Examining the Impact of Delegating Local Authorities to Councils on Enhancing Social Participation of Citizens in Bandar Abbas

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perspectives of local elders in Bandar Abbas regarding the impact of delegating local authorities to community councils, as a socio-civil institution, on enhancing the level of citizens' social participation. Drawing on the principles of decentralization stipulated in Articles 100 to 106 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Law on Islamic Councils (enacted in 1996 with subsequent amendments), the present research analyzes the role of local councils in strengthening citizens' social participation. The research employs a qualitative-descriptive method and was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 21 local elders in Bandar Abbas (individuals with a minimum of five years of experience in council activities or neighborhood affairs). The domains of delegated authority examined include local decision-making, civil dispute resolution, and local budgeting. The findings indicate that delegating financial and supervisory authorities to councils, by creating appropriate legal frameworks, reinforces citizens' participation in local governance processes. The main obstacles include ambiguity in the delineation of responsibilities between councils and executive agencies, as well as insufficient local oversight mechanisms. The study suggests that amending the Law on Councils to clarify jurisdictions and strengthen budgetary authority would enhance social participation in Bandar Abbas and other similar regions.

Keywords: *Delegation of authority, local councils, local elders, social participation, decentralization, local governance, Bandar Abbas*

Introduction

Political–administrative decentralization, as one of the fundamental principles of the legal system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is explicitly emphasized in Articles 100 to 106 of the Constitution. According to Article 100, in order to accelerate the implementation of social, economic, development, health, cultural, educational, and other welfare programs through public cooperation in accordance with local needs, the administration of every village, district, city, county, or province is to be carried out under the supervision of a council elected by the residents of the same locality (1). These provisions identify Islamic city and village councils as popular institutions that mediate between the central government and citizens, tasked with supervising local affairs, electing mayors, and participating in public decision-making. The Law on Islamic Councils, enacted in 1996 with subsequent amendments,

operationalizes these constitutional principles and grants limited authorities to the councils, such as approval of local plans, oversight of municipal budgets, and resolution of neighborhood disputes (2). However, decentralization in Iran has largely remained formalistic, and actual delegation of substantive powers to councils has encountered legal and administrative obstacles (3). Addressing this issue is rooted in the inefficiency of delegating local authorities to councils, which has directly contributed to the decline of social participation.

In the city of Bandar Abbas, as one of the key economic–commercial hubs in southern Iran, despite the regular formation of Islamic councils, these bodies lack sufficient financial and executive authority to make independent decisions. This situation has distanced citizens from local governance processes, reducing their engagement to sporadic protests or passive non-interaction. For example, the absence of council authority in allocating local budgets or issuing binding decisions in civil disputes forces local elders to repeatedly approach central administrative bodies, a process that is time-consuming and ineffective. This gap not only weakens the functionality of councils but also reduces citizens' sense of belonging toward local institutions (4). Previous research has also emphasized this inefficiency, showing that councils have largely remained advisory bodies and have not been granted substantive powers such as budgeting or executive oversight (1, 5).

The importance of this issue within the framework of sustainable local development and good governance is undeniable. Successful decentralization increases citizens' participation in local decision-making and contributes to equitable resource distribution, reduction of regional inequalities, and reinforcement of social capital. In Bandar Abbas—given the demographic challenges arising from economic migration and ethnic diversity—the delegation of authority to councils can provide a foundation for sustainable local management. Good governance, according to well-recognized criteria, requires responsive and participatory local institutions, which Islamic councils can fulfill, provided they receive genuine authority (2). Failure to address this issue not only disrupts local development but may also threaten social stability.

The main objective of this study is to examine the impact of delegating local authority to councils on increasing social participation from the perspective of local elders in Bandar Abbas. Therefore, this study focuses on the lived experiences of local elders to identify key domains of delegated power—including local decision-making, civil dispute resolution, and budgeting—and assess their effect on citizens' participatory behavior. This objective aligns directly with the decentralization principles laid out in the Constitution and seeks to provide practical solutions to strengthen councils and consequently increase social participation.

