

Partisan Elections, Political Patronage, and the Transformation of Rural Local Government in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The practice of party-based governance to involve regime party activists through political patronage exists as a long-established method which southern countries particularly Bangladesh have used throughout their history. The country experienced its first government disruption after independence when political leaders established partnerships with criminals to create armed groups which fought against state control. The regime leaders permitted their followers to possess weapons for protection purposes. The government implemented partisan elections for local government organizations in 2016 which created excitement among rural party members. Political violence which started in cities now reached rural areas because ruling party leaders and rebel candidates won local government elections. The victory enabled them to control state resources through factional politics which created divisions among their opponents and between members of their own party. They established their political power through local government offices by distributing state resources and following party governance procedures which they developed.

Introduction: Partisan Elections and the Reconfiguration of Local Politics

The implementation of partisan elections in Bangladesh's local government institutions during 2016 created a fundamental change which shaped the country's political evolution. The initial presentation of electoral reform at first established electoral reform but later transformed Union Parishads (UPs) into political battlefields which parties use to fight against each other (Kuttig, Suykens, and Islam 2020). The political situation has become worse because this development leads to power struggles within political parties and control over state resources has become a political weapon and public officials now conduct their duties as political party members. The present study examines how these developments have reconfigured rural authority and everyday governance (Aziz and Razzaque 2018).

Electoral violence which erupted during the 2016 local government elections reached its highest point because clashes between rival factions of the ruling party created unmanageable situations. The transition to party-based elections resulted in massive public disturbances which occurred during the Union Parishad elections, Bangladesh's most basic local government elections, and after this five-stage electoral process. About 145 people died and more than 10000 people suffered injuries during this time period because political party factions battled each other (Mollah et al., 2018).

The electoral outcome demonstrated that the ruling party maintained its complete control over the election results. The ruling party received over ninety percent support from 4,578 elected Union Parishad chairpersons who appeared on official party lists and as independent candidates who maintained their party membership. The previous system which allowed local representatives to choose their political identity through community recognition (Noorana, 2015) changed when political parties started using official party labels to define their identities. The requirement for officials to declare their political party

membership created a new institutional framework that transformed Local Government Institutions (LGIs) into platforms which political parties used to manage their administrative operations.

The Union Parishads function as the main distribution system which provides public benefits and welfare resources to marginalized and disadvantaged groups. The distribution of state support became dependent on political loyalty which necessitated obtaining support from state authorities. Community leaders who maintained ideological ties to specific political parties faced diminished power when they did not engage in party politics (Saha, 2017; Sarker & Nawaz, 2019). The new local party leaders who received their power from party leaders above them became the main intermediaries in rural governance (Fieldwork, 2017 & 2019).

The study shows that partisan electoral systems changed which institutions LGIs operated through because these systems function as electoral methods for political parties to compete against one another. Offices that serve the public now function as extensions of political parties which control them instead of acting as public service platforms that serve all members of the community. The organization now operates through partisan networks which demonstrate their dedication to specific political goals instead of acting as an unbiased administrative institution. Political parties within Bangladesh now face internal divisions because their members compete with each other, which creates factional divisions that change power dynamics, especially in the rural parts of the country. To understand this shift we need to analyze it through the complete historical development of state building in Bangladesh which shows how all subsequent governments created permanent institutional relationships between political parties and local governing bodies.

Historical Context: Party Politics and Rural Governance in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's current system of local governance developed through three historical periods which include its colonial past and its authoritarian rule and its post-independence governmental changes. The British Empire established its first hierarchical governance system through which its officials maintained total control over their territories. Pakistan's Basic Democracy system established indirect voting methods which prevented most citizens from participating in elections. Bangladeshi political parties used their control over local institutions to implement various reforms after 1971 which resulted in permanent institutional changes. The 2016 implementation of party-line elections marked the end of a gradual transition during which local government functions changed from delivering public services to helping political parties gain power (Kuttig 2020; Islam 2015).

Bangladesh's early history has been recorded by people who visited the country with different backgrounds including travelers and conquerors and missionaries and princely rulers and peasants. The Portuguese established their first colonial campaigns in Bangladesh which ended with Western powers defeating local kings during the British victory at Plassey in 1757. In 1947, British colonial rule ended, and the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into two separate states based on religious identity: India

and Pakistan. The eastern region, then known as East Pakistan, became part of Pakistan and later evolved into Bangladesh (M. M. Hassan et al., 2019).

The Basic Democracies system for local governance was established during Ayub Khan's rule in Pakistan. The system used indirect elections which stopped voters from selecting their local leaders through direct voting. The centralized authoritarian regime controlled local government positions which resulted in their staffing with individuals who supported the regime (Van Schendel, 2015). The central government of Pakistan treated East Pakistan and its political leaders with continuous disregard throughout its rule. The political unrest in Bangladesh developed into a mass revolt which resulted in a bloody independence war that brought about Bangladesh's statehood under Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's leadership. The 1972 presidential order established a new local government system through the abolition of the existing local government structure which created a four-tier local government system that covered all areas except the three hill districts (Huq, 2016; Chowdhury & Panday, 2018; M. M. Hassan et al., 2019). The authorities have made several changes to the rules that govern local government bodies since that time. Bangladesh has held ten Union Parishad (UP) elections so far which included both violent and peaceful elections.

The unique political and social conditions of Bangladesh together with its substantial changes since past decades create an ideal research environment to study how partisan elections impact local government operations in the country. The economic development of Bangladesh has proceeded at a steady pace despite the country's history of natural disasters and current economic challenges and political instability. The country has achieved economic success yet its political system faces major challenges which affect its operations at the municipal level.

The introduction of partisan elections in local government institutions, such as the Union Parishad (UP), has drastically altered the dynamics of local governance. The case of Bangladesh shows how developing nations practice politics which contradict their democratic values. The shift from non-partisan to partisan elections has led to the centralization of power within ruling party elites, reducing electoral competition and marginalizing opposition voices. Local government units, consisting of local employees, have turned into places for political favoritism and squandering of resources and Services on political loyalist grounds.

