Citizen's Participation in the Urban Local Governance Process in Bangladesh: A Case Study on Rajshahi City Corporation

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OPEN ACCESS

ARTICLE INFO

A B S T R A C T

This paper, based on an empirical study, analyses the scopes, forms and nature of people's participation in the urban local governance process in Bangladesh. It provides insight into why and how representative democracy has failed to ensure active citizen participation. In doing so, it explores the underlying socio-political, institutional and legal factors that should be taken into account when implementing interventions aimed at encouraging more inclusive participatory local governance practices. This paper argues that the institutional design of the urban local government system largely follows the political elites' intention of consolidating political power bases. This in turn severely narrows down the scope for citizen's participation in the governance process.

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Introduction

Governance includes the economic, political and administrative mechanisms, processes and institutions, both formal and informal, through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences (UNDP 1997; Hordijk 2005:221). The governance approach in public administration assume that social problems arise out of the actions of various public, private and semi-public actors and the solution of these problems requires organised, concerted and collective actions of all of these actors (Meehan 2003:2; Fenger and Bekkers 2007:14-15). The concept, therefore, refers to pluricentric, where citizen are core participants, rather than unicentric systems. According to Smith (2004), the term governance by default implies wide participation in decision-making by accepting a wide range of actors other than the state. Hence the state should play the role of 'steering' not 'rowing'; the private sector and civil society take the major hand of providing services, mobilising citizens to participate in the governing process and articulate their demands. This can be seen as the marriage between the liberal democratic theories and neo-liberal economic policy, where civil society organisations are presumed a catalyst in representing the citizen (Cornwall 2002:54).

However, there has been an emerging consensus among the scholars that the representative system under liberal democracy has fallen short of ensuring citizens' voices in the governance process. Gaventa(2004:25-28), drawing on the works of Clark and Stewart (1998), Commonwealth Foundation's Voices of the Poor (1999), the WB's World Development Report 2000/01, Skocpol(2003) and Fung and Wright (2001), states that the gap between ordinary people and state institutions has been growing not only in the south but also in many northern countries. This indicates the ineffectiveness of liberal democratic mechanisms in those contexts. The political representation system of electoral democracy seems to fail there in accomplishing some of the noble ideas of democratic politics, like the active political participation of citizens, building consensus through dialogue, bringing equity and so on (Fung and Wright 2003:3). Therefore, focus, both in theory and practice, has turned to adopt more direct participatory mechanisms and creating new participatory spaces between the state institutions and the citizen, that are represented as extending and going beyond the limits of representative, electoral democracy (Harriss, Stokke et al. 2004:7).

It is estimated that the World Bank alone has allocated about 80 billion US dollars towards participatory development projects over the last decade. In addition, various bilateral donors and regional development banks have spent at least as much as have the governments of most developing countries (Mansuri and Rao 2012). In Bangladesh a significant number of development projects are in progress or have already been completed, which directly or indirectly address the issue of local people's participation and institutional strengthening of urban local government bodies. Notable among them are: the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Urban Governance and Infrastructure Improvement Project (UGIIP), and the Secondary Towns Integrated Flood Protection Project Phase II (STIFPP-II); the World Bank's Municipal Services Project (MSP), and the Bangladesh Municipal Development Fund (BMDF); the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Democratic Local Governance Programme (DLGP); and the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Local Partnership for Urban Poverty Alleviation Project (LPUPAP), and Urban Partnership for Poverty Reduction (UPPR). Many of these development projects have been aimed at promoting active citizen participation in the local governance process. For many this is to addressing the 'democratic deficit' (Bishop and Davis 2002; Cornwall 2002). Internationally, evidence on outcomes is mixed, and suggests that a number of factors, for example, constitutional and legal provision, governance arrangements, local political culture, social movement and associations of various kinds influence the participation spaces and the associated processes. 'Best practices' are difficult to identify since similar mechanisms used in different places appear to produce quite different kinds of outcomes (Cornwall 2002). This emphasises the necessity of considering the local socio-political, institutional and legal context when attempting to introduce participatory practices through creating new form of participatory spaces.

