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Challenges and Trends in Decentralised Local Governance in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has a rich legacy of establishing and promoting local government institutions, but the actual roles and contributions of these institutions to augment citizens' participation and consolidate democratic practices have often been marginal - due mainly to the overwhelming central interference, and abuse and manipulation by authoritarian regimes to perpetuate their power. This study takes a retrospective look into the evolution and functioning of decentralised local governance in Bangladesh with a view to eliciting the major trends, characteristics and challenges. Such a reconnaissance exercise may be particularly relevant in consideration of the fact that there has, of late, been renewed emphasis on decentralized local governance by the government and civil society alike, and a number of structural and legal reforms have been made. This study is mainly based on a desk review, including an examination of official records and documents, and the key literature; and personal observations and insights. Some of the relevant trends and limitations identified and explored here include: lack of genuine political will and support for local governance reforms; capture of the local political space by central actors; inadequate capacity of local government institutions; lack of continuity in policy and practices; bureaucratic domination; inadequate coordination; the gap between policy rhetoric and field reality; inadequate resource mobilization; and low degree of popular participation.

Introduction

The experimentations with, and the history of, decentralized local governance² in Bangladesh would come out to be chequered and intriguing even to a cursory observer. On one hand, the country has a rich legacy of establishing and promoting local government institutions; on the other hand, the actual role and contribution of these institutions to augment citizens' participation and consolidate democratic practices have often been marginal - due mainly to the overwhelming central interference, and abuse and manipulation by authoritarian regimes to perpetuate their power (cf. Rahman 1994, Sarker 1990, Siddiquee 1997). Given this backdrop, in this article I take a retrospective look into the evolution and functioning of decentralized local governance in Bangladesh with a view to eliciting the major trends, characteristics and challenges which may illuminate the interested quarters – including the policy makers, activities and academia. Such a reconnaissance exercise may be particularly relevant today in consideration of the fact that there has, of late, been renewed emphasis on decentralized local governance by the government and civil society alike, and a number of structural and legal reforms have been made (see, Ahmed 2010, Huq 2014).

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² A full length discussion on the concept, connotations, and theoretical discourses on decentralization and local governance is beyond the scope of this article. These have, however, been well covered in the relevant literature; see e.g. Rondinelli and Cheema (1983), Rondinelli (1981, 1983), Conyers (1983), Mawhood (1983, 1987), Slater (1990), Smith (1985), Rondinelli and Nellis (1986), Fesler (1965), Smith (1990) and Ahmed (1993). For the purpose of this article, 'decentralization' denotes the transfer of significant power, including law making and revenue generation authorities, to the locally elected bodies and sub-national units (Conyers 1983), while 'local governance' is 'defined as the exercise of economic, political, administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at the local level' (UNDP 2000:27).

The case for promoting decentralized local governance is now unequivocally established (for some pioneering arguments, see, e.g., Rondinelli 1983:182-185, Esman and Uphoff 1984:15-41, Khan 2001:90-91). First, local government bodies can serve as the medium of citizen participation for increasing the efficacy of developmental activities. Secondly, the local government can coach and tutor local communities in the practice of democracy and citizens' rights-based administration and public service delivery. Thirdly, citizens can hold their government accountable and responsible for developmental actions and interventions through their representation in the respective local government. There are more points of wider salience of local government. It is argued in the mainstream literature that effective the local government can serve as an antidote against two critical disempowering processes: (i) the growing tendency of grossly inequitable distribution of wealth and resources in our society; and (ii) the rigidity, unresponsiveness and poor performance of the centralised planning and management paradigm to bring about desired social changes. One can, therefore, see that there is a cogent, convincing, and globally accepted case for promoting the cause of an effective, participatory local government system (cf. Khan 2014).