To achieve this objective, the present study is structured around two main questions: (1) Which delegated local powers have the greatest impact on enhancing social participation in Bandar Abbas? (2) What are the legal and administrative obstacles to delegating authority to councils within the framework of the Constitution and the Law on Councils? These questions will be addressed using a qualitative method based on semi-structured interviews with 21 local elders, and the findings will form the basis for policy recommendations.

Literature Review

Political–administrative decentralization and social participation, as two complementary concepts within the system of local governance, hold a significant position in Iranian legal and administrative literature. Decentralization refers to the transfer of decision-making, financial, and supervisory powers from central authorities to local institutions, which in Iran is primarily pursued through Islamic city and village councils. Social participation, as the outcome of this process, includes citizens' participatory behaviors in local decision-making, dispute resolution, and

oversight of institutional performance. These two concepts are linked within the framework of Articles 100 to 106 of the Constitution and the Law on Islamic Councils (1996), but their practical implementation has confronted various challenges (1). The relevant scholarly literature can be categorized into sociological, legal, and administrative/urban governance approaches, which are discussed below.

Sociological Approach

This approach focuses on the impact of decentralization on the social behavior of citizens. Hourcade (1988), in his analysis of post-revolutionary local councils in Tehran, highlights their role in resolving neighborhood disputes and demonstrates that limited powers reduced participation to the level of street protests (6). Likewise, Seifollahi and Hafez Amini (2009) examined the impact of development programs on ethnic cohesion and argued that local councils have the potential to facilitate ethnic participation, yet the lack of delegated authority undermines this potential (7). Ghorbanian (2020), in a case study of rural councils and participatory management of natural resources, shows that delegating supervisory powers increases citizens' sense of belonging (8). Moreover, the Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (2024), in its expert report on decentralization models, highlights the inefficiency of councils in Bandar Abbas and similar cities (5).

Legal Approach

The legal approach emphasizes the analysis of the constitutional and statutory frameworks governing decentralization and council authorities. Habibnejad (2009), in his legal examination of Islamic councils, analyzes Articles 100–106 of the Constitution and argues that although the principles of decentralization formally identify councils as participatory institutions, ordinary legislation restricts their authority to advisory oversight (4). This study identifies ambiguity in the division of responsibilities between councils and municipalities as a key obstacle. Similarly, Ebrahimabadi and Abolhasani (2018), focusing on city and village councils, show that decentralization in Iran has taken a political–administrative form, while financial delegation to councils has remained insufficient. They recommend revising the Law on Councils to expand budgetary authority (1). Tajbakhsh (2000), in a comparative analysis, contrasts Iranian decentralization with Western models and argues that despite constitutional provisions, local councils in Iran have functioned as instruments of central control. He identifies the lack of fiscal independence as a major factor reducing participation (3). In a more recent study, Tajbakhsh (2020) evaluates the Law on Councils within the context of an authoritarian state structure and shows that the delegation of local powers has been aimed primarily at consolidating central authority rather than strengthening participation, while also highlighting the absence of effective local oversight mechanisms (9).

Managerial / Urban Governance Approach

This approach focuses on the practical performance of councils in urban management. Sharif (2003), in his critique of the performance of Islamic councils during the first and second terms, highlights their inefficiency in development-related decision-making and identifies a lack of coordination with municipalities as the primary factor behind this weakness (10). Likewise, Rezaei et al. (2014) evaluated the performance of local government in centralized political systems through a case study of Iranian councils and demonstrated that the limited authority of councils in budgeting has reduced citizens' participation. This study proposes strengthening the role of councils in urban planning (11). In this regard, Madanipour (2006), in his examination of urban planning in Tehran, points to

the marginal role of councils in macro-level decision-making and argues that genuine decentralization requires the delegation of financial authority (12). Shabania and Mohammadi Alemani (2019) also analyzed the role of the mayor and the council in good urban governance through a case study of Tehran and showed that ambiguity in councils' authorities has minimized social participation (13).