By choosing Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) as a case, the article examines why and how the

representative mechanisms are falling short of ensuring citizen participation. The paper draws on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through face-to-face interviews with a range of responds categorised as local government experts (1 in total), national parliament members (2 in total), local political leaders (3 in total), civil society activists (3 in total from 3 different organisations), elected representatives of the RCC (2 in total) and community people (20 in total from 4 selected study communities). While analysing, interview data has been 'triangulised' with data collected from various secondary sources, e.g. academic books, academic journal papers and newspaper contents. Data from different sources has been used with an interest to grasp diverse perspectives.

The Political-economy of Local Government System in Bangladesh

The growth and development of local government institutions in Bangladesh is closely related to the local governments in ancient Indian, British-Indian (1858-1947) and Pakistani (1947-1971) periods. From the introduction of local government system in British-India, the rules, regulation, structure and composition of local and central government institutions reflected the colonial elites' intention to treat those as control mechanism instead of using as vehicle of people-centred development (Siddiqui 2005). Inevitably the legacy of the colonial eras, which ended up with the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, continued till to the fall of military regimes and the rise of democratic governance in 1991. The rise of democratic governance in the 1990s is a corner stone in the country's political history in many respects. For example, for ensuring free and fair elections, the provision of interim caretaker government was established through constitutional amendments. On the other hand, as a way of consolidating representative democracy, a parliamentary form of government was reintroduced by refuting the pervious presidential type. These two big moves can be seen as denial of the colonial legacy in building people-centred political institutions. Since the 1990s, the country has observed four democratic regimes led by the two major political parties and their allies who are historically rivals and hostile to each other: Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) from 1991 to 1996, and 2001 to 2006; and Awami League (AL) from 1996 to 2001, and 2009 to onwards. However, the nation experienced the rule of a military backed non-elected interim government (2007-2008), which was resulted from a major political disagreement and the subsequent mass violence between the supports of the two political parties over selecting the chief advisor of the caretaker government, responsible for conducting the national election in 2007.

Since 1991, a number of local government reform commissions were formed and the local government system went through a number of attempts at devolution of authority to local government bodies through various Presidential Orders, Acts and Ordinances (Siddiqui 2005). However, the devolution of political power to the local level has been left incomplete in the present system of decentralisation in Bangladesh (Paul and Goel 2010). In making comment on changes and reforms of the local government system in Bangladesh since 1991, the interviewee from the local government expert category expressed his opinion in this way:

> With every change of government at the centre, there are invariably some changes in the local government rules and regulations. This simply means that those who hold power in the central government opt for suitable cosmetic changes in the local level in favour of their own interests. People at the central government are reluctant to establish a transparent, accountable and participatory local governance system due to the fear of losing control and power.

The above respondent talks about frequent changes in the local government rules and regulations, which are directed towards consolidating political power structure by exerting control rather than sharing power. This corresponds with the concept of power as zero-sum, where power can only be achieved at the expense of other. Furthermore, following the Marxian notion of power, this type of power relation is about struggle over resources (Salinus 2006; Davis 2007). Successive regimes added further 'cosmetic changes' (in the words of the previous interviewee) in the local government system. For example, BNP abolished the Upazila

system immediate after coming in power in 1991, which was first introduced by Lt. General Hussain Mohammed Ershad (1982-1990) in 1982. It was reintroduced in 1998 during the AL regime. During this regime (1996-2001) the AL government introduced a four-tier rural local government system, whereas the successive BNP government (2001 - 2006) followed the four-tier system but changed the name of the lowest tier from 'Village Parishd'to 'Gram Sarkar' (selected body). Except for these cursory changes, no major attempts were made conducive to enhancing people's participation in local development, or making the local government bodies more functional and financially autonomous. In the words of Siddiqui(2005):

> "... though the change was minimal in "content", in "form", the local government system of the country witnessed many instances of "about turns" and "starting everything from square one." (Siddiqui 2005:110)

Thörlind (2001) further explains the reason for such changes by stating that each government tries to capture the electoral base through the participation of their own supporters in the system of local government. For example, the recently introduced Upazila Parishad (Reintroduction of the Repealed Act and Amendment) Act 2009 allows the local parliament members a broad arbitrary power and control over this crucial tier of the rural local government system. In parliamentary form of government, since the majority of the parliament members belongs to the party in power and remains in close touch with the central government, it is convenient for the government to maintain political power down to the local level through them.