The examination of Bangladesh shows that political parties in power use their control to restrict local government functions which leads to less political variety and unfair treatment of citizens. The system provides a framework to evaluate countries in South Asia and Africa and Latin America which encounter similar problems. The situation in Bangladesh shows that democratic institutions need legal protection through reforms which create just governance structures that safeguard civil rights for all political groups. Researchers and policymakers who study how democracy and governance and political development interact worldwide should use Bangladesh as their essential research site. The existing path shows how local government systems have historically connected to national government activities

while academic research on patronage and clientelism and decentralization enables understanding of these social dynamics.

Reviewing the Scholarship: Patronage, Clientelism, and Local Democracy

The academic literature on decentralization and democratic practice highlights ideals of accountability, participation, and representation. In developing areas these institutions fall under the control of patronage networks which transform governmental systems into mechanisms for distribution and exclusion. Bangladesh provides an explicit demonstration of this pattern. Researchers have studied clientelism and electoral violence in urban politics, yet they have not investigated how partisan capture affects rural areas. The review shows that electoral reforms in Bangladesh result in less inclusive democratic processes which the study analyzes through research on patronage and local democracy.

Since the 2000s, literature on local government has grown, covering several previously unexplored areas. Most of this literature focuses on the decentralization of power from the central government to local governments, the process of devolution, election violence in local government elections, accountability, transparency, and more (Sarker and Nawaz 2019; Farrington 2011; Rondinelli, McCullough, and Johnson 1989). However, Ahmed (1997), discussed the importance of the opposition in the parliament and the electoral process of the national government with reference to specific parliamentary elections in Bangladesh (Fifth Parliamentary Election). The author identified two types of roles the proactive and reactive roles played by the opposition make the parliament more effective and the development process more accountable to the people (Ahmed 1997). However, the recent policy change in 2016 has created a pathway for the opposition to be inactive in the local government elections.

In countries such as Bangladesh, local government institutions primarily operate as mechanisms for delivering public services. However, these bodies often remain institutionally weak and face continuous obstacles in ensuring effective distribution of state support to grassroots communities (Sarker & Nawaz, 2019). Although local representatives are elected to safeguard the interests of their constituents, local governments in many developing contexts—including parts of South Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe—frequently fail to perform their mandated responsibilities due to widespread corruption (Harbers, 2009; Krawczyk & Sweet-Cushman, 2016).

The election process for local officeholders operates with both non-transparent and non-inclusive voting methods. Electoral practices are often undermined by fraud and violence together with vote manipulation (Rashiduzzaman, 2002). Political parties commonly provide incentives in return for loyalty and support. The incentives which parties provide to their members as a reward for their commitment to the party include all public office positions which their members can access together with civil service jobs at state institutions and all regulatory jobs and all material benefits which include food and medicine and infrastructure development and concessional loans (Kopecký & Scherlis, 2008). The literature identifies multiple forms of patronage—such as clientelism, pork-barrel distribution, and

corruption—which frequently overlap in practice. Patronage systems exist to maintain political loyalty by providing various benefits to politicians (ibid).

Huntington (1968) in *Political Order in Changing Societies* showed that free and fair elections must exist to preserve institutional stability. The government needs to maintain electoral integrity because it serves as the basis for their governance operations. The domestic and international NGOs together with election observers create a vital system which protects electoral fairness dual (Valters & Jahan 2017) The electoral results obtain their trustworthiness when electoral authorities and security bodies execute their duties according to electoral rules. The democratization process suffers from major obstacles because electoral systems fail to function properly in developing nations which allows political elites to manipulate institutional weaknesses (Mirza Hassan & Nazneen 2017). The intention behind elections is to create peaceful power transitions but elections result in social tensions which lead to conflicts (Mai Hassan 2016 Sarker Khalid 2018).

The purpose of democratic elections is to increase citizen involvement in local government activities. Modern democratic systems enable voters to select representatives for their local governing bodies through their decentralized structure which lets citizens vote on local matters (Johnson, 2001; Johnson, Deshingkar, & Start, 2007). Local governments have the power to distribute resources within their areas while they possess different levels of financial and administrative independence which includes control over their workforce and financial planning yet central governments maintain supervisory authority (Sarker & Nawaz, 2019). The study of decentralization in academic circles examines how power shifts between levels of government through devolution and de-concentration and how local authorities and their political leaders execute their duties (Yilmaz, Beris, & Serrano-Berthet, 2010; Crook & Manor, 1998).

Researchers have published extensive studies on this topic yet they have not studied how local representatives transform these institutions into political control centers. The electoral process suffers from interference because party leaders use their administrative powers together with their political influence to seize control of local government positions (Rahman & Nasrin, 2017). They use their official positions to provide special treatment to party members and supporters despite the fact that local government bodies exist to assist all citizens without discrimination based on their religious, gender, or political beliefs. The current paper demonstrates how local government offices particularly the UP functioned as party centers which operated as local party offices because the regime political party selected most office holders and they won office through party patronage and electoral fraud with backing from politically motivated administration. The subsequent section of this study presents its methodological framework which connects theoretical exploration of patronage to practical research conducted in Union Parishads.

Research Design and Fieldwork Approach

The researchers used fieldwork methods to investigate the dynamics of their study in selected Union Parishads which they studied across Cumilla and Magura districts. The researchers conducted semi-

structured interviews with chairpersons and female members and party activists and ordinary citizens while they gathered documentary evidence and secondary literature. The selected methodology enables researchers to study how citizens experience political control in their local system while researchers trace these experiences back to historical and institutional contexts. The study uses rural areas as its main research site to demonstrate how political changes affect the daily operations of village governance.

