

Decentralisation in Bangladesh

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1 Backdrop

Decentralisation in Bangladesh has attracted the attention of social scientists for several reasons. There is still a dominance of family controls in the political arena through two major political parties: the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). The democratic process of the new republic has been disrupted by successive failures in conducting general elections and the army has emerged in national politics a number of times. These factors have hindered successful enforcement of public administration in the country.

The scenario is not very optimistic even on the socio-economic front. A significant proportion of people live below the poverty line (36% in 2009) in Bangladesh. Policymakers argue that promoting inclusive growth through decentralisation would be one way to alleviate poverty and decrease inequality.

The process of decentralisation would involve more people participating in local government. Devolving power to the grassroots level and strengthening local governments would be two effective mechanisms by which the state can pursue this objective.

In this paper, we review the decentralisation mechanism in Bangladesh and provide a broad assessment of the system. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 describes the local government system. Section 3 discusses the functions and finances of local government. Section 4 assesses the process and implementation of decentralisation. Section 5 compares the performance of key human development indicators with other Asian countries and Section 6 concludes.

2 Local Government System

Political History of Bangladesh: Bangladesh was formed in 1971. Prior to that, the country was a part of Pakistan (1947-1971) and was known as

East Pakistan. Before 1947, parts of Bangladesh were under British India (1757-1947). Bangladesh suffered from an unstable political scenario after independence. The founder of the country, the first Prime Minister and founder of the Awami League party, Sheikh Muziber Rahaman was assassinated in 1975 soon after he became President of the country. General Ziaur Rahaman, founder of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), took over power and became President in 1978. He was assassinated in 1981. The army chief, General Hossain Mohammad Ershad, became his successor in 1982. However, he could not legitimize his status through elections and banned free political activity in 1985. Instead, he conducted a Presidential election and declared himself President. A state of emergency was announced by General Ershad for three years due to political violence. He surrendered power to a neutral caretaker government in December 1990. Free elections were held in February 1991, when Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the BNP, won the elections and became President. From 1991 onwards, regular elections were held in Bangladesh. The 1996 elections were won by allies of the Awami League while the BNP and its allies won the 2001 elections. Bangladesh experienced political instability even then. As a result, the army took charge once again in 2007 to stop the violence between the two leading political parties. There was a caretaker government until the ninth general election (after 2001) was held in 2008, following which Sheikh Hasina, leader of the Awami League, became President in 2009.

History of local government: The process of decentralisation in Bangladesh (as East Pakistan) started in 1959 (Siddiqui, 2005). A new four-tier local government system was introduced by General Ayub Khan which was named basic democracy. It was abolished in 1969 by the end of the Ayub Khan era. Following independence in 1971, the Union Council was named the Union Panchayat, the Thana Council became the Thana Development Committee, and the District Council became the Zila Board or District Board. In 1972, the Union Panchayat was again changed to Union Council. A significant change was observed in 1976. A Union Parishad for a union, a thana parishad for a thana and a zila parishad for a zila were assigned as the units of local government following the newly passed local government ordinance. The Union Parishad consisted of one elected chairman, nine elected members, two nominated women members and two peasant representatives. There was one sub-divisional officer as the *ex-officio* chairman, the circle officer

and the union parishad chairman in a Thana parishad. The Zila Parishad comprised elected members, official members and women members and their term of office was for five years. No elections were held in the first five years. “Swanirbhar Gram Sarkar” at the village level was introduced in 1980 following an amendment of the local government ordinance. However, it was eliminated through a Martial order law in 1982.

A major step in the history of decentralisation was the introduction of a new local government ordinance in 1982 by General Ershad. An elected administration at the sub-district level (Upzila Parishad) was initiated as an intermediate tier between the union and higher levels of government. Upzila Parishads were composed of a head, who is a directly elected chairman, and the members, who are Upzila Parishad chairs. These units of local government became the focus of development until elections in 1991 following which the newly elected BNP government abandoned them. This was mainly because many of the Upzila Parishad chairmen were from opponent parties. Frequent changes in the local government system occur as new governments take over. Thorlind (2001) points out that each government tries to capture the electoral base in rural areas through the participation of their own supporters in the system of local government. During 1996-2001, a local government agenda was practised by the then-elected government. They tried to introduce a four-tier system of local government: the Zila Parishad (district council), Upzila Parishad (sub-district council), Union Parishad and Gram Parishad (village council). An amendment was passed in 1997 to legalise Union Parishads through the Union Parishad Bill.

Decentralisation Mechanism Devolution of political power to the local level is incomplete in the present system of decentralisation in Bangladesh. It is more deconcentrated in nature. There are multiple layers of sub-national government below the central government. The highest levels of sub-national government are the administrative divisions. Six administrative divisions hold offices for major service delivery ministries. Below the divisions, there are 64 districts (zila parishads) working as deconcentrated units of the central government. Approximately, 30 ministries have offices at the Zila level.

In urban Bangladesh, two types of local government exist: municipalities (pourasabhas) and city corporations. 309 pourasabhas are categorised into three groups depending on the magnitude of revenue generated. Six city corporations operate in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet.

Two hierarchical tiers of local government are observed in rural areas: the sub-district council (*Upzila Parishad*) and the union council (*Parishad*). There are 508 sub-district councils, while the number of union councils is 4498. However, these numbers change frequently.

The political power and scope of functioning of the local governments are determined by the central government. No elected bodies exist at the division, district and sub-district levels. Administrators appointed by the central government run these units. No election has ever been held at district council levels and these units do not have any elected functionaries. Though these units have the power to generate revenue, it is hardly used. At the sub-district level, there is an Upzila Development Co-ordination Committee (UDCC) to organise and supervise development spending at the sub-district level. The UDCC has the authority to decide the allocation of central government block grants among the sub-districts. This committee comprises all the Union Parishad (UP) chairs. The activities of the UDCC are directed by the United Nations Organisation (UNO).

