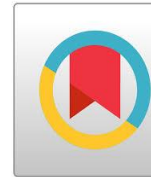


**Examining the Forms of Central Government’s Dominance over Local Governments in Liberia**



**Menelaah Bentuk-Bentuk Dominasi Pemerintah Pusat Atas Pemerintah Daerah di Liberia**

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	
<p><b>Keywords</b>  <i>Central Government;                      Local Government;                      Decentralization ;                      Dominance Officials;</i></p>	<p><b>ABSTRACT</b>                      In recent years, the government of Liberia and its stakeholders have developed several policies towards decentralization that have led to significant developments. However, challenges still remain, especially the dominance of the central government, political greed, etc. This study aims to identify the forms of central government’s dominance over local governments in Liberia and its impacts on local governance. This research applied a qualitative method with primary data obtained through interviews with relevant informants and secondary data obtained through analysis of previous studies, mass media, and policies regarding decentralization in Liberia, and analyzed using an interactive model in addition to the NVivo 12 Plus software. The findings reveal that the central government exerts dominance in three forms, including visible, hidden, and invisible forms. Visible forms include explicit regulations predominantly financial control and local officials' appointment, which allowed the central government to dictate local governance. Hidden forms mainly include intimidation and political party influence, which are not publicly acknowledged, allowing the central government to maintain its dominance and often devaluing local agendas. Invisible forms mainly include institutional capture and policy development, shaping the mindsets of local officials and citizens as well as viewing this dominance as natural, thus leading to a culture of silence. Hence, the research emphasizes the need for further reforms to ensure a balanced distribution of power and the independence of local governments to serve communities effectively and make decisions aligned with local needs.</p>
<p><b>Kata Kunci</b>  <i>Pemerintah Pusat;                      Pemerintah lokal;                      Desentralisasi;                      Dominasi Pejabat;</i></p>	<p><b>ABSTRAK</b>                      Dalam beberapa tahun terakhir, pemerintah Liberia dan para pemangku kepentingannya telah mengembangkan beberapa kebijakan menuju desentralisasi yang membawa perkembangan signifikan. Namun tantangan masih tetap ada, terutama dominasi pemerintah pusat, keserakahan politik, dan lain-lain. Penelitian ini mengkaji bentuk-bentuk dominasi pemerintah pusat terhadap pemerintah daerah di Liberia dan dampaknya terhadap pemerintahan daerah. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan data primer yang diperoleh melalui wawancara dengan informan terkait; dan data sekunder yang diperoleh melalui analisis penelitian sebelumnya, media massa, dan kebijakan mengenai desentralisasi di Liberia dan dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif selain perangkat lunak NVivo 12 Plus. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pemerintah pusat melakukan dominasi dalam tiga bentuk, yaitu bentuk yang terlihat, yang tersembunyi, dan yang tidak terlihat. Bentuk-bentuk yang terlihat mencakup peraturan eksplisit yang sebagian besar merupakan pengendalian keuangan, dan penunjukan pejabat daerah, yang memungkinkan pemerintah pusat untuk mendikte pemerintahan daerah. Bentuk-bentuk yang tersembunyi</p>

	<p>terutama mencakup intimidasi dan pengaruh partai politik, yang tidak diakui secara publik, sehingga memungkinkan pemerintah pusat untuk mempertahankan dominasinya dan sering kali merendahkan nilai agenda lokal. Bentuk-bentuk yang tidak kasat mata mencakup dominasi kelembagaan dan pengembangan kebijakan, pembentukan pola pikir pejabat daerah dan masyarakat, serta memandang dominasi ini sebagai hal yang wajar, sehingga mengarah pada budaya diam. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini menekankan perlunya reformasi lebih lanjut untuk memastikan distribusi kekuasaan yang seimbang dan kemandirian pemerintah daerah untuk melayani masyarakat secara efektif dan mengambil keputusan yang selaras dengan kebutuhan lokal</p>
<p><b>Article History</b>                  Send 26<sup>th</sup> August 2023                  Review 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023                  Accepted 3<sup>th</sup> December 2023</p>	<p>Copyright ©2024 <a href="#">Jurnal Aristo (Social, Politic, Humaniora)</a>                  This is an open access article under the <a href="#">CC-BY-NC-SA</a> license.                  Akses artikel terbuka dengan model <a href="#">CC-BY-NC-SA</a> sebagai lisensinya.</p> <div data-bbox="1203 651 1406 696" style="text-align: right;">  </div>

## **Introduction**

This paper aims to identify the specific forms of power that contribute to the central government's dominance over local governments in Liberia, uncovering the strategies used by the central government to maintain control. Decentralization is a political reform that has been implemented in Liberia since the end of the civil war (Nyei, 2014), which aims to provide autonomy and authority to local governments to promote effective governance, public service delivery, and encourage regional development (Hong & Lee, 2018; Song et al., 2018). Notably, the National Policy on Decentralization and Local Governance as well as the Local Government Acts are policies that decentralized Liberia by transferring authority from the central government to local governments (Podah, 2019). These policies aim to divide powers, authority, functions, and responsibilities between the central government and local governments to protect national sovereignty, including the administration of justice, auditing, elections, foreign affairs, immigration, industrial licensing, intellectual property, money, banking, insurance, defense and security, emergencies, health, education, water policy, police, law enforcement, as well as posts and telecommunications. The policies grant specific powers for local governments, such as political, administrative, and fiscal powers. The Decentralization Implementation Strategy, Liberia Decentralization Support Program (LDSP), and Local Government Act 2018 were also created to maintain the policies' effectiveness in promoting equity and reducing exclusion between the central and local governments (Krawczyk & Muhula, 2018).

