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THE CONSTITUENCY ROLE OF THE MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT IN BANGLADESH

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Bangladesh has a unicameral parliament. It is composed of 350 members, of whom 300 are elected from single-member constituencies on popular votes, while 50 seats are reserved for women to be distributed among different parliamentary parties on the basis of a proportional system. Notwithstanding this difference in the process of election, both categories of Members of Parliament (MPs) enjoy similar facilities and power. As in other Westminster systems, an MP in Bangladesh can play four types of roles: policy advocate, ministerial aspirant, parliament man and constituency member (Searing, 1994). Policy advocates are those who seek to initiate policy and/or to influence it; while ministerial aspirants see parliament mainly as the training ground for government and concentrate on strategies which might lead to promotion (Saalfeld and Muller, 1997: 10). Since ministers are recruited from the rank of MPs in most Westminster-style democracies, it is not unlikely to find many backbenchers aspiring to become ministers. Parliament men spend most of their time in parliament; they are not immersed in the process of representation. Constituency members are different from others in a number of respects. They do not look up but down (Saalfeld and Muller: 10); their priority is to provide services to their constituencies, either of a collective or individual kind. The various roles are, however, not mutually exclusive; to the contrary, one can reinforce the other in a number of ways.

The Constitution of Bangladesh grants supreme lawmaking authority to the Parliament. It also authorizes the Parliament to set up different committees, empowers them to engage in policy-related activities and ensures that these have access to necessary persons and documents. Article 76 (2) of the Constitution of Bangladesh provides that Parliament shall appoint standing committees, and a committee so appointed may, subject to this Constitution and to any other law, examine draft Bills and other legislative proposals, review the enforcement of laws and propose measures for such enforcement and investigate or inquire into the activities or administration of a Ministry (GPRB, 2011). In practice, neither the Parliament nor its committees play any major role in policymaking for various reasons; these range from lack of experience of a large number of members and the constitutional restriction of floor-crossing and independent voting, to the lack of research and expert staff support to committees and MPs. If there is not much scope for the MPs to engage in policy debates, neither can they hope to become 'good parliament men' for various reasons, especially time constraints, procedural difficulties and negative attitude of government. Only a few MPs are full time politicians. Most of them are business people (53.5% in the ninth Parliament) who, as a natural rule, have to remain busy with other works. Career politicians do not have

much scope to enter the parliament. Even if MPs are willing to be parliament men, they are likely to face various difficulties. The Parliament does not meet very frequently. The average number of sitting days per year (75) is exceedingly low; so also is the average length of each sitting day (3.32 hours) (Ahmed, 2013). In both respects, the Parliament of Bangladesh lags far behind other parliaments.

Procedural constraints also discourage the private members to become parliament men. The Rules of procedure (ROP) ensures government domination in different ways. For example, a minister may make a statement whenever s/he feels necessary. There cannot be any debate on ministerial statements. On the other hand, private members have to compete with each other to attract the Speaker's attention to speak in the House. They have to give notices in advance to raise different issues in the House. Thus, the private members are at a disadvantage and this, plus the fact that the party discipline virtually compels them not to be critical of their own party in Parliament itself, ensures that the executive will be dominant. Besides, although there may (legitimately) be many aspirants among the backbenchers for ministerial offices, only a few can actually reach the summit. As a consequence, the MPs in Bangladesh have to find effective way(s) of becoming good constituency members. Their priority, as in other emerging democracies, is to provide services to their constituents, and to redress their grievances.

In fact, most of the MPs in Bangladesh, as in many developing countries, legitimize their role more as constituency representatives than as lawmakers or critics of administration. The need for maintaining close MP-constituency linkages in Bangladesh has become imperative for a number of reasons such as the change in the composition of the electorate, stiff competition for votes between the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which have alternated in state power since 1991, for votes, and the change in electoral behavior. An MP now senses more vulnerability and feels more insecure than before; hence he/she has to explore alternative ways of enlisting the support of the electorate. The unpredictability of the behavior of the electorate necessitates a continual exchange between the politician and his/her constituents. As a natural rule, they have to respond to demands of the constituents for more services and allocation. However, not much is known about the types of demands that constituents make upon their representatives, the nature of problems MPs face while dealing with problems of their constituents, procedures they follow to redress constituents' grievances, and the way those responsible for providing services respond to MPs' requests. Nor does the extant literature reveal much about the amount of time MPs devote to seek projects and benefits for their districts and act as intermediaries between their constituents and the bureaucracy. In fact, the MP-constituency linkage remains a neglected area of study and/or research, and thus needs special consideration.

This paper seeks to explore the nature of constituency orientation of the MPs in Bangladesh. It examines the role of the MPs as constituency representatives, highlighting the scope of their work, problems they face while discharging their responsibilities and methods they use to overcome the problem(s). It also identifies the limits of coping strategies and evaluates options proposed by MPs to overcome the problem. Data were

collected in early 2013. This study used two different methods – mailed in survey and interview - to collect information on the relations between an MP and his/her representative. A total of 28 members of the ninth Parliament (2009-2014) and one MP elected to earlier parliaments were interviewed. Although a structured questionnaire was sent to all (350) MPs, only 14 returned the questionnaire, of whom two were earlier interviewed by the researcher. Much of what follows in this paper is mostly based on the opinion of 40 MPs belonging to different parties on the nature of demands constituents make upon them, causes underlying such demands, strategies they adopt to cope with the overload, and limits of such strategies.

