

Understanding Capacity of Bangladeshi Urban Local Self-Government Institution in Policy Adoption: Politics of Central-Local Relations

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Abstract

Bangladesh has been experiencing a major political transformation since the re-establishment of democracy in 1990. This democratic environment significantly affected the autonomy and capacity of local government units in policy adoption. In Bangladesh, urban local self-government units are identified as poorly governed while their capacity in policy adoption is significantly compromised. As part of the central government, these units have a constitutional guarantee in demonstrating their existence with autonomy and efficiency. Meeting the challenge of establishing local democracy is a constitutional obligation for local self-government representatives and people. In urban areas, the increased influence of central government and the compounding effects of inefficiency and dependency of local self-government units mean that they are in need of adequate administrative autonomy and capacity. This study aimed to explore the factors and issues that impact on policy adoption process at urban local self-government institutions. This exploratory-descriptive research used a mixed method framework to achieve calculative findings with qualitative data support. Central government's control over financial regulations and a range of political and administrative practices are identified in decreasing administrative capacity of the urban local self-government institutions in Bangladesh. Though it was assumed that the re-establishment of national democracy may have resulted in an autonomous local self-government system, this has not been transformed. Thus, the identified findings have implications in capacity building of urban local self-government institutions in relation to their policy adoption and application.

Keywords: Capacity; Urban local self-government; Policy adoption; Center-local relationships

Introduction

Bangladesh is identified with a tedious governance system at local level. Within the unitary form of government, the urban self-government units remain at the lowest level of urban areas [1,2]. There are two types of local self-government system exist in urban areas including (i) Pourashava (Municipality) and (ii) City Corporation (Municipal) [1,2]. An overlap in structures and practices resulted in poor performance of these self-government units in policy adoption [3]. These units also experience serious challenges in coping with the unplanned and rapidly increased urban areas and population as their administrative capacity is determined by central government of this country [1].

In Bangladesh, the central government plays a significant role in managing and planning activities of urban self-government units [4,5]. Different governments of the country introduced policies and programs to reorganize institutional arrangements and functions of these units [1,2]. One of the major policies was decentralization that undertaken as a remedy to transfer adequate authority and autonomy to urban self-government units [6,7]. Though the initiative focused on the decentralization of fiscal, political, and administrative responsibilities to local self-government institutions, urban self-government units never get adequate authorities and responsibilities from the central government in formulating policies for their own [4,5]. Thus, an undemocratic mode in policy formulation and

application takes place at these self-government units which largely impact on public services to urban dwellers [8].

These units involved in social and political practices in urban areas, however, they are considered as extended part of the central government [9]. Their practice in policy adoption reflects political values and norms of the ruling government [9]. Urban self-government institutions such as City Corporations and Pourashavas cannot adopt policies in compliance with the rules and regulations articulated for these units [10]. Elected representatives follow the way advised by central political authority and recruited officials continued the activities what they learned from colonial and ex-colonial periods [4]. As a result, administrative capacity has become main concern at present-day accounts of urban local self-government institutions in Bangladesh.

There are enormous political and administrative challenges in ensuring that there is adequate autonomy and capacity of urban local self-government institutions to adopt policies. The undertaken decentralization policy advances the dependency of local units to central government. There are no completely autonomous policy jurisdictions identified for the urban local self-government and strengthening efforts are not likely to be effective for these units. This calls for an investigation to understand the factors and issues that impact on institutional strength of these institutions. Thus, the paper examines the political and administrative factors in operation, emphasizing the consequences of central-local relationships that impact on policy formulation and application in urban areas of Bangladesh.

Data and Materials

This research project is approved by the University Research Centre (URC) of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Bangladesh. This study conducted from 21 March to 30 July in 2013. The researcher used a mixed method framework under an exploratory-descriptive research design for collecting and analysis data. This mixed method framework involves two phases of data collection. At first stage, study area and population were purposefully selected as this study intended to present a specific country context. The study area was Sylhet City Corporation and the population were selected from mass people and elected and/or appointed officials working in Sylhet City Corporation. The sample size was determined by the simple random sampling technique. A sample size of sixty participants (n=60; elected and selected officials=21 and mass people=39) were recruited to participate voluntarily in this study. These participants were asked to participate in this study by completing a self-administered questionnaire. A complete quantitative data set was produced and analyzed, using the SPSS 22.0 software, from the accomplished questionnaires by the participants. Percentage distribution for individual variables and cross tabulations were undertaken to understand the factors and issues impact on administrative capacity of urban local self-governments unit.