Despite these interventions to improve local governance, there are still major constraints hampering the implementation, such as political posturing and factionalism, corruption, lawlessness and poor service delivery (Agyemang-Duah et al., 2018; Reddy, 2018). For instance, all members of local governments in Liberia are appointed and can be dismissed by the president and have no defined powers and functions since all decisions regarding policies, programs, and the expenditure of money are made at the center, and the local governments are compelled to carry out the directives of the central government (Ntekim Ekpe et al., 2013), which administratively makes the local governments deconcentrated (Krawczyk & Muhula, 2018). It is also important to note that the policy of granting autonomy and authority to local governments in Liberia are on paper only, not in practice, as all decisions on laws and planning are top-down with the central government dominating all aspects (Mbabazize et al., 2022). Additionally, local governments are used as political instruments against opposition parties since all officials of local governments are compelled to be the members of the ruling party (Clarke, 2019). Even though the Local Governance Act was already passed in 2018 to

strengthen the citizen participation and support local accountability, service delivery, election of officials and own-source revenue generation, it still has not been implemented yet since the central government continues to dominate all aspects.

This has drawn the attention of many researchers in recent years. Clarke (2019) found decentralization as Liberia's best policy option for citizen participation and good governance. The achievements include county-level service centres and local government acts. However, the study revealed that the country's history of centralized governance, corruption, inequality, constitution violations, and resource misuse hinder a successful implementation. Ntekim Ekpe et al., (2013) stated that the apparent problems faced by the local governments are structural dysfunctionality, as well as the absence of acceptable and ideal structure, functions, and responsibilities that make them responsive to the yearnings and aspirations of the rural populace. Equally important, Baldwin & Winters (2018) stated that the lack of local government's independence from the central government decreases the beliefs of the citizens as well as the quality of the local government, reducing the will of the citizens to comply with the local government policies. Similarly, Nyei (2014) argued that a myriad of issues ranging from structural to legal and procedural matters - constitutional reform, revenue collection and expenditure - need to be better considered by the government actors in Liberia while rolling out a decentralization program. On the other hand, Mpuya Madaha (2016) posited that although local governments need autonomy, they must continue to work under the authority of the central government for the common good of the entire nation.

It has been investigated that despite the implementation of several decentralization policies in Liberia since 2011, the central government retains total control over all governmental decisions, including financial, political, and administrative, both at the national and local levels (Clarke, 2019; Ntekim Ekpe et al., 2013; Nyei, 2014). Due to this excessive domination, it is important to examine the specific power contributing to this situation. Although the previous literature collected in this study are still relevant and forms the basis for research on local government policies in Liberia, no study has been found discussing why the central government remains dominant over local governments in Liberia. This leads to the question: what are the specific forms of power contributing to the central government's dominance over local governments in Liberia? What is new in this study is its specific focus on identifying the specific forms of power contributing to the central government's dominance over local governments in Liberia and describing the strategies used by the central government to maintain control, which has not been discussed yet to fill the research gap. This study is interesting because it uses new data to address this crucial problem in decentralization and

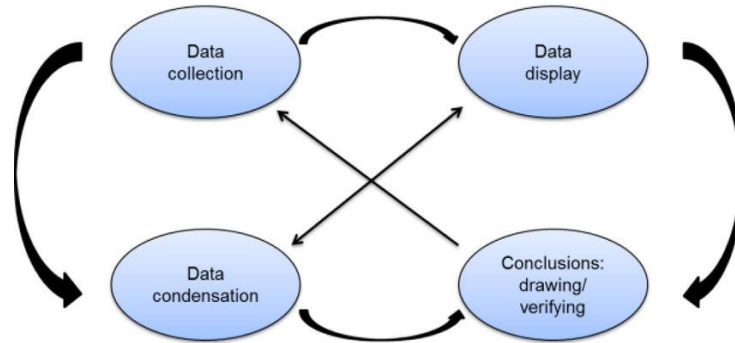
governance by providing new information, especially when the country is heading to a new administration and implementation of new local governance policies. This study will be conducted by focusing on specific cases with the potential to provide insightful analysis and useful suggestions for enhancing local governments and fostering decentralization in Liberia. This study will enrich the existing body of knowledge in academia about local government and decentralization in Liberia as well as countries that are challenged.

In this regard, the Power Cube Theory introduced by John Gaventa will be used to guide the analysis of this research. This framework enables researchers to examine the dimensions of the Power Cube and its relationships, allowing the visualization of situations, actors, relationships, and forces as well as aiding in planning advocacy and action entry points (Gaventa, 2019; Gaventa & Pettit, 2011). However, based on the scope at hand, this research focuses on the dimension of form (visible, hidden, and invisible powers) of the power cube, helping the researchers to identify the forms of power that contribute to the central government's dominance over local governments (Chen et al., 2019; Chygryn et al., 2018; Kumburu & Pande, 2018). By identifying these specific forms of power, this research provides insight into strategies used by the central government to maintain total control in Liberia. Further research should explore the impact of the specific forms of power that will be revealed in this study and propose solutions such as accountability and transparency to achieve social and economic development.

