Beyond Governance: Political Consolidation and Community Engagement in Union Parishad Standing Committees, Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study examines the operational functionality of Union Parishad (UP) Standing Committees (SCs) in Bangladesh, with a focus on their roles in local governance and political consolidation. This qualitative study purposively selected 48 participants, comprising representatives from the UP, government officials, NGO representatives, and SC members. Thematic analysis was employed for data interpretation, revealing that SCs, as governance mechanisms, were utilised as tools by the ruling political parties for consolidation, thereby sidestepping their intended roles of accountability and participation. Additionally, the study reveals that NGOs have shifted from capacity building to commercial pursuits and that a patron-client relationship hinders governance access for all classes, benefits certain groups, and silences critical voices. This study found significant differences between the procedures for forming and operating the UP SCs. Local government reforms should be implemented to enhance UP capacity, encourage opposition participation, and reduce the influence of parliamentary members, thereby improving SC performance.

Keywords: Local Government; Social Accountability; Political Consolidation; Union Parishad; Bangladesh

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Introduction

In contemporary governance discourse, the principles of good governance and social accountability have become essential for ensuring transparency and inclusivity in decision-making processes. These principles emphasise the importance of public participation, particularly at the grassroots level, where citizens' direct engagement is crucial for fostering democratic governance (Acharya, 2018; Blair, 2000; Stoker, 2011). Over the past few decades, developed nations and international donors, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have prioritised reforms aimed at improving governance structures to enhance civic engagement, service delivery, and accountability (Gumisiriza, 2018; Hughes, 1998). This trend subsequently influenced governance reforms in developing countries, including Bangladesh, which is continuously strengthening local governance through institutional reforms.

Bangladesh's historical legacy, shaped by its colonial past (Sarker, 2006), continues to influence its administrative structures and governance mechanisms (Ahmed, 2012; Aminuzzaman, 2010; Ganguly, 1994; Kochanek, 1993). This legacy does not remain bounded within the central level but rather affects all aspects, including local governance. Since Independence in 1971, various reforms have been aimed at strengthening local governance; however, successive ruling governments have often exploited local government structures for political purposes (Islam, 2013), undermining their effectiveness. In Bangladesh, local governance is carried out through Union Parishads (UPs), the lowest tier of rural governance, which was the subject of the experiment by several regimes. In an effort to make this institution more citizen-friendly and efficient in service delivery, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) enacted the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009; however, significant challenges remain in achieving transparency, accountability, and public participation at the grassroots level

(Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). Among the key mechanisms introduced by the Act (ward meeting, Open Budget Meeting, and Right to Information), Standing Committees (SCs) at the UP level were emphasised by law, which were designed to enhance public participation and ensure good governance in areas such as finance, education, health, and rural development. In theory, these committees provide a platform for local citizens to participate in decision-making and hold their representatives accountable actively (Uddin & Basit, 2024; Uddin, 2019)

However, despite the implementation of these reforms for over a decade, recent studies have indicated that SCs have not fully realised their intended role in strengthening local governance (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018; Uddin, 2019). Instead, political instrumentalisation, limited public awareness, and lack of capacity have hampered their effectiveness (Ahsan et al., 2018). Political dynamics at the local level, particularly the consolidation (Lewis & Hossain, 2022) and polarisation (Islam, 2013) of power by ruling parties has further complicated the ability of SCs to function as intended, turning them into vehicles for political patronage rather than platforms for genuine community participation (Rahman, 2018). These issues raise critical questions about the effectiveness of SCs in Bangladesh and whether they truly work in the interests of local communities.

This study seeks to address the central problem of the operational functionality of the Union Parishad SCs in Bangladesh. Specifically, it assesses whether these committees effectively enhance local governance or have become tools for political consolidation by sidelining the interests of broader communities. Furthermore, this study explores the extent of public participation in SC decision-making processes and the influence of local elites on these mechanisms. By examining these issues, this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of grassroots governance in Bangladesh and offers recommendations for

policy reforms aimed at improving the effectiveness of local governance structures.

The need for this study lies in the important role that local governance plays in fostering democratic development and ensuring public accountability. As Bangladesh continues to pursue decentralisation and local governance reforms, understanding the constraints that hinder the effectiveness of key governance mechanisms such as SCs is essential to inform future policy decisions. The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of the challenges facing local governance in Bangladesh and practical solutions for strengthening participation and accountability mechanisms within the UP.

Literature Review

Establishing democratic societies in developing nations, where people can exercise their rights and claim citizenship, is a significant challenge (Mudacumura, 2014). This includes the need for representative and participatory local institutions, efficient governance, democratic decision-making, accountability mechanisms, citizen engagement in governance, institutionalised political parties and party systems, and a clear division of work between central and local governments (Bojanic, 2023; Panday, 2011; Roberts, 2016; Taamneh & Alqdha, 2020; Tshishonga, 2022). Despite the efforts of international development agencies and donor organisations since the 1980s to improve local governance (Wilson, 2000) by emphasising participation, accountability, and transparency, democracy has not yet established a solid foundation in many developing countries, including Bangladesh (Waheduzzaman & As-Saber, 2015). The GoB has undertaken the Local Government (LG) Reform and Decentralization Program in collaboration with various international organisations to develop strong

participatory local governance (Sarker, 2006). However, bridging the gap between legal and technical aspects remains an ongoing challenge in pursuing active institutionalised public participation in Bangladesh (Cornwall & Coelho, 2004).

