

Bangladesh Decentralization: Background And Issues

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Despite some innovative characteristics, the 1982 decentralization policy does not represent a radical departure from past attempts to reform rural government in Bangladesh. Since the relation between the implementation of the policy and the achievement of different objectives/values does not appear to be as direct as is often perceived, a number of important policy goals are likely to remain hypothetical. Notwithstanding such drawbacks, the policy apparently scores well, especially in providing potential political payoffs to the (authoritarian) center. The decentralization policy is thus more an attempt towards developing a (dependent) political entrepreneurial system for mobilizing support for the authoritarian center than providing a framework for public participation and/or an accountable local government system.

Introduction

At her independence in 1971 Bangladesh inherited the tradition of a centralized state in which local government had no more than a marginal role to play. Most of the pre-liberation local government councils lacked not only representative character, but also worked more as extended agencies of the center than autonomous self-governing institutions. In 1972, the Awami League government (1972-75) initially dissolved the inherited local government system. However, within a few years a three-tiered system was reintroduced, with a *Zilla Parishad* (District Council) at the top, a *Union Parishad* at the base, and a coordinating body called *Thana Parishad* in the middle. (See Table 1).

Of the three, only the Union Parishad could still claim to be a representative body. The Zilla and Thana Parishads were headed respectively by the Deputy Commissioner (D.C.) and Sub-Divisional Officer (S.D.O). Despite promises to the contrary, neither the government of Sheikh Mujib (1972-75), nor that of General Ziaur Rahman (1977-81) took any measures to democratize the higher level councils. Nor did they attempt to devolve adequate administrative and/or fiscal authority to any of them. Thus, local government remained neglected and, to some extent, unattended for more

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than a decade following the Bangladesh liberation. However, it has undergone considerable transformations, especially at the Thana level¹, since the assumption of state power in 1982 by the third post-independence military government headed by General Ershad.²

With the implementation of a policy of decentralization by the Ershad government, the Thana Parishad, now renamed *Upazila Parishad*, has been accorded the status of an executive agency and placed under the control of a directly elected public representative. The central government has devolved on it a significant number of development responsibilities which were previously its own exclusive prerogatives. It has also been granted a number of sources from which it can raise revenue. These changes from the government's point of view represent a new beginning, a big leap forward towards achieving a decentralized democracy in Bangladesh.

This paper provides a critique of the 1982 Bangladesh decentralization policy. Contrary to government claims this paper argues that the policy does not represent a radical departure from the past; nor can the various policy goals be operationalized in the absence of supplementary policy initiatives. Since such initiatives are not easily forthcoming, implicit (political) goals underlying the policy, it is contended, are likely to outweigh its explicit objectives. Hence, decentralization seems to provide more benefits to the authoritarian³ center than to the locality.

Background

Shortly after his ascendancy to state power, towards the beginning of the second decade of independence, the Bangladesh President (then Chief Martial Law Administrator) General Ershad appointed a seven-member committee, called the Committee for Administrative Reform/Reorganization (CARR) to look into the deficiencies of subnational and local governments in Bangladesh and to suggest measures for their rectification. The Committee, headed by the then Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrator, M.A. Khan, submitted its report within two months of its inception. It recommended, among others,⁴ representative councils at different levels, e.g., District, Thana, Union, and decentralization of adequate administrative and financial authority to each of them. It also recommended that central government officials working at different subnational and local levels be placed at the disposal of respective councils.⁵ Government accepted the recommendations of the committee, but implemented immediately only those recommendations that related to reorganizing Thana level government and administration in Bangladesh.

It might seem that the Committee's recommendations provided the basic input to the initiation of such a major policy change. From a different

perspective, it can however be argued that the policy was predetermined, i.e., the constitution of the Committee did not predate but rather postdated the formulation of the basic policy framework. There are at least three possible indications that tend to substantiate such a contention.

First, from one of the policy statements of General Ershad, it becomes evident that he was quite certain about where and how to decentralize. Such a policy declaration which preceded even the preparation of the draft of the CARR's report stated that (the) government wanted to transform every Thana of the country into a self reliant unit *where public representatives would oversee and direct development activities performed by civil servants who would be responsible to the former for their actions*. When the recommendations of the Committee were made public they appeared to have reflected the will of the President made explicit earlier. It can thus be argued that the deliberations of a formally constituted body were needed to give final shape to a broad policy the framework of which had been decided elsewhere before. That is, the Committee was needed to determine, at most, the extent to which authority and responsibility could be transferred in keeping with the basic objective of integrating the locality with the center.

