

The Primacy of Political Leadership in Public Policy: A Focus on the Role of Prime Minister in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The Prime Minister (PM) as the head of government in a parliamentary democracy enjoys power and influence of infinite degree in the overall institutional set up. Democratic structure of cabinet government based on the supremacy of political leadership represents a manifestation of the collective actions of the ministers with the Prime Minister taking the lead. Absolute and even simple majority in the parliament is crucial for enabling political leadership to reign supreme in every course of action. The key note of the cabinet government is PM. Membership strength of the treasury bench in the parliament accounts much for the growth of 'premier domination' in the context of cabinet dictatorship. Its authoritarian face speaks for itself with deeply embedded institutional paramountancy of the office of PM. The cabinet consisting of PM and his/her ministerial colleagues lies at the apex of central administration. It is the ultimate decision making body in central administration. All ministers except a few chosen from technocrat quota are politicians with seats in the parliament.

Introduction

The very basis of the constitution of Bangladesh is 'the age old concept of parliamentary system' more or less resembling 'the time tested Indian constitution, which itself drew its inspiration from the mother of democracies, *i.e.* the British Westminster style of parliamentary democracy'. But the way the Prime Minister (PM) in Bangladesh conducts himself/herself under the intoxication of unbridled power it seems the PM smacks of a totalitarian dictatorship with the office of PM ruling the roost.

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"Indeed to-day the situation has come to such a pass that for the student of political science and constitutional law, the all powerful office of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh has almost become a riddle, since it has a few parallels worldwide. Even the rules of business have been so carefully drafted and later amended that all power automatically flow into the hands of only one person, *i.e.* the Prime Minister (PM) and none else. To be more explicit, if we try to look through the language of the scriptures not even a leaf of the tree moves without the PM's nod (Huq 2005)

The hallmark of parliamentary government is the Prime Minister (PM). PM is the supreme political executive with centrality of position in overall administration. "The Prime Minister is the keynote of the cabinet arch, central to its life, central to its death" (Jennings, 1968). PM is supposed to make his/her own choice of cabinet colleagues. He/she has the sole authority to distribute portfolios among them. This is a sort of allocation of functions on the basis of capacity, aptitude and experience. The PM may deem it necessary to hold the charge of some ministries that are strategically important. PM directs the ministers to supervise day to day activities of their respective ministries in weekly cabinet meeting. The cabinet secretary convenes cabinet meeting and prepares its proceedings. PM has to co-ordinate the activities of different ministries to avoid inter-ministerial conflict and forge discipline. The PM has supreme control over all executive matters and guides all executive functions of different ministries.

Leadership of the PM is the main focus of cabinet government. Being the head of the cabinet he/she occupies an extraordinary position. "There is a common subordination of other Ministers to the Prime Minister, though each Minister is given the authority to run his/her ministry independently." (Ahmed, 1998). The Prime Minister's key position in the entire executive establishment is based on three major institutional sources: political leadership in the parliament, commanding position in the cabinet secretariat and the exclusiveness of his/ her official status in Prime Minister Secretariat (PMS). His/ Her power of patronage is the main source of leverage over policy decisions. The PM appoints and removes the ministers, reshuffles his / her cabinet and makes government appointments among the chosen

members of the government and the backbenchers. Normally he/she has to depend on enough support from the cabinet members (Sapru, 1994).

Premier Domination: the Primacy of Political Leadership

The office of PM is a real vantage point to ensure interconnections among departmental policies steering policies towards projected political objectives and development goals. The PM in fact 'plays a crucial co-ordinating role having access to all ministers and communication with all departments. In UK Harold Wilson created the policy unit in 1974 that operates as policy analysis unit. It is headed by a political sympathizer of the PM. Other members may include either political appointees or civil servants seconded from department (Wood and Wilson, 1974).

