

Original Paper

Enhancing Responsive Local Governance in Bangladesh: A Post-Uprising Contextual Assessment in Rangpur

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Abstract

This study assesses the local governance landscape in Bangladesh following a significant political transition marked by a student-led mass uprising in 2024. It explores the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of Local Government Institutions (LGIs) in the new governance environment, highlighting key challenges such as corruption, citizen engagement, service delivery, and capacity-building needs. The findings suggest that despite entrenched governance flaws, there is an opportunity to strengthen democratic local governance through policy reforms, capacity enhancement, and citizen participation mechanisms. The study recommends strategies for ensuring transparent, inclusive, and accountable local governance in Bangladesh.

Keyword

Local Governance, Responsive Governance, Decentralization, Citizen Participation, Service Delivery, Accountability, Corruption, Policy Reforms, Capacity Building, Transparency, Democratic Governance, Local Government Institutions (LGIs), Community Engagement

1. Introduction

Local Government Institutions (LGIs) in Bangladesh serve as critical components of decentralized governance, aiming to bring public services closer to citizens while fostering community participation in decision-making process (Ahmed, 2017). These institutions, which include Union Parishads (UPs), Upazila Parishads (UZPs), City Corporations, and Zila Parishads, are instrumental in implementing national policies at the grassroots level. However, systemic issues such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and political influence have historically impeded their performance and undermined public trust (Blair, 2018).

The recent political shift, triggered by a mass uprising that led to the fall of the government and the establishment of an interim administration, has significantly impacted the functioning of these local

institutions. As the new governance landscape emerges, it is crucial to assess how LGIs are adapting to the transition and whether they are becoming more responsive, accountable, and efficient in delivering services. This assessment was conducted to understand these dynamics and recommend measures for strengthening democratic governance at the local level.

This study employs a mixed-method approach, incorporating qualitative and quantitative research to analyze the structural, operational, and contextual challenges faced by LGIs in the wake of the political transition. It investigates how local government representatives, bureaucrats, civil society organizations (CSOs), and community members perceive the current state of governance and service delivery. The study also examines the extent to which marginalized groups, including Adibasi (indigenous) communities, are included in decision-making processes and whether governance reforms are addressing longstanding issues of exclusion and inequity.

The study findings highlight that while some positive changes have been observed—such as increased responsiveness from newly appointed officials and a reduction in overt corruption—many governance challenges remain unresolved. Citizens still struggle with limited access to services, a lack of transparency in resource allocation, and inadequate opportunities for participation in decision-making processes. Furthermore, concerns persist regarding the sustainability of governance improvements in the absence of institutionalized reforms.

By providing a comprehensive analysis of the governance landscape, this study aims to inform future interventions and studies. The recommendations outlined focus on strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring participatory governance, and implementing policy reforms to enhance transparency and accountability in LGIs. Ultimately, this study underscores the need for a citizen-centric governance model that prioritizes the voices and needs of the most vulnerable populations while reinforcing democratic principles at the local level.

2. Methodology

A mixed-method approach was employed, including a rapid qualitative study, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). The study surveyed 40 respondents from Rangpur District, including representatives from Union Parishads, City Corporations, government departments, and civil society organizations (CSOs). The study also incorporated secondary data from governance reports and policy documents to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current context.

2.1 Study Design and Approach

This study employed a mixed-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the local governance dynamics in Rangpur District. The assessment consisted of a rapid qualitative study, a structured survey, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). In total, 40 respondents participated, including representatives from Union Parishads (UPs), the Rangpur City Corporation, government departments,

and civil society organizations (CSOs). Secondary data from governance reports, policy documents, and relevant literature were also analyzed to contextualize the findings.

2.2 Selection of Respondents and Data Collection Tools

To ensure a diverse and representative sample, the study employed a purposive sampling method. The study surveyed 40 respondents, capturing perspectives from both rural and urban governance structures. The respondents were drawn from a Union Parishad (UP) within an upazila in Rangpur District and from different Wards of Rangpur City Corporation. This allowed for comparative insights between rural and urban governance systems.

