

Local government: Corruption-criminalisation nexus

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LOCAL Government (LG) has been hitting headlines for a couple of months. Headlines in most cases are mere hints, not the whole stories that deserved to be told and analysed. What the stories disclose are obviously important but the missing links of the stories not revealed are more revealing. For instance, let us pick up the stories of Narayanganj and Feni, and the people either killed or accused as killers. The most striking fact is that they are all political party leaders and some of them are elected LG leaders. The principal characters of both the episodes, Councilor and Panel Mayor Nazrul Islam (Narayanganj) and Upazila Parishad Chairman Ekram (Feni) are the victims and Nur Hossain and Nila, councilors of the same LG unit, are among the accused. In Feni too, fingers are pointed towards political leaders and workers like present and former local MPs along with cross-party bandits (so-called leaders of AL and BNP), or simply cross-party 'killer's coalition.'

These are not isolated incidents, rather a common process of maintaining contemporary order of politics in our prevailing political system. Only because of some heinous acts did Lakhsampur, Feni and Narayanganj come into the limelight; many other similar incidents elsewhere are simply tolerated, covered up and ignored. The citizens and electorates of those three specific areas may be asked whom they voted for in their respective localities and with what expectations! It might have been the case that their votes were not at all sought or required. The Parliament in general and LG may be the mirrors for viewing the type and nature of our elected public office bearers. It reflects the extent, depth and magnitude of criminalisation entrenched into our political sub-systems as well as the corresponding and corroborative administrative machinery.

TIB and Shujan (Citizens for Good Governance) published two separate reports on May 25 and 29, respectively, on two crucial areas of LG. The TIB research report titled "Local Government Sector: Challenges of Good Governance and Way Forward," attempted to scan the local government sector with 'corruption lenses.' The study identified about 15

areas of illegal cash transactions, mostly 'rent seeking' of different nature, in and around the LG sector that is composed of government offices and elected LG institutions. The pertinent questions one has to ask (which the report does not disclose) are, when LG leaders bring projects and resources to their respective institutions by bribing officials how do they adjust and accommodate the bribe money in their own institutional accounts? What percentage of manipulated money/resources do they really utilise for the stipulated work? How much is misappropriated?

The report, while describing another grass root level transaction, reveals that for each metric ton of rice or wheat from Delivery Order (DO), the allottee has to pay Tk. 1,000/1,200 as the normal rate to the official concerned. The average size of the schemes implemented through wheat/rice in most cases is worth 2/3 metric ton. The market value of one of ton wheat is around Tk.13,000/15,000. Though the allocation varies from upazila to upazila based on size, population and political connection, an average of 150 to 250 such schemes are implemented every year in each upazila of Bangladesh. Need-based scheme formulation, technical supervision, monitoring and quality assurance are almost non-existent. The whole allocation process follows a patron-client nexus at local level. Leverage and political lumpenisation support corruption nexus rather than addressing poverty alleviation and development, if not in many cases.

The second report produced by Shujan analysed the information voluntarily submitted by the Upazila Parishad (UZP) chairman candidates in the recently concluded UZP elections. Only two figures of the whole presentation are enough for establishing links with degenerative political values of the political elites who aspire for public offices. The litigation records and the professional identities of the candidates contesting in the elections and being elected are enough for understanding the direction the politics of the country. Out of 2,288 candidates and 465 elected chairs, 33 % and 44% respectively reported having court cases against them in the past. Among the elected chairs (465) about 60 are facing now or had faced murder charges in the past under Section 302 of Cr. PC. During the election year, 28% of the candidates and 29%of the elected chairs were still fighting cases in the court. As far as profession is concern, 62% identified themselves as business persons.

The three separate stories discussed above may lead to a very negative logical conclusion on the nature, type and characteristic of our political leadership aspiring for public offices. Though the stories are local, the phenomenon is essentially national. There is an indication that corruption, crime and ascendancy to political prominence nexus are on their way to perpetuation. Private gain through public offices was considered a deviation in the past; it has currently become normal under a new political order. Administration is supposed to be run by neutral and professional civil servants. Unfortunately, many of them work along partisan lines. The common citizen in general and Local Government Institutions (LGIs) are becoming easy and helpless victims of criminalisation of politics. The local leaders are used indiscriminately as fodder for the political big guns and criminal gangs.

The value of local government as envisioned by grand theorists of liberal democracy like de Tocqueville (1835), John Stuart Mill (1861), C.H. Willson (1948), Harold Laski (1931) and many others needs to be re-written in the context of political development of Bangladesh. This may sound as a statement of utter frustration. Let us try to find way forward. A person or a group of persons at a particular historical juncture may be defeated but a nation cannot. As a nation, we shall have to overcome the crisis.

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