The dominant prime ministerial model is a threat to the deliberative, consensus building style of executive leadership (Kingdom, 1990). In UK in the 1960s controversy arose over the role and authority of the Prime Minister (PM) within the cabinet. It was widely believed that UK government has become presidential in character with each successive prime minister having arrogated to itself the power residing with the cabinet (Ibid; 16). The ascendancy of the office of PM during the incumbency of Margaret Thatcher is worth mentioning. She resorted to the prime ministerial arena than has been the case with many of her predecessors in peacetime. (*Ibid*: 6)

In fact the Prime Minister plays second fiddles to none in governing process and other members of the cabinet 'play varying degree of subordinate role. Nevertheless the assertiveness of premier position converges on three factors: charisma, party position in the parliament and internal and international situation. In India, for example, Jawharlal Nehru, the first prime Minister and a man of mission and vision, used his charisma to build up modern India during post-independence national reconstruction (1947-1962). But the humiliation he suffered during Indo-China war in 1962 rendered him almost powerless. Her daughter became a single most powerful person after victory in 1971 Indo-Pak war. Her son proved to be very powerful PM assuming the position of a presidential figure (Sapru,1994). The cabinet government succeeding him after his tragic death was something different significantly. Mentionably, VP Singh, Deve

Gowda and IK Gujral who formed cabinet could not claim to have electoral mandate in favour of their party manifesto affording much less legitimacy compared to their predecessor who had the numerical strength in terms of seats in Loksava.

The dominant PM is likely to curb policy-making influence of bureaucracy. Or, he may seek to harness it. In Bangladesh each successive PM in parliamentary democracy of 'Westminster system' represent the prototype of premier domination.

The first PM after national independence in 1972 became the 'focal point' of decision making. He exerted tremendous influence on the overall governing process not merely on the strength of an overwhelming majority in the parliament; his charisma mattered much. Such manifestation of political leadership in his institution was perhaps of a degree one could not dispute during initial years of national reconstruction in a war ravaged country. The circumstances of time gave him vantage point aplenty for enjoining special privileges enabling him to direct the whole course of action in favour of his cherished ideology and national goals. He happened to introduce a number of measures to reduce policy influence of bureaucracy (Ahmed,1995). Noteworthy among them were the replacement of bureaucrats from senior policy positions in the planning commission (PC), the harbinger socialist planned economy, by professional economists and the appointment of business executives and professionals as heads of different public corporations and public enterprises(ibid:60). The first PM during post-liberation period initiated moves to reform and restructures the civil service. Administrative and Service Reorganization Committee headed by Professor Mujaffar Ahmed Chowdhury was appointed to review the existing administrative structure and suggest measure for 25 organizations. The report of the committee was perhaps influenced by Fulton Report in UK. The committee recommended that the posts from grade2 to grade1 should be called "senior policy and management (Maniruzzaman,1982).

A frantic quest for new state structure was to stamp out the legacies of the colonial and semi-colonial administrative state thus creating a new policy environment suiting the interests of the intermediate

regime. Attempt was made to create the post of junior minister (minister of the state) in between secretary and the minister (Islam,1988).

The penetrating influence of PM during intermediate regime clustered around the dominant role political leadership in the whole range of policy administration with party cadres serving as political watchdogs from the outside. It was dictated by the unflinching loyalty of the elected ministers and backbencher to the Prime Minister as the part icon. They extended influence far to local/field administration through party cadres for implementing decisions 'according to their dictates.'

The ruling party desired such pattern of intervention to establish its hegemony on a solid footing. The office of PM became powerful with the officers like principal secretary, private secretary, political secretary, economic secretary, and investigation director (Rahman, 1980). Most top policy advisors were non-bureaucrats and leaders of 'part-oriented interests groups ' who would provide inputs for policy and programme development in line with party ideology based on four pillars: nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism. . Such a broad framework of objectives includes almost countless policy options. At times there was considerable flexibility in selecting policies and programmes that might not always mutually consistent and compatible ((ibid: 136).

