

Why Ladakh's plan for 7 hill councils has triggered a political debate

Why are Ladakh civil society groups against all seven of its districts getting a hill development council, even when they support local governance?

Written by: **Deeptiman Tiwary** 7 min read New Delhi Jul 16, 2026 07:07 AM IST



Much of the opposition is rooted in the steadily widening trust deficit between the Centre and Ladakh's civil society leadership since the region became a Union Territory in 2019. (File)

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The Ladakh administration's decision to constitute Autonomous Hill Development Councils (AHDCs) in each of the Union Territory's seven districts has reopened a debate over how political power should be distributed in the region.

While the administration says the move will deepen grassroots governance, the two civil society groups negotiating Ladakh's future with the Centre — the Apex Body, Leh (ABL) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) — argue that it could weaken the representative political structure they have been demanding under Article 371. The disagreement also reflects a trust deficit that has steadily widened between Ladakh's leadership and the Centre since the region became a Union Territory in 2019.

What has the Ladakh administration announced?

On Monday, the Ladakh administration announced that an Autonomous Hill Development Council would be constituted in each of the Union Territory's seven districts. Until now, such councils existed only in Leh and Kargil. The move follows the creation of five new districts — Drass, Sham, Nubra, Changthang and Zaskar — in April.

Chief Secretary Ashish Kundra said the new councils responded to long-standing demands from residents of the newly created districts and represented “a major step towards democratic decentralisation and grassroots governance”. He also said discussions with the Centre had broadly agreed on creating a Union Territory-level representative body under a customised framework under Article 371, which would exercise legislative, executive, financial and administrative powers.

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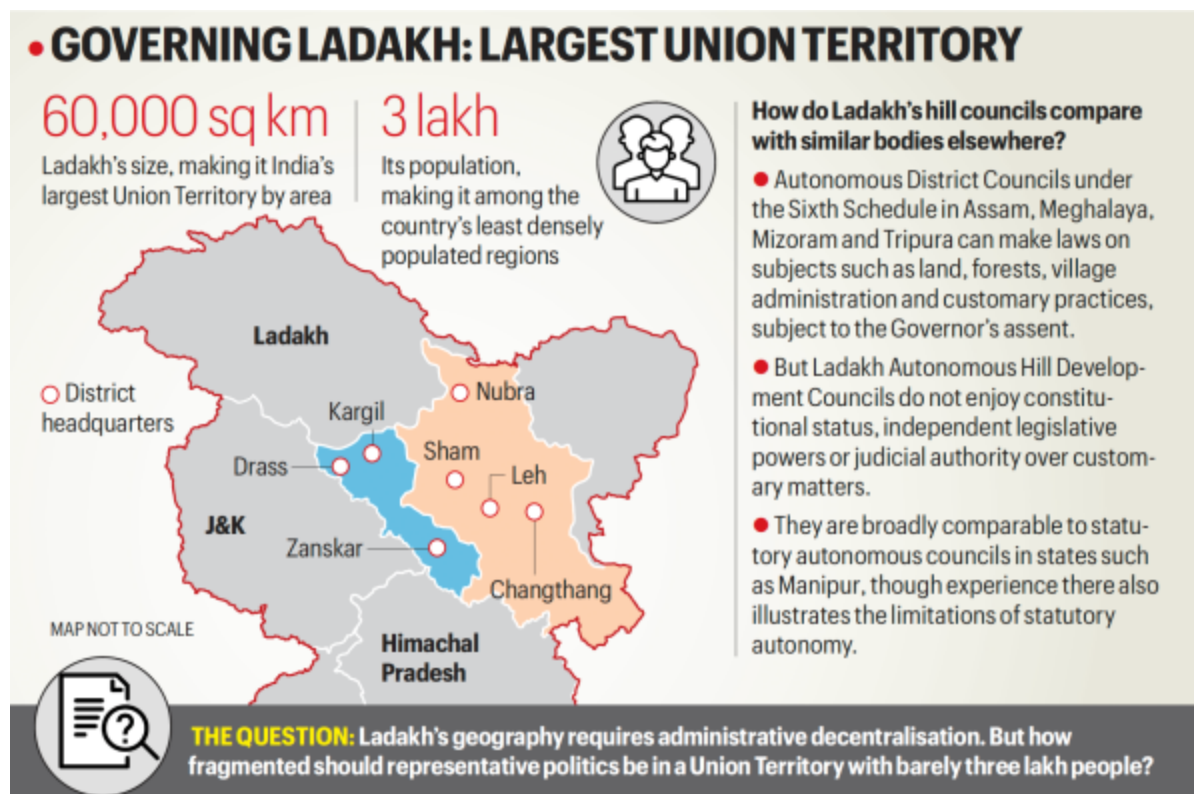


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The administration argues that the two initiatives are complementary. Section 3 of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council Act provides for the constitution of a council in every district

through government notification, and officials say the creation of seven districts logically necessitates seven councils.