## **Method**

This research applied a qualitative method (Huyler & McGill, 2019), enabling the results of this research to explore the forms of power that contribute to the central government's dominance over local governments. Data sources in the study were divided into two types, primary data and secondary data (Taherdoost, 2021). Primary data were the data obtained directly through in-depth interviews with several sources such as local officials, civil society actors, media experts, and activists. Secondary data were the data obtained from previous studies that are relevant to this research, analysis of mass media and archives of documents related to the decentralization in Liberia such as the Constitution of Liberia, the National Policy on Decentralization and Local Governance (NPD LG), the Local Government Acts 2019 (LGA), the Revenue Sharing Act (RSA), Public Financial Management Act (PFMA), Liberia Decentralization Support Programme (LDSP), Pro-Poor Agenda for Development and Prosperity (PADP), Public Sector Reform Agenda, Budgetary Law, etc.

Data analysis was carried out using an interactive model (Miles et al., 2014). The model started with the data collection process and condensation to make the data more focused. The collected data were then displayed through coding and divided into themes and categories. The themes and categories were illustrated in cases and nodes. From these, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted. In addition, this study also used NVivo software using cross-tab analysis. For the interactive analysis model, see the figure below:



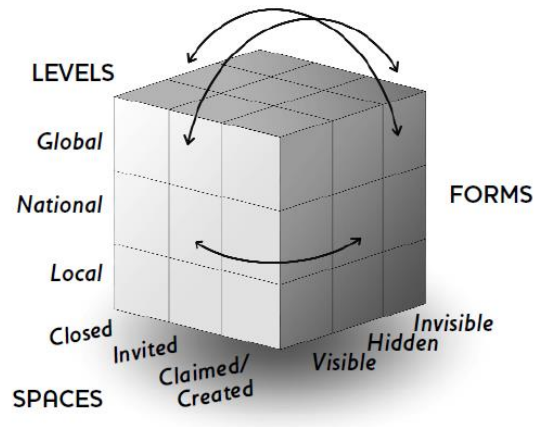
**Figure 1. Interactive Analysis Model for Qualitative Data**

**Source:** Miles et al., (2014)

## **Result and Discussion**

### **The Power Cube Theory**

This research utilizes the Power Cube Theory to analyze the forms of central government's dominance over local governments in Liberia. Gaventa (2019) explained the Power Cube Theory as a framework to analyze power levels, spaces, and forms, allowing the visualization of situations, actors, relationships, and forces. It explores the concepts of power 'over', 'to', 'with', and 'inside' by focusing on how powerful actors control agendas and how less powerful actors can build awareness and action for change (Gaventa, 2021). The cube examines openings, levels, and strategies for exercising agency, strengthening the power to act, and exploring alliances formed with actors working on each dimension. The power cube theory can be better explained below:



**Figure 2. The Power Cube: the levels, spaces and forms of power**

*Source: Gaventa, 2019*

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the dimensions of level, space, and form in the Power Cube Theory. Firstly, Gaventa, (2019) in "Applying Power Analysis: Using the 'Power Cube' to Explore Forms, Levels and Spaces", emphasized the importance of considering all levels of power, including global, national, and local. Globalization has created spaces for participation and influence beyond the nation-state, including formal institutions such as the UN, World Bank, IMF, and regional-level bodies like the African Union, EU, and regional networks. National governments are crucial for change, representing the citizens in global governmental arenas and deciding on international treaties (Gaventa & Pettit, 2011). Sub-national decision-making arenas are essential for holding and challenging power. State-level governments are important actors in federal systems, while decentralization has made local governance more important through programs and structures.

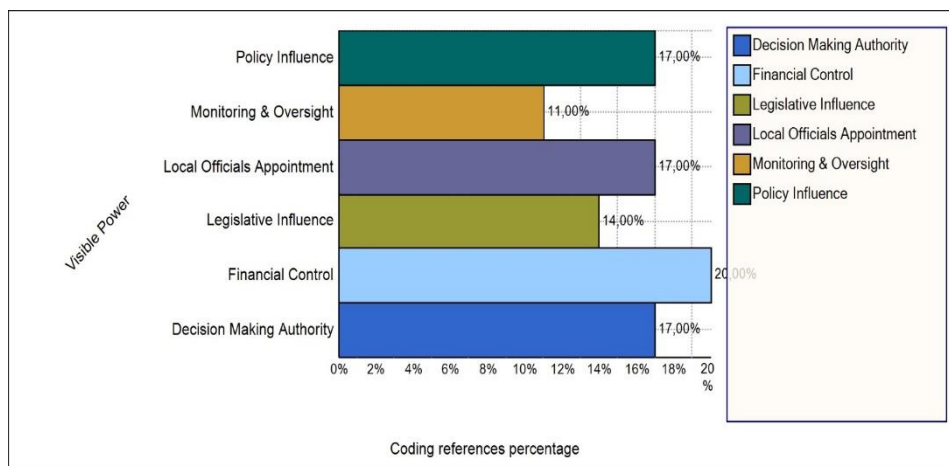
Secondly, Gaventa (2021) stated that the concept of 'space' refers to the decision-making arenas where power operates and spaces are created. He distinguishes spaces into three types, including reserved or closed spaces controlled by elite groups, invited spaces created by external pressure, and hidden spaces for less powerful individuals to develop agendas and create solidarity. Spaces can be virtual or physical, and understanding these forms of space is crucial for better utilization to create more invited spaces and facilitate the claiming of space through negotiation. The Power Cube helps us understand these different forms of space and how to use them effectively.