The study examines how local political parties use Union Parishad (UP) institutions as bases for their members while officeholders use their government positions to gain political backing in rural Bangladesh. The research investigates current UP office operations which now function as political party centers where local officials distribute government resources to their supporters. The research team carried out their fieldwork in Cumilla Bangladesh by studying four UPs which they selected through random sampling across different Upazila Parishads (UPZs). The research study uses identity protection methods by removing all names and personal information from the study data. The research team gathered data from primary sources and secondary sources between September 2017 and December 2019. The research study shows how important rural local government institutions are because they receive less attention from studies which concentrate on urban areas, in literature focused on urban settings, in shaping leadership and democratic processes. The increasing political violence in rural areas poses a threat to the integrity of the electoral process and the development of future leaders.

Especially, urban areas in Bangladesh are highly densely populated, and those involved in political violence are often low-income individuals, migrants, or people engaged in informal and menial occupations. In contrast, rural violence tends to involve local residents and frequently occurs between neighbours within the same community. Based on my fieldwork observations, party activists in urban settings often mobilize supporters through daily payments, recruiting them when needed to demonstrate strength in front of party offices. These mobilized individuals typically operate under the direction of senior party leaders and a small group of loyal organizers who coordinate activities on behalf of the leadership. Rural violence, however, appears more intense at the interpersonal level, as conflicts occur among individuals who interact with one another regularly. This close social proximity gives rural political clashes a different character from those observed in urban contexts. Also, lineage-based rural violence has a different dimension to the violence as the bigger the family the stronger the group helps with the party support and political leaders try to keep those bigger family leaders closer to their patronage networks.

For primary data collection, I prepared an interview checklist and conducted in-depth interviews with 40 respondents from four Union Parishads (UPs) in Cumilla District, Bangladesh, covering different Upazilas. The respondents included current and former UP chairmen and members, local political leaders (from AL, BNP, etc.), female UP members, local elites, and general citizens. Using snowball sampling, I conducted 30 interviews in Bangla, recorded with consent, later transcribed and translated into English. The translated statements from the respondents are used in this article with single quotation marks. I also collected secondary data from UP documents, the Election Commission, articles,

and policy documents to validate my findings. The research study achieved its objectives even though it faced three major obstacles which included insufficient sample size and limited research time and participants' refusal to provide answers about delicate topics. The research faced difficulties because two problems emerged during the interview process and one interviewee did not trust the process and one interview was not documented. The research methodology centers on rural case studies which enable the study to examine an understudied area while providing research evidence about how local institutions develop their operational framework through the overall governance systems in Bangladesh.

Local Government Institutions: Structures and Evolution

Bangladesh has restructured its local government system multiple times since the country achieved independence, which establishes Union Parishads as its most fundamental and easily reachable administrative level. The legislative changes throughout history granted them additional duties for providing services and resolving conflicts and distributing benefits. The institutions functioned as part of national politics because their operations depended on the changes that occurred in government priorities. By the time of the 2016 reform, UPs had already become crucial gateways for distributing state resources, making them particularly vulnerable to partisan capture.

Local government in Bangladesh is supported by various legislative frameworks, while the Constitution formally recognizes and guarantees the existence of local government institutions in both rural and urban areas, including provisions related to elections and public participation (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). However, the roots of local governance in this region predate modern legal arrangements. Historical accounts suggest that during the medieval period, village-level Panchayats functioned to resolve minor disputes, and these traditional bodies gradually evolved into what is now known as the Union Parishad (UP) (Banglapedia, 2012; Panday & Rabbani, 2017; Sarker & Nawaz, 2019; Saha, 2021).

Under British colonial rule, the Local Self-Government Act of 1885 established a three-tier local government structure in the region. Subsequently, during the Pakistani era, an autocratic administration introduced the Basic Democracies system, which operated within a four-tier local government framework and regulated the election of local representatives. After the independence of Bangladesh, a presidential order in 1972 retained the four-tier structure. The first Union Parishad election in independent Bangladesh was held in 1973 (Banglapedia, 2012).

In 1976, a military dictator introduced a three-tier local government system in Bangladesh. Later, another military dictator reorganized the system, making the thana the administrative hub (Van Schendel 2015). In 1982, the Upazila Parishad elections were introduced to decentralize administration, focusing on development programs, education, health, and infrastructure. However, in 1991, the democratic government abolished the Upazila Parishad (Mollah et al. 2018). Over time, Bangladesh's local government institutions have undergone numerous changes. Today, the country has eight divisions, 64 districts, 495 Upazilas, and 4,554 Union Parishads, the lowest tier of local government (Pranab Kumar Panday and Rabbani 2011). This section presents a detailed examination of the historical development

and present-day organization of Bangladesh's local government system, which demonstrates the existing legal framework and operational structure of the government. The following section will analyze how electoral reforms, especially the introduction of partisan regulations, affected the impartiality of Union Parishads after the structural base of local governance was established.

Reforms and Electoral Changes: From Neutrality to Partisan Control

The electoral process which enables voters to select candidates based on their party affiliations serves two purposes because it establishes party identities and enhances governmental accountability. The ruling party gained greater power through the reform which established control over local political parties. The reform limited independent candidate opportunities by requiring candidates to obtain party nominations which created more competition between party members. The local leaders sought party approval while competing for state resources which created new pathways for corruption and coercion. The political power structure of rural areas underwent fundamental changes because of these transformations. Bangladesh has implemented various structural and functional changes to its local government system across different political systems since it established its electoral system and financial operations and administrative staff system. The Khaleda Zia led BNP government which took office in 1991 established the Local Government Structure Review Commission (LGSRC) to enhance local governance through its 1991 establishment. This commission recommended a two-tier system consisting of the Zila Parishad (District Council) and the Gram Sabha (Village Council), identifying the village as the foundational unit of the Union Parishad (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). The Awami League government established another high-level commission in 1996 to create a four-tier governmental system which included Gram Parishad, Union Parishad (UP), Upazila Parishad (UPZ), and Zila Parishad. The Local Government (Union Parishad) (Second Amendment) Act of 1997 created nine electoral wards for direct UP elections which included three reserved seats for women members (Rahman & Nasrin, 2017).

