

# Political Parties in Bangladesh: Challenges of Democratization

Author: Rounaq Jahan

Reviewed by Abrar Ahmad

Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashan, 2015, pp. 212

BDHGLADESH abounds in paradoxes. It has confounded many developmental pundits by maintaining a fairly brisk pace of economic growth while continuing to be mired in dysfunctional politics, rampant corruption, and routine bureaucratic inefficiencies. It won a long and intense struggle to gain its independence, establish its identity based on cultural and linguistic markers, and commit itself to some secular and humanistic ideals, only to see the creeping shadow of disillusionment and rising religious assertiveness complicating the nation's previous clarity and confidence about itself. In a country where the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition (since 1991), and the Speaker of the House (since 2014) have all been women, it is also true that women face objectification and prejudice throughout the land that is pervasive, crude and, often, violent.

Professor Rounaq Jahan's latest book refers to a few other paradoxes more explicitly political in nature. But before we discuss the book, it should be noted that the project itself is situated within a more apparent conundrum. It is abundantly clear that Bangladesh is care deeply, perhaps obsessively, about politics. The people, particularly the highbrow classes, talk incessantly and cleverly about political matters. There is also a long and rich intellectual/creative tradition that is closely associated with the region. But strangely, perhaps lamentably, this passion for politics has neither been informed by, nor reflected in, much serious scholarly effort that has been dedicated to its study. Consequently, there is an academic vacuum in the field that is quite inconsistent with the country's own history, opportunities and needs.

Standing against that trend, and seeking to redress that imbalance, have been a few scholars in the social sciences and the humanities (economists are exempt from this category because many of them have pursued lively research agendas), who have remained intellectually engaged and productive. Dr. Rounaq Jahan has been a pre-eminent member of that small band of the faithful, and has continued to generate work on issues related to development, women, parliament, and so on, that is both sophisticated and relevant. Her current book serves to underscore her reputation as one of the premier political scientists working, and consistently publishing, on Bangladesh today.

The book is, ostensibly, about political parties and democracy in Bangladesh but is actually framed within a wider context of an apparent disjuncture between the country's stated, and supposedly enthusiastic, commitment to democracy on the one hand, and the many customs and practices seemingly inherent in the system itself that seem to threaten the very essence of that ideal.

Thus, its leaders speak fulsomely, and with much chest-thumping puffery, about the need for democracy, congratulate themselves on their struggles and sacrifices to protect it,

encourage their supporters to uphold it, and warn against dark conspiracies that seek to undermine it.

At the same time, some of the habits of thought and action embraced by these "fighters for democracy" have more often served to jeopardize the practice of democracy rather than further it. They have:

- lowered the level of political discourse through employing a rude, polarizing, inflammatory rhetoric that assumes that all "opponents" are "enemies", makes it into a self-fulfilling prophecy, and ensures that no compromise can be possible;

- created an intimidating environment for writers and journalists through political threats and judicial actions which have a "chilling effect" on free speech;

- cultivated a culture of impunity so that the rule of law is only selectively applied;