The strengths of the existing literature include the precise analysis of legal frameworks, the provision of practical case studies, and the identification of executive challenges—all of which demonstrate that, despite constitutional provisions, decentralization in Iran has not strengthened social participation due to the restricted authority of councils. However, the common weakness among these studies is the lack of attention to field data from local elders, especially in cities such as Bandar Abbas. Most prior research either relies heavily on textual analysis of laws or examines large metropolitan case studies (such as Tehran), without exploring the lived experiences of local elders in cities like Bandar Abbas. The sociological approach, despite recognizing the effects of participation on social capital, lacks in-depth qualitative methods for extracting behavioral themes. The present study fills this gap by providing field-based evidence from Bandar Abbas and offering a qualitative analysis of the experiences of local elders to develop practical recommendations for social, legal, and managerial reform.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative–descriptive method with an inductive content analysis approach. Inductive content analysis allows the researcher to extract key patterns and main themes directly from raw data without imposing predetermined theoretical frameworks. By focusing on the content of the interviews, this method makes it possible to identify relationships between the delegation of local authority and citizens' participatory behaviors.

The statistical population of the study consists of local elders (trusted community figures) in the city of Bandar Abbas. A local elder is defined as an individual with at least five years of experience in civic activity or membership in Islamic city/village councils or neighborhood-level institutions. These individuals were considered local experts because of their practical experience in interacting with councils and citizens. The population was identified based on official lists of the Bandar Abbas City Council, neighborhood reports, and initial referrals.

Sampling was conducted using a purposive–snowball technique. First, three key elders with more than ten years of experience were selected as the starting point. Each participant then introduced other eligible individuals. This process continued until 21 people were reached, at which point theoretical saturation was achieved; that is, new interviews produced repetitive information and no new themes emerged. The sample size was determined with regard to the depth required in qualitative studies and the limitations of the local statistical population.

The data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview. This instrument provided flexibility in probing responses while maintaining the structure of the main questions. The three main questions were:

1. Delegation of which local authorities to councils has had the greatest impact on increasing citizens' participation in Bandar Abbas?
2. What are the legal and administrative barriers to delegating authority to councils?
3. What roles can councils play in the domains of local decision-making, civil dispute resolution, and budgeting?

Probing questions such as "Can you give an example from practical experience?" or "How has this limitation affected citizens' behavior?" were used to deepen the responses. The interviews were conducted in person with an average duration of 45 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' permission.

Content validity of the instrument was ensured through review by one sociology expert and two public law experts. These specialists evaluated the questions in terms of their coverage of local decision-making, civil dispute resolution, and budgeting and offered suggestions for clarity and comprehensiveness, which were implemented. This process ensured that the questions were aligned with the research objectives and the legal framework.

Reliability was assessed through recoding. Two independent coders—the principal researcher and a trained assistant—independently coded 30 percent of the interviews. The inter-coder agreement coefficient was 0.87, indicating high stability in the coding process.

Data analysis was conducted manually using thematic analysis. In the open coding stage, key and meaningful expressions were extracted from the transcribed text. Then, in axial coding, the codes were grouped into subthemes such as independent budgetary authority, ambiguity in the division of responsibilities, or increased attendance at meetings. Finally, selective coding produced the main themes, including budgetary and financial authorities, the role in local dispute resolution, legal barriers to delegation, and the impact on citizens' sense of belonging. These stages led directly to realistic, quote-based reporting in the findings section.

Ethical considerations were observed at all stages. Before each interview, an informed consent form was provided explaining the research objectives, the use of data, and participants' rights. Individuals' identities were kept confidential using numerical codes, and the option to withdraw at any stage was ensured. Audio files were deleted after transcription. The research was conducted without external financial support and with no conflicts of interest.

Research Findings

Manual thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews with 21 local elders in Bandar Abbas yielded four main themes and eight subthemes. The themes were derived from the stages of open, axial, and selective coding and emerged directly from the content of the responses. The demographic characteristics of the sample were as follows: in terms of age, five participants were between 35 and 44 years old, nine were between 45 and 54, and seven were 55 years and older. Regarding education, four had a high school diploma or lower, eleven had an associate's or bachelor's degree, and six had a master's degree or higher. In terms of experience, eight had 5–9 years, seven had 10–14 years, and six had 15 years or more of activity.