The LG system in Bangladesh has a rich historical lineage dating back to the early days of Bengal, with *Gram Panchayats* playing a significant role characterised by democratic principles, autonomy, and financial self-sufficiency (Siddiqui & Ahmed, 2016). The era of colonialism witnessed local government reforms enacting several laws driven by exploitative agendas (Sarker, 2006), a deliberate strategy to eradicate traditional, local self-governing institutions in the rural heartlands of Bengal (Siddiqui, 2008). Following the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857,[1] the British administration enacted the Village *Chaukidari* Act of 1870 [2] to legitimise its form of LG reformation to improve law and order and enhance local surveillance (Ahmed, 2012). After the partition of India in 1947, no notable changes were observed in Pakistan's LG system (Khan, 2003a, b; Siddiqui & Ahmed, 2016). During Ayub Khan's tenure, LG's restructuring bolstered bureaucracy and local elites, giving them exclusive control over their local resources (Ludden, 2011).

After independence, the structure and functioning of LGs in Bangladesh evolved with shifts in the country's socioeconomic landscape and political dynamics (Khan, 2008). Currently, LG structures of LGs is divided into two types: rural and urban. Rural LG consists of Division, District (*Zila*), subdistricts (*Upazila*), and UP, while Urban LG consists of City Corporations and Municipalities (*Paurashavas*) (Siddiqui & Ahmed, 2016). In analysing the issues surrounding LG in Bangladesh, it is imperative to acknowledge that LG institutions (LGIs) are inextricably linked to the broader national political process (Islam,

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[1] The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, also called the Indian Rebellion, was a major uprising against British rule in undivided India. Sparked by grievances among Indian soldiers in the British East India Company's army, it quickly spread but was ultimately suppressed. The revolt led to the end of company rule and the beginning of direct British governance in India.

[2] The Village *Chaukidari* Act of 1870 was a British colonial law in undivided India that established a system of village watchmen (*chowkidars*) to maintain local security. Funded by a tax on villagers, these *chowkidars* were appointed by British authorities and reported to local officials, strengthening colonial control over rural areas.

2022). The practice of employing LG for the national political objectives of strengthening the party power base rather than achieving decentralisation (Ehsan, 2020; Nadiruzzaman, 2008; Panday, 2005) has its roots in the Pakistani era, epitomised by the establishment of basic democracy (Sarker, 2006). After independence, *BAKSHAL (Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League)* aimed to consolidate national government rule at the local level using LG bodies (Siddiqui & Ahmed, 2016). During Ziaur Rahman's tenure, the introduction of *Swanirvor Gram Sarker* exemplified the ruling party's use of the system to enhance its local influence. Similarly, Upazila Parishad (UPZ) was harnessed to gain the ruling party's advantage during the Ershad regime (Panday, 2005). Remarkably, this landscape persists in the contemporary era, with the ruling party in Bangladesh solidifying its political control at the local level through both formal and informal political means (Alam & Teicher, 2012) and reducing the scope of local political competition (Lewis & Hossain, 2022). Notably, despite concerted efforts, the politicisation of LG activities and centralisation of control through local bureaucracy have hindered the emergence of an efficient and effective LG system (Ahmed, 2012; Arfina Osman, 2010)

Despite significant changes in traditional social stratification, patron-client relationships and patronage in Bangladesh remain significant in the administrative and political atmosphere (Lewis, 2017; Miaji & Islam, 2023). The country's hierarchical social structure(Ganguly, 1994), particularly in rural areas, is reinforced by economic factors such as credit scarcity and political protection (Ganguly, 1994; Kochanek, 1993). Despite the transition to democratic rule, the democratic governance system continues to foster clientelism (Sobhan, 2010) and solidify the power of the political elite (Islam, 2013). Representative institutions intended to provide an inclusive platform for all citizens have become dominated by socially and economically influential classes, highlighting persistent

concerns regarding Bangladesh's administrative and political issues (Sobhan, 2010; Lorch, 2021).

The lowest tier of Bangladesh's rural local administrative setup is the UP, an elected body consisting of nine *wards* [3](often consisting of nine villages) headed by the chairman, with nine UP members (one from each ward) and three female members from the three concerned wards. The GoB introduced The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of, 2009 highlighted the establishment and operation of the 13SCs. SCs in LG are not novel concepts, as mentioned in LG Ordinance (1976) and LG (UP) Ordinance (1983) (Rahman, 2008). These committees are integral to decentralising decision-making, ensuring transparency and accountability, and facilitating the delivery of essential services mandated by national laws in Bangladesh's LG entities (Islam, 2013; Siddiqui & Ahmed, 2016)

Section 45 of the LG (UP) Act 2009 provided a legal mandate for the formation and operation (Figure 1) of the 13 SCs relevant to the areas of finance, education, health, agriculture, sanitation, social welfare, environmental protection, and rural development (GoB, 2009). According to the UP Operational Manual (UPOM), 2018, members of the SC will be selected based on Citizen Opinion, and there will be participation of people from different classes, NGOs, expert representatives, government officials, and civil society (GoB, 2018).