MP-Constituency Relations: Problem of Representation

The practice of constituency relations involves communicating with constituents, learning about their concerns and, as possible and where appropriate, helping to solve their problems (NDI, 2008: 5). It encompasses a broad range of activities that can be adapted to fit a legislator's budget, time and level of experience. It is now widely recognized that MPs can ignore their constituents' demands at their own peril. A 2012 report by UNDP/IPU observes that evidence from countries around the world suggests that politicians are not held principally to account for their legislative scrutiny or oversight of the executive, but rather for the tangible benefits that they can deliver to the voters. Everywhere members of parliament have to spend a significant portion of their time doing things that their constituents need. The types of service provided to constituents are varied; variations can be noticed across different countries and sometimes within a country itself. In general, services provided by an MP can be grouped into two categories: casework and projects. Casework involves responding to requests for help with individual problems that the constituent believes would be alleviated through government actions if government officials could be made aware of the particular circumstances or of the severity of hardship; while projects involve lobbying by legislators on behalf of the district's collective welfare, usually with respect to local economic circumstances.

Effective member-constituent relationships contribute to democracy by strengthening the people's connection to their government, and by providing "real life" assessments of how government programs are actually working on the ground. Most MPs now have to spend more time and resources to keep their constituents happy. Since MPs expect constituency work to yield more electoral payoffs than other activities, they are likely to engage in it. In fact, constituency work is more important for re-election than is policymaking or oversight. As Fiorina (1977: 43-45) has observed:

By taking explicit stands on policy matters [in the USA], the member will make friends as well as enemies. In contrast, constituency work is not so controversial. Moreover, the members will have more difficulty to claim credit for his policymaking initiatives than for his constituency work because members of a legislature make policy collectively but perform constituency work individually. Finally, the benefits from constituency work are more immediate and concrete than policy outputs.

There is, however, no 'one best way' of establishing relations with constituents. Nor do factors influencing relations between an MP and her/his constituents remain the same everywhere. Nor is there 'one best method' of communicating with constituents. Considerable variations can be noticed in respect of the ways MPs maintain contacts with their constituents. In one American study, it has been found that legislators use relatively sophisticated techniques, such as newspaper columns, radio tapes, newsletters and opinion polls, to gain visibility and communicate with constituents (Kurtz, 1998). Besides, face- to-face contact or 'communication through correspondence' is also widely practiced. Most of the British MPs have traditionally used what is popularly known as 'constituency surgery' – publicly advertised meetings at which an MP is available to listen personally to constituents' grievances (Norton and Wood, 1990: 197). With the advent and popularization of information technology (IT), there is now better prospect of greater MP-constituency interaction. Many MPs now use different technologies to reach their constituents. These include: email (for correspondence), personal website, party website, email newsletters, texting to mobile phones, blog, and social networking. The use of information technology (IT) can be seen as beneficial from different standpoints. In particular, it has helped MPs save time, if not resources. It has also made communication between representatives and their constituents faster and easier (Jackson, 2008).

The numerous methods that MPs in western countries use to maintain links with their constituencies do not have much significance in developing countries where most of the people are illiterate and poor. Even written correspondences are rare; in particular, as these are rarely replied, constituents normally do not resort to this technique. Personal contact thus remains the main method of communication between the MPs and their constituents. The widespread popularity of IT has, however, some impact on improving communication between an MP and his/her constituents. In Bangladesh, for example, although more than half of the MPs permanently live in Dhaka, the capital city, they can now communicate, if they want, with their constituents in a much easier way than before. All MPs elected to the ninth Parliament owned and used cell phones. All of them had direct access to email and more than half had access to fax. The use of cell phone is widespread. Initiating, facilitating and encouraging constituency development projects in one's own constituency represents one of the best ways to bring benefits to constituents and increase his/her popularity. Most of the countries in the South Asian region and in Africa have introduced constituency development funds (CDF) in one form or another.

On the whole, there is now a consensus that an MP can neglect responding to constituency problems and issues at her/her peril. The UNDP/IPU report (2012), to which reference has been made earlier, observes that the need for constituency services does not remain restricted to any particular region; rather it has become a world-wide phenomenon. Even the traditional argument that countries adopting a proportional representational system do not usually encourage representatives to establish closer ties with their constituents as in a simple-plurality system has come under serious attack. Research has shown that if a proportional representation system assumes relatively small constituencies, connections between representatives and constituents will be

closer. This is because voters can easily recognize the few candidates in the party list and also because representatives find it geographically easier than in large-sized constituencies, to reach constituents. Constituency services thus matter.

The Overloaded MP

The MPs in Bangladesh are extremely busy people; they appear to be much busier than other groups having day-to-day interaction with the people. They do many things even though these are not required of them. In fact, most MPs are involved with almost every activity that concerns the electorate. Nothing appears to be outside the involvement of the MP. They are concerned with both important and mundane activities. Moreover, they do so many things that legitimately belong to local levels of government in different democratic countries. In fact, most MPs have become overloaded with responsibilities for providing services and/or responding to different constituency issues.

