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Country's political philosophy against local govt system: roundtable

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Speakers attend a roundtable on urban local governance organised by BRAC University at the BRAC Centre Inn in Dhaka on Thursday. — New Age photo

The political philosophy followed in Bangladesh that seeks to centralize power has crippled elected lower tier local government as well as the city corporations, civic groups said on Thursday.

The stifling political philosophy and the political leadership's mindset were totally opposed to the local government system, researchers, academics and politicians told a roundtable.

Both the factors made the local government units across the country ineffective to ensure that they cannot provide the service for which they were elected, they told a roundtable.

The roundtable on 'Politics of Urban Local Governance: The Case of Dhaka City' was hosted by the Institute of Government Studies of BRAC University at BRAC Centre Inn in the city.

Chaired by IGS executive director Sultan Hafeez Rahman, the roundtable discussants included Power and Participation Research Centre chairman and former caretaker government adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman, Dhaka University Professor Aatur Rahman, columnist Syed Abul Maksud, CPB presidium member Haider Akbar Khan Rono, JSD leader Shirin Akhter, supreme court lawyer Tuhin Malik addressed the roundtable.

DU professor Salahuddin M Aminuzzaman conducted the discussions.

In a keynote paper, BRAC IGS research associates Mohammad Sirajul Islam and Harun-Or-Rashid said that Dhaka city's governance was the manifestation of how the authorities want to politically run it.

The city's political management sustains on loyalty structures, in which the key players are politicians, mastaans and public servants, said the paper.

Enjoying political patronage, these elements use urban space for private gains, it said.

Such politicization of urban governance sets in motion processes of exclusion and inclusion which in turn creates constraints for the citizens to exercise their rights in urban governance, it said.

Besides, it said, lack of coordination among 42 institutions involved in urban development in Dhaka is hampering the process of providing civic services.

Zillur said that the elected local government bodies could not become vibrant in Bangladesh only due to the political philosophy of the political parties.

He said the city corporations should be democratised without any fetters.

He called for the devolution of powers and introduction of ward-based governance in the city corporations.

Rono supported Zillur's contention and said that the functioning of the local government bodies largely depended on the political philosophy and attitudes of the country's political leadership.

Ataur Rahman noted that the country's political leadership should take a decision whether or not the local government bodies would be allowed to be effective and vibrant.

Several discussants voiced their concern over the government's foot dragging in holding the long overdue mayoral elections even after splitting the historic city of Dhaka.

They described as illegal and unconstitutional the amended provision in the local government law under which the government empowered itself to appoint administrators to discharge the duties of elected mayors.