SC in the UP is a crucial platform for public participation in local governance (Rahman, 2008). However, UP members often dominate it without involving diverse stakeholders, leading to ineffectiveness (Ahsan et al., 2018; Ara et al., 2024). SCs are yet to be constituted in several UPs in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2017), and productive discussions are often hindered by ignorance among members (Ahmed et al., 2016; Ahsan et al., 2018) and reluctance to attend bimonthly meeting. Irregularities in meeting record-keeping and a lack of proper coordination between the UP-SC and line agency extension staff contribute to the failure of many UP

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[3]Smallest unit of UP often consists of one or two villages.

services (Aminuzzaman, 2010). SCs are formed to comply with legal rules (Uddin, 2019) but often fail to function effectively because of a lack of financial resources (Uddin & Basit, 2024), insufficient manpower, and limited training opportunities (Haque, 2009). Aminuzzaman (2010) termed the activities of SCs "rituals," and notably, the functions of SCs overlap (Ahmed et al., 2016).

The LG SC has been in place for many years to support UP in providing good services. This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by going beyond fragmented analyses that focus on isolated issues such as public participation, resource constraints, and SC effectiveness in UP

governance. Previous studies have primarily examined these aspects in isolation, without exploring their interconnections or the broader political dynamics that influence SC performance. This study makes a novel contribution by comprehensively assessing the effectiveness of SCs, particularly regarding whether they improve local governance or serve as tools for political consolidation. It also examines the extent of public participation in decision-making and the influence of local elites, which have been explored in existing research. By integrating political instrumentalisation, resource constraints, and social responsibility into a single framework, this study provides a holistic view of SC operations.
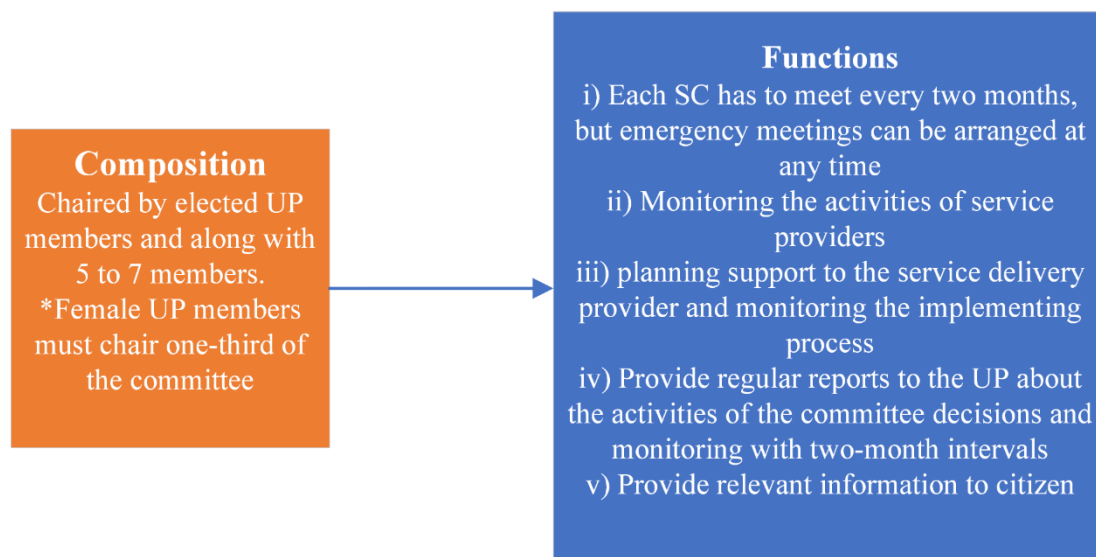
Figure 1 Composition and Functions of SC
Sources: GoB, 2018; Uddin & Basit, 2024

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach underpinned by the social-constructivist paradigm. This philosophy emphasises understanding how social and cultural factors influence decision-making and public participation in UP SCs. This study was conducted across three contrasting UPs in northeastern Bangladesh. It investigated the effectiveness of Union Parishad SCs in

Bangladesh to assess whether they improved local governance or served as tools for political consolidation. Consequently, political affiliation is crucial in the selection of the study area. Three UPZs were purposively selected from two districts, Sunamganj and Sylhet, where members of parliament are affiliated with the ruling Bangladesh Awami League (BAL).[4] Three UPs within these UPZs were identified based on their chairpersons' political affiliations. Two UPs,

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[4] The Bangladesh Awami League, founded in 1949, is one of Bangladesh's oldest and prominent political parties. Since 2009, the Awami League has maintained consecutive terms in power, ruling from 2009 to August

2024. As of August 2024, Bangladesh is experiencing political transitions following the end of the Awami League's long tenure.

Atgaon, a rural area in Sunamganj, and Mugalgaon, near Sylhet city, are led by BAL supporters, whereas Dargapasha, a semi-urban UP in Sunamganj, is led by a Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)[5] supporters. This selection provides an opportunity for a comparative analysis of SC effectiveness in different political contexts by examining the influence of ruling and opposition parties. In addition, geographic diversity from remote rural areas to semi-urban and well-connected regions provides a broad perspective on how political and environmental factors influence SC operations and public participation.

This study embodies a reasonable combination of primary and secondary data sources to enhance depth and breadth. Primary data, sourced from key stakeholders (Table 1), including UP members, Chairpersons, SC Members, UP Secretaries, government officials (line ministry representatives), Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNO),[6] and NGO representatives form the core of the study. Specifically, this study included individuals involved in the operation process of SCs and those involved in monitoring UP SCs. Secondary data complement the primary sources and offer historical and contextual perspectives. Data collection methods were carefully chosen to facilitate a holistic understanding of the topic, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and non-participant observations. Participants were asked about issues related to SC formation and operations. The pre-developed checklist facilitated the data collection process.