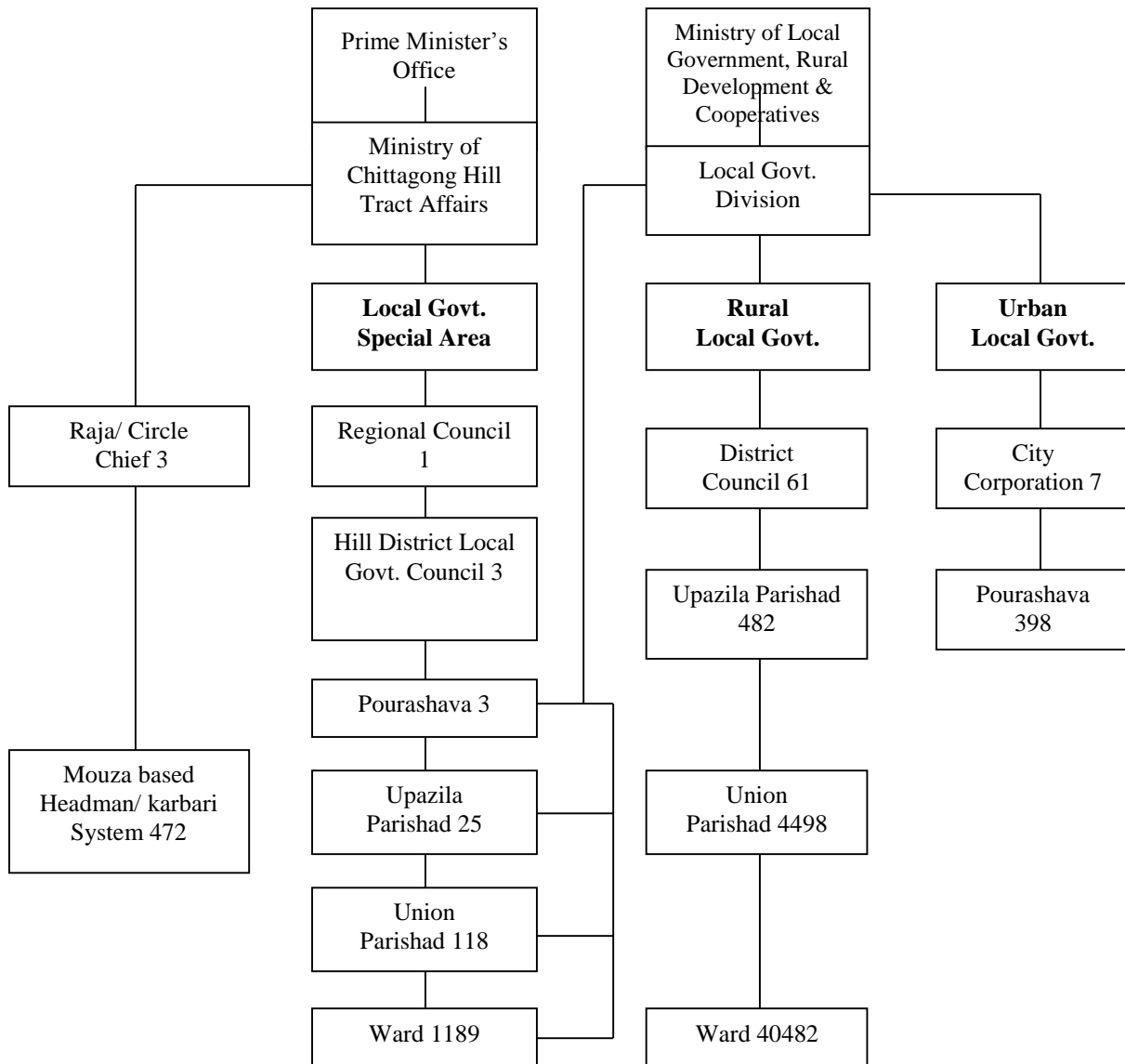
This study is mainly based on a thorough desk review including an examination of official records and documents, and the key literature; key informant interviews; and personal observations and insights³. After setting the scene in this introductory section, the second section introduces the basic structure, categories, and functions of local government in Bangladesh. The third section then probes into the genesis and historical development of decentralization practices in Bangladesh. Drawing on the genesis, the fourth section identifies and summaries the key features, trends, characteristics and challenges of decentralized local governance in Bangladesh. The concluding section recapitulates the key arguments, and offers some clues on improvement.

³ Detailed interviews of two leading national local government experts were conducted during the period between August and October 2014. Currently these two key informants are affiliated with the Bangladesh University Grants Commission and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, respectively. They preferred anonymity. Besides my academic career, I have held substantial development management roles (in both regular and consulting capacities), requiring me to work closely with varied local government institutions and local community settings.

Local Governance System in Bangladesh

The structure of the local government system in Bangladesh is summarized in Figure 1. The local government institutions are organized into three broad ‘streams’: Rural, Urban, and local government for special areas (Chittagong Hill Tracts). The mainstream rural local government system consists of three functional tiers: Union, *Upazila* (sub-district) and *Zila* (District).

