

Policy Brief

Policy Research and Its Implications on Political Parties of Bangladesh

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This policy brief attempts to draw the attention of the political parties in Bangladesh to appreciate and understand the importance of applied social research. The policy brief argues that social research not only helps the political parties to be more responsive to their larger constituencies but also contributes toward political modernization; thus it ultimately helps to develop a positive image of the political parties. The Policy Brief suggests that political parties should develop their in-house capacity and competence to undertake some basic research to assess and appreciate the changing socio-political context.

Political parties are indispensable in a democracy. As Schattschneider, rightly noted that "the political parties created democracy, and modern democracy is unthinkable without political parties" [1]. Broadly speaking political parties play four basic functions to consolidate and institutionalize the democratic process [2]. These are: i. active engagement in the electoral process, mobilize public opinions and voices and demands; ii. generate public support for or against political and social issues; iii. advocate and push ideas and aggregate the demand side of voices; and, iv. ensure the translation of public opinion into public policies and programs.

The mainstream literature on political parties asserts that weak internal democratic processes and practices of the political parties tend to create an oligarchic culture in the mobilization process of the political parties and thus articulation of voices of the party becomes weak [3]. The political observers noted that democracy in Bangladesh is still weak and stands 154th among 179 countries in the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) [4]. The political parties have been criticized as "undemocratic" and accused to be practicing a "patron-client culture". Observers further noted that "Democracy won't be strengthened in the country unless the political parties establish democracy inside them" [5].

The Political party's role in Bangladesh in consolidating and institutionalizing democratic practices has been fading due to its poor image, and declining level of public trust. Elected office bearers at various levels in most cases, win the election not as a credible candidate but because of the party symbol they represent. Parties need to critically understand the role of social and political and economic actors and the overall dynamics of the political economy of the society. Thus, it appears

that political parties despite their negative image still play a significant role in political mobilization, voting, and processes of entry to public offices. However, there are continuous demands from various corners – like Civil Societies, Academia, Think Tanks, and Media for the qualitative transformation of the role of the political parties of Bangladesh.

Importance of Research for the Political Parties

The prime role of the political parties is to mobilize the society in line with their ideology and ultimately get elected to run the country. To achieve such goals, political parties need to take electoral preparations not only through political propaganda but also intellectual and professional preparation to mobilize public opinion and build trust amongst the larger constituencies. The political parties, therefore, need to develop professional competence to come up with pro-people and responsive policy packages and thereby build trust and confidence among the citizens. This can be facilitated by undertaking high-quality research, analysis, and understanding of the social, political, and policy issues and the dynamics of power.

The classical role of the political parties is to advocate and influence the policy decisions of the state. The political parties need to create a large enough support base as well as empirically valid analyses to articulate and analyze the political demand and to have an objective assessment of the socio-economic and dynamics. The political parties in Bangladesh, so far generally emphasized more on organizing rallies, campaigns mostly for political mobilization than political education. Moreover, most of these initiatives are believed to be based on general rhetoric than reflecting ground reality with empirical validation.

The political party needs to prepare itself for the elections. Such preparation needs objective assessment and critiquing of the policies, appropriate assessment of the political economy, re-organizing the support base through positive activism, making their governance and political alternatives clear, and undertake activities at various levels to enhance the support base. These require- intellectual exercises based on research and analysis of the broader social and political issues and governance challenges.

Understanding Policy Dynamics: Political parties have to develop the competence to understand and analyze the characteristics of the socio-political matrix. Most importantly the political parties need to objectively assess and understand the

Understanding Policy Dynamics: Political parties have to develop the competence to understand and analyze the characteristics of the socio-political matrix. Most importantly the political parties need to objectively assess and understand the nature of the relations between state and society, and the role of the power elite and other social actors.

Assessment of Public opinion: Political Parties may find it necessary to research due to several reasons, one of those is to assess public opinion and the social dynamics. Any political party, to become successful would require a strong factual base on the constituencies. Without concrete data and information on distributive justice, demographic trends, income structure, healthcare, and other service delivery indicators, parties would find it rather difficult to allocate or advocate resources according to the aspirations of the population and also promises to be made to the constituencies. For developing an effective election campaign and policy advocacy strategy, a political party has to gather adequate and objective information on both natural and human resources and people's expectations.

Self-Assessment of Performances: Research into past data may help political parties learn from previous mistakes made. It may be a failed government policy or even an incorrect method of assessing the possible remedies to an economic problem. Apart from that, political parties may find it useful to look into past decisions of opposing political groups to help analyze certain decisions in the past, which may have proved popular or even raised a few eyebrows to gain public disapproval in the end.

