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## **Democratization at Local Government (LG): Revisiting the Lowest Tier of LG in Bangladesh**

Ahmed Bashir <sup>1</sup>, Rahman Sajedur <sup>1</sup> and Tarikul Islam Mohammad <sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh

\* Corresponding author: Mohammad Tarikul Islam

### **Abstract**

Union Parishad (UP), lowest tier of the LG is a major component that plays a crucial role to strengthen democracy and to gain sustainable development of the rural community. UP is considered to be the significant breeding grounds for democracy. But in the developing country like Bangladesh, there are several margins prevailing behind the democratization of local government. In fact, UP in Bangladesh is associated with chronic problems i.e. absence of sensitization and bring about progressive change in communalist mindsets of rural populace; absence of capable elected representatives especially the women; no provision for engagement of professionals and consultants for speedy rural development; practice of party driven elections and absence of unanimous elections in avoiding political interference; lack of a devolved function required for administrative and financial authority; highest scope of the intervention and control of state government; absence of a strong political will for the effectiveness of the democratization within UP; fragile economic condition; absence of visionary leadership; poor cooperation among different stakeholders; gender inequality in mainstreaming political parties; patron-client relationship resulting impediment towards democratization of UP. In consequence, sustainable development is not achieved in rural Bangladesh yet.

**Keywords:** Democratization, Democratic Governance, Local Self Governance, Sustainable Development, Union Parishad and Rural Development

### **Introduction**

Democratization is a popular theme of the modern world. It is being widely accepted as a symbol of good governance as well as an indicator of the promotion of human development leading to sustainable development. Indeed, a democracy works when all people including the most marginalized ones participate in the process of governance, have capability to ask questions and seek accountability. For third world countries, it is an indispensable pre-condition for sustainable development. According to Lord Bryce, “the best school for democracy and the best guarantee for its success in the practice of Local Self Government”<sup>1</sup>.

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It is generally recognized that the local institutions constitute the school for democracy. Success of democracy largely depends on the successful working of Local Government (LG). National democracy will be success only when the LSG will function successfully and effectively. It can be said that without a sound system of democracy at the base levels, democracy and form of Government cannot have firm roots at the apex, LSG helps people understood democratic spirit and values, the art of managing things for themselves and ultimately the democratic way of life. Bangladesh is a newly independent unitary state; it achieved her independence in 1971 through a nine month long liberation struggle.

LG is an integral part of the central government of Bangladesh. Despite its long existence, LG in Bangladesh is confronted with some chronic problems. As a result, the units have failed to grow as viable institution to render democratic education properly to the people living in local levels in Bangladesh. Union Parishad (UP), lowest tier of the LG is a major component that plays a crucial role to strengthen democracy and to gain sustainable development of the rural community<sup>1</sup>. UP is considered to be the significant breeding grounds for democracy. Bangladesh is continuously struggling to make herself a democratic developed nation since its inception as an independent state. But several political ups and downs, introduction of one party system, military rules, and irresponsible competition of political parties to capture power have placed the democratic journey of the country at stake. The political problems that Bangladesh is suffering is not rooted in the constitution, rather it is totally political. Even, such political culture has jeopardized the journey towards democratization efforts within the local government structure of Bangladesh. The paper attempts to examine the current status of democratization of UP and suggest possible way forward to make UP democratic as to ensure sustainable development for rural community in Bangladesh.

### **Materials and Method**

Bangladesh has the longest tradition of Local Government. The existing LG of Bangladesh has come to the present form through a gradual process of evolution. The roots of LG can be traced to as far back as the British rule in the Indian subcontinent. The introduction of LG in the country had all along been an idea from the Chowkidari Panchayat Act of 1871. Lord Ripon for the first time had taken initiative for the introduction of LG in the history of British India. As part of his initiative, he issued a resolution on LG. The aim of the resolution was to develop these bodies in order to provide opportunities for training the people in the art of self-government. Since then, there were a number of acts taken by the British government for the development of LG in the Indian subcontinent. The Bengal Local Self Government Act III of 1885 to 1919, the Bengal Village Self Government Act V of 1919 to 1947 was among them. After the independence of Pakistan in 1947, the structure of LG remained the same till 1956. The system of LG changed radically with the introduction of the Basic Democracies (BD) by president Ayub Khan in 1959<sup>2</sup>.

