power at the centre, the centre becomes disinterested in the works of LGAs and channels insufficient funding for LGAs. The money generated through revenue by LGAs is meagre and therefore, talking about participation at the planning level is pointless in the absence of not having sufficient money to implement projects. Communities expect LGAs to implement development projects. (Implementer 1, Moneragala LGA 2)

This shows that LG, as practised in Sri Lanka, has little democratic deliberation unless the power of the centre and LGAs is held by one party. This is also a reflection of heavy control by the centre, which contrasts with the working definition we adopt: self-government with a certain amount of autonomy to decide local needs locally.

The centre also uses the DS, the non-elected permanent de-concentrated structure controlled by the centre, as a mediator to reach local level politics when powers of LGAs are not configured in their favour. An elected member of an LGA in Moneragala district stated:

> Even though we have priority lists approved by the community, money for development projects comes through the DS office and often these are not reflective of what the priority list contains. Sometimes, the DS office implements projects that fall under our subject area and we don't intervene since it's less of a burden for us if they do work we are supposed to do. (Elected Member 1, Moneragala LGA 1)

An implementer from Moneragala raised concerns regarding the centre's encroachment of LG subject areas:

> It is important that the DS and LGA collaborate. While the funding for projects are approved by the line ministries and the money comes through the DS, implementation lies with the relevant LGA which has locality specific knowledge which the DS might not possess. (Implementer 2, Moneragala LGA 2)

These opinions paint a negative picture regarding the functioning of LGAs against a heavy centralization backdrop where the centre is increasingly using other means to usurp LGA powers when they are not in favour of the ruling party. In such instances, the LGAs have little space to deliberate as institutions. Local needs thus become decided by and mediated through central

government institutions. The absence of an independent regional party structure is a crucial factor contributing to this situation. Against such a backdrop, national parties extend to the local level and are largely responsible for the centre's sway over the regions. However, within these spaces, instances remain where the local communities have met certain demands. For example, the short-term electoral mobilization strategies of presidents that promise village and skills development programmes. *Grama Shakthi* programme[13] introduced by President Maithripala Sirisena reflects this. Despite knowing the programme would be short-lived and would end with the president's term, people enthusiastically engaged with it to receive the tangible benefits it offered. Furthermore, the central government acts to reinforce clientelism. An often-cited example is funding for projects reaching the DS offices and LGAs with a list of pre-determined beneficiaries generally selected by national-level politicians active in the area. A staff member from a DS office stated:

> The funding generally comes with the names of the recipients attached. Names are already decided at the national level. Sometimes, these recipients don't actually have a need for the resource they get. Once for a livelihood development programme, it was decided to provide villagers with loans at concessionary rates to purchase cattle. Since we already had the lists, we did not do a survey of who is actually in need. One person whose name was on the list obtained the loan and purchased cattle from his own mother, got her to sign the papers and produced it to us. We knew what he did but these are anyway poor villagers and it was not within our control to interfere in the matter. (Staff 1, DS[14])

Adding more evidence, a staff member of a DS office in Kandy stated:

> Very often the ones who get benefits are not the ones in real need. For example, I've seen people who are from relatively well-off families getting disability benefits meant for the poor; and some who have less of a need for the *Samurdhi* welfare provision receive it when there are others who can actually benefit from it. (Staff 1, Kandy DS).

The second group of players that replaces the need for LGAs as institutions is individual politicians. First, practice locally, as revealed through the discussions, suggests that local level politicians are more attuned to local needs since their careers rest on their ability to deliver local needs and please local populations. Accordingly, an elected member of an LGA in Anuradhapura stated:

[13] See http://www.budgetpromises.org/en/promise/grama-shakthi-and-poverty-eradication-programme-2 for aims and progress of the project as of December 2018.

[14] Here, the district of the DS office is not disclosed for anonymity.

> When we receive funding for development projects, we are pressurized in to equally distributing it among all members from all relevant wards[15] that fall under the LGA. Once we received money to be used in a development project that addresses an immediate necessity of the LGA. We were badly in need of a proper drainage system. But members insisted that the money be used for building of roads as requested by their respective communities. Here too, the prudent thing would have been to build to completion whatever possible number of roads rather than investing the money equally among all wards. However, members insisted that they are all responsible to their individual wards and it will not receive a warm reception by the people if a road was built in one ward and not in theirs. So, we had to distribute the money equally and all members were only able to complete a stretch of 100 meters each in their respective wards which was actually not useful. But there's nothing we can do but to listen to people from our own wards. (Elected Member 1, Anuradhapura LGA 2)