For In-depth Interview (IDI), key individuals involved in the formation and management of SCs were purposively selected to gain detailed insight. These included the UP Chairperson and Member Secretary, who were responsible for decision-making, member selection, and ensuring SC functioning. The UNO was selected to monitor UP activity. Representatives of Line Ministries were selected as they provide expertise in relevant SC based on their respective line ministries. Additionally, NGO staff who worked closely with the SCs were included to enhance SC activities and collaborate with the UP representatives. This diverse group of studies provides a broad understanding of SC from various perspectives. The FGD participants were carefully selected based on recent SC meeting attendance records to ensure active participation and relevant insights. To gain diverse insights and varied experiences, the participants were chosen from different social classes, including female members. The topics covered included SC effectiveness, the challenges faced, and cooperation from UP representatives. The discussions, lasting 45-60 minutes, allowed for an in-depth exploration of these topics, providing a broad understanding of SC dynamics. The researcher used nonparticipant observations to provide an objective account of SC functioning. With the assistance of the UP secretary, the researcher attended three events organised by specific SCs, observing their activities to gain insight into their functioning and internal dynamics. This approach complemented the interviews and FGD data by enabling researchers to observe SC activities directly. Additionally, a thorough review of SC meeting minutes and resolutions was conducted to triangulate the findings by offering a detailed understanding of procedural aspects, such as decision-making, attendance, and accountability. This combination of direct observation and document analysis enriches the data and provides a comprehensive view of the SC operations.

Data Analysis

The selection of thematic analysis as a data analysis method is underpinned by its adaptability and extensive applicability to diverse research objectives and topics. By following Creswell & Creswell's (2017) systematic steps for qualitative data analysis (Figure 2), the research ensured methodological rigour and transparency, ultimately contributing to the reliability of the study's findings. Creswell

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[5] Established in 1978, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is a major political party. It has held both ruling and opposing roles at different times and has served as the primary opposition since 2009.
[6] Administrative head of the UPZ

delineated six stages in qualitative data analysis (Figure 2). Researchers have used the two-cycle structural and provisional coding methods. Provisional coding is theoretically driven, whereas structural or open coding is derived from the data. In the first cycle (open coding), the researchers categorised various notions to facilitate further research. In the second cycle (selective coding), they selected and integrated organised data categories to develop theories. This led to a higher abstraction level in the case narrative, known as pattern coding (Seddiky et al., 2020).

Table 1: Types of Participants and the Nature of Data Collection				
Types of participants	**Nature of participants**	**Number of participants**	**Data collection techniques**	**Sampling procedure**
UP chairperson	**The political head of UP**	**3*1=3**	**In-depth Interview**	
UP members	**Elected representatives**	**Male 2*3=6**		**Purposive**
		Female 1*3=3		
SC Members	**Members of 13 SC**	**7*3=21**	**FGD (3)**	
Field level staff	**NGOs Representatives**	**2*3=6**	**In-depth Interview**	
Secretary	**The administrative head of UP**	**3*1=3**		
UNO	**The administrative head of UPZ**	**3*1=3**		
Representatives of Line Ministries	**Government Officials**	**2*3=6**		
		Total=48		
Source: Primary Data Collection by the Authors				
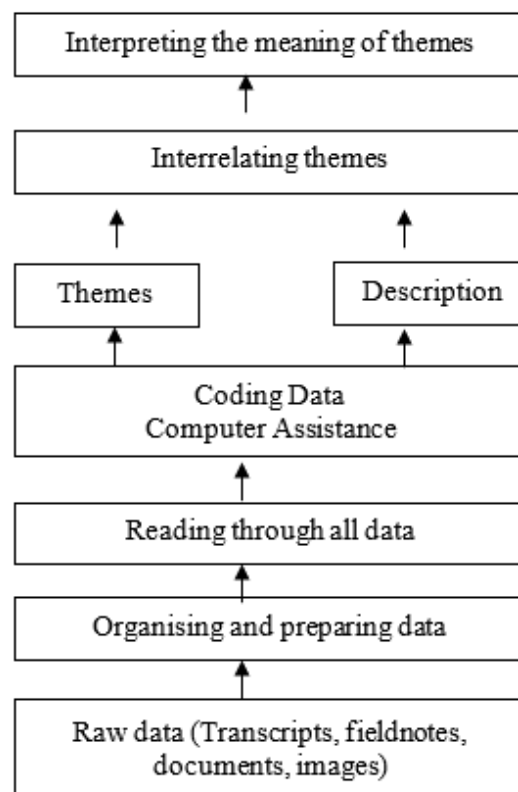
Figure 2 Qualitative Data Analysis Technique.
Source: Creswell & Creswell, 2017

In this study, open coding, which identified concepts such as public participation, political patronage, and decision-making dynamics, led to electoral codes that captured deeper patterns such as limited public awareness, political consolidation, and the dominant role of local elites. For example, the exploration of public participation in SC highlighted how low engagement, social barriers, and exclusion from decision-making were closely linked to exclusionary practices and lack of representation, particularly for marginalised groups such as women. This emerged as a recurring theme, emphasising that SCs often fail to ensure broad-based participation due to social stigma and elite control. Furthermore, the influence of local elites was a significant factor in the functioning of the SC, as electoral coding indicated the dominance of elites and the use of informal power structures that manipulated committee processes. Consequently, SCs have become tools for political mobilisation rather than platforms for genuine community participation, emphasising the overarching theme that political and elite influences often overlook the interests of larger communities. These emerging themes show how SCs reflect broader governance and power dynamics issues in Bangladesh's local government systems.The study followed ethical guidelines, obtained verbal consent from participants, and ensured data confidentiality. Ethical considerations prioritise participant consent, data privacy, and authorised non-participant observation procedures to uphold ethical standards and protect confidentiality.

