

Opportunities for applying participatory democracy in the context of the relationship between municipalities and local actors in Algeria

Received date: 14/08/2025

Accepted date: 23/11/2025

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Abstract:

The concept of participatory democracy has been adopted at the local level in Algeria, as evidenced by its clear presence in political speeches and electoral campaigns. Participatory democracy is fundamentally a model that relies on effective coordination among various local actors, making it essential to understand the nature of the relationship between the official local actor, represented in our study by the municipality, and the diverse social forces that constitute this participatory approach.

This paper aims to explore the challenges facing participatory democracy, focusing on how the relationships among different actors influence the effectiveness of this process. By analyzing these

dynamics, we can identify the obstacles that hinder effective collaboration at the local level. Furthermore, the study seeks to identify the opportunities available to enhance the principle of participation, despite the existing barriers that impede collaborative efforts.

Strengthening participatory democracy requires an inclusive environment that encourages citizen engagement and interaction with local authorities. Through this research paper, we aim to propose solutions that could contribute to activating the concept of participatory democracy in Algeria, particularly within the municipality that is the subject of our study, as a local council seeking effectiveness in managing local affairs.

Keywords: Participatory democracy; municipality; civil society; private sector; citizen.

Introduction:

Algeria has adopted the concept of participatory democracy at the local level in various political discourses, and this concept has become prevalent even among electoral bodies and during election campaigns.

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The reforms affecting various laws have emerged within this context-aiming to entrench the principle of participation-by attempting to coordinate among different social forces at the municipal level. The approach to participatory democracy is rooted in the idea that citizens have the right to participate in public life and manage their affairs through various participatory channels. This includes formulating projects, monitoring their implementation, and participating in their evaluation at the local level. Such inclusion necessitates the existence of elected bodies and popular councils capable of engaging with other actors, ranging from civil society institutions to the private sector.

In the context of this local option, it is essential to explore the potential for integrating new partners into the participatory democratic process at the local levels, focusing on the municipality as it is the closest to the citizen and the most interactive with them. This is particularly relevant following the constitutional enshrinement of the participatory democracy approach in the 2020 Constitution. From this standpoint, this study aims to analyze the roles of the actors involved in participatory democracy in Algeria, along with its legal frameworks, and to investigate its opportunities and limitations in light of the relationship between the municipality as an official actor at the local level and various participatory actors. In light of the above, the following central question can be posed:

What opportunities does the relationship between the municipality and local actors provide for the realization of participatory democracy?

In an attempt to address the issue comprehensively, the research paper has been divided into the following two sections:

Chapter I: The Relationship Between the Municipality and Participatory Democracy Actors

- 1- The Municipality and the Citizen*
- 2- The Municipality and Civil Society*
- 3- The Municipality and the Private Sector*

Chapter II: Challenges and Stakes of Participatory Democracy in the Municipal People's Council

1- Obstacles to Participatory Democracy in the Municipal People's Council

2- Opportunities for Establishing Participatory Democracy in the Municipal People's Council

Chapter I: The Relationship Between the Municipality and Participatory Democracy Actors:

The effectiveness of participatory democracy at the local level (municipality) depends on the nature of the relationship it maintains with social partners. It is inconceivable to discuss a participatory approach in the absence of other community actors. The existence of a space for political participation among various actors and stakeholders necessitates the presence of outcomes from this participatory process, which is the result of the interaction between different players with both formal and informal interests..

1. The Municipality and the Citizen:

The citizen is considered a key active participant in the municipal work mechanism, and their participation, interaction, and responsiveness to local public decisions and policies are essential for the success of municipal operations. The communication process between the citizen and the municipality helps to strengthen social ties, activate democratic practices, and enhance citizens' understanding of the municipality's capabilities while reshaping priorities.