Figure 2: **Current structure of the UP in Bangladesh (adopted by the author)**

In 2001, when the BNP-led Four-Party Alliance assumed power, it enacted the Gram Sarkar (Village Government) Act of 2003, aiming to establish wards as auxiliary bodies of the Union Parishads. However, in 2006 the High Court declared the Act unconstitutional, thereby nullifying its implementation (Huq, 2016; Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). Later, the military-backed caretaker government introduced the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance in 2008, which was subsequently ratified by Parliament as the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009.

Under this legal framework, Bangladesh currently maintains three rural local government tiers: Union Parishad (UP), Upazila Parishad (UPZ), and Zila Parishad (ZP). With the exception of the Zila Parishad, the other two levels consist of locally elected representatives chosen through direct elections. The system also includes reserved seats for women, who are elected directly but compete exclusively among female candidates (Sarker & Nawaz, 2019; Sarker & Khalid, 2018). Nevertheless, these local government

institutions have remained the distribution centres for the state resources for the poor and marginalized populations of the respective communities and are the frontline service delivery centres of the government services.

Regime party leaders in Bangladesh noticed that fragmented votes among their ranks allowed opposition candidates to win local elections and access state resources. To maintain their power, they pushed for partisan elections across all local government positions, a change formalized into law (Sarker and Nawaz 2019; Saha 2017). The ruling party's complete control over the territory became established through this power transfer which created major changes to political violence, government service operation, and political power relationships. The study of these developments shows how the government executives have developed their strategies to acquire authority over local administration which has produced results for the area's political stability. The reforms established centralized administration which changed Union Parishad operational methods, converting them into sites for political rivalry and tools for political patronage.

Union Parishad as Political Arenas: Emerging Practices and Patterns

The research evidence shows that Union Parishads currently function as party organization extensions instead of serving as impartial governance systems. The office space functions as a venue for political activities which includes conducting recruitment processes and displaying dedication to the party. Political parties now control the distribution of welfare programs which used to address community requirements, while dispute resolution methods show inconsistency with political party preferences. The reform process has established new methods of governance which operate as political organizations, turning UP into a space where political factions compete for power while distributing governmental advantages to their supporters.

Following their electoral victory, several AL-nominated chairmen were reported to misuse their authority at the local level. As discussed earlier, the Union Parishad (UP), being the lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh, is responsible for allocating and distributing state resources within rural communities. Therefore, it plays a crucial role in channeling public benefits to the local population. However, based on my fieldwork after the 2016 UP elections, noticeable changes emerged in how these institutions operated. Examining these developments is essential for understanding the shifting patterns of local governance and resource distribution in Bangladesh.

Party Leaders

A substantial portion of UP chairmen functions as local head of the ruling party while receiving party benefits. They therefore have to fulfill their responsibilities to party supporters and party needs. The chairmen who participated in previous elections maintained their political connections yet their main public role remained that of an elected local representative. The political system shift toward partisan nominations has decreased the political differences between the two groups. After a party nominated

their candidates chairmen showed greater dedication to implementing party agendas and supporting their party affiliates.

As one respondent, Abdul Jalil (49), a UP member and BNP activist, stated:

The chairman of different UPs also holds positions such as president of the ruling party's union committee or is linked to the Upazila committee. These political roles of the chairman are affecting the proper functioning of the UP.

The party affiliation and engagement of the local party units caused fractions and interference among the UP members and chairmen because of their political differences. In addition, the regime party supporters and leaders are more powerful compared to the other political supporters making them obsolete to the activities of these local government institutions. Likewise, the supporters of these other political leaders are becoming vulnerable and losing their state-provided services unless they accept the dominance of the regime's political party leaders who are already elected and holding local government offices. The section provides crucial information which shows how political party membership and political commitments affect the ability of local government offices to operate effectively and maintain their impartiality. The study needs this understanding because it helps evaluate how political parties affect local governance operations and their ability to deliver services and distribute state resources.

Party-Based Resource Distribution

The Union Parishad (UP) has the main duty to manage social safety net programs which provide assistance to disadvantaged backward and financially struggling members of rural communities. The UP officials create beneficiary lists to determine who will receive assistance from these programs. The process for identifying recipients used to depend on guidance from local authority figures who had no ties to political parties. The introduction of electoral systems together with the selection of party-based chairmen gave local political groups control over who would become social safety net program recipients. Multiple respondents during my fieldwork said that to join these programs people needed to show public backing for the ruling party because their names would be deleted from the beneficiary list (Fieldwork, 2017 & 2019). Mobarak Mia (78), an elderly resident of the village with no longstanding political affiliation and living in poverty, stated that—

‘I have been receiving old age allowance for a decade now. However, the new chairman and his men told me if my family members didn't support their political party and didn't participate in the party activities, they would remove my name from the old age allowance recipients' name’.

Using these leverages the local political party leaders who have won the UP offices increase their supporter base in their community and at the same time try to undermine the other existing political groups from their political party and other political party groups. This section shows how partisan politics affects social safety net resource distribution and state facility access for marginalized

communities, which creates unfair state support distribution. The understanding of this trend serves as a foundation for assessing how partisan politics impact social welfare programs while non-partisan and oppositional voter groups experience political exclusion. Under the system, policies and procedures should be established to ensure that the resources given to the participants in the program are allocated fairly.