The government also points to Ladakh's unique geography. Spread across nearly 60,000 sq km but home to barely 3 lakh people, it is India's largest Union Territory by area and among its least densely populated regions. Many villages are separated by mountain passes and several hours of travel, making decentralised administration a longstanding demand.



Why are Ladakh's civil society groups opposing the move?

Neither the ABL nor the KDA disputes the need for decentralised administration. Their objection is to what they call the fragmentation of political authority at a time when negotiations are underway over a representative political framework for Ladakh.

ABL co-chairman Chherring Dorje Lakruk argues that empowering seven district councils could leave little meaningful authority with the proposed representative body under Article 371.

"This is a plan to dilute the powers of the proposed representative government that is going to take shape under Article 371. If all the powers are going to be given to the hill councils, what will the representative government do?" he told The Indian Express.

KDA co-chairman Sajjad Kargili termed the move “maximum government and minimum governance”, questioning how seven councils would improve governance when, according to him, even the existing councils have steadily lost powers.

The debate has also opened a broader constitutional question. Ladakh's geography undoubtedly requires administrative decentralisation. But should representative politics be similarly fragmented in a Union Territory with barely three lakh people?

Civil society leaders argue that once seven hill councils, Panchayati Raj institutions, the Union Territory administration and a future Article 371 representative body all coexist, the lines of political accountability may become blurred. “With so few people and so many representative institutions, what meaningful role will eventually remain for the territorial government? And where does Panchayati Raj fit into this?” a Ladakh leader associated with the negotiations asked.

Their opposition has also been sharpened by procedure. According to Ladakh leaders, the proposal for seven hill councils figured in the Minutes of the May 22 meeting between the Centre and Ladakh representatives. They refused to sign that version, after which a revised record, without the proposal, was prepared and signed. They now argue that the Centre has proceeded with the announcement without consulting them.

Why has the announcement triggered such distrust?

Much of the opposition is rooted in the steadily widening trust deficit between the Centre and Ladakh's civil society leadership since the region became a Union Territory in 2019.

The initial enthusiasm following Union Territory status gave way to disappointment after it became clear that, unlike Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh would not have a legislature. Negotiations over Sixth Schedule-like safeguards and later an Article 371 framework have moved slowly, with civil society leaders repeatedly accusing the Centre of delaying substantive political reforms.

Relations deteriorated further after the September 2025 violence during protests in Leh, the detention of climate activist Sonam Wangchuk under the National Security Act, and remarks by political leaders that were interpreted locally as questioning Ladakh's patriotism. The mistrust deepened further when the Voice of Buddhist Ladakh emerged, claiming to represent Buddhist interests. Leaders of the ABL alleged that the organisation had been encouraged to weaken the joint movement of Leh and Kargil — an allegation the administration denies.

The creation of five new districts in April triggered another controversy, with the KDA alleging that the new administrative map disproportionately favoured Buddhist-majority districts. The dispute over the May 22 minutes of the meeting and now the decision to create seven hill councils have only reinforced the belief among civil society leaders that administrative decisions are increasingly being used to shape the contours of Ladakh's future politics.

Against that backdrop, even governance reforms are viewed through the prism of the larger negotiations over constitutional safeguards.

What powers do the hill councils have, and how functional are they?

On paper, the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils are among the more powerful statutory district bodies in India — if territorial authorities under the Sixth Schedule are kept out.

The 1997 Act makes them responsible for district planning and development, preparation of budgets and district plans, implementation of development schemes, management of land vested in the councils, collection of certain local taxes and functioning as the district planning and development board.

In practice, however, political leaders across party lines say the councils have steadily lost relevance after Ladakh became a Union Territory.

Congress leader and Leader of Opposition in LAHDC-Leh, Tsering Namgyal, told The Indian Express last year that decision-making had shifted to the Lieutenant Governor's secretariat and departmental secretaries, with councils often excluded from policy decisions. He said council recommendations on land were frequently ignored, council staff were increasingly deployed for the UT administration and budgets had been reduced.

Lakruk similarly described the councils as “virtually defunct”, alleging that even where the law gives councils authority over land, recommendations often remain pending with the district administration, and elected representatives are bypassed.

The paradox, therefore, is that while the administration now proposes expanding the number of hill councils from two to seven, many elected representatives argue that the existing councils themselves first need to be made genuinely functional.

How do Ladakh's hill councils compare with similar bodies elsewhere?

The LAHDCs occupy a middle ground in India's federal architecture. Unlike Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura, they do not enjoy constitutional status, possess independent legislative powers or exercise judicial authority over customary matters. Those councils can make laws on subjects such as land, forests, village administration and customary practices, subject to the Governor's assent.

The LAHDCs are broadly comparable to statutory autonomous councils in states such as Manipur, though experience there also illustrates the limitations of statutory autonomy. Despite significant powers on paper, Manipur's hill councils have often complained of financial dependence on the state government and limited administrative control.

The debate over the seven hill councils is therefore about much more than district administration. It is about where democratic authority ultimately resides in Ladakh — in multiple district councils, or in a powerful Union Territory-level representative body under Article 371.

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