

Local government: Way forward

Tofail Ahmed

BANGLADESH has a reasonably workable administrative and political system backed by deep-rooted culture of democratic practices. Our local governance structure, though not perfect, has a hundred year's tradition. It is much older than our constitution. The local government institutions (LGI) have not been created by the constitution afresh, rather the framers of our constitution adopted and accommodated the historic continuity and tradition of local government (LG) in the new constitution with due emphasis. LG, in spite of many of its limitations, contributes to upholding social cohesion and stability, and sustains the base and common platform for social and economic development and growth. This nation cannot afford destabilisation of its base and the grassroots. The central political elites of all hues should attach due importance to the stability of the societal base at any cost. Destabilisation at the base for short-term gain is not a safe game for any regime.

Political understanding at the base level has reached a new level and height that many of our central political elites are not aware of. Elections in the unions, pourashavas and city corporations have been held regularly for long, with few exceptions. The upazila parishads had elections for two consecutive terms. A new set of formal leadership at the ground level started to emerge as an autonomous factor in our body politic. They started to exert their limited executive authority and political power, which is not at all a healthy sign. Sixty four zila parishads, 11 city corporations, 487 upazila parishads, 319 pourashavas, and 4,557 union parishads together have about 85,000 elected leaders, one-third of whom are women. They deserve to be counted in the power equations at all levels -- the centre and the peripheries. They have to have proper share and role in the national politico-administrative system from the ground and base levels. Only centralist parties and hierarchical bureaucracy are not sufficient to keep the ground stable. On the same ground, their wild political ambitions also need to be contained.

In spite of many hurdles, majority of the union parishads have acquired the skill and efficiency to formulate their budgets. Almost 70 upazila parishads had five year's planning exercises during their last term, and all 487 of them are preparing their own development plans and budgets, obviously with a lot of limitations. It is expected that the newly elected chairmen and members of the 487 upazila parishads will be able to

follow suit from the current financial year after their foundation training currently undertaken by the government in collaboration with UNDP. The city corporations and pourashavas are also doing the same exercises with relatively better skills and strength. The 64 zila parishads, including three hill district councils and two city corporations of Dhaka, are still in uncertain terrain. This needs to be rectified as soon as possible for greater stability of the system.

Unfortunately, our policy makers at the top are not aware of all the field level innovations so far made by different projects and experiments at that level. Many of the innovations need proper recognition while policies and strategies are formulated at national level on short-medium and longer term planning, taxation policy and national budget. The contributions of 5,438 LG units in GDP and in all other governance improvement indicators are not properly recognised. The national level politicians and central bureaucracy at different levels do not feel obligated to comply with the LG laws passed by the Jatiya Sangshad. Local level plans are not recognised by the national planning system as no reflection of the contributions of the LGs is featured in the GDP.

The National Taxation Policy does not calculate how much tax revenue the LG system generates and proportional services they provide as local service providers. In the national budget we see that LG sectoral allocations always go to the local government division. There is no reflection of the local level revenues mobilised, and budgets prepared and implemented at the base by 5,438 LG units. Moreover, national budget creates misconception about the national government's LG financing. The allocation for LG institutions is termed "anudan" (grant) in the national budget document, which is an insult to the LGIs and violation of the spirit of the constitution. The term 'grant' should be replaced by an internationally accepted term 'inter-governmental transfer.' The LGIs have all the rights to the national government's revenue for public services to be offered at local level.

The allocation for LGIs in the last five years was disproportionate to the size of the total budget of the national government. In absolute and relative counts, the allocation to the LGIs decreased. It is decreased further if adjusted with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) to ascertain the 'real' value of the allocation. One of Professor M.M. Akash's recent calculations shows that the share came down to 0.77% of the total national budget during the last budget of the Grand Alliance government in 2013-2014.

Bangladesh is relatively a new state with a very old nationhood. State building and nation building hardly can progress without institution building. Under unitary form of government, as there are no states or provinces, LGIs as viable governing institutions can share a large part of governance load which national government can hardly handle. Only a single chamber parliament and a cabinet are not at all sufficient to bear the load of 160 million people. LGs should never be taken as competitors, but as a complementary force for efficient and stable governance. The vision for long-term good governance is missing among our central governing elites, which is manifested in the continuous neglect of local governance system in the forty years of our independence.

Reforms in the LG sector (local government and local administration) are overdue. Much of the mis-governance we encounter today in our national system of governance can sustainably be tackled with a functional and empowered local governance structure. The corruption-crime nexus in politics in general could effectively be addressed through functional LG system. A sound LG system can improve 'fragility index' of the state significantly. An efficient LG system can promote institutionalisation of democratic practices along with efficient and economic service delivery. Change of outlook and reorientation of the centralist parties and 'jack of all trade' bureaucracy, and partnership with enlightened civil society, can bring the nation back on track in reorganising local governance.

**The writer is Head of Politics, Democracy and Governance Cluster of Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) at the Brac University.
(The views expressed are the writer's own)**