The enormous concentration of power in the hands of PM during post-liberation period resulted in the alienation of civil bureaucracy. It was not possible to get things done without clearance from the office of PM. Even routine matters were referred to PM for approval (Rashiduzzaman,1980). The inexperienced political appointees who flourished during that period created a buffer between the senior bureaucrats and PM which unnecessarily complicated decision making process (ibid:178)

The Prime Minister's dominant policy role may be found in what one may term as absolutely policy-oriented activism in cooperation with experts specific to a policy issue and those concerned with policy advocacy and representatives of various pressure groups, civil societies and professional bodies. There is further manifestation of

PM domination. This is what one might term as 'inner cabinet' around the PM to maintain secrecy of state policy on strategic issues with the participation of the senior minister, cabinet secretary and PM's Chief Secretary. The parliamentary democracy based on the supremacy of political leadership enables the political executive to assert itself as the policy making center of the political system.

Notwithstanding this institutional omnipotence in the policy role of PM the support of all cabinet colleagues even the junior minister cannot be underrated. Even ministerial policy role within its own jurisdiction has much to be reckoned with. Distribution of portfolio among the ministers is the allocation of policy responsibilities. It covers a large variety of policy sectors and sub-sectors. Such responsibilities are onerous compelling each minister to immerse himself in details (Ibid: 171). A vast number of decisions are of course; made by the individual ministers within the prescriptions of the business rules and these are fully authoritative decisions on behalf of the government. The Prime Minister does not fear to veto his colleagues' decisions. Even policy proposals of the cabinet colleagues are hardly rejected by the PM. Things, however, depend much on political maturity of a minister; his personality and wisdom matters much. Who he wishes to decide and what he will refer to the cabinet or the PM- all he is supposed to do in his own right.

Collectively the ministers take the wider view of state policy. The Minister as political executive may initiate new policy moves placing draft policy proposals or proposals for policy change /shift in the cabinet committee. Either department minister may turn out to do it or the cabinet committee may discuss new policy agenda to take a collective view on any policy sectors in response to demand for

Reasons for Premier Preponderance

One may assign several reasons for monopolization of power by the prime Minister in parliamentary democracy especially in Bangladesh.

First, the nature of premier dictatorship lies in the system theoretically devoid of check and balance. The architect of the Bangladesh constitution gave PM a vantage point aplenty in shaping the direction of control in a manner he/she likes. "The office of the

prime minister is vested with all the powers available minus its original beauty-that is without its inherent 'checks and balances'. The constitutional provision regarding parliamentary democracy and party discipline aimed to create a unique system of dictatorship by the prime minister (Islam, 2006) Conversely, the high office of the president is simultaneously emasculated beyond imagination, making it just a mockery of sorts (Huq, 2005)

Second, personality factor matters a much. This universal phenomenon. The PM like Bangabandhu was a man possessed of charismatic personality. He could command high respect from his party men and cabinet colleagues. Post-liberation construction required such personality and Pandit Jawaharlal exhibited such personal quality during post-partion period.

Third, two third or three fourth seats in the parliament indicating an absolute majority provides enough room for cabinet dictatorship with PM dictating terms and conditions and manipulating things in a manner he/she likes. Already the experience with strong cabinet government and extremely weak opposition was unsatisfactory. Misgovernance has taken a heavy toll all to the wrath and suspicion of the people.

Fourth, absence of democratic culture within the party. Authoritarian predisposition is deeply ingrained in the political culture of the South Asian countries. Party chief and those in the commanding key party positions falter the practice of democracy within the party. The choice of party chief is reflected in the selection of the key position holders. There is irregularity in the holding of council meetings. The ordinary party members and party workers continue to suffer from hurt burning and frustration. All big guns in the party excreting policy influences do not pay heed to the grievances of the ranks and files in the party. The party high-ups only gratify coterie interests. The party chief would like to hold the position till death. He/she and his/her sycophants would not like to create a second string for the sake of sustainability. There is no democratic arrangement to elect party chief.

Fifth, dynastic politics. This has happened to be legacy of the traditional political culture somewhat reflecting the phenomenon of the South-Asian political culture. Ascriptive consideration comes first with the rule of succession determined by traditional values. All

the same dynastic politics continues to deter institutionalization of democracy. The criterion does not account for the development of the civic culture. The approach is parochial with the notion of perennial domination of the of the some ruling families.