The qualitative component involved structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The KIIs were conducted with key governance stakeholders, including:

- Advisor to the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Cooperatives (LGRD)
- Secretary of the Ministry of LGRD
- Deputy Director and Director of the Local Government Division in Rangpur
- Chief Executive Officer of the Rangpur Zila Parishad
- Three local governance specialists representing CSOs
- A former female councilor from Rangpur City Corporation
- A Union Parishad chairman and two UP members, including one female member

At the community level, this study facilitated four FGDs to capture grassroots perspectives on local governance and service delivery. These included:

- Two FGDs in rural settings: one with male constituents and one with female constituents under the selected UP
- Two FGDs in urban settings: one with female constituents and one with male constituents under the Rangpur City Corporation

Participants were selected to ensure demographic diversity, incorporating various age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and marginalized communities.

2.3 Geographic Scope of the Study

The study focused on multiple administrative tiers of local government in Rangpur District, ranging from the district to the union level. The selection of Rangpur District was strategic, aligning in regions with a high incidence of poverty. According to the 2022 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Rangpur Division exhibits the second-highest poverty incidence in the country (BBS, 2023). Furthermore, the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (2022) indicates that Rangpur Division has the highest proportion (42.7%) of households in the lowest wealth quintile among the eight divisions (BBS, 2023). Rangpur District was chosen as the primary study site due to its significance within the broader along with an extensive network of stakeholders, including political parties and local governance actors, facilitated the study.

To ensure a representative assessment, the study purposively selected the following administrative units:

- Rangpur Zila Parishad (ZP) – *The district-level local government entity*

- Kaunia Upazila Parishad (UZP) – *Representing an intermediary governance level*
- Sarai Union Parishad (UP) and Balapara Union Parishad (UP) – *Representing grassroots governance structures*

The selected Upazila Parishad and Union Parishads were chosen based on specific socio-economic and geographic considerations, prioritizing areas with:

- High levels of poverty and economic vulnerability
- Hard-to-reach and remote locations
- Significant populations of ethnic minorities
- Char (river island) communities
- Historically underserved upazilas or unions

3. Discussion and Findings

3.1 Service Delivery

The assessment of local governance in the post-uprising context reveals both improvements and persistent challenges. Service delivery, a critical function of LGIs, has slowed significantly due to the absence of elected representatives and the irregular availability of newly appointed officials. Constituents face considerable difficulties in accessing essential services such as birth registration, ration cards, and social protection benefits. The transition has led to confusion among citizens regarding the appropriate officials to approach for their needs. Poor communication and the absence of visible guidelines further exacerbate delays, making service delivery an ongoing challenge despite some improvements in officials' attitudes.

3.2 Governance

Governance challenges remain deeply rooted in the system, particularly concerning entrenched misgovernance. The historical dominance of nepotism, favoritism, and political bias in service allocation has marginalized vulnerable groups. Access to services has often been determined by patronage systems rather than genuine need. Reports indicate fraudulent practices in the distribution of service cards, with unauthorized possession and misappropriation of benefits. However, post-uprising reforms have initiated corrective actions, such as reclaiming misallocated social protection cards, which have started to rebuild community trust. The diminished influence of political elites has led to more cautious and responsive service providers, though questions remain about the sustainability of these improvements.

3.3 Citizen Participation

Citizen participation in governance remains limited due to a lack of awareness and engagement opportunities. The study found that most people are unaware of the legal provisions that enable them to take part in decision-making forums like Ward Shavas and Open Budget Meetings. Local government institutions fail to proactively include constituents in these processes. However, respondents expressed a strong willingness to participate if structured mechanisms were in place. Establishing independent citizen

platforms, free from political affiliations, could foster greater engagement and accountability within local governance structures.

3.4 Feedback Mechanism

The feedback and complaint response mechanisms within LGIs also require significant improvements. Constituents lack the confidence to report grievances, often fearing that their complaints will go unheard or unaddressed. Community members frequently hesitate to raise concerns about corruption, citing the ineffectiveness of previous attempts. An institutionalized complaint response system, monitored by civil society organizations (CSOs), is necessary to enhance accountability and transparency in local governance.