Public Mobilization: Research is also a practical need when it comes to factors such as public mobilization. To portray incomparability, a political party would find it necessary to be able to assemble the people towards standing up for a common and good cause. This may be carried out only if ample knowledge regarding the public itself is obtained through research to figure out what the people like and what they need, to keep them satisfied.

Policy analyses: There is credible scholarly research that suggests that a complex but strong relationship exists between internal party conditions and progressive policy positions [6]. Political parties need to research to explore and analyze the conditions and processes within which parties work and need to understand such conditions to adopt/adapt and promote to formulate appropriate and progressive

es with particular focus on poor, women, and other conflicting and sensitive socio-economic and development actors/factors.

Developing communication strategy: In any democracy, one of the prime roles of the political parties is to advocate and or suggest policy options and strategies of the state. To do so it is essential to create and mobilize a credible support base vis-à-vis encouraging to generate the demand side. This can be done by establishing credible, objective, and empirically supportive and evidence-based research to draw the public and media attention. These objectives could be well addressed by cogently articulated and perceptively argued thorough empirical research [7].

Understanding the transitions to mature democracy: Since Bangladesh has experienced the reign of dictatorial rule, Political parties, therefore, need more insights to understand and analyze the dynamics of the transitions to maturing democracy. The political parties, therefore, need to appreciate the art and science of political reconciliation as a process of democratic accommodation through dialogue and negotiation.

Recognizing and understanding the role of Social Actors: Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and CSOs are playing a noticeable role in the social mobilization process and many cases economic empowerment. These new social actors are also mobilizing public opinion on governance issues, human rights, and democratization and are also found to be effective in the rural areas in delivering humanitarian services and economic transformation. It is to be acknowledged that social actors have carved out a distinct space in the broader governance mosaic. Some of the CSOs are providing new research-based knowledge and alternative ideas for social and political reforms and transformation. It is therefore important to duly recognize the role of the social actors, and create a space and enabling environment for them to play their roles.

Electoral Finance and Fund Mobilization: Political parties should assess and review their fundraising strategies. They should also ensure more transparency in terms of mobilizing and spending the electoral finance. Too much dependence on financial support from the rich entrepreneurs may cost the image of the party, and also the content of the policies.

Voting behavior Analysis: Political parties generally tend to make assumption-

based on "smart guess" in devising their election strategy. It is imperative for the political parties to study voting behavior and dynamics.

Addressing the threshold of global changes: The political parties need to search for new models and approaches to cope with the changing transnational model of development. Also, it is to be noted that globalization has posed numerous challenges and options to the political parties bearing an impact on the role and relation of the state with the political forces, actors, and the citizens. Environmental, political, ethnic issues, and other regional and global challenges that confront humanity, are constantly deepening. Drawing lessons on political modernization and democratization from the experiences of regional countries are also essential. Furthermore, political parties need to understand the new paradigm of human development discourses.

Understanding Regional economic and political dynamics always stand as a vital issue for any political party to assess and design its political strategy. Without proper international relations, any country would encounter obstacles in the competitive global and regional market.

The following box presents a tentative list of areas of research interests and concerns for the political parties in Bangladesh:

- Pre and Post Budget Analyses
- Survey on the assessment of political trust
- Issues and concerns that shape political interest and electoral participation
- Review and assess the Election Campaign Strategy
- Survey on the assessment of the perceived difference between political parties
- Assessment of public perception/attitude towards selected government policies
- Review of quality of public spending and service delivery programs
- Review of the regulatory framework, financial discipline, and budget management
- Alternative review of macro-economic conditions and distributive justice
- Assessment and follow up review of electoral pledges
- Policy analysis reports for media, academia, and other relevant stakeholders.

Conclusions: In fact research should not be seen as a task of academics alone but it should also be equally important for all strategic and interactive organizations. Political parties being a dynamic and interactive entity should therefore develop professional competence to undertake social research on strategic issues of policy and governance. The political parties in Bangladesh should therefore need to appreciate the necessity of policy research and develop in-house capacity to undertake these initiatives.

Political parties may take assistance from professionals but should not treat research as a one-off service rather than a regular built-in part of the political analysis of policy and strategic issues. While presenting the election manifesto and announcing policy and position papers they should skillfully use the findings of the research to make the policy package professionally sound and credible to the targeted clients. They should arrange occasional press briefing and dissemination of the findings of the research. Such initiatives will further build the image and strengthen the credibility of the party. Research-based policy advocacies will also help the parties to contribute to the political transformation in the context of the external dynamics and globalization process.

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