Under Basic Democracies system, a four tier system of LG was introduced in East Pakistan. After the emergence of independent Bangladesh in 1971, BD, the system of LSG as existed during Pakistan, was dissolved by a presidential order (order no.7) in 1972. Another order from the president changed the name and structure of union panchayat and it was named as the union parish ad. At the end of Mujib Regime, military administration had brought few structural and

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functional changes of LSG bodies through two military government ordinances. During Ershad Regime, few changes/ couple of changes were made into the existing structure of LG bodies. By presidential orders, Thana administration and Upazila were introduced respectively in 1981<sup>2</sup> and in 1983<sup>3</sup>. Local Government (UP) ordinance had also brought a considerable change into the composition and functions of union parishad. As per that ordinance, UP was consisted of one elected chairman, nine elected female members. Each UP was divided into three wards. Three members were elected from a single ward. At last, Local Government (UP) Act 1997 provided an opportunity for the female members to be elected directly by the local electors<sup>4</sup>. As per these act, UP is divided into nine wards. Now a single person is elected from a single ward. Apart from content analysis, the study attempted to learn about the practice of democracy within the functions of Union Parishad, the lowest tier of the local government of Bangladesh. In order to realize the endeavor, a total of 100 persons irrespective of caste, profession, religion, gender and political parties were interviewed from Savar Upazila of Dhaka district of Bangladesh from December to January 2013/2014.

### Results and Discussion

Over the past three decades the developing world has seen increasing devolution of political and economic power to local governments. Decentralization is considered an important element of participatory democracy and, along with privatization and deregulation, represents a substantial reduction in the authority of national governments over economic policy. It is manifest that, central government have allocated some degree of authority to local government but a comprehensive set of indicators that must also take account of institutions for decision-making and politics at this level is lacking. LG institutions are the significant unit, for the promotion of democracy. They are committed to assist the people for learning democratic values in many respects.

Union Parishad (UP), the lowest tier of the LG of Bangladesh provides the rural people opportunities to taste the fruit of freedom and participation. The people generally are more interested in the participation in UP bodies. They can directly participate in the local bodies in large scale. UP also work as a training complex of the national leaders. Ernest observes, "UP offers many excellent opportunities for the training of the man and women who may later lead the country in bigger affairs of the national and world politics". Success of democracy largely depends on the successful functioning of UP.<sup>5</sup> LG is educative both for the electors and the elected. Educative value largely depends upon the spirit of the local self governing institutions. Political education is the major part of LG. If LG does not work democratically, the central government can never be democratic.

Democracy at the centre can work in a better way only if there is a corresponding system of democracy at the local level. No national democracy will have sound footing without grass root democracy. LG is an integral part of the central government in Bangladesh. LG contributes to the strengthening of democratic culture in number of ways. The stability, performance and structural continuity of LG are mostly dependent upon the policy and stability of the government at the centre. Despite the long existence of LG in Bangladesh, till today it is confronted with some chronic problems. As a result

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it could not play effective role to promote democracy. Moreover; these constraints regarding LG impinge upon the success of democracy in Bangladesh. The historical account of LG of Bangladesh shows that the successive governments felt obliged to establish some kind of the local government structure in order to mobilize support of the rural communities in their favor through providing a little bit of welfare measures. Hence, LG could not function properly to provide opportunities for the people irrespective of party affiliation to participate in the development activities of it. The colonial pattern of administration in LG is characterized by elitist and alienated nature. Administrative officials working at different level are mainly bureaucratic in orientation and alienated from the people. Therefore, people cannot take part in different activities of LG properly/ actively in Bangladesh. The most serious obstacles in the way of democratic education by LG remain the weakness of its socio-economic base. The non-egalitarian economic structure trends to control the local bodies by pro-partied class. They often tend to suit their class interest and purposes. As a result, LG cannot render proper services to the people at local level. Beside, general people do not dare to work with LG for the presence of local elite.