Findings

The Selection Process is Confined to UP Members

The selection process for SCs within UPs is notably confined to the decisions of the UP chairperson and members, as revealed by this study. Before committee formation, all UP members convene at the UP office and collaborate to curate their list of committee members. In this instance, one UP Chairman said:

> We tried our best to have representatives from all walks of life on the various committees to the best of our knowledge. We include prominent people in the area, freedom fighters, and educated people in various SC committees.

This statement highlights the potential exclusion of a broader population from the committee formation process. This raises questions regarding whether the selected committee members represent different social strata. The selection of members is, in essence, a mutual decision made by UP members and the chairman, sidelining the principles of public participation, as stipulated in the constitution of Bangladesh and regulatory acts.

Remarkably, the study revealed a prevailing belief among UP members and the chairperson that there is no need for public involvement in committee formation. Their argument rests on the premise that since UP members are elected from specific wards, they possess comprehensive knowledge of their respective constituencies and are thus well-equipped to suggest suitable members for SCs. This conviction and practice consolidate decision-making power in the hands of a select few, chiefly the UP chairman and members, who choose committee members based on their interests.

Citizens' Unawareness of the SC and its Importance

UP representatives are aware of the public committee formation procedure but often find it challenging to implement it in practice. They argued that public meetings lack comprehensive participation from various societal strata. Most people attending the meeting are from low-income classes and may not understand the committees' functions. One IDI participant aptly pointed out the following:

> Even UP members cannot recall the number of SCs that operate at the UP level. How could the masses of people have knowledge about SCs?

This underscores the limited awareness and understanding of SCs, which extends beyond the general population to elected representatives. This knowledge gap further exacerbates the situation, as individuals who attend meetings lack a basic understanding of the committee's structure and function.

Through NPO, it has been observed that people present in meetings often play the role of listeners. They were merely involved in discussions on committee formation. Traditionally, lower-income class people are not habituated to talking in front of local influentials, as opined by FGD participants.

> People from lower income classes refrained from engaging in active discussion. They consider talking in front of local influential Gushthi Pradhan, UP members disrespectful.

Surprisingly, most participants were unaware of their names. Consequently, recommendations are often made without clearly comprehending the committees' roles. Most of whom the name suggests are political figures or influential (economic and social) personalities . A typical mindset is that recommending these names may lead to future benefits. The locals who play a vital role in local governance do not fully understand the importance of SCs. Instead, they focus on cultivating relationships with politicians to achieve their objectives.

Social Stigma and the Women's Participation

The LG (UP) Act of 2009 promotes women's inclusion in committees; however, encouraging their active participation is challenging because of two main factors: women's lack of interest in committees and their unavailability to participate in committee activities, which can hinder their progress. As observed by one UP representative,

> Most of the [SC] committees have female members. However, in the last five years, I have not seen any single woman participating in SC activities.

Most SCs are characterised by male dominance, while prevailing societal norms and familial expectations impede women's active engagement (Chowdhury, 2020; Sultan, 2018). Despite the growing interest among educated women, these external influences limit their involvement in decision-making processes and impact their lives. Furthermore, Female UP members often face barriers to active participation in SCs, with their opinions receiving less recognition from male counterparts and the chairperson, who is usually a male too. The need to balance familial obligations further constrains the availability of female members for council meetings, ultimately leading to decision-making processes controlled primarily by male members and council leaders. However, some exceptions exist. In one UP of our study, female members actively participated in meetings and played a role in selecting SC members. This active participation is linked to the educational level of the female members, which empowers them to exercise their legal rights and engage in UP affairs more substantively.

Changing NGO's Working Area

Another notable transformation relates to the evolving role of NGOs in the UP. Traditionally viewed as civil society organisations that promote awareness of LG activities, NGOs have shifted their focus from capacity-building activities. One participant remarked,

> Their [NGOs] participation in various areas of the UP, including the SC, speeds up the work process. However, NGOs have become less interested in capacity-building activities and are now leaning towards commercial endeavours.

This change underscores NGOs' altered priorities, as they veer away from their once-central role in supporting local institutions and enhancing public awareness of LG activities.

Changes in the Rural Power Structure and Increased Political Participation

Land, class, social status, and clans (Gushthi) have long been considered the bases of rural power structures in Bangladesh. These categories of individuals historically participated in LG activities and exerted control over LG institutions whether they were in a formal

position to exert control. However, this study discerns a noteworthy changing pattern in the class participating in UP. In recent years, there has been an observable increase in local political figures' involvement in UP SCs. People who are active in local politics are increasingly involved in UP and function as SC members. Additionally, political figures have emerged as pivotal actors in reshaping the rural power structure, emphasising the evolving dynamics of local governance. UP chairpersons and members perceive that including influential political figures from their respective areas in these committees facilitates the effective communication and control of local citizens and resources. It is worth noting that the law stipulates criteria for selecting SC members; however, adherence to these criteria is often impeded by public ignorance, a lack of awareness, and the influence of national politics at the local level.

Affiliation with a political party or association with influential political leaders has emerged as a critical determinant of empowerment and leadership in rural societies. A noteworthy aspect is the prevalence of committee members directly aligned with the ruling party, particularly the BAL, as highlighted by the presence of multiple BAL support members in each SC. One FGD participant expressed his views as follows:

> Each SC has more than one BAL supporter member. They were selected. After all, the UPZ chairperson and local MP recommended that party members be kept on the committee.