3.5 Inclusion

The study also highlights the persistent exclusion of Adibasi (Indigenous) communities from government services. These communities, particularly the Santal and Orao populations in Rangpur District, continue to face structural injustices that limit their access to social protection programs. Interviews with CSO representatives revealed that fewer than 20% of marginalized Adibasi individuals receive benefits from Union Parishads, largely due to social isolation and a lack of political connections. There is an urgent need for targeted outreach initiatives to bridge this gap and ensure that governance reforms address the needs of the most vulnerable populations.

3.6 Capacity

Capacity-building remains a crucial area for improvement in LGIs. Many local representatives lack the necessary training in service delivery, documentation, and community engagement. Governance policies, budgeting procedures, and resource mobilization strategies need to be better understood and implemented by local officials. CSOs have a vital role to play in this capacity-building process, equipping local government representatives with the skills needed to enhance service efficiency and participatory governance.

3.7 Policy and Legislation

Policy and legislative reforms are necessary to strengthen governance accountability and efficiency. Mandating public disclosures of revenue collection and expenditure through town hall meetings could improve transparency. Implementing independent performance evaluations for local governments would provide objective assessments of their service delivery. Additionally, reforms should ensure that citizen-led monitoring mechanisms are embedded within governance structures to track government commitments and service performance effectively.

In conclusion, while the post-uprising governance landscape has seen some positive shifts, systemic issues continue to hinder effective service delivery and citizen engagement. The findings suggest that sustained efforts are required to institutionalize transparency, inclusivity, and accountability in local governance institutions. Strengthening citizen participation, improving feedback mechanisms, and implementing comprehensive policy reforms will be key to fostering a more democratic and responsive governance framework in Bangladesh.

4. Challenges

4.1 *Administrative Capacity Deficits*

Local governance institutions in Bangladesh continue to face significant challenges that hinder their effectiveness. One major issue is the lack of administrative capacity among local representatives, many of whom lack the training and technical skills necessary to perform their duties effectively. This deficit contributes to inefficient service delivery, bureaucratic delays, and inconsistent application of governance policies. Additionally, the frequent turnover of officials disrupts the continuity of governance efforts, creating gaps in institutional knowledge and policy implementation.

4.2 *Corruption and Patronage in Service Allocation*

Corruption remains a persistent problem, with entrenched patronage systems influencing the allocation of public resources. Many services, such as the distribution of ration cards and social benefits, are subject to favoritism, nepotism, and bribery, which disproportionately affect marginalized groups. The lack of transparency in financial management within LGIs further exacerbates the issue, preventing proper accountability and oversight.

4.3 *Low Citizen Engagement in Governance*

Citizen engagement in governance remains low due to a combination of limited awareness, institutional barriers, and political interference. Despite legal provisions that mandate public participation in decision-making forums, most citizens remain uninformed about their rights and opportunities to engage. Furthermore, political dynamics often discourage active participation, as local governance structures are frequently influenced by national political parties, limiting independent and community-driven decision-making processes.

4.4 *Exclusion of Marginalized Communities*

Another key challenge is the exclusion of marginalized communities, including Indigenous groups, from accessing government services. Structural inequalities, lack of political representation, and social discrimination prevent these groups from fully benefiting from social protection programs. Without targeted outreach and policy interventions, these communities will continue to face systemic barriers to inclusion in governance processes.

4.5 *Financial Constraints and Budgetary Limitations*

Financial constraints also hinder the sustainability of governance improvements. Many LGIs operate with inadequate budgets, limiting their ability to initiate and sustain development projects. Dependence on central government allocations restricts local autonomy, making it difficult for local institutions to respond effectively to the unique needs of their communities. Enhancing local revenue-generation capacities is necessary to ensure more self-sufficient and resilient governance structures.

4.6 *Lack of Effective Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms*

Finally, the absence of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms limits the ability of local governance institutions to assess their performance and improve service delivery. Without independent

oversight and community feedback mechanisms, inefficiencies and corruption continue unchecked, undermining public trust in local government institutions.