Second, the composition of the committee shows that it was mainly dominated by civil and military bureaucracies. Public representation was evidently lacking in the committee which perhaps confirms, as one finds in the context of the third world, the policymakers' belief that public participation in policy formulation is illegitimate or inefficient.⁶ What is however more important is that the deliberations of the committee were largely influenced by its Chairman who was second to none in command excepting General Ershad. Indeed, as Khan⁷ observes, the chairman directed, controlled and molded the deliberations of the committee. Such a dominant role of the Chairman, as it can be assumed, was intended to ensure that the Committee did not deviate from the predetermined basic policy framework in any significant way.

Third, the extremely short time limit (two months) granted to the Committee to submit its report perhaps reveals that the military was desperate to do something concrete and immediate with a view to legitimizing its unconstitutional moves and actions. Perhaps more importantly, it indicated the military's inclination to keep to a minimum public and political discourse over a predetermined policy. The committee, it is argued, solicited public opinion on decentralization through the publication of a questionnaire in national newspapers and through conducting field interviews. Notwithstanding that, it is difficult to be precise about the extent to which the policy reflects public choice and preference, because when the Committee conducted the various opinion surveys, certain fundamental human rights had already been suspended. Such suspension restricted the

Table 1. Administrative and Local Government Hierarchy in Bangladesh Before and After 1982

Before 1982

Level	Number	Chief Administrator	Local Government	Elected Representatives
Secretariat	1	Permanent Secretary	—	—
Division	4	Commissioner	—	—
District	21	Deputy Commissioner	Zilla Parishad	Election rules never written
Subdivision	71	Subdivisional Officer	—	—
Thana	474	Circle Officer	Thana Parishad	No elected chairman: Union Parishad were members
Union	4354	—	Union Parishad	Chairman plus nine elected members

After 1982

Secretariat	1	Permanent Secretary	—	—
Division	4	Commissioner	—	—
District	64	Deputy Commissioner	Zilla Parishad	Rules not yet written
Subdivision	0	Abolished	—	—
Thana/ Upazila	460	Upazila Nirbahi Officer	Upazila Parishad	Elected chairman: Union Parishad chairmen are members
Union	4354	—	Union Parishad	Chairman plus nine elected members

Source: Larry Schroeder, Decentralization in Rural Bangladesh, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 25, No. 11 (1985).

scope for advancing alternative ideas different from those of the military or the committee.

The above discussion is however intended not to judge whether the intents of the military were good or bad, nor to contend that the formulation of the basic policy framework seems to have predated the Constitution of the Committee. It is essentially intended to show that there appears to exist a direct link between the source/origin of the policy and the ultimate political objectives it (the policy) tends to achieve. To put it squarely, the policy represents more an attempt towards developing what may be called a (dependent) political entrepreneurial system⁸ for mobilizing support for the central (authoritarian) regime than providing a framework for public participation and/or an accountable local government system. However, before we elaborate the proposition in detail, it is perhaps important to identify and examine some of the important characteristics that make the policy different from earlier attempts to reform rural government in Bangladesh.

Policy Contents

Despite certain inherent limitations, the policy represents a major departure from the past in at least three important respects: (1) changes in politico-administrative relationships at the local level, (2) redefinition of bureaucratic roles and their inter-relationships, and (3) changes in the allocation of functions/responsibilities between the center and the locality.

Perhaps the most significant change that the policy proposed was directed towards redefining the role of bureaucratic and political actors in the process of local governance. For one, the Sub-Divisional Officer (S.D.O.) has been replaced from the Chairmanship of the Thana Parishad, renamed Upazila Parishad, by a public representative who is elected at large, and not by representative members, as is the practice in many countries. More importantly, the elected chairman has been empowered to exercise control over and coordinate the work of Thana/Upazila-based central government officials, specially those who have been deputed to the Upazila Parishad.⁹ The latter, who constitute half of the members of the Parishad, have also been divested of the right to vote which they could exercise previously in Parishad meetings. Voting rights have been granted only to *Union Parishad Chairmen* constituting the other half of members of the Upazila Parishad. They are called representative members of the Parishad. These changes apparently mark a move from bureaucracy to democracy at the local level.