UP Member/ Chairman is the New Power Hub and the Use of UP Office

Previously, local authority was largely concentrated in the hands of landlords, retired government officials, and senior political figures. In recent years, newly elected Union Parishad (UP) members and chairmen have emerged as the dominant power holders within their communities, gradually replacing traditional elites. After securing electoral victory, these leaders gained control over the UP office and increasingly utilized it to advance their political interests. The UP acts as the main distribution point for state resources, which causes chairmen and members to function as patrons who distribute particular privileges based on their official positions within local patron–client systems. The process of seeking help has shifted away from former elites and landowners because people now prefer to ask for assistance from UP members and chairmen. Their dual position as elected officials and active actors within the ruling party structure enhances their ability to address both administrative and political matters effectively (Fieldwork, 2017 & 2019). While talking to Tahmina Begum (44) who is a widow and the recipient of the widow allowance from the government told me,

‘One of my neighbours has captured my land next to my house and was trying to force me to sell my land to him. However, I went to the UP chairmen, and he called the neighbour to the UP office and asked him to stop and since then my neighbour freed my piece of land and stopped pressuring me to sell my land to me’.

Because of their position in the UP and the local units of the party the community members accept their direction as these leaders have access to the senior political leaders and local administration including police. This makes them ideal for attracting more vulnerable people in their group as they can solve their problems (Jackman and Maitrot 2022; Jackman 2022; Maïtrot and Jackman 2023). This section explains the shift in local power dynamics, with UP members and chairmen becoming the new power elites. Understanding this shift is essential for analysing how local governance and clientelist networks function in contemporary Bangladesh. It also provides insight into how access to state resources and political connections enable these new power elites to influence and control their communities, thereby affecting local socio-political structures and service delivery.

UP Office as a Party Space

Political parties in Bangladesh traditionally maintain formal offices at the district level and, in some cases, at the Upazila level, but rarely at the Union Parishad (UP) level. This pattern remained unchanged for many years. However, following the introduction of partisan local government elections, the UP office has increasingly functioned as an operational space for the ruling party. Formally, the UP office

continues to represent a local government institution. In practice, however, it often operates as a local base for the incumbent political party. Since many UP chairmen hold leadership roles within the ruling party and must sustain their political engagement to retain influence, they frequently utilize the UP office for party-related activities. In certain cases, even when individual UP members are affiliated with opposition parties, the chairman—being aligned with the ruling party—conducts party meetings, decision-making sessions, and membership drives within the UP office. Although some members express discomfort with this practice, they are generally unable to voice objections due to political pressure from the ruling party structure. Sadman Mia (55) a UP member and supporter of another political party told me,

‘The chairman is always with his party members and supporters at the UP-chairman’s office. The office has certain job responsibilities with a mandate to serve the entire population of the community. However, he is always with his party members, and this makes the office inaccessible for the general citizens and other political party members to obtain the general services provided by the UP office’.

In this way making the office inaccessible for the general citizens and other party followers and members indirectly forces them to join the party or group of the UP chairman. The demonstration shows how partisan politics has taken control of local governance because UP offices now function as extensions of the ruling party. The research studies this pattern which shows how political parties control local governments while restricting public services and political participation to their supporters. The study demonstrates how people who do not belong to the ruling party and common citizens experience difficulties when they try to access government services. The study shows that local government offices need to provide fair service to all citizens in the community.

Quasi-Judicial Practice on Party Line

UP in Bangladesh also works as a village court according to the Village Court Act 2006 (Huq 2016). This quasi-judicial practice is in doubt, given that most of the UP chairmen are political leaders and nominated by a particular political party. One of the general citizen respondents Mofizur Rahman (35) told me from my field area,

‘How we could expect neutral judgment from a nominated ruling party Chairman of the UP who is a supporter of a specific political party and won the election with support from the party members? If any person supporter of the BNP or other political party goes to the UP for judgment, the UP chairman lingers the process of village court. However, the chairman does the opposite when any AL leaders/followers go to the UP for justice. And usually, the judgment goes in favor of the ruling party’.

In this way, the ruling party UP chairmen and members harass the opposition party members and other political party members and supporters when they go to the UP to seek settlement and justice using the village court for their existing disputes among the disputants within the local communities. And it is obvious when the supporters of their party go to the village court will get the full support of the UP-chairman members and most likely they will have the settlement in their favour. On the other hand, it will

be quite the opposite when the opposition or other political party members go to the village court for settlement, they will try to linger the process as much as possible and in the end, it is most likely they will have a decision against them even if they have not done anything wrong. The analysis of these practices reveals their impact on how political bias affects local justice systems and how that bias shapes community trust in local governance. The study shows that village courts need reforms to achieve operational objectivity which will enable all citizens to receive equal access to justice.

New List of Beneficiaries

In the past, the local beneficiaries didn't need the political background to access the UP and its resources. However, to get any service or help for those who need a political recommendation (Chowdhury and Panday 2018). Without any recommendation from the ruling party leaders from the respective area, they cannot get on the list of beneficiaries. During my fieldwork, I found out, that the UP secretary makes a list of beneficiaries for social safety net programs including old age allowance, widow allowance, etc. One of the respondents Rahima Khatun (56) who is a widow, told me,

'I was not listed on the beneficiaries list because I have a relative who is the local leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Still, she badly needs social safety net support as widow allowance'.

In this way, the UP chairmen and members use their leverage as the gatekeepers of the state resources for the marginalized and poor of the local communities. Due to the partisan nature of the UPs, the new list of beneficiaries has been created based on the party-political orientation and especially the commitment the support of the UP chairmen and members. And it is also increasing their power base in the local communities. It illustrates how political bias affects the distribution of social safety net resources; marginalizing individuals based on their political affiliations. Understanding this trend is essential for analysing the broader implications of partisan control on social welfare programs and the equitable distribution of state support. It emphasizes the need for measures to ensure that all community members have fair access to resources, regardless of their political orientation, to promote social justice and reduce inequality.