In this context, Article 12 of Law 11-10 on municipalities states: "In order to achieve the objectives of local democracy within the framework of grassroots management mentioned in Article 11 above, the Municipal People's Council shall ensure the establishment of a suitable framework for local initiatives aimed at motivating citizens and encouraging them to participate in resolving their issues and improving their living conditions. This framework shall be organized in accordance with the applicable legislation and regulations."⁽¹⁾

Additionally, Article 14 of the Organic Law on Municipalities of 2011 stipulates: "Any person may access the minutes of the Municipal People's Council's deliberations as well as municipal decisions. Any interested party may obtain a complete or partial copy at their own expense, subject to the provisions of Article 56 below. The manner of implementing this article shall be determined by regulation."⁽²⁾

However, the first observation regarding these legal provisions is that they are general and lack clarity regarding the channels of participation and the frameworks for its practice.

Moreover, Algerian municipalities generally exhibit a lack of activation of mechanisms for citizen participation in municipal work as defined by law, including participation and attendance at regular

sessions of the Municipal People's Council. This apprehension regarding public communication can be attributed to the nature of the elite, which is influenced by partisan, tribal, or cultural factors, or it may stem from concerns about the increasing demands of citizens that may exceed the municipality's capabilities.⁽³⁾

Additionally, the relationship between the citizen and the council is fraught with ambiguity and distrust. Despite the legal provisions that stipulate informing and involving citizens in local governance, in reality, it is not based on a clear legal framework that grants citizens the right to inquire about issues concerning local affairs. Consequently, the general characteristics of this relationship remain far from the true meaning of the citizen's status in the context of participatory democracy.

From this standpoint, the Municipal People's Council, as a deliberative body, must create a conducive environment for citizen participation and establish appropriate mechanisms to ensure citizens' involvement in decision-making processes, either directly or through elected councils.⁽⁴⁾

Ensuring the citizen's right to attend deliberations and access their decisions, as mentioned in the above article, partially enshrines the principle of participation as a fundamental aspect of citizenship, which is one of the most important indicators of participatory democracy. It is worth noting that the law-in the previous article-only addresses the right to information and access to the decisions resulting from the deliberations, without granting the ability to reject or even express an opinion on the nature of these outcomes.

Returning to elections as a mechanism for participation, the act of voting itself is considered an expression of the citizen's choices regarding who and how their public affairs are managed. However, what makes the idea of elections contradict the involvement of citizens in managing public affairs is that elections in municipal councils are not based on the principle of selecting the best program; rather, they are often dominated by a "tribal" character.

Candidates rely in their electoral campaigns on the strength of "tribes" and the nature of the supporting entities with vested interests. It cannot be denied that tribes are part of the local elite that wields significant influence in the region. However, in many areas, they have negatively impacted the relationship between citizens and the electoral

body. Even after the establishment of the Municipal People's Council, local notables often seek to sway the local electorate to achieve private interests.

2. The Municipality and Civil Society:

After the events of the 1980s, the Algerian state allowed the establishment of a considerable number of associations, marking a development in civil society activities. However, the issue of bureaucracy imposed relative constraints on many associations and limited their independence. Even after the political reforms accompanied by the emergence of the Municipal Law of 2011.

although the principle of civil society participation is generally accepted, practical participation has become somewhat complicated. Despite the existence of a legal provision suggesting the Municipal People's Council's desire to involve civil society institutions in the political process, it, like others, remains general and unclear regarding the methods and areas of participation. This allows us to infer the nature of the participatory relationship between the Municipal People's Council and civil society in light of these considerations.

Article 13 of Law 11-10 on Municipalities of 2011 states: "The President of the Municipal People's Council may, whenever municipal affairs require, consult any local figure, expert, or representative of a legally recognized local association, who can provide any useful contribution to the work of the council or its committees based on their qualifications or the nature of their activities". ⁽⁵⁾

Upon reading this legal provision, one can infer the idea of involving civil society in municipal affairs as advisory bodies on issues related to their activities (environmental, social, cultural, etc.). However, a closer examination of the article reveals difficulties in understanding the nature of participation and whether it is at the discretion of the President of the Municipal People's Council or if there is some form of obligation. It is clear that the law does not mandate the inclusion of other actors in the decision-making process regarding municipal issues. Generally, the concept of consultation implies that there is no obligation to consider the opinions of civil society organizations.

