

STRONG INSTITUTIONS FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE

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Without decentralisation we cannot have effective local government

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Even after independence, several structural changes in the local government bodies were effected under different regimes. Since decentralisation is still more a rhetoric than reality, one may raise the question of the real intentions of the different regimes behind such initiatives. Local governments are not as empowered as they should be due to the highly centralised character of governance in the country.

LG leaders in Bangladesh are not fully empowered to carry out their work. Management systems are typically weak and broad-based while community participation in LG decision-making is usually limited. LG is one of the most important but sensitive items in policy- and budget-making arenas. Most of Bangladesh's local governments are highly dependent on a historically centralised national government system. Interestingly, less than one percent of Bangladesh's GDP funds 85 percent of LG development expenditures. Undeniably, LG bodies are heavily dependent on direct grants from the central government and shared tax revenue with the land department.

Frequent changes in decentralisation policy are politically motivated. Popular changes are usually made by the government with an objective in mind to create political loyalty, and to build a strong political base at the local level by putting party men in various positions. Furthermore, before formulating decentralisation initiatives, public opinion is rarely ever solicited. The only task of the LG is to select kinds of projects and sites for implementation. Approval of these projects rests with the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) who consults with the Upazila Engineer and Project Implementation Officer for endorsement.

Local government suffers from susceptibility to the political and administrative whims of the government. Government also exercises its control over the LG by issuing circulars from different ministries, which is contradictory to the original legal framework. Such a provision endorses enormous power to the district administration to manhandle the local government.

The colonial pattern of administration in LG has been categorised as elitist and of an alienated nature. Administrative officials working at the Union Parishad level are bureaucratic and alienated from the people, and therefore, people cannot properly take part in different activities of the LG. As a result, LG cannot deliver proper services to people at the local level. Besides, presence of the local elite dissuades the general public from participating in the LG, which results in a less effective LG. In rural Bangladesh, this remains a major impediment to popular participation in local level elections.

LG bodies suffer from inadequate financial resources. By taking this into

consideration, the LG regulations have given the LG bodies the power to mobilise funding from local resources through levying taxes, "hat-bazaar" lease, etc. Although the UP generates funds from different sources, it does not receive its total share. Majority of the chairmen and members do not have adequate knowledge and understanding of the operational procedures and functions of these bodies. They also lack the proper knowledge that is required to deal with the complicated rules of budgeting, planning, and managing resources.

In order to ensure people's participation in the decision-making process of LG, and to ensure accountability and transparency of their activities, Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009 provisioned the concept of ward meeting. It consists of all the voters

rooted in the constitution, but in the political culture. It has hurt democratisation and decentralisation efforts within the local government structure of Bangladesh. A paradigm shift in the political system took place in Bangladesh on October 12, 2015 to hold local polls on partisan basis. The century-old practice of non-party poll of local bodies changed by holding the first-ever partisan poll that brought major challenges for political parties of Bangladesh. The government claims that the local government elections will be more participatory by introduction of party-based elections. Ideally, it has opened up an opportunity for the local people to be mindful in selecting their local leaders as well as engaging in the development process at grassroots level. The central political party in power could implement its agenda at the local

Decentralisation comes in effect with the delegation of judicial authority to the grassroots organisations. To bridge the gap between informal and formal dispute resolution, Bangladesh redesigned shalish through the 2006 Village Courts Act. The village courts aimed to combine the best of shalish on the one hand (accessibility and effectiveness), and of the formal judicial system on the other (procedural justice). The 2006 Act provided for the establishment of a village court in every Union Parishad. To enable access for the most vulnerable groups, fees and other associated costs for submitting a case are very low. Unfortunately, they have their own flaws and require further reform. In the presence of powerful influential people, victims do not dare speak the truth; thus village courts cannot achieve much because they are biased due to adminis-

perform numerous functions that otherwise might not be conducted at all. By and large, standing committee is a small group of representatives who are assigned, on either a temporary or a permanent basis, to examine matters more closely than could the institution. Standing committee allows the representatives to perform simultaneously numerous important functions that otherwise might not be conducted at all. The Local Government Act 2009 has created an opportunity to ensure greater participation of the people in the process of development planning and implementation provisioning standing committee at rural local government bodies.

Since the participation of members has not been made obligatory by law, most of the members of standing committees show their reluctance to attend standing committee meetings. Moreover, the issue of functioning of standing committee has not yet received enough prominence among different actors of the Union and Upazila of non-intervention areas that could motivate members to actively participate in this process. Due to excessive workload of departmental officials and lack of notification by their line ministries, the member secretaries of the respective standing committees do not show enthusiasm to expedite the process of functioning of the standing committees.

While decentralisation is a significant catalyst for sustainable development in rural Bangladesh, the relationships between MPs and bureaucrats and local elected representatives should be made trustworthy—based on mutual understanding in the decision-making process. MPs must bear in mind that they are elected by the people of their constituencies to look after their common interests. Citizen engagement should be increased through an effective committee system. Effective decentralisation through inclusive and sensitive inter-governmental transfers as well as sensible resource-sharing is key to strengthening democratic local government bodies and promoting services to the citizens.

To help achieve Vision 2021, relevant stakeholders under the leadership of the government must act together. For meaningful development, a bottom-up approach that involves people directly in the making and implementation of decisions of local government bodies is the need of the hour. We hope the present government learns some lessons from the past and can overcome them. There is a need for a paradigm shift in the realm of local governance, through delegation of authority, and giving local government and local people a voice.

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entered in the electoral roll. The elected member of the ward shall act as the Shava Ward chairman, while the elected female member shall act as an adviser. The Act provides that at least two meetings of the Ward Shava shall be held per year. It is the responsibility of the Ward Shava chairman to present the annual report before the members, and also to let them know about the implementation status of the development projects. Besides, this Act also provides that each UP shall publish the "Citizens' Charter" through which all citizens shall be notified of what services they are entitled to receive from the UP and of the conditions associated with the service provision in the definite period of time.

The political problems that Bangladesh is suffering from are not

level with the maximum backing of UP elected representatives. In reality, violence, complaints related to nominations as well as corruption in the electoral system grew as a result.

As stipulated in the Upazila Parishad Act 2009, MPs' role as adviser to the local government bodies is acceptable as long as MPs are watchful of the wellbeing of the people in his/her constituency. However, the reality suggests that the "advice" of MPs turns into an "executive order", letting them override and control the development planning and actions by the elected representatives at the Upazila Parishad. The success of the upazila scheme largely depends on how best the local leadership, MP and the people interact in an environment of cooperation and partnership.

trative connections, undue influence of ruling political parties, muscle power, and corruption.

LG plays an influential role in grassroots level development through responding to local needs. It gives the structural framework for women's participation in political decision-making, bringing women to the centre of local development and developing new grassroots level leadership. Those who are elected as chairperson or general member are often ignored during decision-making only because they are women.

One important way of guaranteeing meaningful participation in the local development process without weakening the executive is to make maximum use of standing committees. Standing committees allow the members to



Rukindipur UP Complex, Akkelpur.