Persuading New Party Members Through UP Office

By providing support through UP resources, the UP members and chairmen bring new members to the party and strengthen their group. In addition, they are also trying to abolish the other political opposition by suppressing the members of those groups and depriving them of the benefits of the UP resources. In addition, as local political leaders for the ruling party and UP chairman, it is easier for them to bring people into their group by providing opportunities to the other group members. By doing this, the opposition party and groups will be weaker. During my fieldwork, I was talking with one of the factional leaders of the respective UP Hannan Mia (40) who is a regime political party supporter, and leaders of a faction told me,

‘The current UP chairman was a labourer in Dubai and when he came back to Bangladesh and our village my father patronized him to take part in the party activities. After my father died, he used his financial leverage and bribed the senior leaders who the party nomination for the UP election. Now he is using his position to recruit new members in his group and trying to abolish our group in our village’.

This has also created new cleavages among the regime's political party members as the new groups are emerging some groups are abolishing, and some are becoming more powerful. This highlights how UP offices are used as tools for political recruitment and consolidation of power. Understanding this trend is essential for analysing the broader implications of partisan control on local governance and community dynamics. It underscores the need for measures to ensure that UP offices serve all community members impartially, regardless of political affiliation, to promote fair governance, and reduce political factionalism.

Being Awami League (AL) by Force

I have seen many supporters of other political parties in the past in my field. Still, they are politically inactive or joined the ruling party because of the pressure from the AL leaders of the respective communities or to do their business in peace. One of the business owners in my field area told me he used to support the Jataya Party (JP) in the past. Still, after the 2016 UP election, the local ruling party members put immense pressure on him to become politically inactive or join the party. Otherwise, the local ruling party supporters/ goons were disturbing his local business by occasionally vandalizing his shops in the local market. This is why he left politics and now is a full-time businessman. Nazir Mia (44), told me,

‘The local Union AL president called me at night and told me if I don’t join his group and donate money to the party fund then he will put my name in the murder case which took place a few days ago in our community. I had no choice but to join his group and had to pay him some money so that he wouldn’t put my name in that murder case. Now I’m his supporter and people in my community know I’m AL’. In this way, the local political leaders force the other political party members to join their party units in the locality and increase their party base. It also shows the coercive methods used by local political leaders to expand their influence and control. The evaluation of political pressure and coercive methods requires understanding these practices because they have critical effects on community development and political rights of citizens. The situation shows that people must establish protection systems which stop others from forcing them to join political groups because these systems will create a more just and equal political system.

The introduction of partisan elections to local government institutions has resulted in observable changes to UP operations according to our previous analysis. The elite class has shifted from neutral political elites to partisan political elites. The political party activities have increased because every UP office has turned into a local party headquarters which functions as the ruling party office. The UP chairman who leads the local ruling party organization provides clientelist benefits to his local party supporters in order to build his political base. The office operations of UP offices have developed new

trends which demonstrate how political parties influence local governance in Bangladesh. The implementation of effective policies requires understanding these first setup behaviors which protect political rights while distributing resources in an unbiased manner and maintaining fair local governance practices. The first setup behaviors of political parties which demonstrate their attempts to take control of government institutions show multiple ways that they exclude others from participation while using force.

Findings: Patronage Networks, Violence, and Resource Distribution

The Bangladeshi case demonstrates through its main problem of decentralization that democratic reforms which aim to increase public involvement actually result in permanent control by political parties. The 2016 reform established party competition at Union Parishads which resulted in reduced pluralistic political representation and the creation of exclusionary practices. The rural governance system when it becomes politicized will create distrust toward local institutions which will encourage people to support authoritarian rule. Situating these findings within comparative perspectives, it becomes clear that partisan capture of local government threatens the democratic potential of decentralization in the Global South.

Drawing on both the literature and field data, the findings indicate significant changes in the functioning of Union Parishads (UPs), particularly in the context of partisan elections and the integration of party leaders into local government offices. Previously, UP members were largely elected based on their personal reputation, leadership qualities, and contributions to the community. The change from non-partisan to partisan elections has created a situation where actual political competition in local elections has decreased according to Huq 2016 and Chowdhury and Panday 2018 and Sarker and Nawaz 2019.

Earlier rural politics functions through patronage networks which connect local power struggles to landowning elites and community members who hold elder status. The local government electoral system amendment has led to a gradual decline of these political dynamics. Ruling party members have used electoral violence methods to establish control over opposition candidates while they created fake electoral outcomes. The election commission and local administration functions during electoral violence events have played a role in diminishing competitive political processes throughout rural Bangladesh.

In addition, competition for ruling party nomination has intensified. This heightened demand has led to allegations of nomination trading in local government elections, where aspiring candidates reportedly provide financial incentives to influential party leaders to secure nomination. In some instances, however, individuals who paid such sums were ultimately denied nomination. One of the immediate former UP chairmen who failed to secure party nomination from the regime political party Md. Asharaf Hossain (67) told me,

‘The running chairman gave our MP one Bigha (0.5 Acre) of land which is worth around BDT2 Million. In exchange for that, he could ensure the nomination from the party. I didn’t pay a penny, so they didn’t

consider my nomination application even though I have been a supporter of the regime political party for the last four decades’.

This kind of corruption has been corruption reports are regularly reported in the media for the nomination process making the process more complicated and competitive as the intra-party violence has also increased due to the unethical practices in distributing the nominations for UP chairmanships. Similarly, elections to other tiers of local government under the revised partisan framework demonstrate a comparable pattern of weakened political competition. Entrusting local government offices primarily to party leaders may generate long-term consequences, including the erosion of democratic norms among rural representatives, irregularities in resource allocation by Union Parishads, and the exclusion of marginalized and economically vulnerable populations from institutional support. Moreover, the consolidation of factional political groups has the potential to intensify confrontation and violence within local politics.