Second, the policy also proposed changes in inter-bureaucratic relationships, i.e., relations between the generalists and the specialists. Until the

introduction of the policy measure, officials belonging to various specialized departments of government could work independently of the control of the generalist head of Thana/Upazila administration, the Circle Officer (C.O.). It was observed that, as a result, there was a marked absence of central control and lack of coordination which, in turn, led to a shortfall in program performance at the Thana/Upazila level.¹⁰ With the implementation of the decentralization policy the Circle Officer has been replaced as the bureaucratic head of Thana/Upazila administration by a senior generalist called Upazila Nirbahi Officer (U.N.O.) More importantly, all specialist officials working at the Upazila level have been placed under his administrative control. The U.N.O. has also been empowered to initiate Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) of all officials excepting those belonging to the judiciary.¹¹ Such a change has already caused major tensions between the two groups of public servants who, as various studies show, tend to look upon each other as adversaries and potential rivals.

Third, under decentralization, the Thana/Upazila Parishad has been accorded the status of an executive agency and made responsible for undertaking a large number of functions which had traditionally been performed by the central government. The functions of government have been classified into two categories: *retained* and *transferred*. The central government now assumes responsibility only for retained subjects such as flood control and water resources, mining and mineral development, law and order, collection of land revenue, etc.; while responsibilities for planning and implementation of programs and projects relating to agriculture, industry and irrigation, physical infrastructure, social infrastructure, sports and culture have been transferred to the Thana/Upazila Parishad. The Parishad has also been granted a number of sources such as tax on professions, trades and callings, lease money on hats and bazaars, lease money on jalmahals, etc., from which it can raise revenue.¹²

What thus becomes evident is that the policy has some *redistributional* overtones. Such redistribution has provided not only for a major redefinition of functional jurisdiction of central and local governments in Bangladesh; but also higher status power and authority to politicians at the local level. Local bureaucrats have had to surrender some concessions to their rivals, the politicians. Thus, for the first time in a few decades, the rules of the game apparently have been reversed to place bureaucrats under popular and political control.

However, the policy does not represent a radical departure from the past, nor does it provide for a wholesale devolution of authority, as some are inclined to suggest.¹³ If devolution is considered as possessing two basic characteristics, i.e., *autonomy* and *separateness*,¹⁴ the policy can be seen as falling short of such a description. The Thana/Upazila Parishad is not an

autonomous body. It requires the sanction of the central government with respect to financing, execution and implementation of development plans. The center also retains the authority to quash the proceedings and suspend the execution of resolutions made by the Parishad.¹⁵ Moreover, the center can withdraw at its own discretion any or all of the functions transferred to the Parishad.

On the other hand, the police has continuity, to a remarkable extent, with past policies, specially as regards financial relations between the center and the locality. The Parishad is precariously dependent upon the central government to keep its wheels moving. One can easily notice a clear imbalance between what is expected of the Parishad and its ability to live up to that expectation. The sources of revenue granted to the Parishad are highly inadequate to carry out the responsibilities devolved on it. As Khan¹⁶ argues, except in a very few cases, the own revenue of the Parishad is not likely to be sufficient even for defraying its charged expenditure. As a consequence, the Parishad may continue to be an instrument in the hands of the central government despite lofty goals of decentralization.¹⁷

Policy Goals and Assumptions

Since its initiation, the policy has been acclaimed, specially by government, as a revolutionary attempt towards achieving a number of goals/values. As is evident from various Presidential and Ministerial statements, the policy appears to have the potential of providing public access to various sources of decision-making; of accelerating rural growth; of promoting public participation; and of ensuring public officials, both elected and appointed, accountability. A government document reflects some of these claims when it says that besides bringing administrative setup nearer to the people, the decentralization scheme has enormously extended the scope for local participation in the process of planning along with its attendant merits. The local needs are now being better identified and decentralization has also made substantial contribution towards the increase of production and employment in the rural areas.¹⁸

Other sources also reveal that the various rural sectors have experienced a definite growth rate with the implementation of the policy. For example, Haider's¹⁹ account of the implementation of development programs in 25 Upazilas during the period 1983-85 showed that agriculture exhibited 52.29% growth, physical infrastructure 30.23%, cottage industry 5.58% and education had 3.57%.

Such findings are however to be treated with caution and not to be accepted at their face value. These need to be assessed taking into consideration at least two important things: first, the actual costs of growth (if any);

second, the beneficiaries of growth. Available data tend to suggest that, compared to increased financial costs, the rate of growth has been marginal. Wide discrepancies have been noticed between what is expected of increased resource flow from the center to the locality, and the net return accruing from it. Some of the major factors accounting for such discrepancies include gross irregularities (in management), expenditures beyond and outside approved guidelines, investment leakages, and most importantly, corruption.²⁰

Reports pouring in large volume from different sources reveal that the policy not only has decentralized corruption, but has also increased it.²¹ As Main²² observed, the recent decentralization has left the Upazila officers with absolute powers which make absolute corruption possible. The village touts who support it grab the chance and become the direct beneficiary of decentralization. The Cabinet Division of the government even had to suspend releasing funds for Upazila uplift in the early 1984 for what it called a 'disheartening performance' of different Upazilas.²³ The Cabinet has also expressed dissatisfaction more than once over the way(s) the system is working.