Sixth, politicization. Politicization of administration is rampant in South-Asian context, especially in Bangladesh. It tends to weaken the base of democratic governance. The influence of PM has become a matter of infinite degree under the whirlpool of politicization. It gives an outlet for depersonalization of politics in Bangladesh with inefficient sycophants hovering around the office of PM.

Seventh, Ministerial inefficiency and corruption. It goes without saying that most ministers especially in Bangladesh make fool of themselves having a little knowledge about the management of the affairs that they are supposed to do. It accounts much for their docility with the office of PM taking hand in their respective affairs. Any efficient minister with a strong personality would not the office of PM to dictate terms and conditions in his own arena. All the same rampant corruption has its negative impact on the governing process. Corruption tends to ruin the image of the minister as a person and as an institution. Since corruption has reigned supreme in most ministries misgovernance thrives compelling the PM to intervene in the affairs of the ministries soaked with malfeasance.

Since the prime minister of Bangladesh heads the cabinet, and that is an integral part of the parliamentary system, s/he must be prevented from choosing members of the cabinet from outside the Jatiya Sangsad. For the purpose, Article 56 (2) of the Constitution should be amended. Article 70 of the Constitution should be partly amended for the purpose. This was intended to prevent floor-crossing of the members on flimsy grounds with a view to stabilising the government and to that extent this Article played a stabilising role. It has however been used by successive prime ministers as a positive threat to the conscientious members, making them and their free will hostage to a constitutional provision.

The Office of Prime Minister (PM)

The marked distinction of the office of PM reflecting the potential of

prime ministerial direction of policy and administration existed even after the resurgence of parliamentary democracy in 1991. The presidential style of domination of the two successive female PMs bears a testimony to primordial authoritarian attitude opposed to democratic culture in cabinet government. Both female PMs enjoyed a near monopoly of power. Even the sitting PM too does have such monopoly.

The party government under premier leadership has to maintain such domination even at the cost of efficiency to appease the party men. In fact PM runs the show in absolute terms with bureaucracy at his/her beck and call. One potent factor propelling the PM to control bureaucracy is the fear of policy failure and policy sabotage by some high officials covertly opposed to his / her political ideology.

The ethos of governance in parliamentary democracy proclaims the primacy of cabinet in policy determination. Its authority in decision making emanates from its electoral mandates. "Numerous observers reject the prime ministerial thesis, emphasizing the collective role of the cabinet" (Wood and Wilson, 1984). Nevertheless the reality of decision making process in Bangladesh now and then establishes the prime ministerial thesis revealing the nucleus of prime ministerial secretariat in the final approval of any policy proposals or matters. Leadership position in the party is the main source of premier domination.

Both Khaleda Zia, the ex-PM and SK. Hasina., the present PM, contributed to the exclusiveness and enhancement of PM office with a vast array of officials and advisors. This is because PM "requires briefing about policy options experts producing through policy analyses" (ibid:1984)

The office of PM consists of PM and a lot of key personnel like PS-1 to PM PS-2 to PM APS-1 to PM, APS-2 to PM, Protocol officer-1 to PM, Protocol officer-2 to PM, 3 assignment officers, MS, AMS, 3 APC. Besides, PM is flanked by several advisors including Advisor (economic affairs), Advisor (political affairs) and advisor (international advisors). Special assistants in the office are appointed from among the trusted party colleagues.

The burden on the office of PM is so great one can hardly imagine. The volume of function/assignment is vast. Even an expert could not hope to surmise the complexity of such function taken on by PM to meet the challenges of new millennium. decisions have so far been taken on multifarious issues where PM might have his/her own interest and values. The prime Minister as an institution is thus overwhelmed by legislative and executive action in connection with vital policy matters; the amount aggravating the complexity of the function of PM office. Even pretty matters concern this office.

This pattern related to the haphazard development of organizational contours in central administration. It becomes acute when interdepartmental conflicts creep into overall set up or when roles are ill-defined and organizational policy matters in a ministry are not properly handled due to inefficiency of the minister. thing is that new ministry, new departments and ne attached offices take a long time to take shape and develop and political consideration dictates otherwise the process of its functioning with internal policies, implementation decisions and clientele principle. The crisis is reported to be complicated by the advent of enormous projects and resultant necessity of organizing new offices. The issue of creating new offices is also fraught with political expediency.