The current UP offices face accessibility issues because local political leaders control their operations which prevent ordinary citizens from accessing service delivery points. The institutions serve as essential administrative hubs which provide banking support and official documentation services yet their dedicated political alignment leads to service delivery restrictions for different user groups. People who belong to opposition parties or whose beliefs diverge from those of the ruling party encounter obstacles when they attempt to access UP services according to Khan (2015) and Saha (2017).

The existing political systems together with their current functioning create threats which will endanger the political system's future stability. Local governance which relies on partisan control will create dangers which will affect vital democratic systems such as electoral processes and responsible leadership. Local elections require opposition parties to receive equal chances to compete in their electoral battles. The national political power shifts will create structural difficulties which will affect the party that becomes opposition in upcoming times (Huq, 2016; Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). The institutional neutrality and integrity of local government must be protected because it serves as a vital component for maintaining operations. The section serves as a vital component because it shows how the transition to partisan elections has impacted UP operations and local governance systems. The first step to creating democratic policies that support fair local governance and equal resource allocation and protection of democratic rights requires understanding these changes. The discoveries from this study demonstrate the necessity to advance their research because of its effects on democracy and governance systems and rural authority management in Bangladesh.

Discussion: Implications for Democracy and Rural Authority

The Union Parishads electoral system has developed through partisan elections which demonstrate how structural changes create new pathways for electoral contests while these changes affect the fundamental operations of local government. The reform has created deeper problems because it has made political parties depend on patronage while it has increased internal party conflicts and reduced

public access to government services. Service delivery requirements exist to maintain fairness because this practice protects local democratic systems which need equal support for all citizens regardless of their political connections. The Bangladesh experience shows other regions how political parties use decentralization to establish their power over local governments.

The partisan restructuring of Union Parishads has fundamentally altered the landscape of rural governance in Bangladesh. Community-based institutions which existed in the past to provide accessible services now function as operational arms of the ruling political party. The current situation creates a disadvantage for opposition parties and independent voters because it reduces their chances to take part in local decision-making processes. The ruling party-based leaders who control government resources have established authority in rural regions by replacing traditional power holders who included landlords and respected elders with individuals who gained power through party connections. The ongoing developments will establish a system of rural authoritarianism which uses party membership to control access to justice and welfare services instead of granting citizens their fundamental rights. Partisan capture undermines grassroots institutions which leads to decreased democratic development and increased social exclusion throughout rural Bangladesh. The implications lead to a final evaluation of Bangladeshi local governance developments and their impact on governance systems throughout the Global South.

Conclusion: Rethinking Partisan Local Governance

The introduction of partisan elections at local elections has restricted the range of electoral competition which exists in local elections. Citizens need better political collaboration between local political organizations and community leaders and administrative authorities to handle the changing responsibilities of the Union Parishad (Jütting et al., 2005; Saha, 2017). The UP, which previously functioned as a general local governance institution, has increasingly taken on the character of a party-centered space within the community (Sarker & Nawaz, 2019; Sarker & Khalid, 2018; Sarker, 2006). The investigation of these developments needs additional empirical research which should include larger sample studies that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Research that compares different South Asian countries and African nations and Latin American countries will show how similar institutional patterns emerge across these three regions.

Greater scholarly attention is particularly needed on issues of public service delivery and partisan factionalism in local politics in order to assess their wider implications for national and regional political systems. By emphasizing the need for more extensive data collection and comparative studies, it highlights the importance of addressing these issues with a broader perspective. The study requires researchers to examine dynamic systems which operate throughout both time and space. The study demonstrates that local government functions as a governmental system which supports only one political party.

The local government system lost its political competitive nature because non-partisan elections now convert into partisan elections. Parties should face no difficulties when competing through different political systems and their respective elections. The ruling party leaders have used the local administration and security forces to manipulate the whole election system. The link between local political leaders and superior political leaders and local administration and security forces becomes clear through my observations of the UP election of 2016. The local government institutions were always in the hold of the local elites, including the political party and independent elites.

Political parties in Bangladesh often maintain support by promising goods or positions to loyal followers which helps them secure their base especially in rural areas where access to patronage benefits is essential for their success. The historical practice of non-partisan elections enabled local elites to maintain control over both citizen requirements and party activist needs. The ruling party now controls local government institutions through their election system which has emerged from the implementation of partisan elections. UP offices have become centres for party-based resource distribution and local political hubs, with partisan elites replacing neutral leaders. The political system faces disruption because local power brokers backed by their political allies and state authorities and military agencies manipulate elections while they control state assets which should support underprivileged citizens. The study of these patterns establishes the necessary foundation for understanding how political parties affect governance systems through their control of government operations and their impact on community relations and public service provision in Bangladesh. The protection of local democratic processes in Bangladesh needs service delivery systems which operate independent of political control and open Union Parishads to all citizens without restriction based on party membership.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Krishna Kumar Saha is the sole author of this manuscript. The author conceived the study, conducted the fieldwork, collected and analysed the data, interpreted the findings, and wrote and approved the final manuscript.

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The author has received partial financial support from STUBE Waden-Wuttenburg, Germany for the fieldwork of the research.

Clinical trial number: Not applicable.

Ethics approval and Accordance

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Public Administration, Comilla University, Bangladesh, in accordance with the guidelines and regulations of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Comilla University, Bangladesh. The ethical approval was granted under Protocol No.

CoU/Reg./IRB/1024/2017/1212(1). All research procedures were conducted in accordance with the approved protocol and relevant institutional ethical guidelines. Participation in the study was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and all identifying information has been anonymized to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available because they contain qualitative interview data collected from human participants on politically sensitive issues, and public release could compromise participant confidentiality. De-identified data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to ethical considerations.

Ethics, Consent to Participate, and Consent to Publish declarations: not applicable

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Author Contribution

The corresponding is the sole author of this manuscript.