At second stage, the researcher therefore approached all of these participants to participate in a semi-structured interview and six participants were agreed to participate in audio recorded sessions. Participants were given the rights to withdraw themselves at any point of the interview session. The interview sessions ranged from 25 to 35 minutes. Recorded voices were then transcribed from Sylheti dialect to Bangla language as Bangla is the researcher's native language. A verbatim translation from Bangla to English was conducted. The researcher therefore manually coded the transcripts of the interviews and categorized the findings into appropriate themes for analysis.

To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, the researcher used pseudonym for participants and deleted the name of the participants from main transcripts. Moreover, a verbal script was read out to potential participants to invite them to participate in this study. They were given a hard copy of the information sheet that entails information about the research project including aims, nature of the study, time requirement, data collection approaches and ethical issues such as confidentiality and anonymity. All participants provided their consent prior to start the data collection.

Findings

Quantitative data analysis

Sixty participants had completed the questionnaire. The mean age of these participants was 26 years. Maximum participants (62%) were male. A considerable portion of participants (43%) and (33%) has completed their graduation and post-graduation degrees respectively. Most of the participants (65%) were mass people (i.e. students, academicians, businessmen, officials etc.), and 35% participants were elected representatives and civil servants of City Corporation.

The relationship between central government and City Corporation is managed by the central government politically. Most participants (38%) agreed that City Corporation is controlled by the central government. Ruling political party in central government essentially maintains political communication with Mayor (i.e. chief of City Corporation & local political representative of the party). This political communication remains at highest level that impact on administrative

capacity of the institution. Lack of administrative capacity of City Corporation makes a way for the central government to interfere in development activities of urban areas. For example, participants (28%) have a feeling that development activities in urban areas are commonly executed by the central government. There is no participant found who thought that city corporation can do their activities according to City Corporation Act. Thus, there is a question raised about how and what extent the control mechanisms of the central government impact on City Corporation's policy adoption process.

Policy adoption process of City Corporation is characterized by the parent laws that formulated by the central government. Major portion (60%) of the participants believed that all kinds of controlling mechanisms are vested in the hand of central government where the powers and functions are defined in the parent laws. The rules for City Corporation are framed under the parent laws that inspire the central government to control the policy formulation and application process of City Corporation. This control is furthered by the present presidential form of City Corporation that makes this institution more dependent on central government. Existing laws implies a 'one man show' institution where Mayor only plays the role in policy adoption. Rest of elected representatives do not have significant role in policy adoption. This is resulted in a lack authority of City Corporation in the City Corporation (38%), however, the rate of TAX/VAT is determined by the central government. Economic dependency adopting new policies for its own development process. For instance, imposing Tax/VAT is considered as only function of furthered the degree of dependency of City Corporation on central government.

City Corporation is economically dependent on central Government. Maximum participants (38%) believed economic dependency of City Corporation creates administrative, political and societal constraints in policy adoption. Maximum participants (33%) assumed that existing distribution and redistribution system of resources between central government and City Corporation develop a narrow way for democratic process in adopting policies for City Corporation. Revenue and development budget of City Corporation are largely dependent on central government. Though the City Corporation has authority to impose Tax, Mayor does not like to increase the rate of Tax as a member of ruling political party. Mayor does not want to lose his/her popularity as well as the popularity of the ruling political party. Thus, the mayor maintained political relations with Ministers of the central government to get allocation rather emphasizing on local revenue collection. A noteworthy portion (27%) thought that the individual action of Mayor in politics is responsible for increasing the dependency on central government. Local economic and political elite class also perform as a catalyst in making the City Corporation dependent on central government in relation to policy adoption process. These elites put pressure on elected representatives to follow the instruction of central government. This is why maximum respondents (63%) believed there is a callous condition between elected representatives and civil servants in performing administrative activities.

