Wanted strong local government

Editorial

The need for effective local governments for alleviating poverty and ensuring the country’s development and good governance is recognised universally. An accountable administration at the local level is the grooming ground for service-oriented mentality of a welfare state. It is not possible to eradicate poverty and establish good governance by keeping the local government system weak. Although the government has adopted various programs to strengthen the local government structure at different times, it has not been possible to install a powerful local government system during the past three decades.

The precondition for democratic decentralisation is a strong local government. The local governments in many developing countries including those of China, Latin America and even West Bengal and Kerala of India have contributed a lot to the lives of the people. Articles 9, 11, 59 and 60 of our Constitution have clearly articulated the pledge for building a strong local government system. But despite Constitutional compulsions, a strong local government and the participation of the people in local level governance could not yet be ensured.

The villages of this land were self-sufficient in ancient times. Sir Charles Metcalfe dubbed that as the ‘village republic’. Since the ancient era, the ‘village panchayets’ formed by the people were fully autonomous. But discarding that indigenous concept, the Bengal Local Government Act was passed during the British era in 1885 to constitute local government bodies. Through this, district, sub-divisional and union boards were formed at districts, subdivisions and unions. But these were implanted from above, were dependent on the centre and remained tied to bureaucracy. The basic democracy, which was introduced during the Pakistani era, was also nothing different. What remains of the three-tier local governments of the British era is the single-tier union councils. But these are excessively dependent on the centre in financial matters. They lack the opportunity for self-financing. Neither is there any clear jurisdiction regarding planning and policy formulation. The district councils are also devoid of public representatives. No effective initiative has been observed during the past twelve years for installation of elected upazila councils. A law has been passed recently for establishing the Gram Sarkar (village governments). But there is no scope here to elect members through direct elections. Above all, the excessive meddling of Parliament members at the local level has created unfettered opportunities for politicization.

The countrywide Union Council elections are now coming to an end. A precondition for strengthening the local governments is...

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It is also essential to make them accountable to the people rather than called wheat-based development programmes of the local governments. Human and social development goals by coming out of the sphere of so-through parliament members and others. It is now necessary to focus on TR etc., inter-cadre rivalry at the Upazilla level, political influences misappropriation of allocations in rural programmes like VGD, VGF, government offices, absence of accountability and supervision, misused and embezzled. Due to a lack of coordination among various Revenue and development funds worth crores of taka are wasted, corruption database research report published by TIB last year. This sector has been identified as the third most corrupt sector in quantitative terms after law enforcement and education sectors in the corruption database research report published by TIB last year. Revenue and development funds worth crores of taka are wasted, misused and embezzled. Due to a lack of coordination among various government offices, absence of accountability and supervision, misappropriation of allocations in rural programmes like VGD, VGF, TR etc., inter-cadre rivalry at the Upazilla level, political influences through parliament members and others. It is now necessary to focus on human and social development goals by coming out of the sphere of so-called wheat-based development programmes of the local governments. It is also essential to make them accountable to the people rather than to the government officials. Realistic measures on the basis of national consensus have to be taken if the local governments of Bangladesh are to be groomed as powerful institutions. Measures need to be taken to strengthen their financial base. It is not possible to accelerate the pace of politico-economic and social development of the country unless sufficient powers are delegated for policy formulation and implementation. The necessary laws, rules and regulations also need to be framed or amended, proper elections arranged, election to local government of people who are honest, competent and dedicated to people’s welfare and arrangements made for their training. It is also essential to clearly delineate the roles of the central and local governments. Representation of females needs to be raised for establishing their fundamental rights and leadership roles. Corruption would also diminish if genuinely representative and powerful local government bodies are set up at various tiers. It is necessary to forge a responsible consensus for the common good of all by overcoming the divisions at local levels resulting from the scourge of politicisation. We seek strong and effective local governments for ensuring development and good governance.
the locality even after the election. Report cards were released by TIB and the CCC containing the candidates’ personal profiles and future pledges, their objectives for participating in the election, budget, role to be played if beaten in the election, etc. These were distributed among the voters. Presided over by CCC member Mahfuzur Rahman, members of the citizens’ committee Samedul Islam Talukdar, Kohinoor Ruma, Helena Akhter Shimu, Programme Officer of TIB Ekram Hossain and CCC Secretary Mohammad Mohsin spoke at the projection meeting.

Rashidpur Union, Jamalpur
A projection meeting for the candidates of Rashidpur Union Council election under Jamalpur Sadar upazila was held on 26 February. Chaired by the CCC convenor Advocate Md. Nazrul Islam (Dulu), the Additional Commissioner (Revenue) M. Shamsul Alam Chowdhury was present as chief guest at the meeting. During the meeting, all chairman candidates made their election pledges before an audience numbering a few thousand. The candidates were M. Amjad Hossain (Chan Molla), M. Obaidullah (Bhola), M. Tofazzal Hossain (Dudu) and M. Nasiruddin Pakhi. Report cards prepared on the candidates were circulated released during the meeting.

