URBAN GOVERNANCE IN BANGLADESH: THE POST INDEPENDENCE SCENARIO[*]

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I. Introduction

Urbanization worldwide has been found to be an effective engine of economic growth and socio-cultural development. In pure economic terms, urbanization contributes significantly to the national economy. Although the developing world is less than 40 percent urban, its urban sector contributes to more than 65 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Even in Bangladesh (with less than 28 percent of population urban), this sector contributed to more than 60 percent of the GDP in 2009 (Choe and Roberts, 2011, p. 120). This has grown from as low as 25 percent in 1972-73. This obviously may lead one to conclude that urbanization on a macro-scale would be beneficial to the economy of Bangladesh. Urbanization also causes social development in terms of higher literacy rate, improvement in the quality of education, and better health indicators. With greater urbanization, there are also benefits in cultural and political development. Just as urbanization brings along economic and social benefits, it also has some negative effects especially when it takes place at a pace as rapid as in Bangladesh. The negative consequences are manifested in physical environmental degradation, social inequities, persisting poverty, inadequate provision of basic utilities, educational and health services, and increasing incidence of crime and violence. While technical and financial resources are strong factor determining the sustainability of cities, the more critical factor is considered to be the nature and quality of governance. The paper discusses the nature of urban governance in the post independence period with special reference to a number of key elements of governance.

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II. Urbanization and Municipalization: A Brief Historical Background

Although the level of urbanization in Bangladesh remained very low throughout the British period (1757-1947), growth of some individual cities and towns was of considerable significance. The British had felt the need for introducing some sort of municipal local governance even in the early 1820s, but a formal beginning was made with the establishment of one of the first municipalities in the present day Bangladesh region in Dhaka in 1864, through the Bengal Municipal Act 1864. The municipal council was however predominantly composed of officials. Dhaka then had a population about 50,000 and was still the largest urban centre of the region.

The 1932 Bengal Municipal Act was a landmark development as it provided for greater participation of elected representatives in the municipal bodies and also in widening the powers and functions of municipal bodies. The system continued well into the first decade of the Pakistan period, but following the imposition of Martial Law by General Ayub Khan in 1958, and his introduction of Basic Democracy, municipal governance also took a similar twist. Instead of direct election to the posts of Municipal Councilors, indirect system, step wise (such as through Ward Committee and Union Committee) representations, was introduced. Subsequent changes came after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, alternatively giving more importance to members of the National Parliament, then to Government Officials and again to elected local representatives between 1972 and 1976.

The governance of the Capital City Dhaka underwent several changes since liberation. The Act of 1974 (Act 56), designated Dhaka as the Dhaka Municipal Corporation. But in 1983, it was raised to the status of a City Corporation. Chittagong City Corporation was, however, formed in 1982. Four other cities (Khulna, Rajshahi. Sylhet and Barisal) were also given City Corporation status between 1984 and 2001. Smaller cities and towns are known as Pourashavas (or municipalities). Prior to 1994, the City Corporations were managed by Mayors appointed by the government. In case of Dhaka often the Minister in charge of Local Government was given the additional responsibility of the Mayor.

Bangladesh was governed by military regimes during 1975-1990. Parliamentary democracy was restored in 1991 after long political struggle. The democratic process of electing the Mayor and Ward Commissioners through direct voting came into practice only in 1994 in Dhaka, when Mohammad Hanif was elected Mayor through the Local/ Government Act 1993. Similar development took

place in the other City Corporations and Pourashavas. Further progress in the democratization process was achieved in 1999 when direct election of Women Commissioners for reserved seats was introduced. In 2008, all Pourashava Chairmen came to be known as Mayors like City Corporation Mayors and Ward Commissioners as Councilors.

Urbanization in Bangladesh today has become a very strong political, economic, social and cultural force. The population of some of the major city corporations or municipalities is very large, even larger than any district population. The population of an electoral constituency to a seat of the Parliament is many times smaller than the constituency of the Mayor of Dhaka or Chittagong or the other city corporations. The Mayors of these large city corporations have great political significance.