Theme 1: Budgetary and Financial Authorities

This theme was mentioned a total of 48 times in the interviews and had the highest frequency. The subtheme "independent competence in local budget allocation" was mentioned 26 times, and the subtheme "current limitations in approving financial projects" was mentioned 22 times. The subtheme of independent competence in local budget allocation emphasizes the need for councils to have direct authority in budgeting; Participant 4 stated: "If the council can allocate the neighborhood budget directly, small development projects will be implemented without delay." Participant 10 added: "The authority to approve minor budgets turns the council into a real decision-maker." Participant 17 said: "With independent competence, people come to the council to propose local projects."

The subtheme of current limitations in approving financial projects focuses on councils' dependence on central approval; Participant 3 stated: "The council proposes the budget plan, but the governor's office changes it." Participant 13 noted: "The money is in the hands of the municipality, and the council only has advisory oversight." Participant 19 remarked: "Limitations on approval have turned the council into an ineffective institution."

Theme 2: Role in Local Dispute Resolution

This theme was raised 42 times. The subtheme "primary mediation" was mentioned 24 times, and the subtheme "mandatory referral to other authorities" was mentioned 18 times. The subtheme of primary mediation emphasizes councils' competence in the initial stages of disputes; Participant 1 said: "Property disputes first go to the council, and local elders resolve them." Participant 9 stated: "The council, through mediation, settles 60 percent of cases within the neighborhood." Participant 15 added: "People trust the council because its members are from the same neighborhood."

The subtheme of mandatory referral to other authorities focuses on the non-binding nature of council decisions; Participant 6 stated: "The council's ruling is not binding, and the parties go to court." Participant 12 noted: "Referral to the district office or the court prolongs the process." Participant 20 said: "Without binding authority, the council's mediation remains inconclusive."

Theme 3: Legal Barriers to Delegation

This theme was discussed 38 times. The subtheme "ambiguity in the division of responsibilities between the council and the municipality" was mentioned 21 times, and the subtheme "resistance of central executive bodies" was mentioned 17 times. The subtheme of ambiguity in the division of responsibilities emphasizes legal inconsistencies; Participant 5 stated: "The Law on Councils says oversight, but the Municipalities Law grants execution to the mayor." Participant 11 added: "This ambiguity keeps the council in an advisory position." Participant 16 said: "Unclear division of responsibilities disrupts cooperation between the council and the municipality."

The subtheme of resistance of central executive bodies focuses on control by higher levels; Participant 8 stated: "The governor's office vetoes the council's budget plans." Participant 14 noted: "Central bodies do not delegate authority because they do not want local oversight." Participant 21 remarked: "Executive resistance has halted genuine delegation."

Theme 4: Impact on Citizens' Sense of Belonging

This theme was raised 41 times. The subtheme "attendance at council meetings" was mentioned 23 times, and the subtheme "strengthening neighborhood identity" was mentioned 18 times. The subtheme of attendance at council meetings emphasizes increased practical participation; Participant 2 said: "When the council approves the alley's budget, residents come to the meeting to supervise." Participant 7 added: "Real authority of the council encourages citizens to attend meetings." Participant 18 stated: "When people see a local decision-maker, they become more active."

The subtheme of strengthening neighborhood identity focuses on emotional attachment; Participant 11 stated: "Local dispute resolution by the council increases neighborhood unity." Participant 15 noted: "Projects implemented with local budgets raise citizens' sense of ownership." Participant 20 said: "Neighborhood identity is strengthened when the council resolves problems on-site."

In total, there were 169 references to themes and subthemes extracted from the 21 interviews. The theme of budgetary and financial authorities had 48 references, the theme of the role in local dispute resolution had 42 references, the theme of legal barriers to delegation had 38 references, and the theme of impact on citizens' sense of belonging had 41 references. The subthemes, in order of frequency, were: independent competence (26), primary

mediation (24), attendance at meetings (23), current limitations (22), ambiguity in division of responsibilities (21), neighborhood identity (18), mandatory referral (18), and central resistance (17). These data were derived directly from manual coding of the transcripts and provide a basis for comparison with the existing literature.