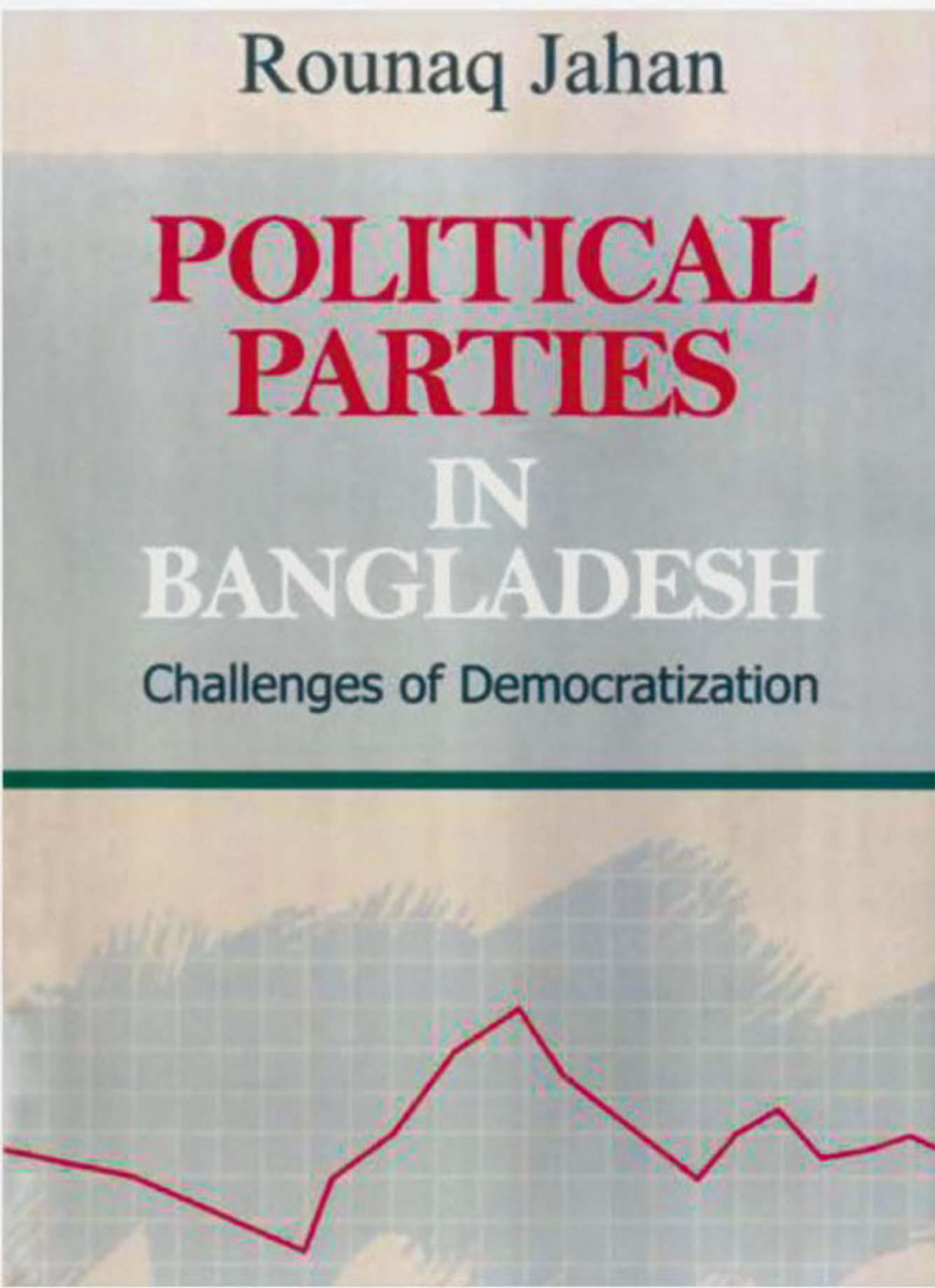
- manipulated the apparatus of the State, and politicized it's institutions, to advance partisan advantages in ways that are often arbitrary and sometimes vicious (which has led to a palpable erosion of civil rights and liberties in the country);

- devalued the Parliament with opposition parties routinely boycotting many, if not most, of its sessions and, in the process, turning the streets into the primary platform to vent political disagreements (which inevitably leads to costly economic disruptions, deeply frustrating public inconveniences, and bloody political encounters); and

- problematized the electoral system itself through pursuing a win-by-any-means strategy, or if-I-do-not-win-I-will-not-play tactics, that clouds the credibility and the moral authority of the entire exercise.

Professor Jahan explores this tension through the perspective of political parties. In the process she offers a broad overview of political parties in Bangladesh in the context of three eras which she has identified - between 1972 and 1975 when Bangladesh transformed itself into a one-party state, 1975 and 1990 when state sponsored parties launched by erstwhile military rulers controlled the system, and the third after 1991 with regular (if, at times, controversial) electoral contests that led to the emergence of the current system of two-party dominant clusters that commands the political landscape of the country.

She goes on to delineate the basic policy orientations and ideological inclinations that differentiate the parties, examine their structures and internal procedures, scrutinize their leadership and membership base as they have evolved over time, analyze their electoral strategies and outcomes, and investigate both the internal factions and the lived experience



of the parties at the grass-roots level. The tone is objective and judicious, the information substantive and well organized, the observations astute and insightful.

But Professor Jahan goes beyond providing merely a competent and comprehensive narrative about the parties she has chosen to investigate (the Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jatiyo Party and Jamat-i-Islami party). She also raises some other issues (paradoxes) that are germane to the notion of democracy itself, and its relevance and survival in Bangladesh. Several are worth pointing out.

For example, it is generally assumed by most political theorists that competing political parties are an indispensable part of the democratic process and the longer they have functioned, the stronger become the prospects of democracy; that electoral contests are expected to facilitate the consolidation of democratic principles and practices; and that an essentially two-party dominant system (with minor parties allied with them) should lead to greater democratic stability than a plethora of parties that can generate unnecessary, and often unwieldy, complexity. But, the extent to which these assumed relationships have been expressed, or realized, in Bangladesh is very much an open and intriguing question. In spite of enjoying almost all the advantages that are supposed to lead to the institutionalization of democracy in the country, Bangladesh continues to flounder at various levels and expose its democratic "defi-

cits" in many self-evident ways.