Nature of constituency involvement: The nature of issues that MPs have to deal with does not remain confined to any specific area. People turn to their representatives with numerous collective and individual problems. MPs do many things while they are in their constituencies. They are often seen as local dignitaries, with many people expecting them to grace important functions as chief/special guests. They also have to attend many school, college and club functions. To have an MP as a guest in a function is considered to be an achievement. MPs have to mediate even personal family matters. Issues that often figure prominently in constituents' behavior include: recommendation for employment, land disputes, loans, and terrorist activities in the area. Probably the most important demand that constituents generally make while meeting their representatives relates to 'development' of the area. People expect their representatives to be a development 'agent'. By development, what people mean the most is infrastructural development.

Most of the MPs raise issues related to their constituencies whenever they have an opportunity to speak in the House. The following table reveals that nearly half of the motions tabled by parliamentarians focus on the concerns of their local areas or that of the region where the constituency is located. Local issues are considered here to be synonymous of constituency issues. Two-fifths of motions moved in different parliaments have focused on local issues; while national issues do not receive as much recognition as their importance warrant. Table I shows that there does not exist any major difference in the geographic focus of motions raised in different parliaments which have differed with each other in various respects. It implies that MPs are, by nature or because of compulsion of electoral dynamics, mostly constituency-oriented people.

An exploration of the demand nature of issues discussed in Parliament also reveals that seeking policy benefits for the locality tops the list of priorities. Nearly one-third of the issues discussed in the eighth and ninth parliaments were intended to seek benefits for the locality. Most of the MPs, irrespective of age, education or political experience, can be seen as concerned with promoting the interests of their constituencies. No major difference in this respect can be noticed between those who are

Table 1. Geographic Focus of Motions in Parliament. Source: Jahan and Amundsen (2012:35).

Focus	Parliament				
	First N= 32	Second N=253	Fifth & Seventh N= 4622	Eighth N= 416	Ninth N=193
Local	15.6	41.5	62.3	41.6	43.5
Regional	18.6	11.2	14.2	13.5	21.2
National	18.6	25.7	23.5	40.1	30.6
International	-	5.5	-	3.6	2.1
Others	46.9	15.1	-	1.2	2.6

Table 2. Nature of Issues Discussed in Parliament. Source: Jahan and Amundsen (2012:35).

Indicators	Parliament					
	First N= 32	Second N=253	Fifth N= 238	Seventh N= 271	Eighth N= 416	Ninth N=193
Seeking policy benefits for locality	0.0	4.8	18.1	23.6	32.9	31.6
Asking explanations for policy failure/non-implementation of policy	9.4	7.5	9.2	1.1	3.4	2.1
Seeking clarification on administrative lapses	18.7	16.2	23.1	4.8	5.8	6.2
Demanding remedial actions	12.5	23.7	17.7	21.4	21.6	22.8
Seeking benefits for specific groups/areas	9.4	17.8	8.8	29.9	12.5	18.1
Seeking policy reversal/modification	3.1	6.7	6.7	10.3	21.9	17.1
Others	46.9	23.3	16.4	8.9	1.9	2.1

highly educated and those who lack university education, and/or between a newcomer and a long-experienced MP. All have a strong constituency orientation. Senior MPs, however, enjoy some advantages. They have a better scope to engage in important parliamentary activities, such as taking part in the discussion on bills or debates on other important matters; hence they often focus on national issues. On the other hand, those who lack previous parliamentary experience are apparently more interested in constituency issues. Similar findings have been reported from other countries. Referring to Britain, Norton and Wood (1993: 35) observe that junior MPs are more involved than their senior colleagues in presenting constituency services to their constituents. They further observe that junior members will have to have inherited a constituency that is absolutely risk-free in order to be able to turn their attention more fully toward Westminster (Norton and Wood, 1993: 36). These corroborate, to some extent, the general theoretical argument that the more one acquires experience in politics, the more s/he seeks to use her/his own conscience in resolving issues that confront her/him.

Frequency of involvement: There is no prescribed time for constituents to meet their MPs. Constituents can contact their representatives whenever they think it necessary. At least two MPs reported to have received calls at midnight from husbands and wives requesting help for settling serious family feuds. Many MPs live in their constituencies. Those who do not live permanently in the constituency visit it every weekend almost as a routine. MPs who live in nearby cities visit their constituencies more often. The number of people that an MP meets when s/he is in her/his constituency ranges from a few hundred to several thousand. MPs have to work until late hours when they are in their constituencies. It is thus difficult to precisely calculate the number of hours spent for doing constituency work. Nor is it always possible to disaggregate the party, personal and political work done by them. Some MPs follow a routine, meeting people in their village/town home (used as office) one day in the weekend and visiting different unions and villages the other day to attend meetings or joining social functions or doing some other activities such as presiding a school/college governing body meetings or chairing selection committees for the recruitment of teachers. MPs do not have any job description; they define their own functions.