In the case of City Corporations (CCs), as an urban local government institution, the central government's intention to consolidate its local political power base is visible through the central-local government relations and the CCs' internal power and authority structure. Not only of the RCC's basic features (for example: territorial jurisdiction, the functions it can perform and the taxes it can impose), but its activities are also robustly guided and supervised by the central government's departments (Siddiqui 2005). Central government is the final approving authority for the decisions and policies made by the CCs.

Furthermore, the CCs are not independent enough to undertake programmes and policies due to financial dependence on the central government. Central government's allocations for the CCs are greatly influenced by the mayors' political loyalty, personal influence and political connections to the central government. According to local political leaders:

> The central government resource allocation for local government bodies is politically biased. If the political affiliation of the mayor differs from the party in power in the central government, the allocation of government grants and funds dries up. This is the reality of our country.

In describing the problems of the urban local government system, the local government expert, I interviewed, highlighted the issue of the CCs' internal power and authority structure:

> The main problem in our total local government system is the centralisation of power within the local government structure. The ultimate power is concentrated in the hands of the mayor. The councillors system is not working here. The councillors are elected for their respective wards. But the mayor is elected for the whole CC area. This is the presidential system but our central government system is based on parliamentary democracy. It clearly violates the parliamentary principle. If it followed the parliamentary system, after being elected by the direct vote of the people, mayor will be elected from the elected councillors and the executive power will be shared by both mayor and councillors. But under the present system, as he/she is elected by the total electorates and vested with full executive power, he/she can easily get away by acting in an authoritarian manner and flouting democratic norms and the councillors.

As the above respondent argues, however, no government has acted to change the urban local government system to cohere with the present parliamentary form of government since 1991. For central government, it is easy to consolidate local power base by managing one person who is vested with enormous power and authority—the mayor. Within the CC's power structure, the mayor is virtually all-in-all. There is a wide disparity in powers, functions and status between the mayor and councillors (Siddiqui 2005). It is entirely up to the mayor to decide how much of what they will delegate to the lower level (Panday 2004).

The Legal Framework, Composition and Policy-Making of RCC

Until the promulgation of the Local Government (City Corporation) Ordinance, 2008 and Local Government (City Corporation) Act, 2009, the legal framework of the RCC was provided by the Rajshahi City Corporation Ordinance, 1987 and subsequent amendments, other rules, by-laws, regulations and standing orders were issued by the government at various times. According to the Local Government (City Corporation) Act, 2009, RCC is divided into 30 wards. The Corporation Parishad–the executive body–consists of an elected mayor, 30 elected Ward Councillors (WCs) from 30 wards and 10 elected Women World Councillors in the reserved seats, with one for every three wards for five years. Wards constitute the most localised level of municipal governance, with each ward governed by a democratically elected WC. WCs manage municipal affairs and carry out development works in their respective wards. As the closest representatives of the city dwellers, they play a crucial role in city governance (Banks 2006).

The 2009 Act dictates that RCC is required to form at least 14 standing committees related to various services provided by the RCC. The RCC can form additional standing committees for other purposes upon the decision of a Corporation Parishad meeting. All the policies of the RCC are passed in the Corporation Parishad. During the latter part of every financial year, councillors are asked to place their demands with the concerned departments. Every concerned department then compiles the demands and gives those to the concerned standing committee. After being considered and recommended by the standing committees, they are placed before the Corporation Parishad for final approval. However, the RCC is obliged to send copies of their decisions to the local government ministry, and the ministry finally determines if the decisions are valid to carry on. After receiving the final approval of the local government ministry, concerned RCC departments take the necessary steps to implement these decisions or projects.

The Scope, Forms and Nature of Citizen Participation

The discussion of this point is divided into three main headings, e.g. participation through formal mechanisms, participation through informal mechanisms and participation through civil society organisations.