Lastly, the Power Cube distinguishes three levels of power visibility, including visible power, hidden power, and internalized power (Gaventa & Pettit, 2011; Qu & Khantanapha, 2017). Visible power is negotiated through formal rules and structures, while hidden power

focuses on decision-making controls and the influence of powerful individuals and institutions. Invisible power influences individuals' perceptions of their place in society and prevents questioning the existing power relations. The Power Cube helps distinguish between different dimensions of power and challenges the assumption that enforcers of rules are oppressors (Luttrell et al., 2007). However, as previously stated, this research will focus on the dimension of form of the Power Cube building analysis on visible, hidden, and invisible powers, as comprehensively explained in the next section.

Visible Power: Observable Decision Making

Visible power is the conventional understanding of power that is negotiated through formal rules and structures, institutions and procedures, allowing certain powerful groups to determine who gets what, how it is done, and what is done within policy-making (Gaventa, 2019, 2021). In the context of decentralization in Liberia, visible power is identified in areas under the central government’s control, such as justice administration, auditing, elections, foreign affairs, immigration, industrial licensing, intellectual property, money, banking, insurance, defense and security, emergencies, health, education, water policy, police, law enforcement, as well as posts and telecommunications (NPDLG, 2011). The central government's control over these areas significantly influences the decision-making process, policy-making, resource allocation, etc., at the local level. Reserving these special authorities to the central government prevents deliberative powers within local units, functioning as extensions of line ministries from the capital. These visible powers are comprehensively explained in the figure below:



**Figure 3. Central Government’s Visible Power over Local Governments: The Case in Liberia**

*Source: Processed by the authors with NVivo 12 plus (2023)*



Figure 3 illustrates the visible form of the central government's dominance over local governments in Liberia with financial control (20%) as the most used visible form. The National Policy on Decentralization and Local Governance, the Local Government Act of 2018, the Revenue Sharing Act, and the Public Financial Management Act of 2019 exclusively transferred fiscal control to local governments, increasing citizen participation in financial management and allowing local governments to retain local revenues for operations (Local Government Act, 2020; Leory III, 2021; NPDLG, 2011; Writer, 2023). However, the lack of political will from the central government has hindered the implementation of fiscal decentralization policies in Liberia which is highly centralized. For example, local officials lack the authority and ability to generate and spend tax revenue independently, leading to their exclusion from the tax collection process (Seminara, 2021; UNDEF, 2020). The central government oversees all revenue collection processes through the Liberia Revenue Authority (LRA) and all revenues collected must flow to the central government through the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Seminara, 2021). Also, there is no transparency in financial management between the central government and local governments due to the lack of authority of the local officials in budgetary transfer/disbursement from national to local regions (Reporter, 2021; Weedee, 2012). This centralized financial control enables the central government to dictate financial policies, allowing the national officials to dominate local governments' budgets and siphoning tax dollars to supporters.

Subsequently, the appointment of local officials (17%) such as superintendents, mayors, council members, etc., is another visible strategy employed by the central government to have significant control over local governments. Liberia is a highly centralized state with excessive executive powers, particularly in the appointment of public officials. Local government officials, city mayors, and township commissioners are appointed and dismissed by the President (Nyei, 2014; Seminara, 2021), and the president reserves the right to appoint and direct all county-level officials, including superintendents, administrative personnel, and mayors (Tipoteh, 2023; UNDEF, 2020). The president also retains powers to remove even-elected chiefs. This system is lack of checks and balances, and the president has exercised extraordinary power in managing the state affairs, especially, since the legislative and judicial branches have always proved powerless in enforcing their monitoring and oversight responsibilities over the executive branch (Menjor, 2021). Additionally, the major excesses of the president remain rooted in its power to appoint and remove public officials at will, set national and local priorities, and determine how the nation's financial resources even at the

local level should be controlled and expended (Dodoo, 2020). In the management of the state affairs, all socio-economic and political decisions that impact local communities continue to be controlled and directed by the president through ministries based in the nation's capital and agents sent to the local administration (Dodoo, 2020; Tipoteh, 2023; UNDEF, 2020). This authority of appointing local officials has allowed the central government to shape local governance and appoint officials who align with their priorities and agenda.

As a result of the appointment of local officials by the president, the decision-making authority (17%) as shown in Figure 3 within local government heavily relies on the central government, allowing the national officials to control local administration. Liberia is an overly centralized country in terms of administrative decentralization due to the lack of subnational elections in the imperial presidency and favouritism over public interests (Nyei, 2014; Seminara, 2021). For instance, decentralization policies in Liberia emphasize the transfer of administrative decision-making authority to the local governments, yet the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) is responsible for overseeing the local administration (Nyei, 2014; Seminara, 2021; UNDEF, 2020). This centralized system hinders the bottom-to-top developmental initiatives, the subordinates' participatory governance, as well as increases poverty and constricts local dwellers to focus on the central government due to the unclear role of local governments. Additionally, the central government lacks the political will to grant decision-making authority to local governments, fearing that decentralization may lead to federal structure demands or secession by richer counties and losing authority to local authorities (Tokpah & Reporter, 2016). Moreover, decision-making authority in Liberia is deconcentrated as local officials have minimal or no space in the decision-making process, but act as agents of line ministries from the capital and accept all decisions made by the central government (Reporter, 2015). This legacy of centralized governance means that Liberia continues to decline in decentralizing local decision-making from the national to the local level.