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Figures

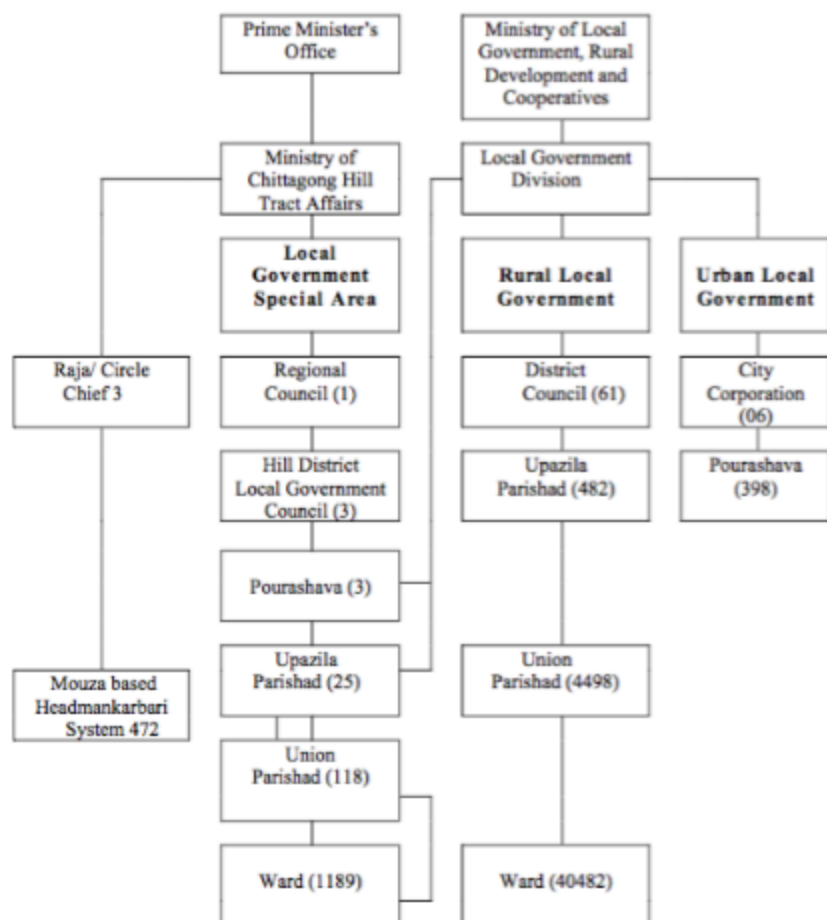


Figure 1

Current Structure of Local Government in Bangladesh prepared by the author (numbers have changed but the structure remained the same)

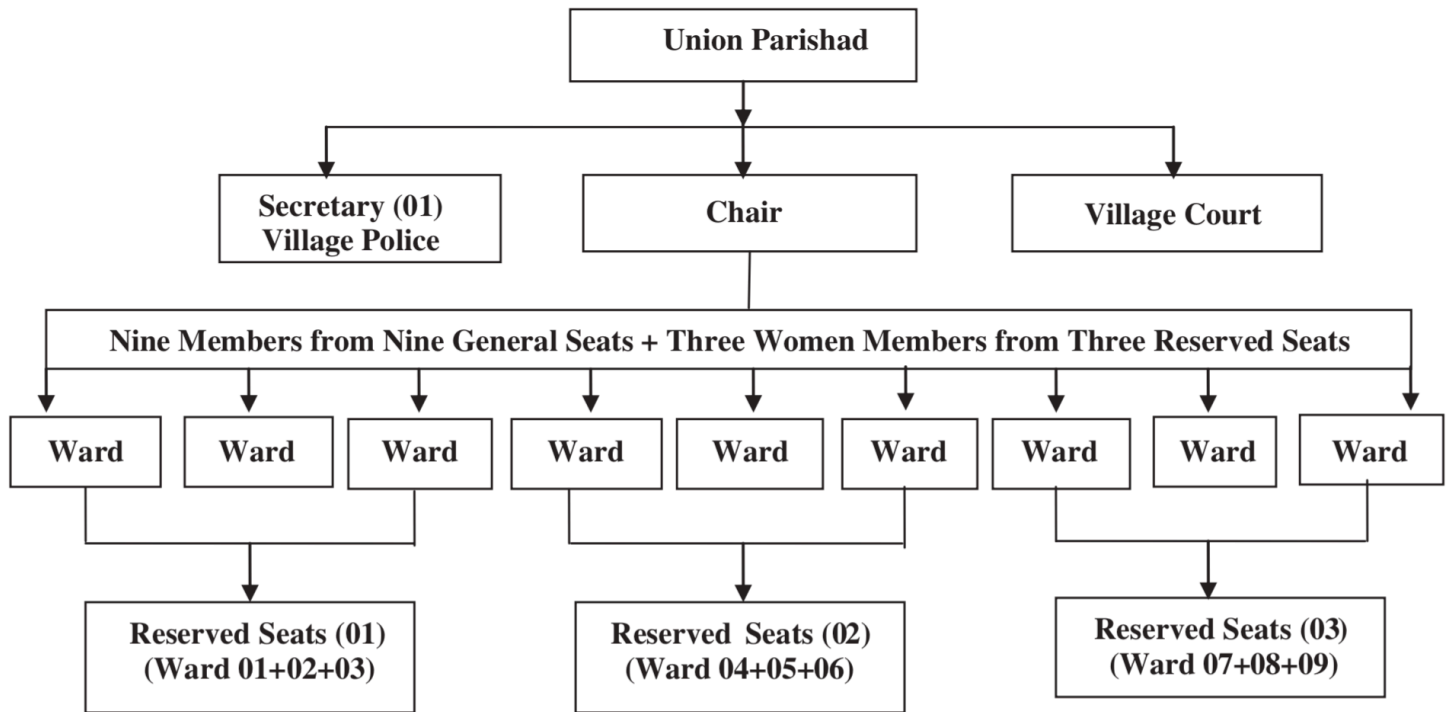


Figure 2

Current structure of the UP in Bangladesh (adopted by the author)