One answer to that enigma is explored by Professor Jahan. She poses this question rather provocatively - can parties really be expected to encourage and support the ideals of democracy at the national level when the parties themselves are indifferent to democratic norms and practices in terms of their own structures and procedures? Can democracies be really safe, or at all functional, in the hands of institutions that are organized in a fundamentally undemocratic manner? How can democracy flourish if the parties which advocate it do not practice what they preach?

Professor Jahan's book deals with this issue at some length and analytical rigor. The picture that emerges is not pretty. Party leadership remains in the hands of single individuals who dominate it for decades often spawning dynastic inheritance of the position. The council meetings (the highest deliberative body of the parties) are not held regularly, and when they are, the meetings are reduced to opportunities for sycophancy and rubber-stamping of the leader's wishes rather than meaningful debate or discussion. Parties are ridden with internal factions which necessitates constant bargaining that leads to a further strengthening of the leader's position because only s/he can negotiate/garner their support through spreading the rewards of sprawling patronage networks. Political campaigns followed by the parties deliberately utilize street agitation, intimidation, and the denial of political space to others. These strategies are reinforced by the increasing influx of money and mastans (thugs) in the political process.

Moreover, the parties typically ignore their own constitutions in terms of leadership selection, candidate nomination and policy setting, with the principal leader (and his/her chosen underlings) making most decisions. They are equally casual about meeting the stipulations demanded by the RPO (Representation of the People Order, 1972, with subsequent amendments) in terms of achieving diversity (both women and minorities are woefully under-represented), campaign finance regulations, or requirements of transparency. None of the parties have established procedures through which disagreements can be handled, or conflicts resolved, either within the parties or with external forces. There is little wonder then that such institutions could not possibly be the guardians and exemplars of democratic governance, and their rhetoric about their respect for, or commitment to, democracy is probably cynical and hypocritical froth.

But, while the book describes well, it does not explain as effectively. Several questions come to mind. First, why is it that the situa-

tion has developed in this direction? What is it that is so unique about the party system in Bangladesh that compels this kind of behavior? Is it political culture, historical quirks, leadership failures, social structure, or something else? Some explanatory framework would have greatly added to the value of the book.

Second, can we really refer to these institutions as political parties with philosophical and policy differences that are clear and specific (except for the Jamaat), or as groups formed around a dominant leader whose personal interests, ambitions and ego drive the group and lead to ideological shape-shifting, opportunistic alliances and factional bickering? (It should be borne in mind that it is entirely possible for the same person to belong to different governments in power, and it is typical to have break-away factions claim the name of the original party with the names of the new leaders in parentheses). In other words, are political parties in Bangladesh merely extensions of personalities rather than formally systematized structures that are supposed to follow the organizational rules and precedents that are usually, and perhaps universally, acknowledged?

Third, can we really discuss the patronage networks through which party leaders seek to secure their positions and extend their authority without reference to the pervasive patron-clientelism that defines a rentier state (hence the desperate scramble to gain governmental power), or the hierarchies and behavior patterns of the semi-feudal class structure that is so entrenched in rural Bangladesh? Thus, are political parties really contravening the democratic aspirations and commitments of the people, or are they merely reflecting, and in some ways reinforcing, the traditional modes of personal conduct and social transactions that are intrinsic to the system itself? Can parties be really expected to behave differently from the way in which other institutions, work-places or even families are organized, the way in which wealthier classes treat the less fortunate, or the way in which women are usually disregarded and made invisible?

Such minor quibbles notwithstanding, Dr. Jahan's book is an impressive contribution to the (admittedly meager) literature on political science in Bangladesh. She presents her case with care, precision and authority. Her style is crisp and steady. Her message is sobering. She does not dazzle us (there are far too many in Bangladesh who try to), but she enlightens, provides a fine example of scholarly research (which, hopefully, may also inspire younger academics), and provokes us to think. For all that, Dr. Jahan deserves our gratitude and, more importantly, deserves to be read and discussed.

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## Local Governance in Bangladesh Policy and Strategy Framework

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MOHAMMAD Rafiqul Islam Talukdar - Senior Programme Manager of BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University, and author of the books "Rural Local Government in Bangladesh" and "Sthanio Shashoner Rajniti (Politics of Local Governance)" - has recently authored an important work titled "Local Governance in Bangladesh Policy and Strategy Framework." The book is published with ISBN 978-984-91161-0-3 by Osder Publications, Dhaka, while the study of the same was commissioned by the Stephen Zuellig Graduate School of Development Management at Asian Institute of Management (AIM), Manila. I am pleased to make and publish this review as I was one of the two formal reviewers of the manuscript of the book, while the other one of the same was Professor Salahuddin M Aminuzzaman.