There is a clear psychological distance exists between elected representatives and civil servants of City Corporation. Maximum elected representatives (67%) assumed that civil servants do not support them in policy making rather they tend to follow acts and rules of central government. Civil servants assumed (48%) that party politics within the City Corporation is involved in poor performance in policy adoption. However, both elected representatives and officials (43%) thought that central government's organs are directly

responsible in decreasing the capacity of City Corporation but mass people (76%) opined differently. Most participants (43%) believed that the central government mainly dominated the City Corporation by appointing administrator for a long time. Another portion (20%) believed that the central government intentionally interferes in policy adoption process of City Corporation through frequent changes in acts and rules. In reply, a number of ways were suggested by the participants in making the City Corporation capable in policy adoption.

Most participants (38%) believed that true willingness of the central and local level political representatives can make the institutions independent and more effective in policy adoption. Maximum number of participants (57%) said that immediate legal changes are necessary to build capacity of the institution. A significant portion (43%) believes that shifting from present presidential form of local government system to parliamentary form can make the institution more effective and efficient. Some important measures also considered such as restructuring legal framework, economic independence, efficient and effective performance of local politicians and create political consciousness among the people.

Qualitative data analysis

Six respondents were interviewed to make a qualitative assessment of the policy adoption practices in urban government institutions. The findings of this study focused on two major themes: i. functional capacity and ii. Control mechanisms by central government.

City Corporation has been given few mandatory and supplementary responsibilities by parent laws. These responsibilities include the functions are civic duties, police making, revenue and general administration related duties, development activities, transferred functions, and judicial responsibilities. This institution failed to perform these activities due to lack of administrative capacity. A female representative (Reserved Seat- 05, Sylhet City Corporation) described as:

'The government has no will to strengthening the City Corporation as they wanted to make these institutions dependent. Most of the local ruling party elites are not conscious about their role to develop the institutions but they always wanted to establish their power and authority. In addition, one cannot imagine how much abuse and mismanagement goes on in this institution due to lack of accountability and transparency as well as lack of institutional capacity.'

This female participant expected that the City Corporation will consider basic drawbacks of the administration and incorporate them in track to ensure equal participation and representation of all elected representatives and people of this area in the policy adoption process.

In relation to the policies taken by the institution consisting of two steps: firstly, control mechanisms are characterized by enhanced power and authority of parliamentary members of central government at local level; and secondly, the strategic interactions between administration and social groups regarding the nature of the center-local relationships. In this context, a representative (Ward-16, Sylhet City Corporation) expresses his opinion as:

'Elected political representatives are failed to formulate new policies and implementation in most of the case as they have no administrative and managerial power and authority. Central government always creates pressure on us for bringing effective services but development policies taken by the central government. We have different political

philosophy for development at this area, however, there is no scope for us to avoid instructions of central government. It is unexpected that we cannot do anything as this area needs.'

All respondents agreed that policy adoption process is largely influenced by willingness and unwillingness of central government, local elected representatives and civil servants. Local representatives lost their willingness due to their political future which is determined by ruling political party. All participants believed that there is a need for adequate autonomy and self-consciousness of elected representatives and appointed officials to ensure efficient utilization of fund and proper social monitoring and quality control of the projects under the city corporation. One of the ward commissioners (Ward-19, Sylhet City Corporation) described this as:

'If central government give up their control from City Corporation then it will be effective to provide services to people. Moreover, City Corporation should increase their income and reduce dependency on central government. People's participation must be encouraged to reduce central's control.'

Discussion

These results recognize a substantial need for specific policy changes for urban local government institutions. There are two different forms of government identified at national and local level of Bangladesh. There is a parliamentary form of government exists at national level while City Corporation is identified with presidential form of government. Mayor is considered as a member of ruling political party resulted in an imbalanced opportunity to exercise democratic power in policy formulation and application.