Figure 1: A simplified schematic presentation of the decentralized local governance system in Bangladesh



Source: Based on Ahmed (2014).

Ahmed (2012:345-346) noted that there is a staggering number of laws - more than 200 – governing local government in Bangladesh. Many of these laws are practically obsolete, lacks enforceability (for a variety of reasons including the lack of follow-up rules and subsidiary legislations), and contradictory in nature. The most active pieces of legislation that guide the operations of decentralized local governments include: the *Upazila Parishad* Act 1998 (amended in 2009 and 2011), Local Government *Union Parishad* Act 2009, *Zila Parishad* Act 2000, and specialized Executive Orders of different Ministries (notably, Home, Disaster Relief and Health) with implications for *Zila*, *Upazila* and Unions. Although long overdue, there is no elected representation at the *Zila* level; Union and *Upazila Parishads* include democratically elected political leaders.

Although it varies in capacity and quality in terms of actual operational effectiveness, the local government system is a relatively large and pervasive entity with some 6000 units and nearly 85,000 elected leaders (one-third of whom are women) spread over the whole country (Ahmed 2012).

The respective legislations provides for a varied and wide ranging list of functions for the main local government institutions. In reality, however, only a limited number of functions are typically carried out by these institutions due to such limitations as low technical and human resource capacity, insufficient financial and logistic resources, difficulty in local resource mobilization, and central political and bureaucratic intrusion and interference. Table 1 proffers a list of functions actually performed by the main local government institutions.

Table 1. Some typical functions actually performed by the decentralised local government institutions

Union Parishad (Council)	Upazila (Sub-District) Parishad	Zila (District) Parishad	Pouroshova (Municipalities)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment and collection of taxes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formulation and implementation of local 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Construction of Union Parishad building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Construction and maintenance of

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance of law and order • Maintenance of birth and death register • Construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, culverts etc. • Construction and maintenance of ponds, rural markets etc. • Re-excavation of derelict ponds for pisciculture • Issuance of various certificates and licences • Provision of road lighting • Tree planting • Settlement of local disputes • Promotion of cottage industries and family planning • Maintenance of Union records and information • Celebration of national occasions and festivals. 	<p>development plans and programmes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of health and family planning • Providing assistance and encouragement to Union councils • Promotion of socio-cultural activities • Promotion of livestock, fisheries and forest • Promotion of educational and vocational activities • Promotion of agricultural activities and cooperative movement • Coordination of functions of officers serving in Upazila 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction and maintenance of <i>Dak-bunglows</i> (rest houses) • Construction of public toilets and passenger sheds • Tree plantation • Maintenance and management of gardens, parks, zoos, technical and specialised educational institutions etc. • Management of charitable dispensaries • Management of Zila Parishad auditorium • Grants for socio-religious, educational and sports organisations • Organisation and celebration of national festivals • Constructions of shops and markets • Disaster relief • Promotion of sports, socialwelfare, libraries, orphanages etc. 	<p>roads, bridges etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal, collection and disposal of refuse, wastes etc. • Provision of street lighting • Provision of water supply • maintenance of community and shopping centres • Eradication of mosquitoes • Registration of births, deaths and marriages • Maintenance of animal slaughter-houses • Maintenance of parks and gardens • Provision of public toilets • Naming of roads and numbering of houses
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Source: Adapted from Khan 2001 (Table 5).

Retrospect into the Decentralized Local Government Practices in Bangladesh

The general history of decentralization has been reasonably well-covered in the literature (see, for example, Siddiquee 1997, Khan 2001, Siddiqui 1994, Umar 1987). The literature, however, substantially varies in terms of quality and intrinsic value. A considerable volume of the literature, however, comes in the form of narrative and compilation of information, rather than analysis of relevant trends and characteristics. Drawing on the key literature, but without intending to repeat the historical narration, the following table proffers a time-line of the key events and milestones that are most relevant for the purpose of our study (Table 2)

Table 2: A summary of the genesis and evolutionary features of decentralized local governance in Bangladesh