In the same way, local policies (17%) such as development and service delivery are also influenced by the central government (see Figure 3), leading to failed development programs and limited service delivery. The appointment of local officials gives them minimal space for decision-making (Seminara, 2021), resulting in excessive policy control. For example, in Bong County, the local government spent around US\$2.29m on thirty construction projects, with no project being fully completed. In addition to this, the local administration paid around US\$59,000 to invisible contractors for four projects, which were never started by the contractors (Lomax, 2022). Political pundits and civil society argued that these financial and developmental policies were influenced by officials from the central government which limited

the roles of local governments, thus causing stalling of these projects. Further, senior officials who are far from local citizens always determine most of the policies regarding projects, resulting in lack of accountability and abandoned projects (Lomax & Reporter, 2017). This has led to massive corruption and leaders being irresponsible to the local citizens. Moreover, central government officials often personalized and interfered with policy creation and implementation for political reasons, resulting in poor oversight from lawmakers (Lomax, 2022; Singbeh Jr & Browne, 2015). For example, concession agreements with companies operating in local areas are signed by the National Legislature and the President, granting rights to the companies without the knowledge, consent, and input of the communities (Lomax, 2023; Tokpah & Reporter, 2016). This empowers the central government to dominate in setting the agenda, determining priorities, and driving policy decisions that directly impact the local governance.

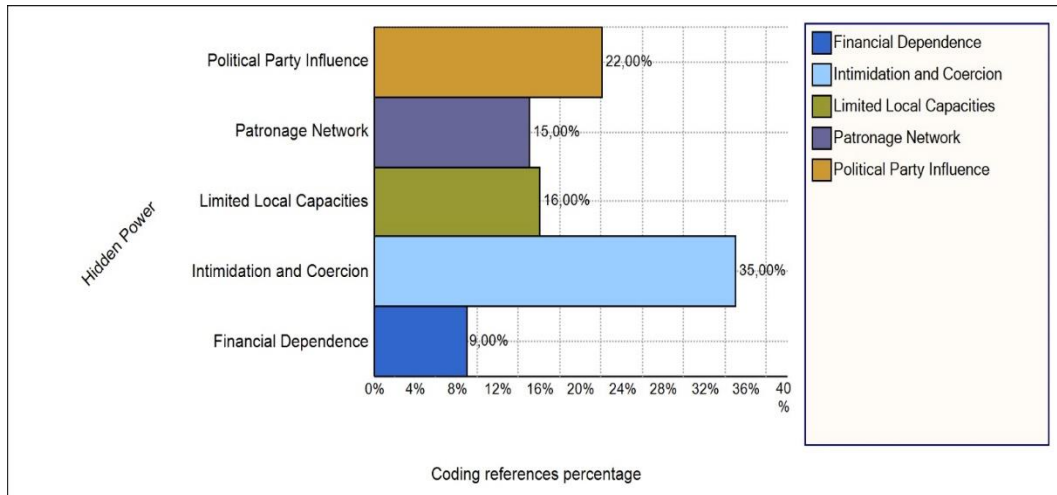
Likewise, the influence of legislative members also shapes local governance (see Figure 3). While this influence has shown positive trends like fighting corruption, it can also be harmful to local governance. For example, in 2021, lawmakers placed a moratorium on Bong County's account and requested an audit over the mismanagement of the local government's budget around US\$80,000 by some national and local officials (Reporter, 2021; Yekeryan, 2021). Additionally, they halted a project in the same region, which initially cost US\$50,000 but was later increased to US\$249,000 by the local officials without the consent of the National Legislature (Mafelah, 2020), not to mention the illegal disbursement of budget around US\$50,000 by some national and local officials without a county sitting resolution (Lomax, 2019). However, legislative involvement has also harmed the local government progress in Liberia. For instance, lawmakers have refused to pass bills that allow the elections of local officials due to concerns that their power and influence will be limited (Tokpah & Reporter, 2016). Additionally, a lawmaker in Nimba County individually withdrew around LD\$ 5 million (Five-million Liberian Dollars) from the county local government's budget to fund a political campaign (Johnson, 2022). In 2022, about 53 bills were enacted by the legislature for effective governance at the national and local levels, yet lawmakers were weak in implementation and oversight, thus frequently violating their own bills and overusing their power over local administration (Menjor, 2021). This has allowed the central government, particularly the legislators, to shape the framework that governs local governance and decision-making processes, leading to corruption and a lack of transparency and accountability.

Lastly, monitoring and oversight (11%) is the lowest strategy, suggesting that the central government still maintains highest supervisory responsibilities over local governments

which can cause fear among local officials. Local governments have a certain degree of autonomy in implementing policies, but the central government still maintains the supervisory role. One example is that local officials act as agents under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Seminara, 2021; UNDEF, 2020), with the head of local governments having no authority to report directly to the National Legislature or the President. Instead, local officials report to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which then reports to the President and the National Legislature (Local Government Act, 2020). District commissioners, paramount chiefs, clan chiefs, general town chiefs, city mayors, and Township commissioners are all under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, except for the Mayor of Monrovia, who reports directly to the President. Critics argue that this mechanism allows the central government to maintain supreme power over local governments. It also lacks autonomy and creates fear, as the local officials should align with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and cannot directly report to the President and National Legislature.