Article 97 of the same law states: "The decisions of the President of the Municipal People's Council shall not become enforceable unless the concerned parties are informed through publication of their content

includes general provisions, or after individual notification by any legal means in other cases."⁽⁶⁾, in this article, the concept of participation is also limited to notification rather than genuine involvement.

In the relationship between civil society and the municipality, as both actors in participatory democracy, the role of civil society can emerge as a partner through the existence of a developmental stake between them. Despite the ambiguity of the aforementioned provisions, opening the space for civil society movements allows them to express their concerns and propose solutions to the Municipal People's Council.

If we consider the issue from a positive perspective, the presence of civil society in deliberations and public proposals can strengthen the relationships between the Municipal People's Council and civil society organizations. Consequently, these proposals may gain acceptance, particularly through the informal relationships that association leaders can establish with the President and members of the Municipal People's Council.

The presence of deliberations conducted by the local council represents a form of transparency in managing local affairs, thereby granting it a supervisory role. If civil society senses any infringement on public funds or administrative or financial corruption, it has various means to exert pressure on the local council's staff through public opinion and various media outlets. This serves to address any issues faced by local administration.⁽⁷⁾

Voluntary work represents one of the areas where civil society can be relied upon. Engaging in volunteer activities to assist local authorities in specific fields, or in areas where the local body finds it difficult to provide services, is facilitated by the flexibility and rapid response characteristic of volunteer operations. This enables actors to share responsibilities, so to speak, and collaborate in achieving the common good.

3. The Municipality and the Private Sector:

It is difficult to discuss the relationship between the municipality and the private sector. Despite the growing size of the private sector in the country and the reforms adopted by the state to involve new actors, primarily the private sector, through partnerships with state agencies in various fields, there is no legal provision in the recent municipal law that explicitly addresses the possibility of involving the private sector

in local decision-making. A review of the municipal law reveals some articles that discuss the delegation of public technical services responsible for certain tasks, including: household waste management, public lighting, covered markets, weekly markets, and public transportation.

Article 155 of the Law on Municipalities states: "The municipal public services mentioned in Article 149 above may be subject to a concession in accordance with the applicable regulations. The concession is subject to a standard specifications document to be determined by regulation".⁽⁸⁾

Article 156 also reinforces its predecessor: "The municipality may delegate the management of the public services specified in Article 149 above through a program contract or a procurement contract in accordance with the applicable legislative and regulatory provisions".⁽⁹⁾

one notable observation regarding both articles is their reference to regulations. Additionally, the areas of delegation mentioned are specifically related to the provision of public services rather than participation in their design. Furthermore, the participatory approach does not equate to the delegation mentioned in Law 11-10 in Chapter Four under the title "Concessions and Delegation of Public Services," as delegation is a form of privatization of management.

At the local level, there may be confusion between the concept of partnership with the private sector in shaping public policies and even decision-making, and other similar concepts such as public contracts and concessions mentioned in the law, as well as privatization. Generally, the idea of involving the private sector as a social partner for the municipality is limited to being a partner in the provision of public services. There are certain types of public service partnership contracts that the municipality can adopt, two of which are mentioned below:⁽¹⁰⁾

A- Service Contracts: *Service contracts ensure the establishment of agreements for specific activities that extend over several years. In these contracts, the municipality sets a range of performance standards and supervision criteria for the private sector, while retaining full responsibility for managing the public facility. The service is*

characterized by flexibility and the provision of optimal cost in management and human resources.

B- Leasing Contracts: *Under these contracts, the municipality leases the public project it owns to a private sector tenant who operates it in exchange for annual payments. Typically, in this type of contract, the private sector finances the capital, and it is particularly effective in the water and transportation sectors.*

This is from a theoretical perspective; however, in the context of application, since there is no clear legal framework through which the municipality can involve the private sector as a social partner in the local political and developmental process, it can be considered as one of the local figures or experts who can be consulted (Article 13). Nevertheless, the absence of the private sector as an actor in participatory democracy at the municipal level is not solely due to the shortcomings of legislative organization, but also to the profit-oriented nature of the private sector, which often conflicts with the idea of “achieving the public good.” This makes it difficult to discuss the private sector and its relationship with the municipality. Additionally, we should not overlook the local authority’s desire to monopolize political and developmental life and control the decision-making process.