<i>The Historical Phases</i>	<i>Milestones, Trends, Manifestations</i>
The Pre-British Scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidences of relatively stable forms of rural governance and institutions in the ancient and medieval times. • Varied manifestations of local governance: in the ancient Bengal, such institutions as <i>Gramin</i>, <i>Gramica</i> or <i>Gramapala</i> (the office of a village chieftain), were in existence. Under some central regimes, for example the Gupta period (circa 200-500 BC), demonstrated organised structure of local government consisting of Village councils, the <i>Vishays</i> (roughly equivalent to Districts of modern Bengal) and <i>Bhuktis</i> (Divisions). The governor of a <i>Bhukti</i>, called <i>Uparik Maharaja</i>, was selected and appointed by the emperor, who, in turn, used to select the <i>Vishayapati</i> or the officer in charge of District. • The main purposes of these local government units included collection revenue for the central government, maintenance of law and order, and promotion of trade and commerce. • The Pal and the Sen dynasties followed the basic spirit of local government of the Gupta period, but further expanded the functions by introducing such specialised departments as revenue, police, public construction, defence administration, judiciary and livestock. • The rule of the Sultans and Mughals further consolidated the revenue maximizing role of the local government, and extended central authority in the local areas
The British Period (1757-1947)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The British Empire's colonial interests in decentralized administration coincided with those of the Muslims, and focused on the revenue mission of the state to support the industrial revolution at home.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A loyal landed class of <i>Zamindars</i>, through the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, which ‘deinstitutionalised’ the indigenous rural organisations in Bengal and provided the central regime with a sound revenue and political support base. • A series of other institutions and legislations were introduced to protect colonial interests in local areas including the <i>Chowkidary Panchayat</i> Act 1870, Local Self-Government Act 1885, and Bengal Village Self-Government Act 1919.
The Pakistan Period (1947-1971)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not much structural change in the initial years of Pakistan until the military rule of Field Marshall Ayub Khan in 1958. • In the name of ‘decentralization’, the military junta pursued a ‘legitimization mission’ with the help of a civilian power base created through the local government reforms. • Launched in 1959, the four-tier local government system of ‘Basic Democracy’ introduced a system of indirect democracy: the Union council members and chairmen were the electors for the District council, the Provincial Assembly, the National Assembly and, ultimately, the President of the country. • In the process, these select and privileged groups of local councillors (electors) were nurtured by the state to act as their trusted ‘vote banks’, and given considerable direct and indirect financial benefits - thereby, institutionalizing a system of ‘political bribery’.
The Bangladesh Period (1971 to date)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first government of Awami League (AL) in independent Bangladesh, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1971-75), avoided any radical reform in the local institutions and administration. This strategy makes sense when one looks into ‘the class character of the AL’: a petty bourgeoisie organization, drawing its support from the rural surplus farming elites and, therefore, consciously avoided any radical reform in the local institutions and administration, which could antagonize their supporters. • The basic structure of local governance remained unchanged; only the nomenclature changed: the Union council was renamed Union <i>Panchayat</i> and the <i>Thana</i> council was replaced by <i>Thana</i> Development Committee. • In June 1975, the multi-party parliamentary system was replaced by a single party presidential system and Mujib became the all-powerful president of the country. The Sub-Divisions (<i>Mohokuma</i>) were upgraded to Districts, which were to be headed by Governors directly appointed by the President. This move is seen as an attempt to politicize the district administration with the aim of perpetuating the regime. • The proposed reorganization stalled, as Mujib was assassinated in a bloody coup in August 1975. • General Ziaur Rahman (1976-81) also continued to use local government institutions to create his public support base and legitimize his transition to a political career.