### **Hidden Power: Setting the Political Agenda**

According to Gaventa, (2019; 2021), hidden power focuses on the actual controls over decision-making and the way certain powerful people and institutions maintain their influence over the process which often exclude and devalue the concerns and agendas of less powerful people. In the context of Liberia, hidden power refers to those forms of control and influence exerted by the central government that may not be openly acknowledged, thus devaluing the concerns of local officials and citizens. This includes political party influence, patronage networks, limited local government capacities, intimidation and coercion, and financial dependence. These mechanisms are often used by the central government to maintain their influence and create behind-the-scene decisions, which can significantly shape the local governance dynamics. This phenomenon can be better explained in the figure below.



**Figure 4. Central Government’s Hidden Power over Local Governments: The Case in Liberia**

*Source: Processed by the authors with NVivo 12 plus (2023)*

Figure 4 illustrates the hidden form of the central government’s dominance over local governments in Liberia, starting with the highest form, Intimidation and Coercion (35%) indicating that the central government frequently employs tactics such as harassment, violence, threats, etc., to subdue local governments. For example, in 2018, the Vice President of Liberia threatened local officials in Bong County to join the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) or get fired (Dodoo, 2018). After this statement, several local officials in this local government were dismissed and replaced with partisans of the ruling CDC (Reporter, 2018). Moreover, the National Chairman of the ruling CDC also made open threats to both national and local officials, stating that those who do not join the CDC will be hunted and also get fired (Genoway & Admin, 2018). Similarly, in Nimba County, senior government officials and lawmakers coerced local officials to join the CDC or face termination of employment if they did not declare support for the ruling party or support the opposition parties instead (Koinyeneh, 2023). Furthermore, local officials are also prohibited from joining social movements and protests against the central government. In 2019, local officials were threatened with termination of employment if they joined the December 30 'Weah Step Down' protest, which was organized by the Council of Patriots in response to severe economic hardship, delayed salaries, and unemployment (Lomax, 2019). These intimidations violate the Constitution, which mandates that local officials should be elected. The government continues to ignore this constitutional provision, giving the president undue power to appoint local

officials and subjecting them to serve at his discretion. This has continued to undermine the autonomy and decision-making process of the local governments, creating fear and contributing to poor governance.

Following, the second highest data collected regarding political party influence (22%) in Figure 4 indicates that alignment with parties significantly influences the appointment and formation of local government in Liberia. In a nutshell, the appointment of local officials are heavily reliant on party affiliation, often as a means of compensating them for political support during elections (Bamba Jr, 2022). Legislators also recommend names to the executive for appointment in return for political support (Bamba Jr, 2022). In fact, local officials must be loyal to the ruling party and participate in all party activities to maintain their jobs. For example, during the pre-election campaign of the ruling party CDC, several officials were mandated to wear party T-shirts, caps, etc., and walk along the streets (Reporter, 2023). Also, in December 2022, an executive order was released mandating all appointed government officials both at national and local levels to be present at party headquarters for the "Weah One Million Citizens Petition Program," and failure to do so could lead to dismissal (Clayeh, 2022). Furthermore, as a means of protecting their jobs, 15 superintendents and several local leaders openly declared their support for the ruling party ahead of the 2023 Presidential and General Elections (Konton, 2022). Therefore, this phenomenon of party affiliations leading to party-linked appointments has allowed the ruling party to control decision-making processes at both national and local levels, preventing officials from creating independent decisions and being innovative.

Meanwhile, limited local capacities (see Figure 4) suggest that local governments face challenges in their capacities due to corruption, lack of authority, and technical skills. The primary objective of decentralization in Liberia was to create County Service Centers in each region to provide basic service delivery and alleviate pressure on citizens to travel to the capital for services like documents, certificates, and permits (Writer, 2023). However, these centers faced challenges such as low salaries, technical personnel shortages, and logistical constraints. For instance, corruption has led to bribery and additional fees as national officials demand extra fees on services, preventing basic services for local residents (Bamba Jr., 2022). Also, the authority to approve and sign documents remains a challenge, as local officials have no authority to sign documents, thus increasing transactional costs for local residents who are forced to travel to Monrovia for documents (Writer, 2023). Additionally, technical skills are also lacking due to low salaries and technical personnel's unwillingness to take jobs in rural Liberia (Bamba Jr, 2022; Reporter, 2021). Furthermore, the lack of a stable power supply, timely disbursement of allotments, and logistical constraints further hinder the effectiveness of

these service centers (UNDP, 2021). For example, public health crises hit Nimba County in 2021 as many public facilities experienced shortages of basic medicines, electricity, equipment, trained health practitioners, etc. (Menkor, 2021). These limitations have undermined the effectiveness of local government and made their purposes useless as citizens prefer the fast and reliable processing of documents by travelling to the capital. These limitations continue to harm the autonomy and decision-making abilities of local governments.