In the studied UPs, it was observed that three UPs—the Union Committee of BAL and BNP—were active, and in two UPs, the Union Committee of the Jatiya Party[7] was active. However, the significant thing is that BAL's ward committee is active in all studied UPs, whereas BNP is active in two UPs. This trend underscores the expanding influence of political activities within rural societies and the local proliferation of national political entities. Furthermore, UP

members often actively engage in politics, assuming roles as presidents or members of unions and the ward committees of various political parties. The UP Chairperson's dual role could result in prioritising party interests over public welfare, causing biased decision-making that benefits the political party rather than addressing the community's needs. As a non-political local government institution, the UP's function can be compromised by political agendas, undermining its independence and objectivity in serving all citizens impartially. Consequently, UP members prefer selecting political party supporters as members of various SCs remain aligned with their political affiliations. One IDI participant shared the following.

> Our chairperson is the president of the union committee of the current ruling party. Due to this, all the SCs have the presence of Awami League ward committee members.

While some exceptions exist, such as in one UP where the chairperson is affiliated with an opposition political party (BNP), leading to more members of that party in the SCs, the balance is influenced by the UPZ vice chairperson and the chairperson, both aligned with the BAL and the local MP associated with the ruling party. This pressure can modify the existing committee structure to accommodate BAL supporters, highlighting the impact of politics on the committee composition.

In most studied UPs, the chairperson significantly influences the SC formation process, primarily by selecting individuals who support him during elections. Additionally, an evident shift was observed in the active engagement of young individuals with various SCs. These young members, affiliated with ruling and opposition parties, such as the Chatraleague and Chatrodol, are appointed to SC positions to secure their support in political activities, including rallies, demonstrations, and other politically relevant events.

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[7] The Jatiya Party is one of the most significant political parties in the country. It has held both ruling and opposition roles at different times and often plays a balancing role in Bangladesh's political landscape.

Religion and the Nature of Participation

Religion is another pivotal component of rural leadership that serves as a platform for the emergence of rural leaders. Religious leadership, encompassing imams, huzoors, maulvis, madrasa teachers, priests, and similar figures, is critical for addressing religious concerns and mediating mundane disputes within village communities. This religious influence empowers these leaders, resulting in a growing trend among UP members and chairpersons to incorporate religious leaders into their SC. The primary rationale for this selection is the high level of respect and respect of these religious leaders' command within the local community, which enhances the social acceptance of members or chairperson among the standard religious population. Furthermore, a significant influence on committee member selection is the concept of the 'Vote Bank' politics. Individuals such as group leaders and Gushthi Pradhans(clan leaders) are appointed to committees as representatives, through whom votes from different groups can be secured in forthcoming elections.

Skipping Bimonthly Meetings due to Financial Limitation

Bimonthly SC meetings are pivotal for addressing critical local issues and making recommendations to the UP. However, this research found that SCs schedule their first bimonthly meetings upon formation but gradually discontinue them due to financial limitations.SC members must be notified of meetings by phone, and meals are typically provided during these gatherings, as mentioned by a UP representative.

> If a UP member organises a meeting of the SC, he must pay all the meeting's expenditures out of his own money, discouraging him from calling the meeting later again later.

The lack of financial support from the UP has exacerbated this issue. UP Chairpersons, Secretaries, and Female Members concur that SC chairpersons face financial challenges when arranging regular bimonthly meetings and that

UP provides no financial assistance to the SC chairperson. However, the Chairperson and Secretaries suggest that adept leadership and strategic management could alleviate financial problems, emphasising that goodwill and voluntary contributions play a vital role.

Previously, the government provided financial support under the Local Governance Support Project (LGSP) to arrange bi-monthly SC meetings involving all members' participation. However, no such financial support exists because the project has been terminated, and the UP cannot allocate funds. Additionally, FGD reveals that SC members often lack a voluntary mindset to attend meetings, citing challenges such as distancing, personal business commitments, and scheduling inconveniences.

Inactive Role of SC Members

After committee formation, the SC chairperson must continue communicating with committee members. In this context, most participants noted a notable decline in the level of participation of SC members in the bi-monthly meetings. Echoing this, one UP secretary mentioned,

> SC members are limited in their participation in maintaining paperwork (signature only). The SC is carried out solely by the SC chairperson.

The limited participation of SC members in bi-monthly meetings and associated irregularities can be attributed to the collective responsibility of UP members, particularly the SC chairperson and SC members themselves. Despite the workload defined by legislation, practical challenges have hindered its effective execution, including UP members lacking knowledge and motivation for committee management and a similar lack of awareness among SC members regarding their committees' functions. Remarkably, during the FGD, it was revealed that no participant, apart from the Law and Order and Tax and Audit committee members, possessed precise knowledge of SC functions. This is because SC members, including UP representatives, received no training on SC tasks. Furthermore, it is worth noting that when

the researcher contacted SC members to arrange FGD sessions, a significant proportion hardly recalled the names of their respective committees, further underscoring the existing challenges in committee functionality.

However, in the UP selected for this study, among the 13SC, only the law and order committee consistently held bimonthly meetings. It is notable that the members of this committee possess a limited understanding of their committee's functions, as revealed through the findings from the FGD and the analysis of meeting resolutions. The reasons for the committee's active engagement were further examined through FGDs.

> The UNO monitors the functions of the Law-and-Order committee. Therefore, the chairperson strictly follows the guidelines for functioning the Law-and-Order Committee.