1.1. Participation through Formal Mechanisms

The formal mechanisms of participation are created and recognised by the state. The present Local Government (City Corporation) Act 2009 provides the three most important mechanisms for citizen participation in the RCC managed local governance process: standing committees, Corporation Parishad meetings and local government elections.

Standing Committees

The numbers of members of a standing committee is decided by the RCC and the chairman and the vice-chairmen are elected among the councillors in a Corporation Parishad meeting. However, no councillor is allowed to be a member of more than two standing committees. The mayor is an ex-officio member of all the standing committees. According to the Act, standing committees are allowed, but not mandatory, to consult with specialised persons. Thus, the law has granted scope for citizen's participation in the RCC decision-making process through various standing committees. In this regard, one of the former mayors of the RCC posed his views in this way:

> In my time I put various specialised and eminent persons in various the RCC's committees. And thus I ensured people's engagement in the RCC activities. I do not have any idea how the present mayor is addressing the issue of people's

participation. But I do feel that without the collective endeavour of the whole society, it is impossible to keep our city liveable.

However, the view posed by one of the local political leaders, who belonged to the present ruling party, is substantially different from the claim made by the former mayor, who belonged to an opposition political party:

> The present local government Act as well as the previous ordinances of the RCC never restricted the participation of general and specialised persons in the standing committees. However, in the past we never saw that the RCC was using that opportunity provided by the laws. In the past, the people who were in the office were more politically driven rather than being driven by the people's interests. They used the RCC as a means for consolidating political power. Therefore, they were not courageous enough to allow people to participate in the formal decision-making process. But our present mayor's vision and approach is different. He is committed to involving people in the RCC decision-making process, so that the RCC can reflect the local people's aspirations.

These two contradicting opinions regarding specialised persons' presence in various standing committees possibly follows the political culture of blaming political opponents and claiming own political party's success and goodness over an issue. Nonetheless, the second quote above indicates that the scope for involving local specialised or eminent persons in various standing committees could be used as an instrument for consolidating the mayoral political power base. Though contradictory, both statements reveal two important aspects: first, that the scope for citizen participation in the RCC's formal bodies has long been recognised in laws and second, elected representatives are aware of the importance of citizens' engagement in the local governance process. When the local political leader criticised past elected representatives for not

ensuring people's participation through standing committees, the former mayor claimed that the issue was addressed in his time. Again, while the past mayor is not aware of the present mayor's initiatives, the local political leader declaimed the present mayor's willingness to engage citizens in the RCC's decision-making. But the present mayor's willingness in practice is again perhaps limited by putting some people in standing committees which was revealed by the comment made by one of the respondents from the civil society category:

> He [the present mayor] once told me that he wishes to put some expert members in various standing committees. They would not have voting rights but would give their opinions ... In every standing committee there are names but the RCC never ever invites us.

This statement suggests that the inclusion of various non-elected specialised persons in various standing committees is tokenistic. The underlying motive for including various non-elected persons in RCC bodies was described by one of the members of the parliament who played the role (role-playing) of the mayor of RCC while speaking and expressed his opinion in this way:

> I would say in the case of local government, people could only participate in 5% of local government activities. One of the reasons for this situation is putting those people in important positions who are loyal to me. This is to keep my leadership unthreatened by restricting the bubbling up of different views against me. I always place my people at every stage. On the surface, they seem to represent the people, but in reality they are my representatives.

This statement describes a process by which the inclusion of specialised persons in various standing committees has been used as a means for securing the political power bases of RCC's office holders, and thereby, limits the scope of citizen participation in the local governance process.

Corporation Parishad Meetings

The Corporation Parishad is obliged to hold a meeting at least once a month. No business can be done unless there is a quorum which consists of one third of the total members present in the meeting, and all decisions must carry the support of the majority of members present in the meeting. All members have one vote and only in the case of a tie the chairman can exercise his casting vote. The 2009 Act provides citizen with the right to attend Corporation Parishad meetings, if those are not declared by the majority of councillors as private. This provision is not new and was also included in the previous Ordinances as well. However, the Act limits the scope of people's participation by stating, 'Corporation can control the entrance of the public in its meeting by its decision.' Moreover, the scope of people's participation in the Corporation Parishad meetings is also limited by a number of other reasons, for instance: irregular meetings and frequent changes of dates and time due to busyness of the mayor.