Methods of contact: Contact between MPs and their constituents are mostly face-to-face and intimate. Written correspondence, which is the dominant method of communication between an MP and her/his constituents in established democracies, can rarely be seen in Bangladesh. In recent years, however, the use of cell phone has become very popular. In fact, both MPs and their constituents now consider cell phone as the most effective medium of communication. Since cell phone allows the sender and the receiver to talk directly, the risk of distortion of the message can be minimized, at least up to large extent. Using a cell phone is easy; it is also not very expensive. Some differences can be noticed between the old generation and the new generation of MPs in the use of web-based communication networks. The former mostly depend on face-to-face communication and cell phone; only a few are aware of the use and application of email as a medium of communication. But some of the MPs representing the new generation have access to and often use different web-based communication technologies, e.g. blogging, emailing, and social networking such as face book and

texting to mobile phones. This group, however, does not underemphasize the importance of personal contact. In fact, everyone interviewed and almost all those returning their questionnaire observed that face to face contact still remained the most popular method of communication, followed by contact by cell phone.

Explaining the Overload

The way(s) the MPs in Bangladesh behave have both similarities and differences with the behavioral pattern of their counterparts in both advanced countries and also in emerging democracies. Several reasons prompt MPs become so much concerned about solving issues that concern the constituents. This following discussion tries to identify reasons that account for the overload of the MPs.

Nature of Public expectation: Most of the MPs consider raising constituency issues in the House and responding favorably to demands made by constituents as a 'sacred' duty. Part of the reason is that most constituents want to see their representatives more as patrons and brokers rather than as policy advocates and/or parliament men. A Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) survey results, reproduced in Table 3, show that most respondents wanted regular involvement of their representatives in infrastructure development in the locality. They also wanted their representatives to serve people at the personal level. One can thus say that much of what MPs do in the localities reflects public preferences. In other words, they orient their role toward doing many things that their constituents want.

The MPs also often do many things that constituents do not always want. For example, the TIB survey showed that most people did not want their involvement in project implementation. Nor did they want MPs leading different local level committees. But the MPs usually want to be associated with different committees such as managing committees of schools and/or other committees. Many people also expect that their representatives will raise in Parliament problems that relate to their constituency (Table 4). Empirical evidence shows that most of the MPs often try to promote and safeguard the interests of their constituencies whenever there is an opportunity to speak in the House (Tables 1 and 2). The public also expects regular involvement of the MP in lawmaking and oversight of government, although this expectation cannot be met in full more because of the existence of several structural constraints, as stated in an earlier section, than for the cognitive limitations of lawmakers or/and for their individual failings. One thing to be stated here is that in most Westminster-style democracies, backbench MPs remain seriously disadvantaged vis-à-vis the front benchers in lawmaking and/or oversight. Bangladesh thus cannot be an exception.

Imperative of electoral politics: The imperative of electoral politics may be seen as probably the most important factor prompting the MPs to be attentive to needs and demands of their constituents. Electoral politics in Bangladesh has become strongly entrenched in the succession of government. No one can predict beforehand who will win an election. Part of the reason is the unpredictability of the behavior of the electorate, which necessitates a continual exchange between the politician and his/her constituents. Such exchanges are not always as asymmetrical as some are inclined to argue. Electoral

Table 3. Public Expectation of MP's Role in Local Area. Source: TIB (2008).

Role	Want no involvement	Minimal involvement	Frequent involvement	Regular involvement
Infrastructure development	0.3	0.3	9.3	90.0
Serving people at the personal level	1.5	1.2	17.0	80.3
Supervise local level project implementation	1.7	3.7	26.7	67.9
Getting involved in implementing projects	69.8	11.6	6.3	12.3
Supervision of law and order situation at the local level	8.2	3.5	19.7	68.7
Leading different local committees	23.5	16.4	29.9	32.1

Table 4. Public Expectation of MP's Role in Parliament. Source: TIB (2008).

Role	Want no involvement	Minimal involvement	Frequent involvement	Regular involvement
Place the constituency problem in Parliament	0.2	0.1	12.7	87.0
Lawmaking for the welfare of the people	0.3	0.4	16.8	82.6
Making the government accountable to the people	0.4	0.9	19.4	89.2
Oversight government's activities through parliamentary standing committees	0.4	1.4	25.8	72.4

politics appears to have weakened, to a certain extent, the asymmetrical relationship and increased uncertainty about how a representative will perceive the behavior of her/his constituency. It has particularly led to a gradual weakening of patron-client politics which has traditionally influenced electoral politics in a significant manner.

Some empirical studies reveal that the introduction of democracy has made political rivalry more than a segmental rivalry. Political candidatures now remain theoretically open to anyone and due to the provision for secret voting, economic dominance no longer automatically guarantees political power. The secret ballot can

spawn more than one type of politician, although the pace of such change may still remain very slow. Rashiduzzaman's argument that the election in the rural areas is essentially a two-way process of interaction and not a predetermined affair (1966: 200) is as valid today as it was more than four decades ago when he first made the statement. To quote Rashiduzzaman: "Against the usual theory that the underprivileged are exploited by the privileged few during the election, our observations indicate that the former can utilize the elections for improving their status and during the elections dormant and latent forces come up and try to express themselves" (1966: 200).