Moreover, the Tax and Audit committee exhibited proactive involvement in operations in two of the studied UP. This is because of the meticulous scrutiny undertaken by higher authorities during audits and regular inspections, which includes a critical examination of meeting resolutions, sometimes necessitating discussions with committee members. Consequently, the UP Secretary directly collaborated with the committee to ensure the correct execution of their functions.

Ineffective Role of SC and its Impact on other Social Accountability Mechanisms (SAMs)

SCs play a critical role in organising Ward Shava (WS) and Open Budget Meeting (OBM). They must provide relevant information before the WS and OBM to citizen so that people can actively participate in discussion The SC's inability to gather requisite information through social mapping hinders the information flow to citizens and renders them unable to participate actively in WS and OBM discussions. Furthermore, the SC is responsible for checking the viability of the project undertaken in the WS. However, in the UP, SC members lacked awareness of this responsibility. Consequently, projects automatically proceed to the UP, where the UP chairman and members exercise their judgment on either approving or rejecting projects. This dynamic results in a lack of accountability among the UP representatives.

The Roles of Line Ministries and Divisions in SCs Remain Unutilised

The engagement of line ministries and divisions in SCs remains underutilised despite the UPOM's mandate to include pertinent representatives from these entities. At the same time, the UPOM directed the formation of SCs with expertise from various ministries and departments, most operated in isolation, without coordination with the UP. Legally bound to execute services assigned by the UP and being accountable for their actions, these entities have evaded accountability despite the UP-chairperson's attempts to enforce it, often disregarding UP representatives. Government officials have highlighted several factors that have contributed to this isolation. These include limited awareness among SC members regarding committee activities, inconsistencies in meeting organisations, and neglecting invitations to relevant officials. In contrast, UP representatives emphasise that collaboration between line ministries and the UP could enhance the effectiveness of functions because SCs, where ministry representatives actively participate, exhibit better functionality.

Table 2: Status of UP SC Functioning			
Description	**Dargapasha UP**	**Atgaon UP**	**Mugol Gaon UP**
Supervision of the implementation and service delivery of UP	**Solely by SC chairperson (Other members' participation limited only in signature)**	**Solely by SC chairperson (Other members' participation limited only in signature)**	**Solely by SC chairperson (Other members' participation limited only in signature)**
Supervise the implementation and service delivery of government officials in line ministry.	**Solely by the SC chairperson**	**SC members are unaware of this. They do not even know that monitoring it is one of their responsibilities.**	**SC members are unaware of this. They do not even know that monitoring it is one of their responsibilities.**
Provide information to the public before Ward Shava (WS) and Open Budget Meeting (OBM).	**No**	**No**	**No**
Availability of meeting resolution	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Status of the meeting resolution	**The resolution contains the participating member's name. Sometimes, the present member's signature is missing. The agenda for every meeting is the same.**	**The resolution contains only the participating member's name.**	**The resolution contains the participating member's name. Sometimes, the present member's signature is missing. The agenda for every meeting is the same.**
Source: Field Data, 2023			

Role of Member of Parliament (MP) and Political Commitment

Political party allegiance among SC members and the influence of local MPs were evident in all studied UPs. The LG (UPZ) Act of 2011 designates MPs as advisors with pivotal authority in budget allocation, leading to differences in budget allocation based on the Chairman's political alignment. UPs with opposition-aligned chairperson received fewer funds than those with ruling party-aligned chairperson. Disparities in the allocation of the VGD [8] and VGF [9] resources were also noted. MPs channelled government incentives/funds under their authority through party-affiliated SC members, promoting party activities. Ruling party-aligned chairperson and vice chairperson actively engage in UP activities, enhancing their party image. Conversely, opposition-aligned chairperson faced challenges holding ruling party-aligned SC members accountable as they communicated through their party-aligned local leaders, hindering the SC's effectiveness. Decision-making within SC meetings often favoured political figures, neglecting input from experts and ministry representatives. This trend overlooks diverse perspectives and impacts committees' decision-making processes.

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[8] Vulnerable group development

[9] Vulnerable group feeding

Skipping Monitoring in an Unlawful Way

The Act mandates that the SC hold meetings and advises the UP, requiring written resolution (Table 2). However, in practice, bimonthly meetings are not regularly held, leading to incomplete resolutions. These resolutions contain only member names and lack signatures, raising questions about meeting legitimacy. One UP Secretary opined:

> During the audit, audit officers wanted to see what suggestions were made by the SC and what were accepted by the UP SC. Most of the time, for fear of an audit, decisions taken in the UP meeting are written down as resolutions in the SC meeting. Thus, it can be shown as evidence of the Audit Officer'.

Such practices circumvent this law and hamper accountability. Members of the UP have found ways to avoid monitoring and auditing by using loopholes. However, this practice reduces the SCs' importance.

Discussion

This study reveals that Union Parishad SCs are often leveraged as tools for political consolidation, with consequences that hinder participatory development processes intended by local governance mechanisms. The expected level of active engagement of local communities in committee formation differs from the predominant involvement of UP representatives in selecting SC members, consistent with prior research (Adhikary, 2010; Huq, 2014), highlighting centralised decision-making by UP representatives, primarily by UP chairs (Das et al., 2020) within local governments. The LGs failed to associate effective participation in SC formation and functioning, reinforcing the arguments of Hasan & Ara (2022) and Ingham & Kalam (1992) regarding the absence of participation, leading to suboptimal outcomes at the rural level. Marginalised people remained isolated from participatory governance, where only selected people with influential social, economic, and political backgrounds participated in the governance process and influenced the decisions that affected the lives of the local people. The persistent underrepresentation of women in local governance remains a pressing concern, primarily attributed to societal norms and familial pressures that hinder their active participation in SCs, which is consistent with the findings of Qayum et al. (2024) and Cornwall & Rivas (2015).