Subsequently, patronage network (15%) based on Figure 4 indicates that the central government often distribute benefits, resources, and favors to individuals within local governments who are key members of the ruling party. Particularly, political patronage has overshadowed local governments that leads to the recruitment of friends and relatives, often resulting in uneducated officials with poor qualifications, corruption, and a lack of transparency and responsibility in governance (Bamba Jr, 2022; Seminara, 2021). Not only this, but also, a local official in Bong County openly stated that some senior officials often collaborate with local officials to loot natural resources, bribe, and illegally award contracts to friends and families for personal gains (Tokpah, 2023). In addition to this, senior officials also collaborate with some local officials to secretly increase their salaries as a result of their cooperation in misusing local funds for personal gains. For example, salaries of some local officials were increased from US\$1,000 to US\$2,000 without any justifiable cause (Tokpah, 2023). Moreover, some local officials receive special treatment from the central government as opposed to others. For instance, the General Audit Commission (GAC) released an audit report on the Bong County administration which revealed the misuse of over US\$500,000 by some officials, but these officials were never held accountable as they are believed to be strong members of the ruling regime (Taylor & Yekeryan, 2022). On the other hand, the superintendent of Margibi County was immediately fired following his alleged involvement in criminally trespassing a land belonging to another person (Writer, 2023b). Moreover, this is common in Liberia as patrons within the central government often use their positions to secure resources and protections for their supporters, which has created power imbalances between the central and local governments.

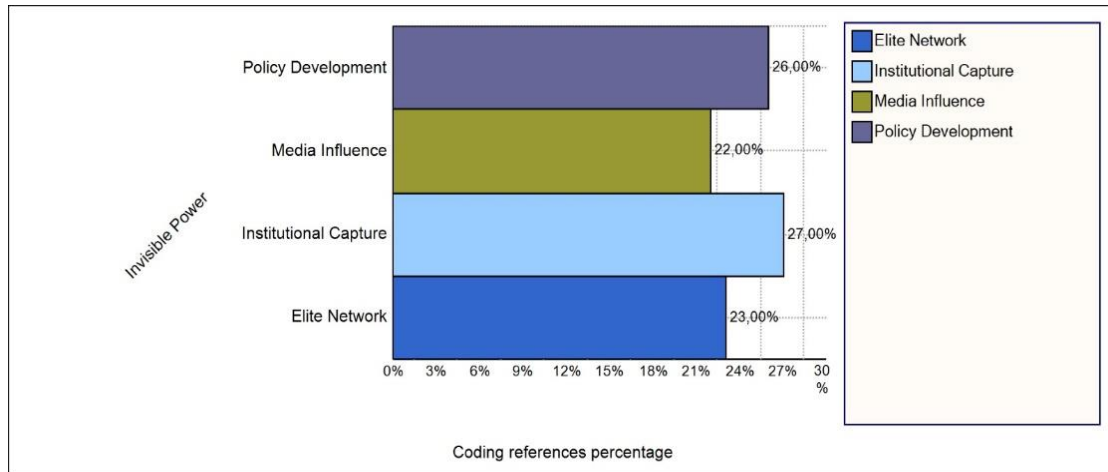
Least in the data (see Figure 4), but yet significant, is financial dependence (9%) implying that local governments rely on financial resources provided by the central government, thus facing challenges such as lack of electricity, salary constraints, low budget allocation and logistics. Between 2016 and 2022, local governments generated over \$4 million in revenue through service provisions that went directly to the central government through the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Seminara, 2021; Writer, 2023). To address this issue, the

government enacted the Revenue Sharing Act (RSA), which mandates local governments to retain 40% of revenue from service provision for operational purposes (Leory III, 2021; Writer, 2023). However, local government officials are excluded from the tax collection process, and concession agreements with regional companies are signed without local consent, leaving companies accountable to the central government only. Companies are obligated to pay a certain amount to the local government's budget, but the money is paid to the central government, which later transfers to local governments. In some cases, the central government delays payments or doesn't pay at all. For example, developments in Gbarpolu County have been stalled due to the national government not transferring over US\$1.4m to the local government. Additionally, three counties, Nimba, Bong, and Grand Bassa, experienced a significant reduction in their shares of the Social Development Fund (SDF) from Arcelor Mittal, a mining company operating in these regions. The central government cut these shares by 20%, causing locals to feel misunderstood and limiting their autonomy (Koinyeneh, 2020). As a result, local governments only depend on their annual entitlement of around US\$250,000 from the central government for development purposes which is insufficient.

#### Invisible Power: Shaping Meaning and What is Acceptable

Invisible power operates by influencing how individuals think of their place in society and explaining why some are prevented from questioning existing power relations (Luttrell et al., 2007). According to Gaventa, (2019), this power is often hidden through the adoption of dominating ideologies, values, and behaviors by powerless groups themselves. Also, in this form of power, people may be unaware of their rights, and their ability to speak out, and may come to see various forms of power or domination over them as natural, or at least unchangeable, and therefore unquestioned, leading to a 'culture of silence' caused by the internalization of oppression (Gaventa & Pettit, 2011). In Liberia, invisible power is often a tactic used by the central government to shape the meaning of governance and influence the powerless (local citizens) to accept what is implemented by the central government which has created a culture of silence. This is because the locals feel that the central government's dominance is natural and unchangeable, thus, there's no need for questioning. Notable invisible powers often used by the central government include policy development, media influence, institutional capture, and elite networks. The situation is explained in the figure below:





**Figure 5. Central Government’s Invisible Power over Local Governments: The Case in Liberia**

*Source: Processed by the authors with NVivo 12 plus (2023)*

Figure 5 illustrates the invisible form of central government’s dominance over local governments in Liberia with institutional capture (27%) being the most frequent form of invisible power. Despite decentralization policies, the central government still holds absolute control over bureaucratic and regulatory institutions such as finance, education, health, environment, civil service agency, and electricity, with local governments having no participation (Giahvue, 2022; Seminara, 2021). For instance, absolute control over education has led to poor education for many locals in rural areas, with 50% of Liberia's human capital lost due to poor education (Azango, 2012; Koinyeneh, 2022). Health is another area where local governments have no influence. About 70% of Liberia's population lives outside the capital, with only one hospital per 100,000 people, most of which are located in the capital (Marie, 2021). Access to health facilities in rural areas is often difficult due to the lack of transportation equipment and financial resources. Excessive control over regulatory institutions also hinders local governments. For example, the central government usually manipulates and exploits the vetting process of civil service jobs by recruiting party members, friends, and relatives (Senkpeni, 2018). These institutional captures have led to a concentration of power within the central government, undermining effective local governments and are considered natural and unchangeable.