It is however too early to evaluate the achievements and/or failures of a policy which has been underway only for a few years. Nonetheless, what is increasingly becoming apparent is that the relation between the implementation of the policy and the achievement of different values does not appear to be as direct as is often perceived, especially by government. We elaborate below the limitations of the policy in making workable two or its important goals: *accountability* and *participation*:

Decentralization and Electoral Accountability

Theoretically, the introduction of the policy measure marks the beginning of a transition from a 'bureaucracy dominated administration' to a 'democratic administration' at the Thana/Upazila level. Thus, under the new arrangement, the Thana/Upazila Parishad assumes responsibility not only for taking all major policy decisions on local development, but also for overseeing their implementation by the central government bureaucracy deputed to it. The Chairman of the Parishad as well as all of its voting members are now directly elected public representatives. Hence, various Parishad decisions are expected to reflect public choice and safeguard public interests.

However, the extent to which public representatives owe their allegiance to the locality and the Parishad's response to public demands/preferences depends, most importantly, upon the nature and level of effectiveness of local control over their cosmopolitan²⁴ representatives'

behavior. Preliminary observations indicate that the central instrument of control, i.e., elections, is largely ineffective for holding incumbents accountable for their actions. This basically stems from defects of the social context within which electoral participation takes place.²⁵ The policy does not propose any major alternatives to overcome them and to make elections effective.

Rural Bangladesh provides a classic case of extreme inegalitarianism, where a small minority disproportionately decides the course of events in elections more than the majority of the electorate who largely remain apathetic. Due to its control over the means of subsistence of the poor majority, the minority organizes the latter into an asymmetrical patron-client relationship, thus exercising tremendous influence over their political choice during elections. Those who remain dominant can put economic sanctions, and even apply physical force, to have their choice acceptable to the poor clients.²⁶ Their relationships with the local bureaucracy and also those at the nexus of power in the center help them buttress their control over the majority.²⁷

Elections are thus unlikely to reflect public will or compute public opinion. Dependence and (elite) solidarity in village level politics preclude the possibility of election of those belonging to disadvantaged groups of the population. Thus, those who turn up in elections not only remain unrepresentative of the majority of the population, but also can avoid electoral responsibility and remain unaccountable performers for the imperfections of their performance. Such a problem is likely to be compounded when the central authoritarian regime tries to recruit their allegiance/support and make them susceptible to its political demands.

Decentralization and Administrative Accountability

The policy not only fares badly in promoting electoral responsibility, but is also likely to remain largely ineffective in ensuring bureaucratic accountability. Various officials working at the Thana/Upazila level do not belong to the Parishad. They are on deputation to it from different central ministries. The latter thus decide who is to be assigned to which Thana/Upazila, how long his/her stay will be, and what to get for his/her work. The Parishad does not have any control over the selection of officials, nor can it decide on their conditions of service. In the face of resistance by officials, public representatives are likely to remain helpless. What they can at most do, as has been observed in comparable situations/cases,²⁸ is to cultivate relations with ruling coalitions at the center and thereby get a recalcitrant official transferred elsewhere.

The statute governing the nature of relationships between officials and

public representatives²⁹ states that the U.N.O. and the Chairman will respectively sign and countersign Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) of all officials deputed to the Parishad. But such ACRs will be assessed not by the ministries/departments which exercise control over the U.N.O. and the Chairman, but by deputationist officials' parent departments. The extent to which a line department will be ready to take actions against its own officials on the basis of reports from other organization(s) is yet to be seen. However, what seems to be certain is that the policy is likely to lead to a situation in which a split in loyalties is inevitable. Deputationists now have to work under dual control which, in turn, is likely to produce dual loyalties: *operational loyalty* to the Parishad, and *career loyalty* to central ministries/departments. In the face of conflict in loyalties an official is likely to emphasize the latter. When it happens (which seems inevitable), it would be very difficult to hold public officials accountable to the Parishad.