According to the Act, Corporation Parishad must sit for meetings at least once a month. The Act also mentions a list of government officials who will be present in those meetings upon being invited by the RCC and are allowed to actively participate in the Corporation Parishad meetings, but do not have voting right in decision-making. During discussion, one of the elected representatives informed me that the Parishad meetings were not regular in the past. He described the scenario in this way:

> In the past there are precedents that there was no Corporation Parishad meeting even during a six month period.

He went further, stating that due to the busyness of mayor, the meetings frequently took place at short notice, and the dates and times changed frequently. Therefore, the RCC officials did not get enough time to invite government officials. On the other hand, due to the busy schedule and short notice, they also could not manage time to participate in meetings. Another councillor informed me that in many cases, decisions which are taken in meetings with the presence of few councillors get signed by more councillors who did not attend those meetings by altering the dates.

In practice, the parishad's decisions are heavily influenced by the mayor. In the absence of a definite policy framework and, since the mayor's influence and effective lobbying is the key in getting development funds and grants from the central government agencies, the political influence and the pioneer role of mayor in receiving external funds make the mayor the singularly dominant actor in the distribution of RCC resources among the wards. Like the national government allocation, the RCC does not have well followed guidelines in allocating development resources and services among the wards. Personal relationship between the mayor and councillors, that often follows political line-up, remains the primary determinant in distributing local resources. As a result of this, changing party affiliations among the elected representatives has become a culture at the local level. In this way a culture of political patronage system has developed within the RCC, where the councillors are virtually connected to the national level politics through the mayor. This is an inducement of the nation-wide patronage politics (Kochanek 2000; Wohab and Akhter 2004; Rahman 2010), where the councillors' capacity to act on behalf of the electorate is shaped by the opportunity structure featured by a patron-clientelistic relationship. As a result, citizen's participation either directly, or through the elected representatives has been nominal in the Corporation Parishad's decision-making process.

Local Government Election

During the interviews with two community people from two different study communities stated that:

> During elections they [election candidates] promise to give this or that. Afterwards, they give a few of the things they promised, but not all. This electricity pole has been given by the WC. To win the election, he [the WC] should work in favour of the people. He needs to come to us during the next election time. If he remains beside us, we will vote him next time, otherwise not ...

> Our ward councillor had been working in favour of us since before our locality came under the RCC's

jurisdiction. He used to stand beside us when necessary. When the election came we realised that we should vote him since he had been working in our favour.

The quotes above reveal how two of the respondents perceived local elections as important for making elected local representatives accountable to the people. According to Banks (2006), election is the most conventional form of political participation for the urban poor in Bangladesh. Siddiqui*et al* (2004) argue that participation by the general public has been limited to simply voting in municipal elections (referred by Banks 2006). Thus, local elections are the predominant form of local people's participation in the urban local governance process. It is desirable that in a representative local democratic system people would elect their own representatives by exercising their voting rights. But in reality, people in the study area cannot exercise their voting right in meaningful way due to two major reasons: irregular local government elections and vote politics.

After the formation of the RCC in 1987, there was no election until January, 1994 and the RCC was run by mayors nominated by the central government. After the first election in 1994, people have only exercised their voting right twice: in 2002 and 2008 City Corporation elections. Apart from irregular elections, the vote politics is another dominant factor in detaining the reflection of people's desire to choose their representatives in the RCC. Interview data indicate that securing vote-banks is one of the key issues in local politics. What will be allocated and how much for the ward level development work is not needs-based, and is instead largely influenced by local vote politics. In the local political arena, a politician is more powerful the more he/she can secure a pool of followers as a secured vote-bank. In many instances the poor do not exercise their voting rights, instead choosing to sell their votes.