Factional attitude of the people is responsible for the less effectiveness of LG in Bangladesh. In rural Bangladesh, there are bitter experiences regarding factional politics that jeopardizes the successful working of LG. It remains as a major impediment of proper popular participation in local level elections. Such attitude pushes the loser candidates and their supporters in a conflicting situation in post local election. As a result, they do not intend to cooperate with the winner candidates and for that the very functioning of elected council remains problematic. Politico-administrative contradictions often disrupt the very functioning of LG units. Administrative wing of the UP often expects that political leaders should work under their supervision due to their technical expertise. On the other hand, local representatives claim that they are able to work for the development of the people as they can understand problems and find out solutions. Such kind of contradictions always hampers the structural and functional continuity of UP and therefore people representatives cannot serve the interest of local people. Moreover, local people cannot provide any sort of inputs in decision making process for their welfare. Since the very beginning of its evolution, the units are being used by both the party in power and the opposition for their narrow political ends. Besides, the national political activities in different ways are foisted upon the grassroots level units. As a result, people at local level divide in political line and they do not get lesion of cooperation and coexistence unlike the national politics prevailing in Bangladesh. Patron-client relationship is also responsible for the less effective role of UP in democratic development.

In Rural Bangladesh patron decides the will of political participation of the client and such trend keeps the vast majority portion apolitical at the local level. Education is one of the major components of political participation. Unfortunately, despite have 41 years of existence of Bangladesh as an independent country her majority people are illiterate. Among them, most of the people living the local areas have no idea about the significance of UP in strengthening democracy. Women constitute half of the total population in Bangladesh. But they are in backward position due to their ignorance. A number of barriers are responsible for their backwardness such as poor rate of literacy, myths, religious sanction, and patriarchal society above all government negligence and so on. In the backdrop of such a condition of UP system to strengthen democracy in Bangladesh, there are some positive outlooks are observed. These are mentioned below:

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- Regular basis election.
- Women direct representation.
- Increasing the rate of people's participation in local elections.
- Increasing the tendency of the people to participate in different level of development activities of UP.
- Increasing the rate of literacy.
- Expansion of the activities of NGOs and their pro vital role to socio-economic development of women at local level.
- Expansion of the mass and electronic media at the grass root level.
- Space for the people in order to have access to information at rural Bangladesh.
- Tele-center for the rural community and introduction of community radio
- Initiation of UP based budget formulation
- Activation of village court as alternative dispute resolution option to empowering UP <sup>6</sup>.

### **Findings, Analysis and interpretation of Data received from perception study are as follows:**

From the figure-I, it can be seen that out of total number of respondents 65 % are of the opinion that the Union Parishad's role and responsibilities are well known to all while 35 % opined that, UP is not visible to all through its due roles and responsibilities. From the figure-II; it can be seen that out of total number of respondents 55 % are of the opinion that decisions and activities undertaken by Union Parishads reflect popular opinion while 45 % opined that, decision and activities of the Union Parishad are mostly representing the interest of certain section in the society. From the figure-III; it can be seen that out of total number of respondents 70 % are of the opinion that Union Parishad failed to provide education on democratic values to the rural people while 30 % opined that, the Union Parishad has earnest strong suit to provide education on democratic values to the community living under jurisdiction. From the figure-IV, it can be seen that out of total number of respondents 75 % are of the opinion that successive governments make best use of union Parishad in order to succeed the backing of the rural people for their party interest that jeopardizes the spirit of democracy at the grass root level while only 25 % are of the opinion that, Union Parishad is free from any form of influence of the successive government/political party(s) in power.