Decentralization and participation

If participation is considered as denoting the involvement of a significant number of persons in situations or actions which enhance their income, well-being and security,³⁰ the 1982 Bangladesh decentralization can be seen as falling short of this. It does not provide for any major change in rural institutional arrangements, especially in those institutions which affect peoples' daily lives, but remain the monopoly of rural strongholds. On the contrary, the euphoria surrounding decentralization has led to the extermination of the only institution, the Gram Sarkar,³¹ which had the potential to provide representation/access to, and accommodate the interests of various disadvantaged groups of population in the society.

The policy, however, accords more scope for electoral participation. It thus stresses political participation more than development participation.³² However, as various studies show, there seems to exist no direct correlation between a high level of electoral participation and the selection of alternative policy issues for local development. Nor is there any causal link between it and representation of the disadvantaged/poor in governing bodies.³³ Without major social reforms, provisions for higher participation are unlikely to broaden the base of political recruitment and promote representative accountability.

What thus becomes evident is that the policy does not appear to be sufficient in itself to translate various goals underlying it into concrete reality. There is a need for supplementary policy initiative/intervention, which is however not easily forthcoming. As a consequence, some of the major policy goals/assumptions are likely to remain hypothetical. Notwithstanding such drawbacks, the policy apparently scores well at least in one important respect, i.e., providing potential political payoffs to the (authoritarian) center.

Decentralization: An Experiment in Political Entrepreneurship

During the first decade after independence, as various government assessments tend to reveal, crude political expediency rather than anything else provided the major deterrent towards decentralizing authority and responsibility to different local councils in Bangladesh.³⁴ The extent to which these arguments remain valid is still a debatable question. Yet what is increasingly becoming explicit is that the political rationale behind the introduction of the new policy was no less important than any other rationale. Perhaps, it was more important.

That the 1982 Bangladesh decentralization policy is not devoid of political objectives became explicitly clear when the Bangladesh military President claimed, barely two days after the May 1985 Upazila elections, that at least 85 percent of those elected were supportive of his policies and programs.³⁵ Theoretically, the Upazila elections were held in a non-partisan manner, as a martial law ordinance promulgated a few weeks before the elections barred all political parties from officially nominating candidates, and/or campaigning for any one along partisan lines. Yet no sooner were the elections over than the government promptly claimed the allegiance of an absolute majority of the elected chairmen. The political implications of such a tactical move by the government to make the non-partisan(?) chairmen partisan overnight have to be evaluated taking into consideration 1) policies undertaken to neutralize the (local) institutional power-base of the mainstream opposition; 2) incentives provided to lure the elected chairmen to flock around the government; and 3) strategies adopted to control their behavior. As argued below, while the first seems to be intended to make the chairmen relatively immune from competing local political elites control, the latter, on the other hand, is intended to ensure that the cat did not get out of the cage.

Consequent upon the introduction of decentralized reforms, two grassroot level (local) government institutions, i.e., *Gram Sarkar* (Village Government) and *Union Parishad* respectively, controlled by the B.N.P., the party the Ershad regime overthrew from power in 1982, and the Awami League, the largest of all Bangladesh political parties, witnessed serious setbacks. *Gram Sarkar* was established as a local government institution in 1980 by the government of Ziaur Rahman (1977-81) with the ostensible objective of making each Bangladesh village self-sufficient within a limited time frame. Critics however argue that with time it came to be dominated by the (Zia) government controlled Bangladesh Nationalist Party (B.N.P.).

Nevertheless, it could still be considered an innovative attempt. The legislation creating the *Gram Sarkar* provided for representation in equal numbers of various disadvantaged groups such as the landless, youth,

women, and other professional groups in it. It thus appeared to have recognized the inherent drawbacks of the electoral process in Bangladesh, and also recognized that the major way these groups could promote their interests was through their participation in governing bodies. But before it could blossom, the Ershad government abolished it without providing any substantive rationale. It can however be argued that such a decision was prompted more by the governmental desire to neutralize the local power-base of the B.N.P. which could provide an actual and potent source of challenge to the authority of Upazila chairmen.

On the other hand, the Awami League controlled *Union Parishad*³⁶ was no better than extended agency of the center's new creation, i.e., the Upazila Parishad. The latter has absorbed not only the major sources of revenue of the former, but also retained authority to regulate and control its activities through its power to approve its budgets, plans and programs. More importantly, the Upazila Parishad remains almost the sole source of supply of funds to the Union Parishad. It is thus likely that the (government-controlled) Upazila chairmen can make the (opposition) Union Parishad chairmen vulnerable to pressure and manipulation. Although the latter constitute half of the members of the Upazila chairman, they can not unseat a no-confidence motion against an Upazila chairman, they can not unseat him. The authority to take final decisions whether a chairman remains in office in the face of resistance from Union Parishad chairmen rests with the center. The center thus retains the authority to reprimand those whom it may consider recalcitrant, and to reward those likely to be malleable.