During elections, candidates try to be close with local people and go to the communities with lucrative offers. Most of the cases, as I found from interviews with community people, involve promises and offers made by the candidates during the pre-election voting campaign. These are tangible, materialistic and sometimes collective in nature. In many cases, these are the community's basic civic entitlements; for example, electricity distribution poles, provision of pipe water, building foot-paths and the establishment of temples or mosques. Asaduzzaman(2008) has called this 'soft democracy' (*votetontro*). In her study on Dhaka city in Bangladesh, Banks (2006) found that 'soft democracy' is very important to the urban poor because this is the only time when the poor feel politically empowered. However, local people—especially the poor—cannot be judicious voters due to candidates' offers of various gifts, cash money and sometimes coercion. One of the community people described her experience in this way:

> Those who are rich can win the election by buying votes within a night. Candidates manage one or two influential persons from every community, give them money and promise to provide them with many other facilities if the candidate wins. In return, those people manage community people by giving promises, various gifts and money and sometimes through coercion.

After having conversations with many of the interviewees in the four study communities, I found that these interviewees, who were in general poor, believe that after the election they will never see those politicians until the next election. Asaduzzaman (2008) has termed this as 'hard democracy'. By referring to Banks' (2006) similar findings, he describes the situation as:

> Hard democracy starts soon after the election has ended. This is termed 'Dolotontro' (party oriented democracy). The elected officials change their minds and attitudes immediate after taking over their positions, and try to be closer to the visible and invisible powerful actors of the locality. (Asaduzzaman 2008:150)

Under such circumstances, the poor find taking direct, in-hand benefits to be more lucrative than depending on the promises that the candidates make before election. Besides these, vote rigging, muscle power, securing votes through taming minority

groups (like Hindu and indigenous people) to detain the poor from becoming thoughtful in exercising voting rights (Akram and Das 2008; Husain 2008; Eicher, Alam *et al*. 2010). Consequently, local elections do not necessarily ensure people's participation in the local governance process.

1.2. Participation through Informal Mechanisms

Apart from the formal mechanisms discussed above, there are informal mechanisms for people's participation in the local governance process. Due to the absence of precisely defined duties and responsibilities, elected representatives are left to perform their responsibilities according to their individual initiative and commitments. Thus, role perception is basically 'personalised' (Ahmed 2009). Due to the absence of a precisely defined formal interaction mechanism between the constituency and elected representatives, informal means have become an important way for citizen to participate in the local governance process.

Elected Representatives' Visit to Communities

Elected representatives' visit to the constituency is a part of showing their electoral commitment and closeness to the people. Both of the elected councillors I interviewed during my field work confirmed that they regularly visited their constituencies. According to them, they considered this to be a part of their duties and responsibilities as councillors. Both of the WCs claimed that during their visits, they meet people by visiting their homes and listening to them. Many interviewees from the study communities 2 and 3 confirmed the regular visits of their councillors. But one of the respondents from study community 1 strongly refuted the claim that the present councillor visits their area.

> I cannot remember when the present councillor visited our locality last time. But the past councillor was very kind and used to visit our locality regularly. We do not think the present councillor is our councillor. He is biased towards his own living area.

The two WCs I interviewed during my field visit resided in the neighbourhoods within which the study communities 2 and 3 belonged. But the previous councillor (mentioned in the above quote)

of the study communities 1 and 2 resided in the study community 1. Therefore, it is plausible that the people of study communities 2 and 3 experienced more visits than the people in study communities 1 and 4. If it is the case, I infer that people who get councillors from their own neighbourhoods for their wards, might experience more frequent visits from those councillors. During their visits elected representatives and electoral candidates give many popular promises and speeches. However, a view of the ineffectiveness of such informal visits and promises became apparent in the following statement of one of the civil society activists:

> Before the election, the mayor visited a number of wards and promised that if he won the election, he would not increase local taxes and rates. Later on, when he visited wards before the RCC annual budget, he reiterated his pre-election promise of not increasing taxes. However, before announcing the final budget, the RCC increased the taxes in some cases up to 100%. We think this is a mockery of the people [elected representatives].

The above statement well portrays the already mentioned 'hard democracy' where the elected representatives change their mind and attitudes immediately after taking over their positions.