A basic element in a democratic process is the election of representatives to lead and govern the citizens. The people of Bangladesh in general participate in all elections with huge enthusiasm, voter's turnout being almost always over 50 percent and in many cases even over 85 percent. Municipal elections are equally popular and participatory. Municipal (or local government), elections have been held on a non-party basis, while the elections to the Parliament are held on party identity. However, most candidates in municipal (or other local government units) have party identity and are indirectly supported by one or the other established political party. In fact, the election to the position of the Mayors of such cities as Dhaka or Chittagong, are very much dominated by party affiliation and in turn exert huge influence on the elections of the Parliamentary seats. The candidature of the city Mayor is therefore a very critical issue in major political parties. So far the candidates chosen for the mayoral elections specially in the larger cities have been party stalwarts. The Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation enjoys the status of a Cabinet Minister. While the other city Mayors have a State Minister's status.

Recently (2011-2012) a number of Pourashavas (single or in combination of two or three) have been upgraded to the status of city corporations. These include Narayanganj (with Siddirgonj and Kadam Rasul Pourashavas amalgamated), Comilla, Gazipur (with Tongi Pourashava amalgamated) and Rangpur. Elections to the Narayangonj City Corporation, Comilla City Corporation and Rangpur City Corporation have already been held. The election to these City Corporation have been positive developments in municipalisation. That the democratic process in Bangladesh has achieved a reasonable level of

maturity is evident from the fact that all local government elections held since 2009 have been considered free, fair and credible by both neutral observers and the people.

Although municipal governance in Bangladesh is based on direct vote, the urban local governments (City Corporations and Pourashavas) do not enjoy adequate power, authority or autonomy. These are also heavily dependent on the central government for funds and personnel. Their functional jurisdiction is also very limited. This is more true for the large City Corporations such as Dhaka and Chittagong, since such functions as town planning and urban development, water supply and electricity supply services have been taken away from them and given to separate autonomous but unelected authorities under the central government.

However, despite the truncated functional power, the Mayors do enjoy enormous power within their own municipal administration. Decision making within the organization is highly centralized in the hands of the Mayor although there is a system of decisions to be processed upward to the Mayor through a number of subject based Standing Committees chaired by Ward Commissioners. Almost all financial authority is vested in the Mayor.

Geographical or area based decentralization is very limited. All City Corporations and Municipalities are composed of Wards but the Wards do not enjoy any worthwhile financial power. They seriously lack in personnel. The Ward Commissioners have to address demands of a large constituency (sometimes of over 100,000 people in Dhaka) almost single handed. He does not have a committee to advise him.

Municipal elections have been held more or less regularly since the 1990s, except for Dhaka, where the last Mayor (Sadek Hossian Khoka) elected for a period of 5 years, was in fact well into his 10th year of office before he was removed through amendment in the Corporation's legal status in November 2011. A similar situation occurred during the regime of the previous Mayor (Mohammad Hanif) who stayed in office for nearly 8 years in place of 5 years.

There has also been some change in the structure of Pourashavas as incorporated in the Pourashava Act of 2009 (GOB, 2009). Of particular significance is the formation of the Ward Committees each comprising 10 members of which 40% would have to be women. The committee would be chaired by the Councilor of the Ward. This has enhanced greater participation

of citizens in municipal management. In addition, a practice of instituting Town Level Coordination Committee (TLCC), with civil society representatives, have also been introduced in the Pourashava.

III.   Urban Governance in Bangladesh: Reflections on some Indicators

Municipal Governance is not merely the function of the Municipality or City Corporation alone, rather it is the function of a complex combination of many organizations - government, autonomous, semi-government bodies as well as private sector, civil society, community and also now-a-days increasingly development partners and international agencies. All these different types of organizations and institutions have their roles to play in establishing functional, efficient and progressive urban governance system. The prime role of course should remain with the municipal administration or the office of the Mayor and his/her leadership.

Good urban governance demands attention to a number of **key indicators**, such as participation, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, authority, rule of law, decentralization, coordination, efficiency, and leadership. In the following sections of the present paper, some discussion is made on **participation**, **transparency** and **accountability, leadership, coordination** and **roles of the key stakeholders in urban governance.**

With greater participation of the citizenry and people of different walks of life, greater degree of transparency, accountability and responsiveness may be achieved. However, the degree and quality of participation will in turn depend on the charisma and commitment of the leadership as well as on the legal mandates of the municipality. Participation also depends on decentralization and devolution of power and authority. In urban governance it implies decentralization from Central government to the city level, and also from the city level to the ward or community level. Participation of all stakeholders specially the citizens in urban development planning, financial management and service delivery is important.