4.7 Capacity-Building Needs for Local Representatives

Many local representatives lack the necessary training in service delivery, documentation, and community engagement. Governance policies, budgeting procedures, and resource mobilization strategies need to be better understood and implemented by local officials. CSOs have a vital role to play in this capacity-building process, equipping local government representatives with the skills needed to enhance service efficiency and participatory governance.

4.8 Policy and Legislative Reforms for Strengthening Governance

Policy and legislative reforms are necessary to strengthen governance accountability and efficiency. Mandating public disclosures of revenue collection and expenditure through town hall meetings could improve transparency. Implementing independent performance evaluations for local governments would provide objective assessments of their service delivery. Additionally, reforms should ensure that citizen-led monitoring mechanisms are embedded within governance structures to track government commitments and service performance effectively.

In conclusion, while the post-uprising governance landscape has seen some positive shifts, systemic issues continue to hinder effective service delivery and citizen engagement. The findings suggest that sustained efforts are required to institutionalize transparency, inclusivity, and accountability in local governance institutions. Strengthening citizen participation, improving feedback mechanisms, and implementing comprehensive policy reforms will be key to fostering a more democratic and responsive governance framework in Bangladesh.

5. Recommendations

To address the challenges identified in this assessment and improve local governance institutions (LGIs), a multi-faceted approach is required. Strengthening citizen engagement in governance is crucial for building more inclusive and accountable institutions. This includes establishing independent citizen platforms that are free from political influence, ensuring that community voices are effectively heard in decision-making processes. In addition, mechanisms such as Ward Shavas and Open Budget Meetings must be actively promoted and institutionalized to increase transparency and local accountability.

Transparency in service delivery must be enhanced by ensuring clear communication channels and accessible information. The installation of citizen charters in prominent locations at all LEGIs can serve as a valuable tool for informing citizens about available services, processes, and requirements. Additionally, a structured feedback and complaint response system, monitored by civil society organizations (CSOs), should be developed to empower citizens to report grievances without fear of repercussions.

Addressing the exclusion of marginalized groups, particularly Indigenous (Adibasi) communities, requires targeted interventions. Local government bodies should actively engage these communities

through outreach programs and awareness campaigns. Providing training for local officials on inclusive governance practices will help ensure that social protection programs reach those who need them most. Capacity-building efforts must be strengthened to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of LGIs. Training programs should be developed to equip local government officials with essential skills in documentation, financial management, and citizen engagement. Workshops and knowledge-sharing platforms facilitated by CSOs can help create an environment of continuous learning and improvement within governance institutions.

Legislative reforms should be pursued to enhance governance efficiency and accountability. One key reform should involve the depoliticization of local government elections to ensure that governance remains independent of partisan influence. Additionally, legal provisions should mandate public disclosure of revenue collection and expenditure through structured reporting mechanisms such as town hall meetings. Independent performance evaluations should be introduced to assess the efficiency and responsiveness of LGIs, ensuring accountability in service delivery.

Finally, strengthening local resource mobilization is essential for sustainable development. Local government institutions should be trained in revenue generation strategies, improving their ability to fund development projects independently. Engaging local businesses and private sector stakeholders in governance initiatives can also contribute to sustainable economic growth at the community level.

By implementing these recommendations, local governance institutions in Bangladesh can become more transparent, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of their constituents. A concerted effort from government bodies, civil society organizations, and community stakeholders is required to achieve meaningful governance reforms and ensure lasting improvements in service delivery and citizen participation.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the post-uprising governance landscape has seen some positive shifts, systemic challenges continue to hinder effective service delivery and citizen engagement. The lack of administrative capacity, entrenched corruption, and limited public awareness of participatory governance mechanisms remain significant obstacles to progress. However, the removal of political influence over service delivery has created opportunities for governance reforms that promote greater accountability and inclusivity. Strengthening transparency, enhancing citizen participation, and implementing structured feedback mechanisms will be crucial in ensuring that local governance institutions function effectively and equitably. Additionally, legislative and policy reforms must focus on sustainable governance improvements that address the needs of marginalized communities. By prioritizing these areas, Bangladesh can move towards a more democratic, transparent, and citizen-centric local governance framework.

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