Sharifpur Union, Jamalpur
The chairman candidates of Sharifpur union council under Jamalpur Sadar upazila made their electoral pledges in front of thousands of spectators present before the podium at Srirampur High School ground on 25 February. All the chairman candidates made commitments to work together in development activities with transparency and accountability. The chairman candidates of this union were AFM Shamsuddin, M. Zahurul Haque Akand, M. Mizanur Rahman, M. Saiful Islam, M. Enamul Haque and Mostafa Kamal Litton Fakir. Held under the aegis of TIB and Jamalpur CCC, CCC convenor Advocate Md. Nazrul Islam (Dulu) presided over this projection meeting. Additional Deputy Commissioner (General) M. Zahid Hossain was present as chief guest. In his address, the chief guest said that democracy would move one step ahead by making the people conscious locally, helping them in choosing the right candidate and by ensuring an accountable system. Programme Officer of TIB Ekram Hossain urged everybody to vote for honest, corruption-free and patriotic candidates. During the presidential address, Advocate Md. Nazrul Islam (Dulu) called upon all to make this movement successful. Report cards on the candidates were disseminated during the programme.

The picture of corruption in South Asia is similar everywhere
lower judiciary comes next, with 75.32 percent falling prey to its corrupt practices. Land administration is the third most corrupt sector with 72.78 percent becoming victims of corruption. In case of services received from health, education, power and tax departments, the proportions of people falling victims of corruption are 55.53 percent, 39.73 percent, 32 percent and 19.25 percent respectively.

In nearly all cases, the service providers seek bribes either directly or through a third party. A negligible number of service-takers offer bribes directly. In all cases, the people hold ‘lack of accountability’ as mainly responsible for corruption. 95.65 percent people fall prey to police corruption when they seek the help of police administration for evading arrest on false grounds. 90.91 percent fall prey to police corruption when they seek police clearance certificates, 87.62 percent when they submit complaints and 75 percent in other police-related services. 24 percent become victims of on-duty police officers, 19 percent at the hands of investigating officers, 13 percent at the hands of officers-in-charge and 4 percent at the hands of clerks. It is seen from the survey that the households which become victims of corruption while seeking assistance from the police administration have to pay on average an additional amount of Taka 9,675. Taking this amount as the base, the concerned officers and employees of the police administration collect Taka 2,066 crore per year as bribes from the people who approach them for assistance.

After the police department, the lower judiciary has been identified as the most corrupt sector with 75.32 percent of the service recipients reporting corruption. The service recipients have spoken of falling prey to corruption at the hands of 66 percent employees of the lower judiciary, 13 percent of public prosecutors, 10 percent of lawyers representing the opposite side and 8.62 percent of the magistrates. Those households which became victims of corruption while seeking assistance of the lower judiciary had to part with an additional sum of Taka 7,800 on an average. On the basis of this estimate, the people belonging to the lower judiciary extract Taka 1,135 crore as bribes as an annual average.

The land administration is the third most corrupt sector. After approaching the land administration, the concerned households had to incur an additional expenditure of Taka 3,509 on an average. Based on this estimate, an average amount of Taka 1,515 crore is collected annually by the employees working in this sector as bribe.

In the health sector, 47.56 percent of the household members admitted to hospitals are done so through alternative means. 30 percent have spoken of paying additional sums for getting a bed, 19 percent for medicines, 16.49 percent for doing X-ray, 13.62 percent for pathological tests and 3 percent for getting blood. The average additional amount paid by each household for receiving treatment in government hospitals was Taka 1,847. On the basis of this estimate, people have to incur an additional expenditure of Taka 1250 crore annually for getting treatment in government hospitals.

In the education sector, 87 percent of the household members have spoken of falling prey to corruption at the hands of teachers. Students who fell prey to corruption while seeking admission had to incur an additional expenditure of Taka 742 per head on an average annually. According to the figures provided by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, there are currently 3 crore 10 lakh students in Bangladesh. On the basis of this estimate, 40 percent students of the country who fall prey to corruption due to various malpractice of the education department have to pay an additional amount of Taka 920 crore annually.

The households which fall prey to corruption for receiving services from the power department have to incur an additional expenditure of Taka 950 annually on an average. Based on this
estimate, the officials and employees of the power department elicit Taka 182 crores as bribe each year. Corruption is committed by the power department in areas such as providing legal and illegal connections, getting proper supply of electricity, payment of bills, over-billing and non-snapping of connections due to non-payment of bills. 98 percent of the households which recourse to alternative means for getting power connection reported that they had bribed the office staff. 32 percent of those who had gone to the power authority in connection with electricity-related work during the previous one year reported that they had been victims of corruption.