Besides making the Upazila chairmen relatively less vulnerable to competing political elites' influence (by abolishing the Gram Sarkar and making the Union Parishad an agency), the center has also adopted other measures to ensure their allegiance. For example, they have been granted the status of a senior government official, e.g. Deputy Secretary, and accorded a number of other facilities such as free accommodation, free transport, and free telephone (both home and office). They have also been empowered to take decisions on a number of important issues including control over a substantial amount of funds.

Thus, unlike local public representatives in the past, Upazila chairmen can now take decisions in the context of relative financial abundance. The income of the Parishad has increased manifold. More importantly, as the press reports, government has taken measures to make the Upazila Parishad fund immune from the control of the Public Accounts Committee which, in turn, can potentially help chairmen exchange resources for neutralizing opposition, and/or enlisting support. In addition, the center is also seen to be receptive to some of their important political demands which include, among others,³⁷ provisions for extending their tenure from

three to five years, and making them answerable directly to the President, thereby short-circuiting ministerial or parliamentary control.

Behind the rationale of overstressing the role of the Upazila Parishad at the expense of other grassroots level councils, and in particular, according disproportionately more importance to the Upazila chairman, there appears to lie the basic political motivation of developing what may be called a *political entrepreneurial system*. The authoritarian center needs such a system at least for three purposes: to neutralize the mainstream opposition which almost forced it (government) to postpone the March, 1984 Upazila elections; to reduce its dependence upon its original source(s) of support, i.e., the military; and to establish a grassroots support to mobilize the bases, if not the masses, to work for it. To achieve these objectives the center, as can be discerned above, has given more concessions than did the previous military regimes in Bangladesh.

Yet what is apparent is that the center is unwilling to allow the growth of a political entrepreneurial system independent of its control and influence. It has accordingly taken measures to restrict its autonomy and discretion. The authority of the Parishad is largely circumscribed both in respect of raising resources locally, and also in utilizing centrally allocated funds. As Ahmad and Sato³⁸ observe, local mobilization of resources accounts for only two percent of the projected revenue receipts, and one percent of the total projected receipts under both revenue and development heads. The chairman thus has to depend upon the center to keep his Parishad functioning. But a Planning Commission guideline strictly sets the limits within which the Parishad has to allocate centrally made resources to different sectors of the rural economy. By statute, the Parishad cannot even slightly modify the formula without the approval of the center. Central steering over the Upazila Parishad is also maintained in a number of other important ways. The center specifies, as Khan³⁹ argues, to the minutest details the contents of planning, type of project to be chosen, criteria to be used for project formulation and procedures to be utilized in the preparation, approval, management, supervision and implementation. Despite increasing demands by the Upazila Chairmen for such restrictions to be withdrawn, the center is evidently still reluctant to accede to their pressures.

However, the center has followed a liberal policy of providing equal benefits (through block grants) to each Upazila without a formula distribution or a matching requirement. Bangladesh Upazilas differ not only in size and population, but also in terms of their level of development, both potential and actual. Providing an equal amount of grants to different Upazilas irrespective of these variabilities is not only inefficient, but inequitable too. It is inefficient in the sense that some of the Upazilas do not have adequate staff support to utilize such a large amount of funds. As

Hye⁴⁰ found in one Comilla Upazila, only 23 percent of the fund for the ADP 1983-84 could be utilized and the balance had to be carried over to the next year. It is inequitable because the grant system allocates greater per capita income to smaller Upazilas.

Some have proposed a revision of the policy, and measures for rewarding those Upazilas which have scored well in utilizing development grants and penalizing those that fared badly.⁴¹ But the policy which still remains unchanged, has, behind it, a major political logic, i.e., to make each Upazila chairman feel that he is equally important to the center irrespective of his level of performance. Political goals thus tend to outweigh other goals of decentralization. Indeed, as one finds, the broadly stated goals of reforms have been formulated and publicized mainly for public consumption and for achieving short-term political gains.⁴² However, previous experience suggests that such short-run political gains are unlikely to provide any major societal payoffs in the long run.