The above observations are not intended to overstate the role of electoral politics in Bangladesh. That is has some major limitations has long been recognized. The importance of constituency services in the (re)election candidates/incumbents is often overestimated. Elections of a large number of political 'novices' in the last two parliamentary elections (eighth and ninth), to a large extent, have weakened the traditional argument that a strong constituency linkage is a 'sufficient' condition to get elected to the national Parliament. Rather it implies that the party is probably more important than individual candidates. Rarely are independent candidates now elected to the Bangladesh Parliament. Those who get elected as independents are what one may call 'party defiants' – those contesting elections independently after failing to secure party nomination. All except one of the independent candidates elected to the ninth Parliament subsequently joined the AL, their parent organization. Parties often adopt a dubious policy – nominating 'wealthy' candidates to secure funds or for personal reasons instead of long-term party loyalists in many cases and welcoming back the latter if they get elected as independents.

Yet, as different scholars suggest, personal votes matter even in countries like Britain, Australia and New Zealand where the two-party system is strongly entrenched. Several studies have found that MPs themselves believe that constituency casework has an impact on their vote (Barker and Rush, 1970; Cain and Ritchie 1982; Buck and Cain, 1990). The electoral impact of constituency service may be more complex than merely winning votes. Rush (2004) argues that that avoiding constituency service may be more of a vote loser. Norton (2004) explains this by suggesting that constituency service bolsters existing support rather than converting floating voters. However there is evidence that a good constituency MP, especially in the context of an election where there appears to be little impact on the national result, can have a significant impact (Lilleker, 2006, 2008). In Bangladesh competition between those seeking public offices is also more widespread now than it was in the past. Rarely are candidates elected unopposed to various elective offices. As a consequence, those contesting elections have to adopt a variety of strategies including providing *janaseba* (public service) to secure the support of the electorate.

Weak local government: Local government exists in all modern democracies. It performs a range of functions that local people consider important. In fact, there exists a sharp division of responsibilities between local government and central government, with MPs mostly dealing with issues that concern the latter. Rarely can one find MPs in established democracies including India interfering in activities falling within the domain of local government. But Bangladesh remains an exception. The MPs in Bangladesh have better scope to get involved in local level activities. In fact, they often undertake many mundane

activities that should ideally be done by local councils and councillors. For example, the MPs decide the nature and number of projects to be planned and implemented under the food for works program. Previously it was the responsibility of locally elected councils. The MPs, in fact, have intruded into the prerogative of locally elected representatives.

Coping with the Challenge

As observed in earlier sections, the MPs in Bangladesh are over-burdened with responsibilities. The ways they try to cope with the challenge are many and varied. Below is provided a summary account of different methods the MPs use to overcome the challenge.

Formal Support to MPs: As in other countries, each MP is entitled to a number of benefits that are intended to promote links between the lawmaker and her/his constituents. The Member of Parliament (Remuneration and Privileges) Act, which has been amended several times, now provides for granting each MP an amount of Tk. 300, 000 per year as discretionary grant. MPs can spend the money the way they want, subject to conditions as may be prescribed by rules made by the Parliament Secretariat Commission. No money, however, can be spent for personal purposes. Nor can MPs personally make the [cash] disbursement. They provide lists to the concerned upazila officials who (on behalf of MPs) make the distribution. Previously the discretionary grant was much smaller – taka one lakh per year. The new ceiling was made effective from first July 2010. Considering the size of the constituency and needs of its constituents, this amount seems to be very negligible. Yet, it can be said that it is likely to enhance the capability of the MP to become proactive, at least in some places.

Each MP also receives TK. 75000 per annum as travelling allowances. If a member opts not to accept travelling allowances, s/he is provided with a non-transferable pass of the same amount. S/he is entitled to Tk. 40,000 per month as transport allowances. In addition, a member can import a car/jeep/microbus free of tax/duty in each five-year term subject to a maximum of two. These facilities should enable a member to travel at regular intervals between her/his constituency and the capital city where the Parliament is located. Each MP is also entitled to two other allowances – a constituency allowance of TK 7000 per month and an office allowance of TK. 9000 per month. Besides, office facilities with one staff have been provided to some MPs in Dhaka; the Parliament has a plan to allocate an office and a personal assistant (PA) to each MP. The privileges and facilities enjoyed by an MP, which have been increased manifold in recent years, cannot be seen as unimportant considering the level of economic development of the country. The initiation of an infrastructure development project, often referred to as the MP project, is also likely to help MPs fulfill commitments made to the voters during elections. Further reference to this project will be made in a subsequent section.

Ad hoc Response to Constituency Demands

Direct help (Cash): Most of the MPs spend a huge sum of money every month to help constituents meet some of their needs. The amount spent varies considerably, with rich MPs, as a natural rule, spending more than their less fortunate colleagues.

Traditionally those who have held leadership positions have a reputation for their charity. This also reflects traits of a clientelist political culture where clients generally remain loyal to their patrons for their generosity. Providing ‘bakhshis’ (tips) mostly in cash to constituents, particularly those in distress or in desperate need, is one way of making the latter indebted to the former. This practice has become a part of Bangladesh’s political culture, and it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to change it. Some government-initiated programs implemented by MPs also have the potential to strengthen relations between them and their constituents.