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A three-tier local government system, consisting of Union, <i>Thana</i> and <i>Zila Parishads</i> (district councils) (in close resemblance to Ayub's 'Basic Democracy') was introduced via the Local Government Ordinance 1976. Additionally the new institution of <i>Swanirvar Gram Sarkar</i> (self-reliant village government) was launched in 1980 with the subterranean agenda of creating a political base for the regime by patronizing a vested alliance of rural elites. • General Hussain Mohammad Ershad (1982-91) set up the Committee for Administrative Reform and Reorganisation (CARR), and based on the recommendations of CARR, the government upgraded 460 <i>Thanas</i> to <i>Upazila</i> (sub-district). • The performance of the <i>Upazila</i> approach has been mixed: it created some basic developmental infrastructure at the sub-national level and provided for a degree of 'deconcentration' (not 'decentralization' though) of public services. The degree of local community participation and actual benefits to the disadvantaged sections of the communities was clearly low – with most of the benefits going to the rural elites that supported the regime. • Bangladesh entered into the much acclaimed 'democratic era' (1990 onwards) after the fall of Ershad, and succession by Khaleda Zia (1991-1996) through a democratic election. • Khaleda government (1991-1996) discontinued with the <i>Upazila</i> system in 1991, and established the Local Government Structure Review Commission, which recommended a two-tier system of local government: the District and Union councils. Additionally, the <i>Thana</i> development and Coordination Committee was suggested to coordinate developmental activities at the <i>Thana</i> level. Except these rather superficial changes, no further qualitative or meaningful reform; the government practically did not execute any elected form of local government at the District and <i>Thana</i> levels. • The next democratically elected government of Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001) established the Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC) in 1997, and brought about some structural changes in the local governance: a four-tier rural local government system comprising of the District, <i>Upazila</i>, Union and Village <i>Parishads</i>. The urban local government consisted of some 129 <i>Pouroshovas</i> (municipal councils or 'municipalities') and 4 City Corporations. For the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a third form of local government was commissioned comprising of 1 Regional Council and 3 Hill District Councils. • The non-party Caretaker Government – CTG (2007-2008) attempted some significant reforms including the formation of an 'independent' Local Government Commission, the enactment of the <i>Upazila Parishad</i> Ordinance, the amendment and enactment of the new uniform City Corporation Ordinance, the Pourashava Ordinance, the New Union Parishad Ordinance and the holding of elections for the
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	<p>Upazila Parishad and Pourashava under new legislations (within their short tenure, they could only complete selected <i>Pourashava</i> and <i>Upazila Parishad</i> elections).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extended government of Sheikh Hasina (2009 to date), drastically scrapped nearly all major reforms by the CTG (The Ninth Parliament (2009-2013) and did not ratify the legal changes brought by the CTG in 2008, leaving the local government system in a limbo. Subsequently, four Acts were promulgated – the Local Government (Union <i>Parishad</i>) Act 2009, the Local Government (<i>Pourashava</i>) Act 2009, one ‘umbrella act’ for all City Corporations in 2009, and the Local Government (<i>Upazila Parishad</i>) Act 1998 - readopted with some revisions, and further amended in 2011 paving the way for a more dominant and interfering role of the MP in the respective local governments. • Other recent trends: a degree of regularity in holding elections (there are however still considerable cases of long overdue elections in some local government bodies⁴); resurfacing of the old conflicts between the central political and administrative elites, especially at the <i>Upazila</i> level; increased violence and use of ‘muscle-power’ in local governance; duplications and/or inadequate coordination in the operations of local governance systems; and widespread central interference (e.g. by MPs on local politics). Until the second round of <i>Upazila</i> elections⁵, the election results were broadly considered fair; but from the third round, widespread fraudulent practices and manipulations have been reported by many independent observers (see, Mojumder 2014, Hossain 2014, Hussain 2014, Anon. 2014). Indeed, this trend at the local level is considered a reflection of the wider predicament of national elections (the latest) 10th national parliamentary elections (held in January 2014) are considered ‘Democracy’s no-show’ (Parnini 2014; also see Riaz 2014a, 2014b, Hasan 2014).
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Source: Developed by the author based mainly on the discussions (and the literature cited therein) of Siddiqui (1994), Khan (2001), Ali et al. (1983), Huque (1988), Siddiquee (1997), Ahmed (1998), and Umar (1987).