On the other hand, the relationship between the elected body and the private sector extends from the electoral campaigns, as candidates or electoral lists rely on funding from the private sector. This relationship continues even after the formation of the municipal people’s council. The influence of wealthy individuals on the political process cannot be denied, not only at the national level but also at the local level. Another crucial point to discuss in this context is how the municipal people’s council can involve another actor as a partner in the decision-making process regarding public affairs if its decisions as an official actor are subject to oversight by central authorities. Therefore, the authority to determine the partners in the developmental process does not primarily belong to the municipality but is influenced by certain legislations governing the process.

The examination of the roles of the three actors at the local level and the nature of their relationship with the main actor (the municipal people’s council) leads us to the conclusion that the effectiveness of these actors is weak. The data brought forth by participatory

democracy necessitates the active participation of all societal forces in a manner that serves the public interest. In the context of completing the efforts of regional communities in managing local affairs and achieving new relationships that move away from traditional management methods, we believe it is essential to provide a suitable environment to realize the participatory approach, both in terms of legal frameworks and the nature of the actor itself, which suffers from a crisis in terms of structure and function. This is what we will attempt to address in the following section, along with outlining some key points that need to be met to overcome this shortcoming in applying the participatory democracy approach.

Chapter II: Challenges and Stakes of Participatory Democracy in the Municipal People's Council:

In the context of Algeria's efforts to enhance the participatory democracy approach at the local level, several legal, political, and even social mechanisms have been established to activate it. This includes promoting popular oversight of elected councils and attempting to cultivate a culture of participation in shaping local policies. However, in reality, when we return to the practical level of the participatory approach, we find a weakness in the application of the concept of participation within the municipal people's council. What are the reasons that led to the failure of implementing this approach, and is it possible to find pathways through which effective participation can be realized within the framework of participatory democracy?

1- Obstacles to Participatory Democracy in the Municipal People's Council:

When examining the reality of the Algerian environment at the local level, we encounter several points that hinder the effective application of the principles intended to activate participation. Some of these points can be mentioned as follows:

A- The Problem of Weak Institutional and Legal Frameworks:
Despite the importance that the law has given to elected councils, particularly municipal ones, in its recent legislation following political reforms coinciding with changes on the international stage, the establishment of the principle of participation in municipal law was not clear. Most legal provisions were general and referred to regulations, not to mention the absence of a clear mention of the concept of participatory democracy in any article of the municipal law. The

legislator merely mentioned the term "participation" without specifying how participation should occur and the channels through which it should be implemented.

B- The deliberate confusion and lack of distinction by the municipal people's council between the principle of confidentiality and the lack of transparency is concerning. The law is supposed to enshrine the right to information, with the principle of confidentiality being an exception. In this matter, the electoral body relies on the ambiguity of the legal concept of confidentiality, thus leaving it to the discretion of the electoral body.

C- There is no legal provision in the municipal law that explicitly states the involvement of the private sector under any designation, which is considered a drawback of the municipal law. This oversight reflects a lack of importance given to one of the key actors in participatory democracy, despite the establishment of the principle of participatory democracy in the constitution.

D- The Problem of Oversight on the Municipality: The municipality is subject to oversight exercised by the wali as a representative of the central authority, as well as oversight by the Minister of Interior. This includes central authority oversight over the members of the municipal people's council and their activities. In other words, despite the municipality being a legal entity with an independent financial status, it cannot manage its resources or make decisions regarding its territory without referring back to the central authority. This certainly limits its effectiveness in independently involving other actors in managing its local affairs. Furthermore, the overseeing authority has the power to dissolve the municipal people's council.