Conclusions

The paper has identified a number of important areas in which the Ershad government's decentralization policy appears to be an improvement over policy reforms carried out in local government in the past. The new policy specifically provides for democratizing the Thana/Upazila Parishad, devolving greater administrative authority on it, and bringing local bureaucrats under political control. Notwithstanding such innovative features, the policy suffers from a number of major drawbacks. For example, it carries potential to generate intra and inter-role conflict in local government without providing any specific mechanism to resolve it. It also remains largely ineffective in avoiding possible divergence between rules and roles, as already reflected through corruption, inefficiency, and mismanagement. Although government functionaries at the national level seem to be aware of this divergence, measures taken so far remain limited to circulating more guidelines and issuing directives prescribing efficient use of funds.⁴² But such directives are very often honored in breach.

Perhaps more importantly, the policy does not provide for any effective measures to strengthen local control over the behavior of the dominant role actors (bureaucrats and politicians) in local government. The latter can thus remain unaccountable performers for the imperfections of their performance. Additionally, the aggressive strategy of the center towards acquiring the allegiance of the locally elected politicians, and its attempt to make them immune from local control are likely to widen the gap existing between the authoritarian center and the rural society. On the whole, although the center can gain, to a great extent, with the implementation of the policy, the locality is still likely to remain out of the reach of the center.

Paradoxically, it is only the center which, through direct intervention, can frontally attack the odds placing restrictions on the participation of the majority in the process of local governance.

Endnotes

¹ A Thana (renamed Upazila), which covers an area of 125 square miles and an average population of 200,000, is a lower level administrative unit in Bangladesh. It was originally created for organizing police administration in the rural areas, but has since undergone considerable changes. Under the recent reorganization, it is recognized as the nucleus of development and administration, and placed under the control of a directly elected public representative.

² For an account of General Ershad's army coup which overthrew the government of directly elected President Abdus Sattar, see P.J. Bertocci, "Bangladesh in the Early 1980s: Praetorian Politics in an Intermediate Regime," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 22, No. 10 (1982).

³ Although General Ershad has civilianized his military rule through the holding of elections for the presidency and the parliament, the basic nature of his government still appears to be authoritarian. The parliament and the government party, the Jatiya Party, which commands the majority of seats, can, at most, play only a second fiddle role vis-a-vis the executive and the bureaucracy. President Ershad and his cabinet does not owe any allegiance to parliament. He is concurrently chairman of the Jatiya Party and has recently been given absolute powers to make decisions at his own discretion. Thus, the party has been made a tool of the government.

⁴ For a full text of the recommendations, see Government of Bangladesh, *Report of the Committee for Administrative Reorganization/Reform*, Dhaka, Cabinet Division, June 1982.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

⁶ M. Grindle, ed., *Politics and Policy Implementation in the Third World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁷ M.M. Khan, "Politics of Administrative Reform and Reorganization," paper presented at the 13th World Congress of the International Political Science Association held in Paris, July 1985, p. 3.

⁸ For an excellent analysis of the growth and workings of the political entrepreneurial system in Indian local governments, see D.F. Miller, "What Price Politics in India?" *South Asia* (1975). The concept, as used in this paper, is borrowed from him.

⁹ Thana/Upazila-based central government officials who have been deputed to the Upazila Parishad include: Upazila Nirbahi Officer, Upazila Health and Family Planning Officer, Upazila Agriculture Cooperative Officer, Upazila Livestock Officer, Upazila Fishery Officer, Upazila Social Welfare Officer and Upazila Finance Officer.

¹⁰ S.M. Ali *et al.*, "Decentralization and People's Participation in Bangladesh," Dhaka, NIPA, 1983; see also K.M. Tipu Sultan, "Problems of Rural Administration in Bangladesh," Comilla, BARD, 1974.

¹¹ See Government of Bangladesh, *Resolutions on Reorganization of Thana Administration*, Dhaka, Cabinet Division, November 1982.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Khan, "Process of Decentralization in Bangladesh," seminar paper, Comilla, BARD, 1985.

¹⁴F.J. Sherwood, "Devolution as a Problem of Organization Strategy, in R.T. Dalland, ed., *Comparative Urban Research* (New York: Sage Publications, 1969).

¹⁵M. Faizullah, "Functioning of Local Government in Bangladesh," paper presented at the International Seminar on Decentralization, Local Government Institutions and Resource Mobilization held at BARD, Comilla, January 20-23, 1985, p. 17.

¹⁶A.A. Khan, "Local Government Finance in Bangladesh: A Survey," *Local Government Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1983-1984), p. 109.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Government of Bangladesh, *Bangladesh Economic Survey*, Dhaka, Ministry of Finance, 1985, p. 375.