Secondly, policy development (26%) is another form of invisible power often used by the central government to influence local governments. The central government appoints local governments, who has the authority to shape and control the policy agenda which potentially marginalizes the local governments and their ability to address local needs (Seminara, 2021).

For example, the policy for resolving the harmonization of regional boundaries that divides regional governments was highly centralized, leaving local authorities and citizens out of the process (Tokpah & Reporter, 2016). Also, senior executives and legislators reserve all rights to decide how County Development Funds are used, leading to the failure of many developments in many counties (Quato, 2015). Further, powerful central political actors do not allow local authorities to develop independent policies, fearing that they will develop policies to maintain political allies in rural areas that potentially leads to rebellion against the central government (Gbartea, 2020). Moreover, Liberia is highly centralized with the central government having absolute authority over the policies of local governments, allowing political actors from the centre to dictate to local authorities and providing insufficient space for local government input and representation in the policy-making process, thus creating a culture of silence.

Thirdly, the presence of an elite network (23%) in the data indicates the existence of influential individuals or groups closely connected to the central government who use their connections to control local governments. These individuals are specially treated and no one is allowed to speak against or question them. For example, a lawmaker in Margibi County was denied questioning the Minister of Health about the mismanagement of donor funds allocated for health facilities (Karmo, 2023). In Bong County, about \$1.8 million of the Social Development Fund was allocated for development and student empowerment but left in limbo through elite connections (Lomax, 2021). Thirteen projects were initiated and \$100,000 was allotted for tuition aid for university students through County Council Sitting, but none were completed. Further, senior political actors, especially from the central often gave local development contracts to their personal companies and friends and mismanaged public funds without accountability (Lomax, 2022). Moreover, jobs at local governments are usually manipulated by the central government by distributing them amongst their party's elites which violates the regulations of the Civil Service Agency (Senkpeni, 2018). This concentration of power has led to exclusionary practices, favouritism, and elites who prioritize their own interests above those of local governments and the public.

Lastly, least in that data, yet important is media influence (22%) that indicates another invisible form of power contributing to the central government's dominance over local governments. Media has the potential to shape public opinion and influence perceptions of locals, thus, the influence of the central government in controlling ownership and influencing media outlets and practitioners shape and influence how people feel and think within the governance of process. The government continues to influence public information through the

media, imposing threats to media practitioners who report against the government (CEMESP, 2020). Recent reports show that critical Liberian journalists face threats and intimidation from senior government officials for reporting sensitive and investigative articles (Niranjan, 2018). For example, in 2019, a journalist was arrested and incarcerated for publishing sensitive financial documents about the Lofa Community College in Lofa County (CEMESP, 2020). Additionally, an award-winning journalist was attacked and humiliated by law enforcement officers for covering a protest against the government (Charles, 2023). Furthermore, the media is vulnerable to senior political actors, threats and intimidations, and several journalists have lost their lives (Niranjan, 2018; Reporter, 2022). Moreover, political actors have their own media institutions for reporting positive news about them only, which has led to imbalanced and inaccurate news dissemination among locals and a lack of media independence.

## **Conclusion**

Despite numerous efforts to decentralize Liberia, this research reveals that the central government still maintains significant dominance over local governments through three specific forms of power, including visible, hidden, and invisible forms of power, which have negative impacts on local governance. First, the visible forms include explicit regulations, such as financial control, decision-making authority, local officials' appointment, policy influence, legislative influence as well as monitoring and oversight, which limit local governments' autonomy and influence, allowing the central government to determine who gets what, how it is done, and what is done within policy-making. Second, the hidden forms include tactics, such as intimidation, political party influence, limited local capacities, patronage networks, and financial dependence, which are not publicly acknowledged, allowing the central government to maintain its influence and often devaluing the concerns and agendas of local officials and citizens. Third, the invisible forms include institutional capture, policy development, elite networks, and media influence that shapes the mindset, attitudes, and behaviours of local officials and citizens to view these dominations as natural and unchangeable, leading to a culture of silence. Hence, this research emphasizes the need for further examinations and reforms to ensure a balanced distribution of power. The research calls for increased transparency, accountability, and autonomy for local governments to serve communities effectively and make decisions aligned with the local needs. It serves as a stepping stone for scholars, policymakers, and stakeholders to empower local governments and foster inclusive, participatory, and sustainable governance structures. Finally, further studies can look into the specific impacts of the three forms of power already revealed in this study and consider

potential solutions for the imbalanced power between the central and local governments, such as building local capacities and increasing local autonomy by introducing the election of officials (superintendents, mayors, etc.) by citizens to encourage accountability, transparency as well as social and economic development in Liberia.

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