### **Conclusion**

It is apparent that, UP is on one of the most important grounds of democracy. Any program of UP is very significant contributor to democratic development of the state. It has been understood by the academics and the policy planners that for democratic development there is no alternative to UP. The existing UP system in Bangladesh is not sound and effective enough to promote democracy. Moreover, this institution is facing some prolong and profound problems. As a result of which it has failed to render it service for the development of democracy. The gov't should be committed to bring about the structural and qualitative changes into the existing UP bodies. Besides, the political party in power and the opposition should rethink about the significance of UP for strengthening democracy and for that they must not use it for their narrow political ends. As peoples outlook in our country is fatalistic and their consciousness about their way of

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political life is very limited the reason why there is no alternative to the spread of education. Education is the way of political awareness. Democratization enables UP to achieve sustainable development and the author has attempted to provide the end benefit of democratized Union Parishad in Bangladesh through the diagram as figure-V. Hence, our civil society, media, NGOs must be more active in making the education a social movement and make the people aware of it. The working of grass-root democracy in Bangladesh is facing numerous challenges from many sides' .i.e. legal inadequacies, lack of funds, functions, functionaries and capacity, adverse socio- economic environment, vested political interests and lack of political will. On the basis of Indian experience we may conclude that the following measures may be useful in making the institutions of grass- root democracy more effective and vibrant.

- Commitment to decentralization as a political value and the consequent political will to establish it.
- Institutions of self-government should have recognized as an agency for the preparation and implementation of the development programs of the government in consultation and discussion with different stakeholders within government entities.
- Any agency set- up by the Central or State government for rural development should work under the supervision and control of institution of local self-government.
- Clear-cut role specification of all the levels of decentralization.
- A legal instrument for decentralization must have adequate and well-defined provisions for devolution of power.
- A devolved function must have required administrative and financial authority.
- The scope of the intervention and control of state government must be minimum and well-defined.
- Power of dissolution of lower level as well as to seek its accountability must be vested in the higher-level institution of decentralized governance, not in the government, in order to ensure peer-group accountability.
- Grass-root institutions should be empowered to raise their on resources by widening their revenue base as also through other ways.
- Grass- root Institutions should have their own staff to carry out their work. They must be able to engage professionals and consultants for speedy development.
- Decentralized units must have clear working instructions about how to exercise powers devolved to them.
- Role of village assembly must be strengthened so that it may effectively work as village legislature - a forum for discussion of village problems and plans as also for seeking accountability from Panchayat (the village executives).
- Vigorous efforts should be made for awareness, sensitization and bringing about progressive change in traditional casteist / communalist mindsets of rural populace. Involvement of the electronic and print media, non-government organizations, social activists and teachers in the task would make the social environment more conducive for success of the grass- root democracy.
- In order to eliminate the impact of economic stratification and poverty on the working of grass- root democracy- Land reforms and vigorous poverty alleviation programs should be undertaken by the government.
- Rural banks like Krishi Bank with easy loan facility should be more focused and client-oriented

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- In order to ensure transparency and accountability of grass- root institutions – All the relevant information should be displayed on bill-boards.
- Expansion of Right to Information (RTI) by making people aware of their Right to Information.
- Proper accounting and auditing system should be established for UP. The requirement of financial accountability should be designed and supervised by the state level audit organization. Provisions should be made for social audit and its binding legal outcome to curb corruption and abuse of funds
- Capacity-building of newly elected representatives especially the women and the under- privileged class through intensive training and orientation programs must be made a regular feature.
- Women may be empowered through organizing them in groups such as Self Help Groups.
- Massive mobilization support from Non-Government Organizations, academics, political parties and other groups in exerting pressure on government to restore power to the place where it belongs to may be of great help
- Efforts should be made to encourage unanimous elections to grass- root institutions. This will help in avoiding political interference and securing village harmony
- Subscription to the autonomy and empowerment of grass-root institutions should be an important parameter to judge the performance of a state government.
- An appropriate structure of incentives to recognize and encourage grass root institutions for outstanding performance should be devised.
- A strong political will is the most required condition for the effectiveness of the democratization