Author argues that absence of a local governance policy is a prioritized governance problem in Bangladesh, which affects effective implementation of decentralization policies and programmes sporadically undertaken from time to time. Democratic decentralization in line with the fiscal autonomy and local administrative reforms are in limbo for over three decades. The absence of a clear policy also affects institutional linkages of the local government bodies. In some cases overlapping of functions are evidenced in different Local Government institutions, while in other cases lack of coordination and inter agency cooperation are evident. More importantly, unless the country does have an aggregated local governance policy, it will not have a vision and road map for development of local governance. The author addresses issue along with the theories of decentralization. The book altogether consists of seven chapters.

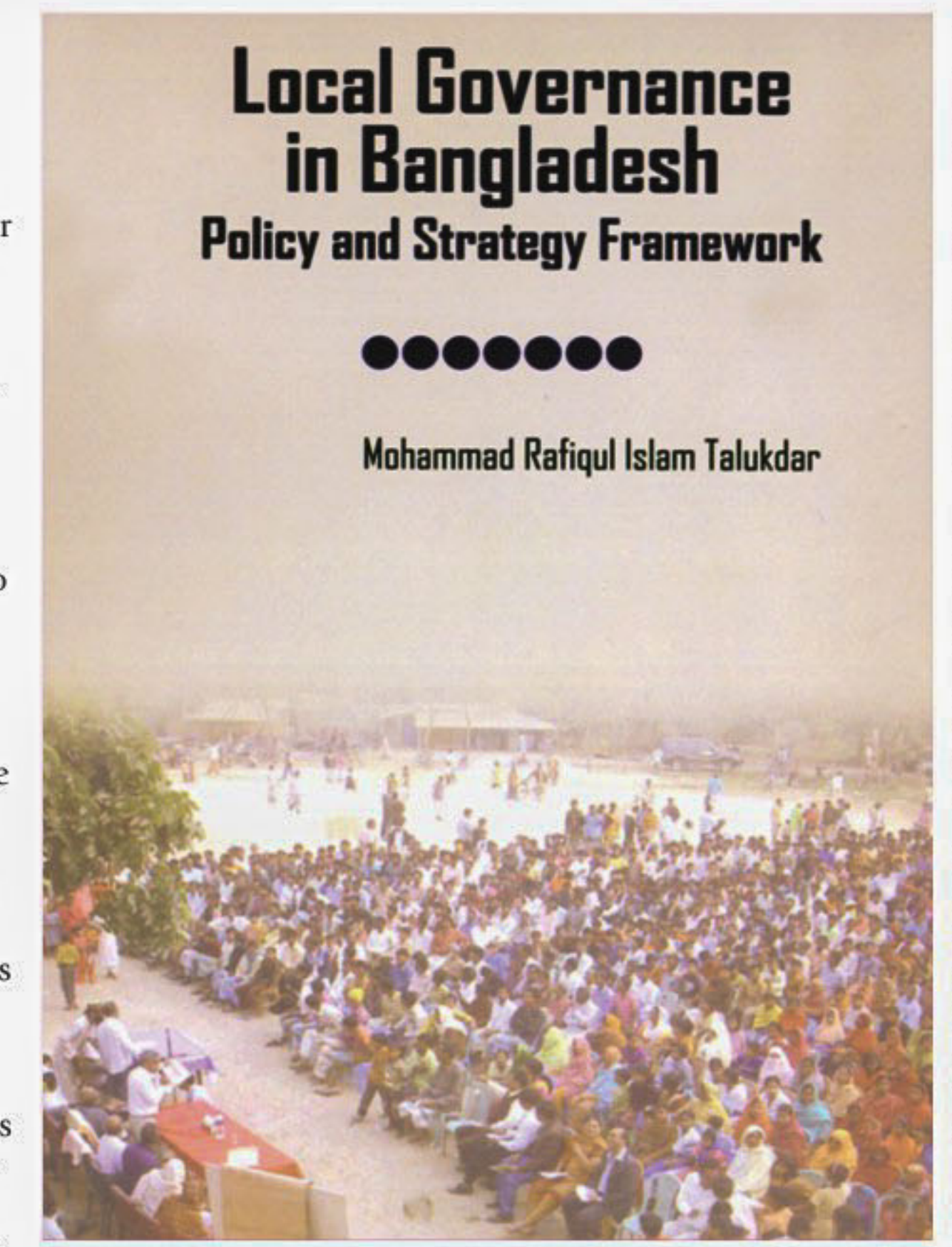
Chapter Two provides "SWOT Analysis" in its three sub-chapters: internal analysis that includes analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the 'Local Government Division', opportunities and threats analysis of external environ-

ment, and SWOT perspective to the policy.