E- Given the absence of regulatory frameworks and institutional traditions for practicing participatory democracy, the electoral body's goal in integrating social partners is often to buy social peace. Although the procedural mechanisms for participation provide a certain level of information to citizens, their role in decision-making remains weak. However, the authorities aim to avoid opposition to the decisions they issue through these mechanisms. ⁽¹¹⁾

F- The idea of "consultation" is repeated in several legal provisions; however, it renders participation a mere formality due to the non-binding nature of the decisions resulting from the consultation process. This is because the municipal people's council is not obligated to follow

the consultation mechanism in the first place, which may render the idea of involving other actors practically irrelevant.

G- The Problem of Civil Society as a Framework for Individual Behavior: Recently, the phenomenon of the increasing number of civil society organizations with various orientations and names in Algeria has drawn attention. Despite their theoretical importance, they have faced the reality of lackluster outcomes for several reasons, including:⁽¹²⁾

□ The failure of civil society organizations to activate their oversight and accountability role.

□ The widening structural problem, which is characterized by their inability to represent real social forces and the persistence of traditional active channels, such as endowments and religious orders, within specific historical frameworks.

□ The increasing forms of financial dependency of civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations, which reflects on their policies and practices, often leads to the prioritization of the explicit or implicit agendas of donors, whether they are governmental or private entities.⁽¹³⁾

□ The legal restrictions imposed on civil society organizations under the pretext of regulating their activities and functions, in addition to the exertion of pressures and the establishment of administrative, organizational, financial, and security constraints, alongside legal controls.

□ The dialectic relationship between the state and civil society remains one of tension and pull, within the context of the relative freedom granted by the state, but without allowing civil society organizations to activate their fundamental role.⁽¹⁴⁾

□ The absence of transparency and democracy in management: Most civil society institutions suffer from management issues that have often led to splits, resulting either in their dissolution or the suspension of their activities. Additionally, the programs and objectives of civil society associations in Algeria are unclear due to their uneven emergence.⁽¹⁵⁾

□ We also find a weakness in legal culture and organizational expertise among the elite leading this civil society. Most of these institutions, for example, rely heavily on the state for material support,

whether in terms of premises or funding, and they struggle to establish organizational frameworks for financial independence. This compels them to align themselves with local authorities to obtain their share of assistance and support. On the other hand, polarization represents another challenge facing Algerian civil society organizations.

□ *The exploitation of civil society organizations, whether by their leaders or by local authorities, to promote projects and private interests that are unrelated to the public good.*

□ *Civil society institutions are characterized by a weak democratic culture within them; these organizations operate under the leadership of specific individuals for years and decades, much like the system itself, and there is no rotation of power, for example. How can they practice democracy in the absence of its values within their internal structure?*

□ *The Problem of Political Culture: One of the most significant obstacles to establishing participatory democracy is the weak culture of participation among citizens and the absence of civic values, even among the local elected officials themselves.*

□ *The central idea of the role of the state is firmly established; in Algeria, it is difficult to view other actors as drivers of political or developmental action.*

□ *The weakness of political socialization: Most citizen-building institutions do not effectively socialize individuals in a healthy manner regarding participation in public action.*

□ *The withdrawal of the elite from participating in the management of public affairs is one of the biggest problems currently facing the establishment of participatory democracy in Algeria. This is not due to a lack of political awareness, but rather to the entrenched belief in the futility of participation, given what they perceive as the marginalization of competencies.*

□ *The contribution of the security crisis experienced by the Algerian people in the 1990s led to the withdrawal of the majority of social groups from active participation in public affairs, favoring the option of security at the expense of democracy, participation, and development.*

The obstacles facing participatory democracy in Algeria, especially at the local level across various fields, are fundamentally related to the

context of its application, meaning the environment that supports this approach. Is it truly conducive to establishing such new concepts? Amid this complexity between the social environment and the official state institutions, what are the prospects for participatory democracy in its local aspect, particularly at the level of elected bodies?

2- Opportunities for Establishing Participatory Democracy in the Municipal People's Council:

The challenges arising from the calls for implementing the participatory democracy approach at the local level require alternative strategies to activate the elements that facilitate the establishment of participatory democracy in practice. This includes both existing but inactive elements and those that have not been utilized wisely, as well as the elements that need to be provided in order to overcome the reasons that have led to the failure to apply the approach practically.