Turning to ministers: Turning to ministers with demand for doing some important things for the constituency is a routine activity of an MP. The MPs turn to ministers for various purposes, including the satisfaction of constituency needs and resolution of conflict. More than half of the MPs in the sample observed that ministers responded to requests by MPs in partly positive and partly negative way. 20% of the MPs in the survey reported that ministers were positive in their response. It is instructive to mention here that MPs in established Westminster-style democracies do not turn to ministers in person without some specific reasons. It usually takes place when an MP does not receive a response from a minister. An MP will write to the concerned minister advising him about the complaint and requesting action. The letter will invariably be replied. If not, the concerned MP will raise the issue in the House, thereby causing [political] injury to the concerned minister. On the other hand, it is conventional for an MP in Bangladesh to bring issues, constituency-related or otherwise, to a minister’s attention through visiting his/her office in person.

Approaching local officials: Unlike in established democracies where an MP acts as a local ombudsman, attempting to redress public grievances against arbitrary administrative actions by central government agencies and agents following certain specified ways, for example, writing letters/forwarding complaints to concerned ministers, two-thirds of the sample respondents observed that they turned to concerned officials and got things done. Such direct relations between an MP and a government official do not fit well with the spirit of parliamentary system of government. The practice seems contrary to the mediated lineage model of parliamentarian–bureaucrat relations. The model does not presuppose any direct relations between parliamentarians and officials; the minister usually mediates the relationship. The over-concern of MPs in Bangladesh with undertaking locally important activities, besides overburdening him, also risks generating conflict with the local arm of the central bureaucracy.

Constituency Development Fund: Many countries in the South Asian region and in Africa have introduced a provision for providing funds to the MP for undertaking development activities in their constituencies. The MPs in the ninth Parliament succeeded in influencing the government to initiate a project called Important Rural Infrastructural Project (IRIDP). The project outlay was originally estimated to be about Tk. 4691 crores. Each MP was asked to propose infrastructure projects worth Tk. 15 crores for a five-year period. The project, often called “MP project”, was similar to what Indians called Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS). The main works planned to be done under IRIDP were 1,000 km road improvement in upazilas, 5,100 km village road development, 2,370 km union road development, construction of bridges and culverts on village roads of 49,500 metre. Immediately after the approval of the project

by National Economic Council, the former Planning Minister AK Khandker said the project had been taken for rural development following the lists provided by the lawmakers. He said MPs from all parties submitted proposals and the project had been taken accordingly. No discrepancy was made on political consideration. The Planning Minister said the lawmakers would not be given any money in cash, as it would be done through the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) in line with the MPs' proposals. Most of the MPs had submitted their project proposals to the LGED, the agency responsible for checking the technical feasibility of the projects and for their implementation. The tenth Parliament (2014 -) has decided to continue with the project.

Limitations of Coping Strategies

It has been observed that an MP in Bangladesh adopts several strategies to respond to demands of their constituents for services; with time, the demand on representatives has increased considerably. The MPs find coping with such demands very difficult. Such difficulty compounds for several other reasons, probably the most important is lack of office and staff. As stated earlier, each MP receives an office allowance and a constituency allowance. Most MPs, however, consider these allowances to which they are entitled as too meager; these are not adequate to hire an office or to employ any staff. Many of them are, however, not aware of the provision for office allowances. Only a few of the MPs could actually name the allowances. One of the important reasons is that since allowances are not paid separately, rather these form part of a single package of remuneration and allowances, many MPs remain unaware of the break-up of the total amount.

Most of the MPs do not have any office in their constituencies. Nor do many employ staff at the constituency level. Absence of any office or staff has several negative consequences. It discourages the organization of outreach activities at certain intervals; transmission of credible feedback from the constituency to the MP/office in the capital also becomes difficult. It also discourages any kind of forward planning; while things are mostly done on an ad hoc basis. What the MPs mostly do during their regular weekend visits to their constituencies is to use their village/town home as a convenient place to meet with constituents and/or to listen to their grievances, problems or suggestions. Some MPs use their party office(s) for the purpose of dealing with constituency issues. One major problem with the latter is that those who are not members/supporters of an MP's own party may not be willing to meet him (MP) in an opponent's office. Besides, many people may not be aware of the location of an MP's party office. But most constituents are likely to know the village homes of their MPs. They may feel comfortable to meet with the MPs in their (ancestral) homes rather than in a party office which generally remains overcrowded. It is generally difficult to communicate with an MP in private in a party office. But a constituent may find it possible to have intimate discussion in a place where there is scope for meeting in private. However, an MP's personal home cannot be an alternative to a designated MP office located in a suitable place in the constituency.