Those households which became victims of corruption while interacting with the tax department had to pay an additional sum of Taka 318 on an average annually. Based on this estimate, it is seen that the officials and employees of the tax department collect Taka 12 crore as bribes annually. The members of the households fall prey to corruption at the hands of officers and employees of tax department in the course of paying their taxes. On the other hand, 67.4 percent of those who approach the agricultural bank for getting loans have to pay bribes to the bank officials.

This report presents a very dismal picture about the current state of affairs among the service providers engaged in serving the country’s citizens. The subjects covered in the report are well-known to our citizens from their day to day experience. This report has only presented an overall picture by compiling the experiences of many in order to comprehend the situation prevailing throughout the country. It cannot be said that corruption has risen suddenly or in a single day. It has come to this level after increasing for years after years, decades after decades.

The politicians go to power by making pledges to weed out corruption. But many of them themselves get involved in corruption after coming to power. Quite often, they object to this type of report. People try to put the blame on each other. TIB has recommended the report that corruption can be checked through the constitution of an independent anti-corruption commission, appointment of an ombudsman, administrative reforms, political goodwill of the policy framers, and above all by building up a social movement against corruption. Needless to say, if the politicians and policy formulators do not come forward to curb corruption with political goodwill, then the general people would have no alternative but to groan due to the crushing weight of corruption. The sooner the policy framers, politicians and members of the civil society come forward to build a corruption-free society, the better it is for the masses.

‘Terrorism and corruption are two sides of the same coin’

- Dr. Kamal Hossain, at a meeting on Good Governance
Corruption and Human Rights

R enowned lawyer and Chairman of the Advisory Council of Transparency International Dr. Kamal Hossain has said that terrorism and corruption are two sides of the same coin. The Constitution is directly hit whenever a terrorist, arms-holder or extortionist is kept above law, he added. He was speaking as chief guest at a meeting on ‘Good Governance, Corruption and Human Rights’ organised by the Jamalpur CCC on 18 December 2002.

Chaired by the Convenor of the CCC Advocate Md. Nazrul Islam (Dulu) and held at the Jamalpur Public Library building, the Chairman of the TIB Board of Trustees Professor Khan Sarwar Murshid was present at the meeting as special guest. The keynote paper was presented by Advocate Sorwar Zahan.

Dr. Kamal Hossain opined that the ruling and opposition parties should reach a consensus on how the lives and properties of the people can be protected. There should be a consensus that the people are the real owners of the country and all should work together to uphold democracy, Constitution and rule of law.

Professor Khan Sarwar Murshid said that the growth of GDP would have doubled annually if the wastage due to corruption could be checked. He called upon the countrymen to get united for establishing good governance, justice and a corruption-free state.
Terming corruption as a monster with a hundred hands in the context of Bangladesh’s socio-economic and political setting, former Chief Adviser of the caretaker government Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman has said that the Constitutional mechanism to fight corruption has become totally ineffective. Even the electoral process, which has been to ensure the participation of the people in order to ensure their rights, has...

‘Corruption is a monster with a hundred hands’
- Justice Habibur Rahman, at a citizens’ meeting organised by CCC

FROM NEWSPAPERS PAGES

Monthly power theft of Taka 20 crore
There are complaints of monthly power theft worth Taka 20 crore in the south zone of DESA through collusion among some officers and employees of the power department. The authorities claim that the amount of system loss or power theft is lesser. Lakhs of taka are collected each month by a section of officers and employees of DESA through theft of electricity by encouraging the owners of factories and industries.

Source: The Daily Ittefaq, 6 January 2003

Taka 9 crore as bribes
The officers and employees of the forest department working in Chittagong’s south and north jones received bribes worth Taka 9 crore 72 lakh during the past one year. 20 lakh cubic feet of wood worth Taka 200 crore had been illegally smuggled to various places of the country including Dhaka from Janali Hat and Battoli railway stations of the city by preparing fate legal papers. The bribe money were obtained in this way. Although carrying of wood by the railway was once stopped due to the existence of this practice, it was again resumed for unknown reasons.

Source: The Daily Inqilab, 18 January 2003

Theft of wheat worth Taka 37 crore
Incidents of wheat-theft worth Taka 37 crore from foreign ships that came to Mongla port for downloading goods have been unearthed. During the past four years, 37, 750 metric tons have been siphoned off from ships that came to the port carrying assistance for the country from foreign donor organisations. The price of this pilfered wheat is around 37 crore 44 lakh taka.

Source: The Daily Manabjamin, 4 February 2003

Allegations of corruption against railway ministry

Stipend money embezzled
Headmasters of many schools of Paikgachha upazila under Khulna have embezzled stipend money which was collected through corruption and irregularities in collusion with concerned