Discussion and Conclusion

The themes extracted from the interviews clarify key domains of delegated local authority. The theme of budgetary and financial authority emphasizes the councils' independent competence in resource allocation, which is directly related to local development decisions. Participants repeatedly noted that without such authority, small neighborhood projects remain pending central approval. The theme of the council's role in local dispute resolution highlights primary mediation as a practical domain in which councils can act independently without requiring judicial authorities. The theme concerning legal barriers identifies ambiguity in the division of responsibilities and the resistance of central administrative bodies as key obstructive factors. The theme addressing the impact on citizens' sense of belonging links increased attendance at meetings and strengthened neighborhood identity to the genuine delegation of authority, elevating participation from a consultative to a practical level.

These findings align with legal and managerial literature while adding new local-level insights. Ebrahimabadi and Abolhasani (2018) emphasized the insufficiency of financial delegation within the Law on Councils, which aligns with the sub-theme concerning independent budgetary authority; however, the present study documents this issue through the practical experiences of local elders in Bandar Abbas (1). Habibnejad (2009) identified ambiguity in the division of responsibilities between councils and municipalities as the main obstacle, which corresponds directly with the sub-theme of responsibility demarcation (4). Sharif (2003) assessed council performance in development-related decision-making as weak, and this is confirmed by findings related to budgetary constraints (10). Tajbakhsh (2000) described decentralization in Iran as largely formalistic and attributed control to central resistance, which aligns with the sub-theme concerning resistance by central executive bodies (3). Tajbakhsh (2020) also emphasized the absence of local mechanisms for dispute resolution, a point expanded by the theme addressing the council's mediation role in Bandar Abbas (9). The Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (2024) reported the inefficiency of decentralization models in port cities, a conclusion that is reinforced by the field data presented here regarding citizens' sense of belonging (5). Ghorbanian (2020) linked participation in resource management to delegated authority, and the present study's financial and budgetary themes confirm this relationship at the urban level (8).

The results obtained from analyzing data in response to the research questions indicate that delegating budgetary authority and local dispute resolution powers are the domains with the strongest impact on social participation. Participants considered independent budgeting authority the primary factor increasing citizens' attendance at council meetings, while the council's role in primary mediation strengthened neighborhood cohesion. Unlike macro-level decisions—which remain centralized—these domains have a direct effect on citizens' everyday lives.

Additionally, legal ambiguity in the division of responsibilities and administrative resistance from central bodies were identified as the main obstacles. Ambiguity within the Law on Councils and the Municipalities Law keeps councils in an advisory position, while the resistance of governorates and municipalities has impeded genuine delegation. Despite constitutional principles supporting decentralization, these barriers disrupt practical implementation.

Overall, it can be concluded that delegating local authority in budgeting, civil dispute resolution, and neighborhood decision-making strengthens social participation by increasing citizens' sense of belonging and practical engagement. With appropriate legal foundations, Islamic councils can become effective institutions of local governance and facilitate the sustainable development of Bandar Abbas.

The study faced two main limitations. First, its geographical focus on Bandar Abbas restricts the generalizability of findings to cities with similar economic and demographic characteristics. Second, the use of non-random sampling reduces the ability to generalize findings to the broader population of local elders.

Executive recommendations derived from the study include: amending the Law on Islamic Councils to clearly distinguish budgetary and mediation authorities from the responsibilities of municipalities and central administrative bodies; providing specialized training programs for council members on budget management and dispute resolution; establishing local oversight mechanisms by community elders to evaluate council performance and report directly to the parliament.

Research recommendations include undertaking comparative studies of delegated authority in southern and northern port cities to identify successful patterns, and quantifying the effects of budgetary delegation on participation indicators—such as attendance rates at council meetings—through large-scale surveys.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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