The Legal Framework: Establishing local participatory democracy requires, first and foremost, regulating the relationship between the municipal people's council and the central oversight authorities. Then, it is essential to work on embodying the principle of separation of powers, as this ensures clarity of competencies and prevents the overlap of jurisdictions. Consequently, it guarantees that no authority interferes with or exerts pressure on another, thus overcoming the formality of institutions.

To establish the participatory democracy approach, it is essential to regulate the relationship between citizens, civil society, and the private sector, institutionalizing this relationship to make it more sustainable and transparent. This should allow for the involvement of these relevant forces in the issues raised concerning the municipality's territory⁽¹⁶⁾. In this context, a mechanism must be found to obligate the municipal people's council to involve other actors in the council's deliberations and to require their participation in decision-making, not just consulting them (of course, with conditions and criteria for participation).

Establishing bodies for consultation among various social forces and the necessity of legally enshrining them to protect citizens' right to participate. These bodies would study, evaluate, and possibly implement proposed projects. Additionally, it is essential to limit formal decentralization; the elected council, being closest to the citizens of its territory, should have a margin of freedom in decision-making without

having to refer back to the overseeing authority.

Enhancing the performance of civil society institutions by ensuring their financial and ideological independence, and eliminating the closed political behavior towards these institutions. This can be achieved by revisiting the associations law, which has restricted their freedom in developmental work. Additionally, it is important to organize the relationship between civil society and the state in a way that guarantees at least relative independence and limits or alleviates state control over civil society entities. Therefore, local authorities should commit to relative neutrality towards the various forces and organizations of civil society and work to involve them in decision-making instead of merely engaging in formal consultative processes. They should also reduce bureaucratic procedures in dealing with these organizations and minimize oversight within the limits allowed by law, ensuring the proper functioning of public order. ⁽¹⁷⁾

From this, the necessity of involving civil society institutions according to their specialization in the committees formed by municipal councils arises, rather than merely consulting them.

Raising the level of political awareness among different segments of society and instilling the values of participatory democracy can be achieved by promoting civic values, avoiding the exclusion of others, accepting pluralism and diversity, and even encouraging intellectual pluralism. In the same context, it can be said that there is a need to restructure citizens' involvement in the political process at the local level through empowerment tools such as media and modern technologies, which councils should adopt to disseminate as much information as possible to reach the largest number of citizens.

Theoretically, what has been mentioned seems easy to implement through legislation and the enactment of laws, as well as the establishment of mechanisms to enable various forces to participate in managing local affairs. However, the critical point that arises with every central idea is the extent to which a suitable institutional environment, especially in terms of human and cultural aspects, is provided for partnership and empowerment of various active forces to participate in political life. This is the primary challenge that must be addressed to achieve a proper understanding of modern concepts and their applications.

Conclusion:

he approach to participatory democracy at the level of the municipal people's council suffers from certain shortcomings, which is evident in the laws related to municipalities and in the implementation of the policies outlined in those legislations. Despite the transformation witnessed by some actors, such as civil society organizations, in their activities at the local level and their attempts to translate their role through partnerships with official bodies, their role remains weak compared to the responsibilities assigned to them under the concept of the participatory approach.

On the other hand, there is a near-total absence of the private sector at the level of municipal councils, both in terms of laws and practice. Its relationship with elected councils has been limited to its role as a supplier of goods to the municipality and its public interests, or as a party in public contracts.

From the above, it appears that the municipal people's council represents the official actor in the participatory democracy approach and is the central force driving the participatory process. To establish participatory democracy, which assumes a multi-polar society where all its parties participate in the local decision-making process, the following must be done:

□ *Working to transform rigid laws into practices, while necessarily adapting them to the nature and values of society.*

□ *The process of building participatory democracy should generally start from the bottom, beginning with the desire of individuals and then groups to engage in public affairs.*

□ *In order to build a political value system that encourages effective participation, a solid foundation based on the individual must be established; otherwise, the approach to participatory democracy will remain merely a slogan in political discourse raised at every national or political occasion.*

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