⁴ One example is the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) – a vital local government body – which has been without election since 2007, violating a Constitutional obligation. This followed from the experience and observation of the results of several City Corporations (Comilla, Narayangonj, Gazipur, Rajshahi, Khulna, Sylhet, and Barisal) in 2012 where the ruling party faced devastating defeat. After this dismal experience, DCC elections were postponed by the ruling government. Similarly, no election has been held for the District Councils – although the Local Government *Zila Parishad* Act was passed in 2000.

⁵ *Upazila* elections were held in 5 phases, between 19th February and 31st March 2014.

Key Trends, Features and Challenges of Decentralized Local Governance in Bangladesh

Based on the above historical review, a survey of the major literature, and personal insights, this section elicits some characteristic trends in, and features and challenges of, decentralized local governance in the country.

Manipulation and (mis)use of local government institutions by successive ruling regimes for consolidating and legitimizing power:

Local government and decentralization policies have mainly served to perpetuate power and authority of the central ruling political regimes. Local government reforms and actions led to the creation and nurturing of a vested interest group – typically comprising of local socioeconomic and political elites who essentially acted as ‘vote banks’ in favour of the respective central regimes and provided the required political backstopping support.

Lack of genuine political will and support for local governance reforms:

As Siddiquee (1997:92) astutely summarizes, “measures were neither intended genuinely to facilitate the development and well being of the local people nor to foster their participation in local administration and development; ... the local government reforms were marked by a chronic unwillingness on the part of the successive regimes to actually devolve power and authority to lower levels”.

Capture of the local political space by central actors:

With the long overdue local government elections (notably *Upazila* elections in 2013-14) held, a reasonable political space has been created, which is much needed for democratic consolidation at the local level. The potential role of such a space, however, has not been maximized due to constant and heavy influence and interference by various central actors. Examples include the interference by MPs on *Upazila Parishads* on day to day operations (the original *Upazila Parishad Act* of 1998 was amended in 2009 to make the respective MP an ‘Adviser’ to the *Upazila Parishad*) and

the MPs' control over the distribution of social development services (such as Test Relief, Vulnerable Group Feeding) at the Upazila.

Inadequate capacity of local government institutions:

The technical capacity of local government institutions, especially at the Union level, is clearly low. The relevant laws and ordinances stipulate a wide range of developmental functions and roles for these institutions; most local government staff have limited or no capacity to perform these suggested technical roles. Besides, human resources and logistics are typically at the minimal level rendering these institutions ineffective, especially to play the envisioned role of a community-focussed 'development agent'.

Lack of continuity in policy and practices:

With the change of governments, local government policies, vision and practices are drastically changed, stalled, or scrapped altogether. There has been a common tendency to begin local government reform measures from the scratch with each change of government. The latest example concerns the discontinuation of local government and decentralization reforms initiated by the caretaker government from 2007-2008. These reforms included establishment of a high powered, independent Local Government Commission; promulgation of a series of laws (ordinances), notably a uniform law for all City Corporations, new laws for *Paurashavas* and Unions, revision of the *Upazila Parishad* Ordinance; and efforts towards coordination of 'donor' (international aid agencies') assistance. After assumption of the office in 2009, the Sheikh Hasina government ditched nearly all reform efforts: the Local Government Commission was dismantled, the five vital ordinances were not ratified and thereby made null and void. Then, the new government amended the *Upazila Act* (1998) in 2009, paving the way for the party MPs to exert disproportionate power at the local level. Besides, a series of Executive Orders were passed to exercise central discretionary power of decision making in the domain of local government.

Bureaucratic domination:

The historic trends in domination of local government administrative apparatus by career members of the civil bureaucracy continues. This is especially poignant at the *Upazila* level – the vital tier of local government. Such important urban local government bodies as the Dhaka City

Corporations (North and South) have also been run by hand-picked bureaucrats with known leaning towards the ruling political regime.

The gap between policy rhetoric and field reality

Notwithstanding the lofty policy prescriptions, the actual translation of these policies and aspirations in the field have been strikingly limited. The highest law and policy document – the Constitution of Bangladesh – provides for a number of dedicated articles (clauses) – notably on local government institutions and the spirit of empowerment and decentralization (see clauses 11, 16, 59 and 60 in GoB 2010). The state of implementation of these policy provisions is dismal. Clause 59 of the Constitution, for example, commits: “Local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law”; in reality, some major local government units (for example, the District Councils and the Dhaka City Corporation are currently run by non-elected persons hand-picked by the ruling political party.

Inadequate resource mobilization:

Historically local government institutions have depended on central resources even for maintaining basic daily activities. The central funding typically comes in the form of ‘block grants’ and other project aids. These resources remain a major avenue for central manipulation and interference. Efforts towards local resource mobilization have been limited with little success. The reasons include the reluctance on the part of local government political leaders to enforce taxation measures for fear of losing popularity amongst voters, low technical capacity, the temptation of ‘low hanging’ central funds, and inadequate legal and executive backstopping support.

Low degree of popular participation:

With such (aforementioned) trends as bureaucratization of the local government administrative apparatus, shrinking of locality specific political space, and manipulated election systems, the extent and degree of community participation in local government decisions and actions have been marginal – to say the least⁶. The engagement of local communities in local government

⁶ There has been a good number of studies examining the nature and extent of popular participation in local government; see, e.g., Rahman and Khan 2000, Siddiquee 1997, Sarker 1990.

activities have typically been in such forms as waged-labour inputs in various infrastructural projects, and recipients or ‘target beneficiaries’ of various social safety nets and development schemes.