As stated earlier, most of the MPs do not hire any office in the constituency. Although the amount that each MP gets from the Parliament for the purpose is not

very high, neither can it always be seen as insufficient to rent an office in most of the rural constituencies. The problem is that the amount is not enough to both hire an office and employ a staff. The few MPs who have set up offices in their constituencies are obviously very rich, but have followed different ways of using the office to serve the constituents. For example, one MP said that he had set up an office in each union (several unions constitute a constituency); a staff has been employed to look after the operation of each office. These offices perform political as well as constituency functions, defined in a loose sense. However, no strategic vision has been envisaged. The offices respond to needs and queries of the people in the constituency more or less on an ad hoc basis. In fact, as long as constituency offices are supported by MPs themselves, these are unlikely to behave as genuine MP offices as in established democracies. Party people are likely to dominate these offices.

Some other MPs also claimed to have done a number of good things for their constituencies, with one lawmaker claiming to have established more than 200 schools in his area, and another, by profession, a doctor, claiming to provide free health services to poor constituents. These are notable achievements. But a Dhaka MP has adopted an innovative approach to constituency work that has envied others. The key innovation is the development of a microfinance system, a low-cost health care system and an educational IT program for young people. These are intended to turn handouts into helping hands. According to UNDP/IPU:

... the credit union of small savers now numbering 25000 members who receive competitive rates of interest on their savings. Those savings are then put to work, financing loans to people with smart business ideas who would otherwise struggle borrow money from a traditional bank. The credit union is a cooperative owned by the people and with a management board that decides where to grant loans. By 2011, around 20,000 loans had been granted to help people establish business ranging from a mobile shop to the export of saris ... In the case of health care and education IT program, individuals sign up for a one-off fee and then pay low rates for any diagnosis or courses they use (2012: 58-59).

This approach to promoting MP-constituency linkages is rare, almost non-existent. The pioneer of the approach has explained its rationale in the following way:

The benefits are obvious. When people come to you for help, you can only give them a one-off gift. This way they are having to use their industry and their enterprise. You are creating a breed of social entrepreneurs, bringing much wider benefits to the community (UNDP/IPU: 58).

None of the MPs interviewed for this study apparently had any special interest in speaking about IRIDP. Projects for inclusion in IRIDP are mostly selected by MPs, although sometimes in consultation with local government representatives. MPs did not have any role in the implementation of projects. Nor did they have any inclination to monitor the progress with implementation of such projects. Experience, however, shows that the IRIDP, although very important from an MP's standpoint, had witnessed a major

setback as only a small part of the yearly allocation had been released. Many projects selected by MPs remained unimplemented or half-implemented mostly because of lack of funds. MPs often cried foul for release of funds but nothing happened. However, allegations were brought against some MPs interfering in the administration of IRIDP approved by NEC, among others, by deciding who would get what project in return for cash (*Amader Shomoy*, 23 April 2010).

Moreover, funds earmarked for IRIDP were often transferred to other projects or cut in order to allow other projects to move forward. An evaluation report by IMED showed that although the project was designed to be completed by 2013, it would need at least 17 years for budgetary deficit. The government could provide only 22.7% of the total estimated cost in the first three years of the project. MPs thus remained seriously handicapped. What they mostly did was to raise the issue in the Parliament and ask for rectification. In fact, in the face of a concerted attack by the MPs in Parliament, the Finance Minister promised to make sure that the project received the minimum amount to make it operational. But he apparently forgot his pledge and the MPs seriously criticized the ministers for finance, planning, and local government for their failure to allow the project to move forward. It was thus unlikely that the project would produce the intended benefits very soon.

Conclusion

It is now well recognized that nowhere can public representatives deliberately ignore the interests of their constituents. The MPs in Bangladesh thus cannot be an exception. As stated in the text, there remains a major gap between what constituents expect of their MPs and the way they behave. Part of the reason accounting for this gap stems from the over-enthusiasm of the lawmakers to get involved with many ‘mundane’ activities which can more usefully be undertaken by others, particularly by local councils, and partly from the inability of constituents to understand that there are limits to what an MP can do. By assuming responsibilities for activities that have traditionally been done by local councils, MPs have become overburdened, while marginalizing the role of local government in delivering different services. Similarly, constituents often think that the MPs can do almost ‘everything’ – no matter whether it is lawful or not. This has become evident from a recent statement by the incumbent State Minister for Finance. He has remarked: “About 90% of the work I do [as Minister] *relates to tadbir* (); [worse even] 89% of such *tadbir* is unfair. If you fail to comply, they will say that they fought for independence and are working for the party”[but are discriminated against] (*Bangladesh Protidin*, 13 October 2015). Yet, rather than helping constituents change their perception, among other things, by communicating clearly what an MP, as a representative, can and cannot do for them and/or by educating citizens about their own responsibilities by helping them to understand the processes that lead to getting a house or a job (IPU, 2012), most of the MPs continue to identify ways of accumulating more power and resources, and making them overburdened.

Different NGOs and CSOs organizations have raised the issue of MP involvement in local affairs with the government, arguing that it will cause two types of problems: first, it will make national parliamentarians more locally-oriented, thereby inducing

them to neglect important national functions; and second, it risks marginalizing the role of local government and local leadership in the framework of governance and strengthen the role of centripetal forces. Part of the reason accounting for the ‘heavy’ involvement of the MPs in local level affairs is their apparent inability to play any proactive role at the national level. As stated in the introduction, several structural, political and procedural factors act as barriers to the involvement of the MPs in the national political and policy process. The policy process is highly centralized, with the Prime Minister playing almost an ‘omnipotent’ role with the aid and advice of the bureaucracy rather than the party. The party clearly plays a role second fiddle to the bureaucracy, especially in policy matters. In the context of widespread centralization of power, the MPs, as a matter of necessity, have to look ‘down-wards’.

