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## Emergency Managers Undermine Principles of Democracy

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Around the world, people are demanding democratic accountability from their governments. Many of those crying out the loudest are people with very few resources, whose countries are facing deep and painful economic woes. No one who values democracy would suggest that just because they are poor, these heroes have no right to self-rule.

Yet here at home, some in our state have given up on democracy—despite being elected officials themselves. And evidently they believe that those with the fewest resources need democracy the least.

Earlier this year, our state government passed Public Act 4, the Local Government and School District Fiscal Accountability Act, which establishes a new form of local government: government by decree, with citizens ruled by an unelected official.

The law gives the governor "sole discretion" to appoint and oversee an emergency manager for any city, village or school district in the state. EMs, once in place, can sell off public property and shred all municipal contracts, including union contracts. They can dismiss all elected officials, charge the local budget with hefty salaries for themselves and anyone they choose to hire, and even dissolve the local government entirely.

Talk about a cure worse than the disease—far from adding to the financial resources of a struggling local government, emergency managers add costs that weren't there before. More important, by assuming authority over every single local matter, even those that are not financial, these appointed officials rob citizens of the most fundamental right: a say over their own community.

This is indeed an emergency—an emergency for democracy. That's why 28 citizens from across Michigan are challenging PA 4 in court, represented by the Sugar Law Center for Economic and Social Justice and a coalition of dedicated lawyers.

The plaintiffs include young professionals and retirees, African Americans, whites and Latinos, parents and people without children. Some live in cities that are suffering great financial distress, others in communities where the fiscal challenges are currently less dramatic. What unites them all is a passion for government of the people, by the people and for the people.

Over the last hundred years, Michigan voters have voted repeatedly to increase, not decrease, the autonomy of municipalities, villages and school districts. This growing concern with local control is legally enshrined in the 1963 Michigan Constitution, which specifically authorizes elected local government.

The idea is that local governments do not simply come and go at the whim of the state Legislature. Neither can the legislative branch make an end run around the Constitution by enabling the executive branch to do what they cannot do themselves.

Big Brother taking over may not concern us when it is happening to someone else, or when it looks as if "they brought it on themselves." And, of course, Big Brother always says, "Don't worry; I am only here to help you."

But this allocation of power to unelected officials with no accountability endangers the very essence of our system. Democracy makes us great not because it eliminates difficult choices, or always leads to perfect outcomes, but because in an imperfect world the people ultimately have the right to govern themselves.

In Libya, in Syria, in Egypt, those who are laying down their lives for democracy today understand this. Why don't the politicians in Lansing?

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