Further shrinking of power-sharing/democratic space and absolute usurpation of power and resources:

In the recent years, especially since the mid-2000s, the political power-sharing space at the sub-national level has further shrunk, and the culture of usurpation and appropriation by the central ruling party has become even more poignant. Attempts to silence dissident and opposition voices through harassment, oppression and misuse of state apparatus have become a common practice. Even the limited efforts to revive local government institutions have often been prompted by ulterior party interests. The hitherto somewhat dormant District *Parishad* (Council), for example, has been reconstituted by the current government. However, the government avoided the long overdue elections, and arbitrarily appointed local party officials as ‘administrators’ (vide clause 82 of the 2000 Act).

Increased project-based development activities and a degree of fiscal decentralization:

Over the last decade, there has been a degree of increase in the number of ‘development’ projects and programmes at the sub-national level. This, among other implications, has led to a relative rise in the availability of financial resources and (temporary) work opportunities. The government, for example, has been implementing the Social Safety Net programmes with an estimated budget of some Taka⁷ 24000 crores/year over the last five years, and a notable part of this budget has been spent in association with various local government bodies⁸ (Ahmed T., personal communication). A number of large programmes pivoting around local governance are currently being implemented. These include the Local Government Support Project (first and second phases); UP Governance Project (UPGP), SHARIQUE (SDC), HYSAWA, and the Strengthening Local Government Project (USAID). In the same vein, there has lately been a degree of de-concentration of fiscal management to the local government bodies in the forms of direct transfer of (project and other) funds to UP and *Upazia Parishad* and sharing of land-based taxes (land development tax,

⁷ 1 US Dollar = 78 Bangladesh Taka approx.

⁸ Dr. Tofail Ahmed, former Member, Local Government Commission.

land transfer revenue, part of which goes to various units of the local government). It also seems that there has been renewed interest of the ‘donors’ – notably the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) - in local government projects. There are potential benefits of this trend: these programmes and the associated financial investment and money flow to the local territories may contribute to considerable infrastructure development, work opportunities, and other spill-over market effects. The downsides include increased avenues of administrative and political corruption, wastage of resources, diverting the resources meant for local communities to political party activists, among other risks. The actual long term effects of this trend remain to be seen.

Epilogue

Based on a retrospective study on the political economy of local governance in Bangladesh, Khan (2001:105), echoing many others (e.g. Rahman 1994, Sarker 1990, Ahmed 1998, Ali 1986, Blair 1974, Khan 1985) summarized the predicament of local government in the following manner:

Decentralisation policies in Bangladesh have served, more than anything else, to create a sub-national political support base for the successive ruling regimes. [These] initiatives have suffered from a lack of genuine political commitment to devolution Such vital issues as local resource mobilisation, greater autonomy of the local state, proper representation of local populace in decentralised institutions, and combatting the tendency of central manipulation and interference ... have rendered the decentralisation efforts mostly ineffective in bringing about any meaningful, broad-based qualitative changes in the lives of the rural mass.

A more recent study (Huq 2014:17) also draws a similar conclusion:

... it has been revealed how the ... local governance process ... has stemmed from central governments’ interest in consolidating political power by using local government institutions. Thus, it is more about consolidating the local political power base through the local government system than sharing power down to the local levels and deviates from

the principles of democratic decentralisation. The initial pro-democratic national spirit in the 1990s of denying colonial legacy (given that institutions are the products of history) in building political institutions is virtually lost in designing the local government system in Bangladesh.

A full length discussion on possible remedies is beyond the scope of this exercise; here the intention has been to look back into the evolution and progress of local governance with a view to identifying the broad trends and characteristic features that may elicit lessons and inform the relevant policy makers and activists. Suffice to note here is that much of the underlying causes and characteristics that inhibit effective functioning of decentralized local governance stem from, and are deeply engrained in, the wider political economic fabric of the country. It is therefore unrealistic to expect ‘magic bullet’ solutions. It is, nevertheless, possible to suggest some clues on improvement - including the following: a degree of genuine political commitment on the part of the ruling regime; continuity and consolidation of the (limited and experimental) reform efforts that have been tried in the recent decades; appropriate utilization and maximization of the potential of the recent trends in greater fiscal delegation at the local level; linking research and academic learning with the policy and practitioners’ quarters; greater utilization of the local political space by local activists; advocacy and support from the civil society on key issues of local governance; completing the policy reform process; and exploring more proactive forms of community engagement, not only in implementation, but also at the decision making levels of the local government operations.

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