

---

# Decentralization and Governance Capacity: The Case of Turkey

---

By Evrim Tan

Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 286 pages, \$76.82, ISBN: 9783030020460

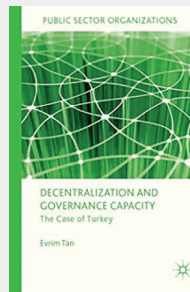
---

Reviewed by Çiğdem Görgün Akgül, Ordu University

---

Under what circumstances would decentralization lead to better governance? This is the question Evrim Tan addresses in *Decentralization and Governance Capacity: The Case of Turkey*. Tan analyzes the relationship between capacity and decentralization in Turkey using surveys and official data collected from 65 provincial municipalities, finding that socio-economic conditions are more determinant on the outcomes of decentralization than local capacity. Using an analytical method based on regression, Tan indicates that the relationship between decentralization and governance should be dealt with not only at the institutional level but also at the socio-economic level. Thus, he presents a new approach toward practices of capacity building and decentralization reforms. To achieve better governance outcomes, the author suggests asymmetrical decentralization based on socio-economic development at the sub-national level.

The book consists of an introduction, conclusion and four main chapters. In the introduction, Tan draws attention to the ambiguous relationship between capacity and decentralization and provides an overview of the two major views in the literature regarding the subject. The first chapter asserts that the existence of certain governance capacities is a precondition for decentralization to reach a successful outcome, whereas the second posits that the



success of decentralization leads to high governance capacities (pp. 2-4). Tan approaches this dilemma as a “chicken and egg situation.” He emphasizes the difficulty of refuting either argument since capacity and decentralization could emerge simultaneously. He opposes the generally accepted tenet in the literature of public administration that decentralization leads to more successful governance. Instead, based on the outcomes obtained from the examples of developing countries, Tan argues that decentralization succeeds only if certain conditions are met (pp. 11-12).

The second chapter presents the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of local governance, decentralization and capacity. The main goal of the chapter is to tease out the intersections of the governance, decentralization and capacity literatures and review decentralization and capacity from the perspective of public governance. Tan defines public governance as a model wherein local actors, among which local government is *primus inter pares*, act together to provide service to the people and meet their demands. This conceptualization is significant since this theoretical point of view on public governance does not exclude other actors’ roles or reduce them to passive watchers by diminishing their functions. It puts forward that their relational positions should be considered in assessing the quality of the service delivery. Therefore,

this new analytical model involves not only certain administrative and organizational capacities of local government but also includes environmental conditions such as geographical location of the organization, economic sources of the environment and its level of development.

Chapter 3 introduces the case of Turkey. Turkey has a deep central state tradition and has applied different localization reforms since the beginning of the 2000s. As such, it presents a unique example for the author to explore the relationship between capacity and decentralization to understand their relationship to better governance. This chapter starts with a general outlook on the historical development of local administration in Turkey and continues with the current legislation regarding the public administration system. It touches upon local administration reforms and discusses whether the reform process has transformed Turkish public administration into a more decentralized and more managerial system or not. The findings indicate that central administration still maintains its effective position in local governance despite the increasing administrative and financial autonomy of the local administration (p. 99).

In Chapter 4, the author examines a series of governance capacities, such as financial, material, planning, communication, managerial and human resources capacities, in the case of Turkey with reference to statistical data. According to the results, the capacity of local governance changes depends on various factors, such as the size of the local administration, the geographical area in which it is located and the type of local administration. For instance, while bigger municipalities possess more financial and material capability compared to small municipalities, those located in socio-economically more advanced

areas possess more resources in terms of human resources, e-government infrastructure, and user profile (p. 141). Similarly, metropolitan municipalities have more capacity compared to provincial municipalities, and provincial municipalities have more capacity compared to district ones (p. 153). Lastly, the author argues that only the same type of local administrations should be compared in terms of capacities.

In Chapter 5, titled “What Is the Relationship between Governance Capacity and Decentralization?” Tan reinforces his arguments with empirical data. He assumes that the financial autonomy of the local administration is the essence of successful decentralization. In this direction, he discusses whether administrative and organizational capacities or socio-economic conditions are more determinant for the financial autonomy of a local administration. Within the framework of his findings, Tan reveals that socio-economically more advanced provinces can develop better public governance even with insufficient administrative and organizational capacities. Further, the local administrations in socio-economically underdeveloped areas have limited success (p. 186). Therefore, socio-economic conditions are much more determinant than the administrative and organizational capacities of a local administration in terms of public governance.

In the conclusion, the author claims that standardized and symmetrical decentralization reform process applied at the local level could plausibly lead to different public governance outcomes in developing countries where wealth distribution is disproportionate and regional inequalities are ample (p. 202). For these countries, the author suggests an asymmetrical decentralization policy in which the central government intervenes less in a more

talented local administrations and takes on a more active role in inadequate local administrations (p. 204). Hence, asymmetrical decentralization policies may contribute to more successful public governance in these countries compared to symmetrical decentralization policies.

All in all, the author unpacks the important relationship among socio-economic development, local capacity, and better governance in

the case of Turkey. However, he leaves it open whether the situation observed in Turkey is compatible with other countries or not. Nevertheless, the effort to put these complex and overlapping themes into an appropriate order should be appreciated. This study provides a reliable reference for academics in the field. In addition to its academic value, *Decentralization and Governance Capacity* provides a useful reference for policymakers and bureaucrats interested in this subject.

---

## A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa

---

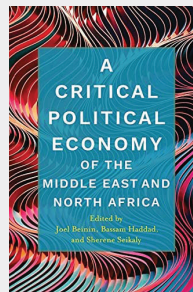
*Edited by Joel Beinin, Bassam Haddad and Sherene Seikaly*  
Stanford University Press, 2021, 344 pages, \$28.00, ISBN: 9781503614475

---

*Reviewed by Fouad Mami, University of Adrar*

---

*A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa* is premised on the idea that Rentier State Theory (RST) can no longer serve as an explanatory principle in analyzing state dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The editors of the book presuppose that only a methodology rooted in a critical political economy can explain the fortunes of people in the MENA region in their respective polities.



The concept of 'class' is usually swept under the carpet, but not in this volume. Given the domineering neoliberal order, marshaling the courage to discuss class is an added value. Nevertheless, the editors trust that "...causes are simultaneously effects; all events are situated in a relational matrix." (p. 1). The flattening of causes by equating them with effects and presupposing both as free-roaming enunciations serves the stultifying of historical change.

Developmentalism has been responsible for the reintegration of precapitalistic modes of production into global capitalism. Applying units of measurements such as GDP not only hides how measurements come littered with ideological biases but that the sophistry of numbers can somehow magically replace analysis. Furthermore, developmentalism sells the illusion that the peoples of the MENA region may one day become the replica of Europe.

The book is divided into two uneven parts. Part I, "Categories of Analysis," has four chapters. In Chapter 1, Kristen Alff illustrates how diverse land tenure practices under the Ottomans, contrary to Orientalist allegations, have never been a hindrance to capital accumulation. Mercantile activities have been predominant in the region, but the wide-ranging practices of Middle East elites should not be construed as capitalistically