The central government in fact appears to be ready to allow the MPs to play an interventionist role in the management of local affairs, while locally elected representatives, especially at the Upazila level, remain seriously handicapped. Nothing moves at the local level without the concurrence of the local MP. Recent newspaper reports on the (mis)conduct of the MPs abound (*Bangladesh Protidin*, 13 October 2015, 18 August, 2015, 3 August 2015; *The New Age*, 3 September 2015; Liton, 2015). Those affected by the deviant behaviour of the MPs do not have much scope to seek redress. What happens is that rather than acting as a development agent, an MP now behaves like ‘modern Moughals’, seeking to expand his/her ‘zone of influence’ without any challenge. Two factors have contributed to the expansion of the ‘zone of influence’ by the MPs: first, the deliberate attempt by the government to make them ‘powerful’ probably because it (government) need them more than the locally elected representatives to survive in power; and second, the lack of any challenge by the opposition political parties which have been marginalized in recent years mostly through government repression.

Bangladesh has now essentially become a ‘one-party’ state; any opposition to the ruling party/government is considered to be an ‘anti-state’ activity. In contrast, for nearly two decades, the political system in Bangladesh was an extremely competitive one, with two major parties – BNP and AL – alternating in state power. What contributed most to the evolution of a two-party system was the introduction of the provision for a Non-Party Caretaker Government (NPCG) to exercise state power between the dissolution of a Parliament and the election of a new one. Since members of the NPCG could not contest the parliamentary elections, they did not have any stake in their outcome. As a result, elections were held in a free and fair manner and there was a peaceful and orderly succession of government. But the NPCG system has now been abolished as the Supreme Court has declared it void. Although the Court observed that the NPCG system could survive for ten more years so that two more elections could be held under the interim arrangement, the AL promptly amended the Constitution abolishing the system of NPCG and reintroducing the provision for allowing an outgoing government to exercise state power during elections. This virtually ensures the re-election of the ruling party which, as previous experience showed, used both the administrative machinery and the party to win state power. As the consensus on the process of the succession of government has eroded, the risk of serious political confrontation became inevitable. The government, however, used a fraudulent tactic to get re-elected in the

2014 parliamentary elections. More than half of the MPs were elected to the present (10th) Parliament without any contest; a ‘collaborative’ administration also ensured that those ruling party candidates who had to wait until the election-day were victorious. The government has used its ‘might’ to muzzle the opposition since the tenth elections held in January 2014. There is now no effective political challenge to the government either at the national level or at the local level; this has helped MPs emerge as important sources of power and patronage.

The government, however, wants to use the MPs as its political agent, not a development agent. The resource allocation process still remains highly centralized, with the bureaucracy playing an important role in the locality in the allocation and implementation of programmes for development. The MPs do not even have any major control over the way Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) are to be used. They only send the list of projects to be implemented with CDF, while the central bureaucracy is responsible for deciding who will implement the projects and how. Thus contrasts sharply with other countries where CDFs exist. In India, for example, an MP not only decides the projects to be implemented under Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS); s/he also has the authority to decide when and how to implement schemes. Experience shows that there exists greater collaboration between the MP and local councils in the planning and implementation of MPLAD schemes. The MPs often empower different local councils to implement such schemes, thereby helping the latter to develop capacities and acquire resources. The central government in India, which failed to empower local governments for a long time mostly because of the resistance of MPs, MLAs, and bureaucrats, made constitutional amendments during the Rajiv Gandhi rule requiring the central and state governments to adopt measures for strengthening local governments. This change in attitude of the central government can almost equally be seen in the behaviour of lawmakers. Using local councils as one of the agencies for implementing MPLADS can be seen as an important example.

The situation is different in Bangladesh. Neither local government nor the MP in Bangladesh has any control over the implementation of schemes under CDFs. Moreover, the role of the MP and local councils remains clearly distinct, with the former attending meetings of the latter as a member in India; in contrast, an MP in Bangladesh acts as an adviser to the Upazila Parishad (UZP), the most important tier of local government. The law requires that the UZP mandatorily seek the advice of the lawmaker. It is this provision that actually makes local government and local level central government officials, especially those deputed to the UZP, extremely subservient to the MP. This helps MPs have leverage over both politics and administration at the local level.

On the whole, as the scope for electoral competition and participation has decreased since the election of the tenth Parliament, the MPs have become interventionist, taking part in local affairs in a far more aggressive manner than before, especially when a competitive political system existed between 1991 and 2006. One political commentator has observed that “Bangladesh appears to have become a safe haven for MPs; to enjoy unlimited immunity and freedom one just needs to be an MP of the ruling party” (Liton, 2015). The MPs have become more locally-oriented; this is perhaps intended more

for self-preservation than for genuine local development. The MPs have now become an important source of power and patronage. Their omnipresence can be noticed everywhere which, in the long run, is likely to weaken rather than strengthen democracy.

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