Community People's Visits to the Elected Representatives

Another informal mechanism of communication is people's visits to elected representatives at their offices and homes. This is the most common way for community people to obtain services from elected representatives during 'hard democracy'. During my visits, I found hundreds of people gathering every day either at the mayor's residence or his local political office. People came up with a variety of problems from police cases to job recommendations. During my wait at the Mayor's local party office to fix an interview time with him, I saw the mayor's political advisor talking to the local police station on the phone and chastising the concerned officer for arresting a pro-ruling party activist. I also observed that people who were

politically identified as the pro-ruling party came alone. But in most cases, people with low political profile came with someone who was well known to the mayor or to the political advisor. Thus, the opportunity to meet the mayor and have things done by him is selective in nature. The same situation persists at the ward level in the case of meeting local councillors. General people sometimes need the assistance of middle-men, as it was described by two of the community people. Local people's access to councillors is also limited by voting behaviour and political identities. In this respect, one of the respondents from the civil society activist category stated:

> Only party people have access to the mayor ... many do not go to their councillors, thinking that since they did not vote for the councillors, the councillor would not work for them. Because at the ward level it is identifiable who supported whom during election.

The above statement gives an indication how people's representatives can become patrons predominantly of their own political party activists or followers after being elected. Thus, the informal mechanisms of citizens' participation through elected representatives' visits to communities and community people's visits to elected representatives is manifested by 'hard democracy' and political patronage.

1.3. Citizen Participation through Civil Society Organisations

The three civil society organisations included in this study, Manobata, Rokkha and Sushashon, differ by origin, agenda and in working procedures. Manobata is an initiative of an international NGO; Sushashon is the local body of a national civil society organisation; and Rokkha is a locally originated civil society group. However, all these groups work on local and regional governance issues. Each group has their own agenda, but they sometimes work together on common issues; for example, by observing various national and international special days. Of the three organisations, only Manobata has specific programs related to the RCC. The other two groups do not have such specific programmes though, and in

many instances work in co-operation with Manobata. On many occasions these civil society groups, through their activities, provide spaces where elected local representatives and citizens can get together. The common task of the three civil society groups is 'naming and shaming' of the RCC's activities. In most cases they use seminars, processions, human chains and media reporting as their way of communicating between people and the RCC. In explaining the role of Rokkha, one of the respondents said:

> RCC is involved in the local governance process and plays a key role as a local government institution. In this respect, Rokkha plays the role of a hammer. If RCC becomes involved in corruption, a forum is needed to put pressure on them. Rokkhais just such a forum which tries to prevent those irregularities.

Sushashon is also active in local issues, but is not specific to the RCC. However, the RCC is a concern of their overall agenda. It tries to highlight various local issues to the concerned authorities. On the other hand, Manobata addresses the RCC directly through their programmes like citizen report cards, service delivery satisfaction surveys and RCC open budget sessions at the ward level. By referring to the open budget sessions at the ward level and the various seminars organised by them, the convener of Manobata claimed that people gained opportunities to question the elected representatives and answers face-to-face. How are local people attached to the activities of these civil society groups? In addressing this question, all respondents from civil society panel unequivocally claimed that their respective organisation represented the people from every stratum of society. In commenting on the participants of Rokkha's programmes, one of the interviewees firmly stated:

> We are currently working on the Northern Irrigation Project. And if you look at the participants of our programmes, you will find hundreds of farmers participating in processions, human chains and mass gatherings.

The same types of claim were also made by other civil society group members. In this respect, the respondent from Manobata boldly affirmed that many of their programmes were quite successful in involving people at the grass-root level, for example in open budget sessions at the ward level.

> When we organised an open budget session at the ward level, our youth volunteers invited community people by going from house to house. The presence of community people at open budget sessions was encouraging. We found higher level of participation from relatively under developed wards. People came up with demands for streets, electric poles, drains, health services, schools and so on. The mayor and the concerned councillors had to hear them and general people could express their opinions without fear. The mayor collected the draft budget from every ward and gave his word that the final budget will be prepared in light of those draft budgets receiving from the open budget sessions. This year's RCC budget was the first ever which had been announced publicly in the presence of thousands of people.