During the incumbency of Begum Khaleda Zia as Prime Minster (2001 to 2006) there were more than 50 minister/deputy minister/state ministers. They looked to PM for final decision; none dared to take decisions unless PM permitted him to do so. During the meeting of the cabinet committee held in 31st August, 2002 the issue of prime ministerial workload was discussed (Prathom Alo, 2003). The meeting observed that delay in decision making and decision implementation was caused by the need for prior permission of PM office and the need for final approval whatsoever. The meeting clearly pointed out that the PM was occupied with policy making functions on various important subjects in domestic and international spheres. The meeting decided to direct the cabinet secretary to identify those matters that required no action of PM. (ibid). The Rules of Business specifies 21 areas within the functional jurisdiction of PM. It provides for the leverage of the PM office on any matter of course within the limit set by the Rules of Business (GOB, 2000).

In practice centralization of administration runs parallel with the centralization of power in the office of the Prime Minister. Prime ministerial secretariat is a practical reference for such centralization. This likened to the presidential secretariat introduced by the then President HM Ershad. PM secretariat consists of chief secretary, secretary, additional secretary, four director generals and PM's personal officials. Two successive PMs retained presidential pattern of centralization with little interests in decentralization either in the form of deconcentration or in the form of delegation even after historic shift to parliamentary democracy. Although SK Hasina during first tenure(1996 to 2001) made amendments in the Rules of Business to make minister the executive head of his /her concerned ministry/department the ministers were reluctant to take financial responsibilities and so the secretary would act as administrative head and principal accounting officer (Prathom Alo, 2003). However the institutional arrangement continued to be that the secretary continued to intimate the minister about possible approval of any agenda of action/programme/project. The minister was to approve decision but in case of any confusion and obscurity he was required to bring it to the notice of PM.

Work procedure in connection with decision making process continues to be cumbersome from bureaucratic ritualistic rings to the office the Prime Minister. Things to be settled at the secretariat level even with complicated work procedure are to be finally settled at PM office via concerned ministry. File processing is lengthy involving several steps. Any policy matters even a trivial issue settled at the ministerial level may be changed second time in the office of PM. As a result file is finally approved with necessary amendment, additions and omissions. In some cases the concerned officials in PM office may think to dispatch any proposal initiated by ministry/department to the cabinet division functioning under PM. In the recent past development projects and even miscellaneous trivial matters that were routine functions were not decided upon without informal permission of PM office. Even now the PM may show concern in such development project and matters that bear strategic and political significance.

To a great extent once policy/programme has been decided in the

ministry/department the question of final approval is left to PM office. There are various tactics the officials in PM office might have deliberately employed to thwart authentication of policies /programmes decided by the ministry about which they might be skeptical: procrastination, imposing unworkable suggestions and other insurmountable obstacles.

It was alleged that PM as the head of the government has been captive in the hands of a host of advisors sitting in the office of PM. Some advisors become so powerful that as if they were running the show forming an inner cabinet. The cabinet minister

Conclusion

Does it hint that accountability and transparency in the parliamentary democracy is more rhetorical than real. Premier absolute domination without the element of transparency might have a disquieting impact on overall process of governance. Indeed, frightening is the fact that his/her injudicious decision bolstered by the supportive roles of the cabinet colleagues and political appointees may undermine the impersonal image of the institution and panders to partisan administration-all at the cost of efficiency. It does mean that the PM and his cabinet associates are motivated by narrow party interests less by common interests undermining responsible governance in democracy thus isolating themselves from the voters.

Now in an era of globalization with the proponents like good governance, sustainability and open market economy a country needs positive political leadership answerable to popular institutions. Positive leadership demands much potency and competence on ruling elite and its advisors. Amidst the challenges of great magnitude prime minister has to efficiently manage things placing value on good governance and even good enough governance. The pm may well precede with politicization mission of course exercising rationality in selecting experts from the persons of his/her liking. This is to ensure smart implementation of public policy in the age of information.

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