Chapter Three titled as "Force-field Analysis" starts with the stakeholder matrix and ends up with the force-field matrix. This analysis identified forces for and against the local governance policy design. It has also helped frame the policy strategically and design its advocacy as well as implementation strategy.

In Chapter Four "Local Governance in Bangladesh" focuses on how the current paradigm of decentralization opens avenues for the development of democratic local governance. In order to get the proper outcome, local government must be responsive to the citizen needs and gain the authority, resources and skills needed to be operative and accountable. Author argues here that the development of electoral politics at the local level is very important. The involvement of political parties in local political elections is at the center of several debates, but one of the vital aims of democratic decentralization concludes these debates. The Election Commission should be keen to transform the involvement of political parties towards a supportive climate for a competitive, free and fair election process.

Author has also addressed here some critical issues concerning good local governance, for instance, institutional linkages, inter-governmental relations, structuring local governments' borrowing, local government financial planning and management, gender mainstreaming in local governance, central to the institutional challenges and local government commission etc. Author claims that the constitutional commitment as well as spirit, to the extent that is evidenced, for ensuring good local governance in Bangladesh has never been made into reality. Power of the local government, national-local relationship, degree of democratic and fiscal decentralization, and functions as well as



functionaries of the local government are not clearly included in the devolution package as directed in the constitution.

Chapter Five "Local Governance Policy" has two sub-chapters: proposed policy and policy framework. According to the author, the purpose of this policy is to develop a fully decentralized local government system at all spheres of the local administrative units so as to ensure full-fledged democracy and good local governance through citizen engagement, inclusiveness and empowerment. The goal is to guarantee that this local governance policy will be translated fully in laws, rules, regulations and practices by 2018, and to ensure that the public

services delivery will be made available with fully decentralized approach so as to meet the civic satisfaction and needs without irrational system loss or corrupt practices by 2020. The overall objective of the policy is to facilitate political, economic, social, administrative and developmental empowerment of local citizens to make sure they attain the rights to development and public services, and set access to the knowledge and information.

As per the proposed policy, there will be two types of local government institutions in Bangladesh, namely rural local government institutions and urban local government institutions under a total of eight regional local government commissions and one national local government commission. 'Division' would no longer be treated as administrative unit of the government as it infringes on the constitution. Importantly, rural local government and urban local government units will never be geographically overlapped, which means that the rural local government units and urban local government units must be with separate constituencies fitted with clear-cut area mapping, but interfacing of rural-urban given the perspective of service delivery in particular should increasingly be harmonized. Author suggests functions, finance and functionaries must be aligned to make democratic local governance process successful. Author also recommends the Local Government Division to be downsized with limited scope of responsibilities.

Chapter Six "Policy Implementation Strategy" deals with strategic implementation plan, which is basically a management tool for policy to be measured and/or quantified followed by a package of procedures and actions. This is designed to assist concerned departments, commissions and agencies to manage and monitor implementation effec-

tively. Author opines that sound strategic implementation planning is central to ensuring the successful delivery of the policy. Once the policy is approved, focus must go to the strategic implementation plan, and on executing and monitoring the policy implementation process by the concerned departments, commissions and agencies. Author further argues that policy implementation plan must be scalable and flexible, and it is expected to reflect the degree of exigency, urgency, innovation, complexity and/or sensitivity associated with the concerned policy appraisal.

In conclusion author points out the fact that one major political party alone cannot strengthen the local government institutions in Bangladesh because one political regime is too short to garner durable results in this domain. According to the author, in reality, political regimes here are changing between the two political parties, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Bangladesh Awami League (AL). As such, the government must realize the importance of the stated policy and bring the issue to the discussion table with the main opposition party to make a consensus. Then it has to allow Local Government Division to do the policy initiation with adoption or adaptation of this proposed one.

I think the book contains lots of very substantive new thinking which the policy makers can consider. It advances the reform agenda on local governance and is intended to assist policy makers in Bangladesh in making more informed choices on formulating a nuanced local governance policy and strategy. The work has certainly made interesting for reading. And it significantly adds value to the knowledge bank in the domain of decentralization and local governance.

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