There are elected bodies at the Union Parishad, municipalities and city corporations, which are composed of chairpersons or Mayors, one representative from each ward and women members from the reserved seat. The chairpersons of the Union Parishad and municipality and the mayor of the city corporations are directly elected by popular vote of the entire constituency. At the same time, the members and commissioners are elected by their respective constituencies.

Women reservation: Womens reservation: According to local government ordinance, 1976, two members in a union council should be female (Shafi, 2001). In 1983, we observed an increase in the quota for women from 2

to 3. Women members should be elected by the votes of the elected chair and members of the Union Parishad. Following the local government second amendment act, 1997, three seats are reserved for women in each Union Parishad. The basic difference from the previous amendment is that women candidates should be elected by direct election based on ‘universal adult suffrage’ (Sultana, 2000).

We observe that only one woman was elected as chair out of 4,352 Union Parishad seats in 1973 (Table 1). This number increased to 6 out of 4,400 seats in 1984 while the number rose to 22 in 2003. Though there is an increasing trend in womens representation, it remains low among the total number of elected members.

Table 1: Women’s Respresentation in Union Parishads

Year of election	Number of Union Parishad	Total no of candidates contesting for post of chair	Total no of women candidates contesting	% of women candidates contesting for the post of chairs	Elected women chairs
1973	4352	-	-	-	1
1977	4352	-	-	-	4
1984	4400	-	-	-	6
1988	4401	18566	79	.43	1
1992-93	4451	17444	115	.66	24
1997	4479	-	102	-	23
2003	4223	21376	232	1.09	22

Source: Sultana (2000)

3 Functions and Finances of Local Government

In Bangladesh, fiscal decisions are controlled at the national level (Asaduzzaman, 1985). The share of local expenditure in the total public expenditure is significantly low here. Following UNDP Report 2003, the local

government expenditure as a percentage of GDP is less than 3%. In addition, the fiscal power of different tiers of local government is also limited . The main source of funds for the local governments comes from the central government through the Annual Development Program (ADP) of block grant mechanism. There are four broad expenditure headings of ADP allocation, namely, sector/program allocation, block allocation, self-financed allocation and food assistance. Local government block grants come from the funds of block allocations. A significant share of ADP allocation goes to vertically-driven sectoral programmes, which are directly controlled by the ministries (Bahl and Wallace, 2007). Only a small part of the ADP fund is allotted to the local block grant, while, in reality, an even smaller share is designated as transfers to the local governments. Apart from the ADP, other sources of funds for local government are raised through Food for Works (FFW), Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Rural Infrastructural Maintenance Programme, Old Age Pensions, etc. Local small-scale infrastructure development is funded from these sources. However, the Union Councils have little say over the utilisation of funds. Local government units, specifically, Union Councils receive a limited amount of grant as honorarium, salary and other allowances for the elected officials and staff, in addition to the development transfers.

4 Assessment of Decentralisation

We will assess decentralisation in Bangladesh from the perspectives of autonomy and accountability of the sub-national government.

Autonomy of local government: Though Bangladesh has a history of decentralisation for the past several decades, the structure of government remains centralised even today. There is limited independence of the units at the sub-national level in terms of expenditure responsibilities and transfer of funds. Local government units do not play a significant role in delivering public services, *viz.*, education and health services. It is still controversial whether devolution of power to local authorities would enhance the quality of public goods, promote local resource mobilisation or raise local voices in public service decisions. The structure of local government is also very complex. Two or three intermediate levels of government exist as deconcentrated regional offices of the central government. These intermediate tiers do not serve the

purpose of devolved intermediate authorities. In reality, no devolved intermediate governments exist in Bangladesh.

Accountability: The accountability of local governments is extremely weak. Politically elected officials are unable to control their staff and can not meet the local demands. Civil service officials and local political leaders blame each other for failure in service delivery. It lessens their accountability to the local population. Moreover, the local electorate does not even know about the resources available to the local government or how the resources would be spent.

5 Decentralisation in Practice

Inadequate devolution of power to local levels hinders implementation of policies at the grassroots level. Though there has been improvement in the performance of human development indicators, these are far from satisfactory compared to other Asian countries which have implemented the decentralisation programme (Table 2). The unemployment rate in Bangladesh is the highest among China, India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Education-enrolment in Bangladesh is lower than in the other Asian countries except Pakistan.

Table 2: Human development in Bangladesh vs. other Asian countries

Mesaure	Bangladesh	India	China	Sri Lanka	Pakistan
Unemployment rate (in %)	12.5	5.9	6.1	10.5	10.9
Life expectancy at birth	65.7	63.4	72.9	74.0	66.2
Education enrolment (in %)	52.1	61.0	68.7	68.7	39.3

Source: UNDP Report 2009

Womens participation in local government remains low even if seats are reserved for women candidates. In the Union Parishad election in 2003, 232 women candidates contested for the post of chairperson, while 617 female

candidates contested for general seats. Of them, 22 women were elected as chairpersons and 79 won general seats. Lower participation results from absence of operational guidelines, lack of awareness of their roles and responsibilities and gender discrimination (Khan and Fardaus, 2006).

6 Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing description that Bangladesh, despite its fairly long history of decentralisation, has not been able to promote a fool-proof mechanism of decentralised system of governance. While admittedly Bangladesh has adopted several measures of inclusive growth, it is yet to fully address issues related to the genuine interest of the local people. Perhaps, inappropriate delegation of power to the local government units is one of the reasons behind the shortfall.

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