Participation

Participation in Urban Development Planning

We have seen that urbanization, urban growth and urban expansion are taking place in Bangladesh at rapid rates. For sustainability, these require proper planning, which implies preparing technically sound urban plans (Master Plans, Details Area Plans etc), with adequate participation of the citizens and

stakeholders. Such plans are being prepared in Bangladesh for cities and towns of all sizes from the Capital or Megacity Dhaka to a small Pourashava. In the four large cities (Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi) urban plans are prepared by City Development Authorities (like RAJUK, CDA, KDA and RDA) with some degree of participation. In case of Dhaka, civil society groups and professional bodies have compelled RAJUK to allow greater participation in plan preparation. The government at one stage respected the opinions of such bodies and passed necessary administrative decision such as the Detail Area Plans (in 2009), but subsequently yielded to pressure exerted by powerful real-estate groups. This illustrates the complexity of participatory governance in urban planning. Level of participation in urban planning is considerably lower in other cities, specially in Pourashava, where plans are prepared under supervision of central government agencies like the Urban Development Directorate or the Local Government Engineering Department. However, exceptions are also there. The Master Plan for Cox's Bazar is being finalized after adequate participation of all concerned people.

Ideally, the responsibility of preparing the plan or any other development plan of a city should rest with the local urban authority, such as the city corporation or the Pourashava. These bodies are also legally mandated to perform the planning function. But in the early fifties, Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT) was created to take exclusive responsibility of developing Dhaka, then Capital of East Pakistan, in a planned manner and with this the planning function of Dhaka Municipality was suspended. Similar development took place in the other three large cities at that time. Dhaka Municipal Corporation, however, got a full-fledged Urban Planning Department in 1990, but without the authority of preparing a Master Plan. Instead, the Department could only undertake small scale site plans, like shopping centres, or parks. It could however maintain liaison with Rajuk in its Master Planning or Detail Area Planning exercises. No other city corporation or Pourashava had their own Urban Planning Department or unit until about the year 2000. Such units have been established gradually in all A Category Pourashavas, basically as obligatory conditions under Urban Governance and Infrastructure Improvement Project (UGIIP) supported by the Asian Development Bank. This and other externally funded projects, have indeed brought back some essential functions to the Pourashavas, but not yet to the large city corporations. The projects like UGIIP, also inspire greater participation of people in the planning process.

Participation in Urban Financial Management

Urban local authorities, both city corporations and Pourashavas, are themselves responsible for the preparation of their respective annual budgets. By law they are required to solicit participation of the citizens in the budget preparation process. Normally, the people in the authority's finance or accounts department prepare the draft budget which is then presented to the Mayor and the Council. Generally the budget is prepared along a set structure with some nominal adjustments such as a certain percentage change in each approved head. In recent time, the City Corporations and Pourashavas have invited greater participation of the people. Members of the TLCC also take part in discussions on the budget, but basically there remains little scope for major change.

The urban local bodies are seriously weak in financial strength. Most of the authorities can not raise enough property or holding taxes. Few of them ever try to reassess or enhance property rates for fear of losing popular support. They are also incapable of innovating new sources of revenue earning. However, many of the urban local bodies receive one or more development funds from the central government or development partners and in which citizens have scope for participation.

Participation in Urban Infrastructure Development

Major infrastructural projects are prepared and implemented in urban areas by the central government agencies or even by city authorities without much of people's participation. Such projects normally have financial and technical support of foreign development agencies. These often lack transparency in the process of planning and implementation. Only when a powerful government agency or civil society group raises objection, compromises are made in plans. Opposition by civil society groups may cause delay in implementation of projects even when these projects are legitimate (a good case in point is the plan for the first metro line in Dhaka). Citizens in general show little interest, for or against, even for such mega projects. Political parties, interestingly, remain conspicuously silent on such issues. Major and expensive environmental improvement projects may be taken up, initially on pressure from the civil society, but during implementation hardly any participation of the citizens are solicited, rather more involvement of the army has been ensured. Case in point is the Hatirjheel Lake Development project, Dhanmondi or Gulshan Lake development projects in Dhaka. Green city movement is not a political force yet. In one exceptional case of health and environmental improvement, had the

former Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation, Sadeq Hossain Khoka, sought and received participation of the civil society. This is in the fight against adese mosquito responsible for dengue fever. The former Mayor of Chittagong, ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury, had also undertaken some dynamic programmes of greening the city with citizen's participation.