This highlights several characteristics of democracy as practised at the LGA level in Sri Lanka. Even within LGAs, there exist multiple, often competing communities. Second, members of LGAs seem to be using development aid to appease their respective electorates even without a specifically beneficial function to the populations concerned. Here, participatory democracy exists in that people participate in conveying their demands to the concerned politicians. However, these demands seem to lack proper deliberation in that these do not reflect a community advancing the notion of using their agency to decide their priorities. Rather, there exists a notion to get whatever the others get, thus not utilizing the space for participatory planning to the fullest. Finally, the idea of participation is used to attain tangible benefits such as roads and infrastructure development, rather than for an educative purpose of democracy to create autonomous societies, as the participatory strand suggests. However, these needs are as valid as any 'educative purpose' of democracy. When you do not meet your basic needs, you naturally try to satisfy these before creating autonomous political societies as envisaged by theory. Creating such an autonomous political society can only be realized when everyone has had a chance to participate on equal terms.

The second aspect of politicians replacing LGAs as institutions is such replacement by ruling party parliamentarians of the central government who are also frequently party organizers. These parliamentarians have more capacity than LGAs as institutions and local politicians to deliver services and resources. These parliamentarians, however, deliver services in exchange for support for electoral mobilization. A capacity-building trainer from the Moneragala district stated that 'LGAs don't actually function as per the Act but according to the commands of the party organizers who are often times parliamentarians. Votes matter to them. So, they work' (Trainer 1, Moneragala LGA 2). According to an elected member of an LGA in Anuradhapura, 'I can

[15] Wards are sub-units that fall under LGAs.

always talk to the minister if there is something our LGA needs but we can't do. The minister can always do' (Elected Member 1, Anuradhapura LGA 2).

These reflections suggest that clientelism as a form of political engagement engineered by the centre and individual politicians exists locally. Despite shortcomings of participation from a normative sense, these clientelist networks reinforce participation and result in rural populations receiving certain tangible benefits that advance their socio-economic status. These benefits are sometimes a reflection of individual and/or community-specific needs, as shown. Therefore, the engagement with clientelist networks also realises local needs (however, limited these may be). For politicians rendering personal support, votes matter. Therefore, the exchanges they extend come with the underlying assumption that the vote will be given in return for the service. However, as Chatterjee (2001) and Roy (2018) suggest, destitution and resultant conditions have made these local populations negotiate their demands in spaces available to help advance their circumstances. When democracy, as practised nationally, is plagued with many shortcomings and no meaningful autonomy given to LGAs, placing one's trust in the institutional architecture is not the most desirable political action these populations have. In such circumstances, they resort to clientelist means to achieve what normative democracy fails to give them.

Incentives for active Non-participation at Local Level Politics on the part of Citizens

The second major finding speaks to the point on the participation of citizens. The capacity building trainer from the Moneragala district stated that 'there is no need for participation from the side of the citizens beyond elections. They don't want to participate. There is no need for policies on their part. Votes can be collected even by distributing tin sheets' (Trainer 1, Moneragala LGA 2). This shows a general lack of interest on the part of the citizens to participate actively. However, a closer look at the phenomenon revealed through the data shows two aspects that might have resulted in this general lack of enthusiasm to participate.[16]

Most of the populations in these LGAs are rural populations, of whom a majority are daily wage labourers. For them, being physically a part of local deliberations entails an opportunity cost of letting go of their day's earnings. If there is no tangible benefit offered by attending such deliberations, they see no real purpose of such participation that is detrimental to their economic needs. The following two excerpts highlight this:

> We once had a project that needed approval from a social audit committee formed by the population. The project expected them to monitor the construction work of a community development initiative. It was for their benefit. Most of them were daily wage labourers and had joined expecting an allowance. When they found out

[16] Note that voter turnout at LG elections is generally satisfactory (Oberst, 2003) with a 70% turn out at February 2018 LG elections (Peiris, 2018). However, this enthusiasm to participate is not shown in-between elections (Peiris, 2018, p. 31).

there was no allowance and it was voluntary, they started complaining saying that they lost their daily wages to be part of the project. (Staff 2, Moneragala LGA 1)

Knowledge and awareness about democracy are not viewed as benefits by the community. For them a benefit has to be tangible. If there is no tangible incentive, they are reluctant to attend awareness raising campaigns. Once we had a gender awareness raising campaign. Some asked, 'Isn't it better to plant banana trees using this money?' (Trainer 1, Moneragala LGA 1)

Furthermore, many locals fear active participation in the form of challenging one's local politician. Such challenging generally leads to acts of vengeance by the politicians. Therefore, most locals either do not participate or, if they do, tend to tow the way of the politicians, as seen below:

Most people seek the advice and guidance of LGA members of their respective areas in creating priority lists for the area. They don't usually want to bypass the politicians. (Staff 2, Anuradhapura LGA 1)

It's not the public that knows what they want but us. So, it's better if they let us decide on priorities for them. We know the best. (Member 1, Anuradhapura LGA 2)

No organization tries to implement projects without consulting local politicians. If they do, they know it's doomed to fail since the politicians will always disrupt those. (Staff 1, Moneragala LGA 2)

People are scared to bypass their politicians. They know it comes with repercussions. (Trainer 1, Moneragala LGA 1)

The Elusiveness of the idea of Community as Practised at the Local Level

The final major finding revolves around the concept of community as practised locally. Many definitions used in the article concerning local participatory democracy discuss a community with shared interests and histories (Ilbert, 1898) who cooperate to decide on (Habermas, 1996) local priorities (Stoker, 1991; Barber, 2004). Field data reveals that local community in Sri Lanka is elusive at best and parochial at worst. Regarding elusiveness, practice shows that communities do not decide on common objectives; rather, political and funding objectives decide who the community is. Thus, community changes. An example that speaks to this emerged from a Focus Group Discussion with community leaders and the public in an LGA in the Anuradhapura district concerning a water purification project. Most residents here are kidney patients and in dire need of clean drinking water. An international donor funded the project and required a Social Audit Committee (SAC) to monitor each stage of the project, from submitting the proposal to construction work to the post-evaluation phase. Initially, people formed a Community Based Organization (CBO) and were part of the SAC quite enthusiastically.

However, the project progressed in phases, with water supplied to a particular community section in each phase. The CBO was expected to function until the project reached completion,

with the entire population receiving drinking water. However, as it progressed, villagers started leaving the SAC when their respective areas received water. This made the project progress quite slowly, which shows that the boundaries of 'community' are extremely porous and largely coincide with material needs rather than any intrinsic affinity. The earlier example of villagers demanding incomplete roads for each ward, rather than seeing the completion of a couple of roads and waiting for the next round of funding for roads in their areas, also indicates this reality. This is also reflected in elected members of a particular LGA in the Moneragala district at the policy planning level. While these members are expected to act as a cohesive local body, they tend to prioritize ward specific demands that will win the support of their respective communities instead of adopting an integrated planning approach that will benefit the entire LGA.

> Elected members give prominence to the proposals that come from their villages/wards in participatory planning thus neglecting the demands of the LGA as a whole. Because of this, a holistically beneficial plan never comes out. (Staff 2, Moneragala LGA 1)

Conclusion

We reviewed the literature on participatory and deliberative democracy and explored the importance of local implementation. In setting the theoretical framework, we identified variations in the practice of participatory and deliberative democracy, situating clientelism as a form of such participation largely prevalent in the developing world. How participation occurs at the LG level, an institutional and political space specifically created to advance local self-government by a community of citizens sharing common interests and histories was then explored.

Our findings reflect the Sri Lankan experience at the LGA level, demonstrating how citizens' participation at the LG level in Sri Lanka is characteristic of multiple deficiencies as understood in conventional literature on participatory democracy but also reflecting opportunities and spaces that advance citizens' participation and, thereby, autonomy. In other words, participation happens in different ways from our conventional understanding of participatory democracy. The three findings discussed highlight the embedded clientelism in LG politics in Sri Lanka, factors that encourage and constrain numerical and meaningful participation, respectively, at the community level and the non-existence of a fixed community that makes it problematic to attain certain participatory democracy goals on behalf of a community.

Despite the negative connotations associated with the idea of clientelism, the Sri Lankan experience, as revealed through the data, shows that the local institutional architecture yields meaningful results for generally rural/local communities when patronage networks supplement them. LG becomes meaningful for the citizens when they receive benefits to advance their socio-economic conditions, be it the local politician or the central government. Reluctance to actively participate in LG politics reflects these constraining socio-economic structures and citizens'

reluctance to challenge the authority of local politicians who are the main political actors who provide them with their desired benefits, however insignificant it may seem to an outsider.

Such dependence on clientelist networks has also resulted in obstructing the development of a local normative community as envisioned in theory, an ideal the attainment of which for Sri Lanka depends on multiple factors ranging from meaningful devolution of power to battling socio-economic inequalities. However, within the existing structures, despite the normatively problematic inclinations the polity at the local level displays, rural communities have successfully navigated political configurations to realize their demands. The main contribution of this article is thus to present an alternative narrative of community participation from the perspectives of local communities or the clients and to appreciate different mediation and negotiation strategies employed by communities to navigate everyday politics in the spaces available to them.

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