¹⁹Y. Haider, "Development: The Upazila Way," Dhaka, Ministry of Establishment, 1985, p. 431.

²⁰H. Khasru, "Upazila Uplift Funds Stopped," *Holiday*, May 11, 1984; also A.F.M. Islam, "Utilization of Development Assistance Fund by Upazila Parishad," *The Young Economist*, Third Issue (April 1986); and M. Maniruzzaman, "Resource Mobilization: Policies and Practices at the Upazila Level," *ibid.*

²¹Various national dailies and weeklies publish special reports on potential pitfalls of Thana/Upazila administration more or less on a regular basis. For a sample account, see the following: "Corruption Makes Mess of Austragram Administration," *Bangladesh Observer*, May 25, 1984; Prafulla Kumar Vhakta, "Upazila Council: Irregularities in Expenditure" (in Bengali), *The Daily Sangbad*, April 27, 1985; "Decentralization of Corruption," *ibid.*, August 18, 1985; "Upazila News 3: Decentralization of Corruption in the Name of Administration (in Bengali), *The Dainik Desh*, March 5, 1984. See also N.N. Mahtab, "Administrative Decentralization and Rural Development in Bangladesh," *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (1985), pp. 1297-1318.

²²M. Main, "Upazilas Yet to Bring Any Benefit to the Masses," *Holiday*, December 27, 1985.

²³Khasru, *op. cit.*

²⁴A 1985 BARD survey reveals that an absolute majority of the Upazila chairmen not only have higher mean levels of education (in Western universities) and occupation, but are also more exposed to urban values and have greater affiliations with urban areas. More than 50% have houses, and/or own land in the urban areas. In addition, the average size of their landholdings ranges from 11 to 45 acres. This points more towards their status as absentee landholders, if not landlords, rather than actual tillers of land. In this paper the terms cosmopolitan and local are used in a relative and not in an absolute sense. For a discussion of the theoretical differences, see Robert K. Merton, "Pattern of Influence: Cosmopolitan and Local," *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), pp. 441-474.

- ²⁵ See R. Jahan, "Bangladesh Politics: Problems and Issues," Dhaka, O.U.P., 1980.
- ²⁶ A.L. Arn, "Dependence and Solidarity in Village Level: Politics in Bangladesh," Copenhagen, CDR, 1982.
- ²⁷ R. Sobhan, "Basic Democracies, Work Programs and Rural Development in East Pakistan," Dhaka, O.U.P., 1968.
- ²⁸ Like Bangladesh, India has an elective local government system where central (state) government officials have been placed under the control and supervision of locally elected representatives. However, as various studies show, relationship between the two have been characterized by conflict and antagonism which is often manifested, among others, by the frequent transfer of officials. See D.F. Miller, "Pervasive Politics," Department of Political Science, University of Melbourne, 1973.
- ²⁹ Government of Bangladesh, *Resolutions on Re-organization . . .*, *op. cit.*
- ³⁰ N.T. Uphoff, *et al.*, "Feasibility and Application of Rural Development Participation," Rural Development Committee, Cornell University, 1979.
- ³¹ See discussions in the next portion of this paper.
- ³² Uphoff, *ibid.*
- ³³ For an elaborate discussion of the causes and consequences of a high rate of politicization and electoral participation in Bangladesh, see Jahan, *op. cit.*
- ³⁴ Khan, "Process of Decentralization. . .," *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- ³⁵ A national weekly provides a conservative estimate. According to the weekly, only 50% of Upazila chairmen claimed to belong to the government party. See *Ekata*, May 24, 1985. For General Ershad's statement, see the BBC interview as reported in *Bichita*, (Annual Number), January 3, 1986.
- ³⁶ For an account of partisan affiliations of Union Parishad chairmen elected in 1977 and 1984 see M. Rashiduzzaman, "Bangladesh in 1977," *Asian Survey*, vol. 18 (1978).
- ³⁷ For a full text of the Charter of Demands, see *Holiday*, January 24, 1986.
- ³⁸ Q.K. Ahmad and Hiroshi Sato, "Aid and Development in Bangladesh," Tokyo, Institute of Development Economics, 1985.
- ³⁹ Khan, "Process of Decentralization. . .," *op. cit.*
- ⁴⁰ H.A. Hye, "Upazila: A Framework for Rural Development", *The Young Economist*, *op. cit.*, p. 223.
- ⁴¹ Haider, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
- ⁴² Maniruzzaman, *op. cit.*