Transparency and Accountability in Urban Governance

Transparency and accountability in the administration of local urban authorities are essential to good governance. The Pourashava Act 2009 makes it obligatory for the Pourashavas these days to exhibit Citizen's Charter openly so that people are better aware of developments in their local authorities. The Commission for Right to Information further empowers people to demand information from their local leadership and authorities. Moreover, the election process in the local bodies and the formation of the Town Level Coordination Committee with participation of representatives of the civil society is another step forward. The various Standing Committees are expected to process municipal decision making. The existence of a comparatively free and vibrant print and electronic media and the watchful eyes of the of the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) further improves possibility of greater transparency. Despite all these checks and balances, allegations of corruption in urban local bodies is rather common. Mayors of large cities are often charged with serious cases of irregularities. Lack of transparency in development projects and partisanship in appointments to municipal jobs is a common allegation.

Leadership in Urban Governance

Leadership is one of the most significant factors in good urban governance, as well as is in any other sectors of development. Local urban governance depends greatly on the quality of local urban leadership, meaning the elected mayor and his/her council. Visionary, dynamic, innovative, committed and honest leadership can make a city more efficient and liveable. In general, city corporations and Pourashavas in Bangladesh are lacking in such leadership. At least Dhaka was not fortunate in this respect. Chittagong's former Mayor ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury was certainly quite dynamic and innovative and got elected three times, but later he committed some serious mistakes and lost the popular support. The immediate past Mayor of Tongi, Advocate Ajmatullah Khan has been elected in four consecutive terms. He understands the urban dynamics, however does not seem to be effective in making the city liveable. It is indeed not an easy task either, given the character of this industrial city.

The Mayor of the newly constituted Narayangong City Corporation, Dr. Selina Hyat Ivy, was a successful Mayor when it was a Pourashava. She has charisma and commitment. The larger municipal entity will be quite a challenge for her. The former Mayor of Barisal City Corporation, Shwkat Hossain Hiran left his mark in improving the physical appearance of the city. He had been able to win people's participation in his development initiatives. The Mayor of Feni has also shown dynamism. Such are some examples of good urban governance. There is also greater participation of elected women councilors in Pourashavas although they themselves are not satisfied with their status and privileges.

It may be noted that projects like UGIIP, MDF or UPPR have played some role in improving the governance style of urban local bodies, particularly through the emphasis on citizen's participation in local decision making. Intelligent local urban leaders have exploited the positive elements of such projects effectively.

Coordination in Urban Governance

A key concept in good urban governance is that of coordination, particularly among the governmental and para-state institutions that are involved. In case of Dhaka city, for example, as many as 40 different governmental or autonomous organizations are known to have such involvement, many of which are directly so on a day-to-day basis. There is serious problem of coordination among such agencies resulting in wastage of resources and time, and ultimately causing sufferings to the people (Islam *et.al*, 2000).

Occasional attempts were made to solve the problem of coordination in Dhaka City. One attempt was made in the mid 1990s, when Mohammad Hanif was the city Mayor. He in fact demanded the formation of a City Government with the implication that all relevant governmental service delivery and controlling agencies be brought under the single authority of the City Mayor (or Governor, if such a title might be more acceptable). The Government of the time (led by Awami Leugue, Hanif's own party) only allowed a Coordination Committee to be chaired by the Minister for Local Government and co-chaired by the Mayor. The arrangement became dysfunctional in no time. A similar situation arose during the regime of his successor, Sadeq Hossain Khoka, when a high powered Coordination Committee was established under the Chairmanship of the Mayor who enjoyed a Cabinet Minister's status. It was during the BNP regime that Khoka was the President of Dhaka Mohanagar BNP. It was formed with over 30 agency chiefs and 5 civil society representatives. The Committee, like the

previous one, could not work properly and at the request of the Mayor, the committee's responsibility was shifted to the Prime Minister's office with the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister acting as the Chief Coordinator on behalf of the elected Mayor. It worked for sometime, but as it was not constitutionally established, the system discontinued with the change of government, and coordination remains a very critical issue in governance in Dhaka City. It is also a serious problem in other major cities. Attempt has, however, been made to improve Coordination of agencies in Pourashavas through the Town Level Coordination Committee (TLCC) formed under UGIIP. Civil society representatives also sit in the TLCC.

