Political Economy of Democratic Decentralization and Local Political Associations in Rural Punjab: A Case Study of Sialkot District

Democratic decentralization is the transfer of power to lower tiers of governments and bringing state closer to people through representative governments. What modes of democratic decentralization are required in increasingly modernizing rural Pakistan? In addition, how citizens perceive it as well as use their political agency and participation in local government politics? These questions are explored by using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods by using a primary data set of 240 households in six rural union councils of Sialkot District in Punjab province. Findings of this study state that parameters effecting local government elections are qualitatively different from other forms of elections. With the transformation of economic relations, new forms of clientelistic political association, at micro level, have taken roots. We have found that both principal and agents are engaged in pragmatic political calculation that undermines horizontal political relations. Increase in spread of informal economy directly associated with informal political adjustments that use traditional social structures for redistribution of economic surplus. This study also counters the argument about progressive role of middle class in furthering democratic politics. Majority of our respondents, belonging to middle class, engage and contribute to the consolidation of newer forms of clientelistic politics. Underdeveloped economic structures underlie the clientelistic political associations. The voters and politicians participate in political field for particularistic and materialist reasons. Collective action suffer in presence of several social, economic and psychological cleavages along which communities are divided. All participants engaged in transactional politics for structural reasons and thus, we argue, awareness campaigns will not suffice to meet democratization goals.