

Traits of politicians in Bangladesh

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Do they matter?

THE recently launched “The State of Governance in Bangladesh Report 2013” by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) aimed to understand the outcomes that democratic politics has delivered since the post 1990 period, when parliamentary democracy was re-introduced. In particular, there is an explicit focus on the role of political parties, because there is general concern that the democratic deficit observed is ultimately shaped by how political parties behave in our socio-political space. Against this backdrop, one of the key components of the research examined those who have emerged as political representatives in Bangladesh through receiving political support from the dominant political parties. More specifically, the types of leaders who are elected to parliament received noticeable scrutiny, and it explored whether leadership type has any significant relationship to parliamentary performance.

The focus on the personal characteristics of legislators is essential for two reasons. First, while it is often vividly noted that effective institutions enhance the quality of government, it is worth appreciating that institutions which are weak offer only limited restraints on politicians. Therefore, the individual motivations of public servants are likely to play a significant role in determining policies and socio-economic outcomes. Second, empirical evidence indicates that leader type can have significant policy implications both at the national and local level.

Thus, this examination contributes to this discourse by exploring the types of politician who have found representation in the national parliament and how such personal characteristics are correlated with parliamentary performance of legislators. More specifically, distinct

personal features of legislators are examined, which include: {i} legislative experience of lawmakers; {ii} gender; {iii} educational achievements; {iv} dynastic identity; {v} age; {vi} criminal profile and {vii} professional affiliation. The study examines how MP traits have changed over time, especially between the 8th, 9th and 10th Parliament. The analysis then explores if personal traits of legislators are associated with their legislative performance. To this end, three key indicators of parliamentary performance of legislators are examined, which are: {i} attendance in the parliament; {ii} budget speech participation; {iii} attendance in standing committee meetings.

Collectively, the detailed evaluation of legislator characteristics allows the study to provide the following insights:

- * There has been a considerable rise of female leaders in the parliament since independence.
- * There is a strong presence of dynastic leaders in both the 8th and 9th National Parliament. To be precise, 17 percent of elected MPs are dynastic and they have a noticeable representation in AL, BNP and JP.
- * The presence of businessmen in the 8th, 9th and 10th National Parliament witnessed a remarkable rise as more than 50 percent of the parliamentarians are businessmen by profession in the 9th and 10th National Parliament. Additionally, across all the major political parties (AL, BNP, JP and Jamaat-e-Islam), businessmen continues to be the dominant profession among elected legislators.
- * There is a significant injection of first-time MPs in the 10th and 9th National Parliament in comparison to the 8th National Parliament.
- * The analysis shows 54 percent elected MPs has or had a legal charge against them in the 9th National Parliament and more than 40 percent MPs has or had legal charges against them in the 10th Parliament. The investigation also noted that in both 9th and 10th National Parliament at least 10 percent had corruption charges against them.
- * More than 80 percent elected legislators have an undergraduate degree in the 8th, 9th & 10th Parliament, even though there is a slight decline in this ratio from 88 to 82 percent between 8th and 10th National Parliament.
- * There is a strong presence of lawyers in the 8th, 9th and 10th Parliament. In contrast,

there is a decline in the proportion of ex-military personal.

These findings also brings to attention some important questions that future research can explore. For example, what factors have aided the rise of businessmen within our political process? Is it because the political parties are increasingly dependent on businessmen for financing elections and other activities? If so, how is this phenomenon shaping our overall state of governance within our society? The descriptive evidence is also suggestive that dynastic MPs have a strong presence in the parliament. Even though it is still not understood what explains the emergence of dynastic leaders and how they influence the quality of governance within their respective political space. Lastly, the noticeable presence of legislators in the parliament with legal and corruption charges highlight the quality of our electoral arrangements in screening clean political candidates and is indicative that the dominant political parties accommodate individuals with undesirable track records.

The overall examination has also offered some insights on what kind of personal characteristics matter in shaping legislative performance. For example, there is evidence that legislative experience has a strong negative association with attendance. Likewise, there is also some indication that businessmen and legislators with corruption charges on average have lower levels of attendance. Remarkably, these results are not difficult to reconcile with political suggestions that argue political parties should offer lower support to businessmen or individual with corruption charges. Our findings also do not validate claims that educated legislators are necessarily better in their legislative duties than others. The research also identifies a strong role of political parties in shaping two types of parliamentary performance: attendance and budget speech participation. Nevertheless, there is no indication that political parties influence the extent parliamentarians attend standing committee meetings, and findings show that even MPs from the opposition bench do not necessarily underperform their respective legislative duty in this regard. Thus, there is a hint that political parties might be a key source of underperformance of legislators in the parliament.

To conclude, as eminent political scientist V.O Key argued, "...Let there be emphasis on those we elect to office". This, in essence, has been the central motivation of the discussed analysis. In that spirit, this study examines the democratic implications of leadership characteristics by offering an empirical investigation of a political arena that is almost devoid of scientific inquiry. Taken Together, the descriptive and empirical evidence also indicates

that it is essential to further examine the systematic relationship between who leaders are and how they behave, and what it means for the overall democratic nature of our political landscape.