The above two statements illustrate the scope and nature of people's participation in civil society activities. However, the presence of common people is still limited in other activities. Firstly, by reviewing the members' profiles presented in various publications (for example, one of the souvenirs of Rokkha), various official documents collected during my field work (for example, a list of the members of Manobata and Sushashon) of the respective civil society organisations, I found that the membership of these civil society groups was mainly limited to people who enjoyed better positions in society. For example: doctors, engineers, teachers, journalists, local politicians and other professionals. The key positions of these groups were cross-cutting and common, and were occupied by the dominant sections of the society. For example, the convener of Manobata was a professor in a public university who had also direct political affiliation with the party in power. The

convener of Rokkha was the editor of a well circulated local daily newspaper. The convener of Sushashon was the sub-editor of the above mentioned newspaper. Secondly, in programmes like seminars, symposiums, and discussion and meeting sessions with RCC authorities, the attachment of common people was limited.

Some of the respondents raised their suspicion regarding the activities and motives of these civil society organisations. One of the parliament members expressed his opinion regarding these civil society groups in the following way:

> I do not believe that there is the existence of civil society groups in Bangladesh. They are also politically divided. The existence of civil society could be true for Australia, Canada or America. But in our country they all are politically motivated … The main problem in our country is that all are politically polluted. From village people to top state authority, no one is neutral.

The same notion is found in the words of the respondent from Manobata:

> … almost all these [who are working in Rajshahi] groups have individualistic hidden agenda. And for this reason, they are not gaining the acceptance of the general people. Personal identities are becoming more vital than the organisations.

The above findings and analysis present a contesting scenario of citizens' participation in the RCC governance process through spaces created by various civil society organisations. While some of the initiatives and programmes taken by these groups remain conducive to citizens' participation in the local governance process, other findings indicate the issue of co-optation possibly by the dominant and privileged sections of the society.

Concluding Remarks

The paper explores the limit of citizen's participation in the urban local governance process in Bangladesh under the representative, liberal form

of democratic system. It has been revealed that the institutional designing of the local government system in Bangladesh still follows the colonial legacy. It reflects the national elites' intension to absorb local political energy through the local government while masking the effective centralisation of power. This in turn severely narrows down the scopes of, both direct and indirect, citizen's participation in the urban local governance process. Citizen's participation through various formal mechanisms, for example, standing committees and Corporation Parishad meetings, has been tokenistic. This is partly due to the fluidity of laws and also because of the office holders' lack of commitment to ensuring people's participation. Local government election, the other formal mechanism, is the predominant form of citizen's participation in the governance process. Local people, especially the poor, get an opportunity to exercise bargaining power during the election time. Thus, elections are important for making elected representatives accountable to the local people. However, evidence shows that irregularities in election and local vote politics deter the process of people's participation through election. As such, informal means of participation have been important in the study area. Apart from election time, the informal mechanisms of citizens' participation through elected representatives' visits to communities and community people's visits to their elected representatives is the most practiced form of participation. During the elected representatives' visits to the communities, local people get an opportunity to be heard regarding local issues. Local people can also enjoy the option of visiting elected representatives on their own initiative. However, the scope of participation through informal means is largely manifested by 'hard democracy' and a culture of patronage politics. On the other hand, citizen's participation through spaces created by various civil society organisations is a contested terrain. Some of the initiatives and programmes, for example, citizen report cards, household surveys, and open budget sessions at the ward level, put forward the promise of citizen's participation in the local governance process. By presenting some successful endeavours, data indicate the growing influence of civil society groups in the local governance process. Nonetheless, membership of these civil society groups is largely limited to the privileged sections of the society. These organisations are not also free

from political party interests. The findings of this paper bring forward the importance of incorporating direct citizen participation in the local governance process and, thus, rationalise the implementation of various development project that are aiming to develop new form of participatory practices at the local level in Bangladesh. However, the inadequacy of devolution and the presence of political patronage based patron-clientelistic relationship, which follows in a cascade manner from the national level to the community level, may have immense implications in shaping such participatory practices.

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