The central government often determines the political and bureaucratic structure at urban local self-government system which is identified in this study. This is also supported by the article 59 and 60 of the constitution and the legislations of Sylhet City Corporation Act-2001 that demonstrate the power of central government over urban self-government units [2]. The central government formulates detailed rules of procedure relating to election mode, power, and duties of elected representative of urban local government institutions [1,2,11]. The central government often appointed administrator for City Corporation and regularly appointed officials for routine activities of the corporation. City Corporation is staffed by two different types of officials including directly employed by the institution and deputed by the Ministry of Public Administration, Bangladesh. There are 2 cadre officials and 15 non-cadre officials are employed from the central government who are involved directly in formulation and implementation of policies. This resulted in an influenced culture of policy adoption process by the central government.

Mode of economic dependency of urban self-government units on central government considers the sources of funds and expenditure structure which are usually fixed up by the central government [2,12]. The central government also suggested in assessment of Taxes, preparation of budget, making contract and appointment, accounts and audits and all other related issues [1]. Most importantly, the urban units have rights to make new regulations but subject to the approval of central government which make it most ineffective body in policy formulation and application.

According the City Corporation Act, City Corporation are supposed to form eight standing committees, comprising ward commissioners and elected female representatives [1,2]. These committees cannot

perform their duties and responsibilities due to political and administrative interference of the central government. Though the Sylhet City Corporation of Bangladesh was established in 2001 (Under the Sylhet City Corporation Act-2001), it fails to provide necessary services (i.e. public health; water supply and waste management; food and drinking water; animals; town planning; control of building constructions; roads; public security; tree, park, forest management; education; culture; social welfare and development etc.) for the people [13].

This institution has always been institutionally and financially weak, and lacked social and political accountability and transparency. In addition to that, capacity building in policy application process is always negotiating with dumped policies of central government. This study found that economically development policies and practice are largely responsible to make the institution dependent on central government, and there is no scope created for the institution to depend on local innovation. Urban local government institution failed to emerge as a true self-governing body with adequate capacity to perform their committed roles and functions effectively and efficiently [9,10].

This is another issue between elected representatives and local officials in relation to mutual trust in policy adoption [2]. These people do not believe each other, and the relationship is sometimes hostile among them. The central government can transfer any development scheme to local government bodies any time and local body has an obligation to implement this scheme as priority basis [12]. This makes the elected representative dependent on civil servant of the institution. Additionally, there is a misunderstanding between mass people and elected representatives as people have no knowledge about policies and programs of the institution. People love to believe that most of the policies practiced in local areas are influenced by the central government. Thus, it becomes challenge to overcome these problems and meet the demand of the people of this constituency by their own way [13].

Conclusion

This study identifies the reality of central-local relationships in policy adaption at urban local self-government institutions. Most respondents can understand that inefficiency and ineffectiveness of urban local institution, specific to policy application and its consequences, play a significant role in promoting poor governance in policy adoption system. An intensive group effort is required from central government, local government; academician, experts, and others related institutions to help to strengthen the capacity of urban local government institutions in policy formulation and application process. Thus, these institutions will be able to provide full support in providing service for urban people, and they will achieve a successful self-governance system at urban areas in Bangladesh. In this regards, the researcher proposes the following policy guidelines for strengthening the urban local self-government system:

- Urban local self-government system should be community oriented.
- Local innovations should be considered in policy formulation and application process.

- People of urban areas need to be permitted to impeach elected representatives of self-government units.
- Power and authority should be vested in the hand of self-government units in making decisions about the development issues of the constituency. In this regards, a local parliamentary system can be introduced to discuss their policy issues.
- A future step-by-step procedure in decentralizing power and authority should be undertaken by the central government.
- Empowering in policy adoption system, institutions should be autonomous and powerful in relation to finance and decisions making process.
- Central government can introduce new scheme on urban development strategies though a combination of elected representatives and representatives from local communities.
- Civil services of urban local self-government should be under control of elected representatives and this service can be divided into two sectors including policy management and development functions.
- Central government should take immediate initiatives to revive the urban local self-government institutions by providing essential support to build professionalism in policy adoption process.

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