Sustainable Development is the dream shared by vast humanity throughout the world. To make the development really meaningful, empowering and sustainable, ‘bottom – up’ approach of development, involving people directly in the making and implementation of decisions is the need of the hour. This necessitates the decentralization of democracy to the lowest level. Bangladesh has embarked on this great experiment through the introduction of Union Parishad. True, there are problems at the moment. But the path of great goals is never smooth. Let us take the lessons from the problems and overcome them with greater conviction and commitment.

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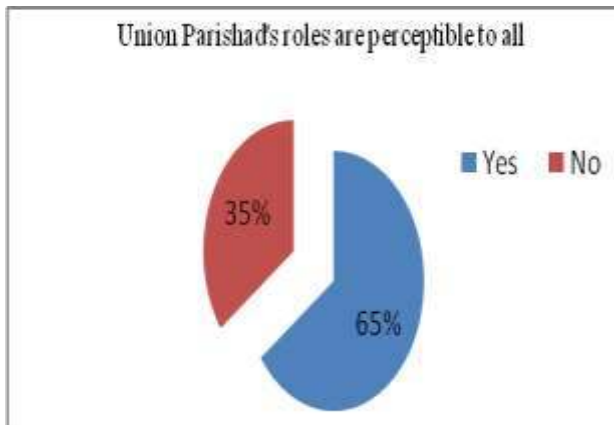


Figure –I : Roles and responsibilities of UP are perceptible to all

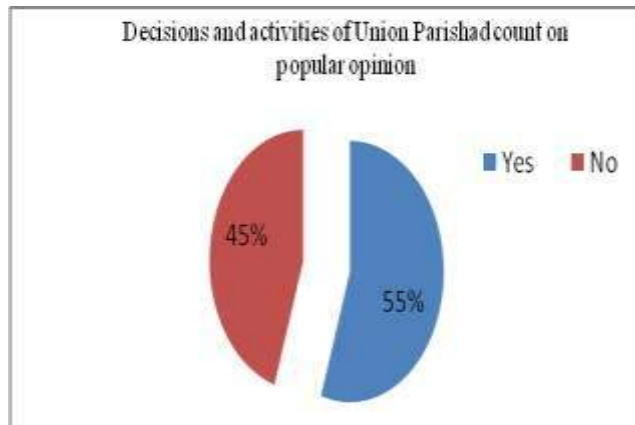


Figure –II: Decisions and activities undertaken by UP reflect/count on popular opinion

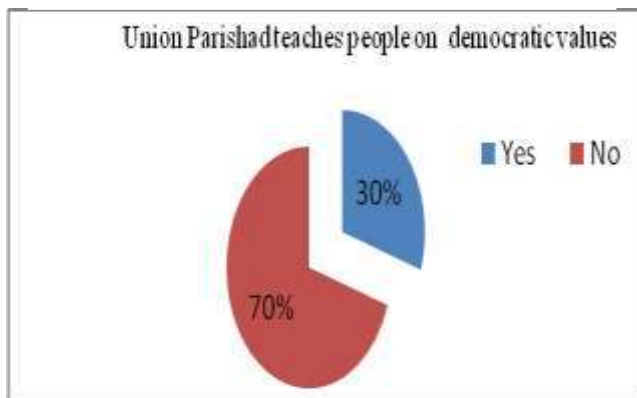


Figure –III: UP assists the rural people for learning democratic values.



Figure –IV: Approach of successive governments to take advantage of UP in order to mobilize support of the rural communities in their favor