Role of Various Stakeholders in Urban Development and Governance

Role of Civil Society Organizations

Civil society organizations, which include NGOs, CBOs, and professional groups, among others, have significant roles to play in urban development and governance. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the *Panchayets* (neighborhood level social/ community institutions) used to contribute significantly to the maintenance of social order in Dhaka. There are now new and different types of social groups performing some such functions. Among these, neighborhood level environmental activist groups in middle or upper class areas or the slum dwellers associations, as well as city or national level civil society groups are parts of the new democratic dynamics of urban development and urban governance (Islam and Mahjabeen 2000). The national level civil society groups such as Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA), Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), Consumer Association of Bangladesh (CAB) etc. are now important civil society organizations which raise their voice on urban issues. BAPA, for example, has a Task Force on urbanization and offers both analytical discussions and agenda for action. BELA goes for legal action against public or private projects harming the urban environment. Civil society's urban awareness is much stronger today than ever before, but still not strong enough to stop all kinds of bad projects.

Role of the Private Sector

Dhaka, the megacity with about 14 million people (in an area of 1350 sq.kms, including DCC, Narayanganj City Corporation and other Pourashavas), is becoming distinctive as an unequal city with hardly any evidence of planned effort in reducing the pattern. The private corporate sector plays a strong role in accentuating the inequality. During the past two decades particularly, the

private land and housing development companies have primarily invested in luxury residential development rapidly pushing the lower income groups out of the housing market, and to marginal locations of degraded physical environment.

Critical issues in urban governance sometimes arise due to motivated actions of the private sector. In the area of industrial development, the private sector sets up factories which produce chemical effluents which harm the environment. The governmental agencies responsible for maintaining environmental standard are either incapable of controlling the unacceptable activities of the industries or are in alliance with them. The real estate companies, particularly those involved in land development, are mostly uncontainable and almost ungovernable. They now have strong lobby in the Parliament as well as friends in the administration. The victim is the environment, particularly the water bodies and rivers in and around Dhaka and other urban areas. The private sector real estate developers are also responsible for illegal hill cutting in Chittagong and Cox's Bazar. Weak governance is held responsible for such activities. The Government has enacted a number of relevant acts and rules to safeguard the urban environment but poor implementation results in negative development.

Role of Development Partners and International Agencies in
Urban Governance

The roles of development partners, which include foreign country specific aid agencies and also international financial and development organizations, have become increasingly significant in urban development and urban governance in Bangladesh since its recent times. UN bodies like UNDP, UN Habitat, UNCDF and UNICEF have played an active role in helping build physical infrastructure and provide social support in urban areas, particularly in sanitation, drainage, water supply, waste disposal and income generating activities. The role of foreign development agencies like JICA, Danida, DFID, GTZ have also been significant. Similarly projects like UGIIP of ADB or Municipal Development Fund of the World Bank have also made impact both on the urban structure and the urban governance system in Bangladesh. The development partners have now their own lobby and insist on participation in the decision making process related to urbanization and urban governance in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh has recognized their role and ensured their participation in the newly formed the Bangladesh Urban Forum (BUF). They have also participated in the formulation of the National Urban Sector Policy, now awaiting

government approval. In other words, many of the major urban development decisions will be taken with participation of foreign and international development partners.

IV. Conclusions

Bangladesh has a very large population which continues to grow rapidly and is likely to cross 200 million by 2050. This is a matter of great concern in view of the limitation of land and natural resources. Amount of arable land per capita is decreasing fast; many people are turning homeless and they tend to move to cities. Bangladesh used to be a low urbanized country, which however, is experiencing rapid urban growth in recent decades. Population may become 50% urban by 2040, or even earlier due mainly to rural-urban migration and change of status of current market towns or rural areas. Urbanization in Bangladesh is mostly spontaneous with indirect impact of government policy on investments and some decentralization of administration, industry, education and health services.

Bangladesh has been enjoying a western-style democratic system in national governance as well as in local urban governance for the last two decades. Democratic urban governance has a much longer tradition. However, much remains to be seen in the improvement of quality of governance. Local urban authorities suffer from inadequate power and autonomy and financial capacity. Level of participation of the citizens also is not satisfactory. However, there are now more stakeholders in urban development and governance than before. Coordination among agencies working in urban areas is still a critical problem.

International experience indicates that the key ingredient to realizing the goal of sustainable urban development is good governance, specially through the local urban governments. Therefore steps should be taken to devolve authority and power from the centre to the city corporation and Pourashava level and strengthen the capacity and capability of these local bodies to interact effectively with citizens and meet their needs. Good urban governance demands effective leadership of the elected representatives of City Corporations and Pourashavas with participation of the municipal officials, the central government agencies at the local level, the private sector, NGOs, civil society and, finally, the people.

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