Consistent with Khan (2003b) and Lewis & Hossain (2017), this study also noted the evolving role of NGOs, from their traditional role of supporting local institutions and enhancing public awareness of LG activities to becoming more involved in commercial activities. Although the 2009 LG Act prioritised NGOs and civil society organisations, as they became essential actors in local development (Rahman & Tasnim, 2023), UP members did not value the engagement of NGOs and civil society on platforms such as the SC, leading to the disassociation of NGO with LGIs. This observation differs from Chowdhury's (2018) finding that NGOs collaboratively work with UP representatives to enhance local governance. Government officials from different line ministries at the UP level have limited involvement in SCs, akin to NGOs. In line with Aminuzzaman (2010) and Waheduzzaman (2010), this study reinforces their arguments regarding the isolated nature of government officials' operations and their lack of accountability to UP chairpersons for their UP-level activities. However, the LG (UP) Act of 2009 mandates UP accountability for assigned activities. The study also highlights that effective SC operations benefit from the proper coordination between line ministries and UP representatives. The rural local government structure was firmly tied to landowning elites (Lewis & Hossain, 2022), but over the years, it has transformed into the hands of the political elite. This research highlights the increasing involvement of political figures in SCs and the influence of the ruling party, as the alignment of committee members with political parties and the use of SCs for political purposes have been found in various contexts in the study. Local decision-makers, such as the chairperson and UP members, are firmly allied with the ruling party; thus, they strive to pacify their political party

base at the local level by electing members from their party. The opposition party's participation was frequently overlooked during this process, which affected democracy and participatory development. Further, UP representatives try to secure their position by recognising the rural elite as SC Members who will play a crucial role during the upcoming election. This further aligns with the findings of Lewis & Hossain (2022), Rahman (2018) and Islam (2013), emphasising the intertwining of politics with local governance in Bangladesh and the ruling party's political consolidation practice at the rural level. The influence of local MPs further reinforces political consolidation, as the local MP directly influences the committee formation and functioning process through connections with the UPZ chairperson and vice chairperson to influence UP representatives. In addition, discrimination in financial allocation based on the political identity of the UP chairperson and the distribution of government funds under the political party banner through SC members helps the ruling party to promote itself. Notably, SC member selection during committee formation meetings is influenced (if the meeting occurred) by political clientage relationships rather than adherence to appropriate qualification criteria. Currently, the resources that sustain political patronage are less monopolistic in developing countries (Leonard et al., 2010). However, the study unravelled that, in the absence of a viable opposition party, more monopolistic sources of political clientage from the ruling party tightened clientage relations in rural Bangladesh through public resources. Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2016), the absence of consistent bimonthly meetings and an anomaly in maintaining meeting resolutions was also evident through which SC members were supposed to carry out their functions. Even if an SC meeting is held, the decisions of these committees are not given importance in the subsequent monthly UP meetings. UP representatives manipulate SC meeting resolutions to avoid audit complexities during periodic monitoring by higher authorities. The UP has yet to be formed with the capacity to supervise 13 SCs. Currently, it is not possible to provide financial assistance to the SCs.

Surprisingly, the SC does not have a term for reference (ToR), and committee members do not receive any training. Consequently, expecting these committees to produce precise results would be hazardous.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

This study highlights significant discrepancies between the intended role of the Union Council SC and its actual performance, revealing a landscape plagued by political consolidation and inadequate community engagement. The findings clarify that these committees, rather than serving as platforms for public participation, often become instruments to strengthen the ruling party's local political power. The lack of active involvement of the local people, compounded by a limited understanding of SC functions, presents an important barrier to effective governance at the grassroots level. To improve the functioning of Union Parishad SCs, it is essential to increase public awareness and inclusion in the electoral process to ensure diverse representations of various social and economic groups. Training and capacity-building initiatives equip SC members with the skills and knowledge necessary for performing their roles. Legal frameworks should be strengthened to reduce political interference, and financial autonomy for SCs is crucial to support regular operations. In addition, limiting the influence of local parliamentarians and establishing non-partisan oversight would promote accountability and transparency. These reforms and a commitment to decentralisation strengthened SC performance and local governance. This study has several limitations. The findings are based on a qualitative analysis of selected UPs, which may not fully capture the diverse contexts of Bangladesh. Future research should explore the dynamics of SCs' political involvement in different regions of Bangladesh, mainly how local elites influence decision-making processes. Exploring the influence of socioeconomic factors on community participation in local governance can provide valuable insight.

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Ethical Approval and Conflict of Interest

This study was conducted within the Department of Public Administration at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) and adhered rigorously to ethical principles and guidelines (Reference No: 2020227010/2023). The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. The authors also declare that neither the text nor the figures have been generated using AI.

Author Contribution

Mr. Abdul Basit conducted fieldwork to collect data for this study. Dr. Mohammad Shafiqul Islam and Mr. Abdul Basit worked on the literature and methods used in this study. Then, both authors worked on the data processing and analysis. In addition, both authors contributed to the discussion and conclusion sections of the manuscript. Finally, both authors read and

approved the final version of the manuscript before submission.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data were not publicly available because they protected the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

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