

Public Policy-Making Process in Bangladesh: Recent Trends

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Abstract: Public policy-making is an essential function of governance, determining how a country addresses socio-economic and political challenges. In Bangladesh, the policy-making process has evolved significantly over recent decades, shaped by political dynamics, institutional frameworks, and social movements. Thus, the policy domain of Bangladesh is highly unstable. This study provides both theoretical and analytical discussions on the public policy-making process in Bangladesh. Recent trends indicate that the policy landscape of Bangladesh is experiencing substantial transformations. This qualitative study explores contemporary trends in the formation of public policy in Bangladesh, analyzing the role of political elites, bureaucratic structures, public participation, and external influences. This paper also identifies some ongoing issues and recent trends of public policy-making in Bangladesh. However, the study concludes that public policy-making in Bangladesh is not done properly due to a lack of democratic values and influence of controlling elites in administration.

Introduction

Public policy is the mechanism through which governments address societal issues, shaping economic growth, governance, and social welfare. In Bangladesh, the formulation of public policy is a comprehensive and dynamic process influenced by various stakeholders, including political elites, bureaucrats, civil society, and international organizations. Over the years, policy formulation in Bangladesh has been largely centralized, with key decisions often made by the executive branch, limiting the role of parliament and civil society. **Akbar Ali Khan (2010) in his book 'Friendly Fires, Humpty Dumpty Disorder, and Other Essays'** states "*Bangladesh is an enigma wrapped in paradoxes*". Bangladesh is a country which is deeply divided politically. Unstable socio-political environment is common in Bangladesh. As a result public policy domain in Bangladesh faces various problems and challenges. In Bangladesh, policymaking is driven more by incentives from patronage politics rather than the government's need to fulfill a strong developmental role (**Aminuzzaman 2013: 443**). This paper examines recent trends in the policy-making process of Bangladesh. This paper is divided into four parts. The first part provides introductory discussion. The second part describes the conceptual framework. The third part points out some case studies, and the recent trends in the policy domain in Bangladesh. Based on the previous analysis, some observations will be presented in the concluding section.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the recent trends in the public policy-making process in Bangladesh. The research design includes the following components:

1. Document Analysis: Analyzing policy documents, government reports, parliamentary debates, and legal frameworks.
2. Expert Interviews: Conducting in-depth interviews with policymakers, bureaucrats, academics, and civil society leaders.
3. Case Studies: To examine major policy developments.

By triangulating data from above mentioned sources, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the policy-making process in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

Public policy-making has been widely studied from different theoretical perspectives. The classical "stages model" proposed by Dye (1981) conceptualizes policy-making as a linear process involving agenda-setting, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. However, critiques argue that this model oversimplifies the complex interactions among stakeholders. Elite theory, as proposed by Michels (1911), suggests that policy decisions are controlled by a small and powerful group. Additionally, group theory and institutionalism provide alternative frameworks to analyze policy-making. Institutionalism emphasizes the role of formal institutions, such as the parliament and bureaucracy, while group theory examines the influence of interest groups in shaping policy outcomes. This study applies these theories to analyze recent policy-making trends in Bangladesh.

Conceptual Framework

Public policy is a multi-disciplinary approach. In order to understand recent trends of public policy arena in Bangladesh we need to explain the concept of public policy. This section contains theoretical framework of public policy-making process.

Defining Public Policy

The term "Public Policy" is composed of two words, "**Public**" and "**Policy**". At the very outset, we must elaborate on both of these terms. "Public" refers to something which concerns people as a whole. To be more specific, it denotes the people living inside the territory of any state who enjoy constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights. "Policy" means planned course of action taken by an individual or group to address a specific issue or concern. Political scientists have defined it in many ways. But they do not come to a consensus. Here are some definitions of the scholars:

- **Dye (1981: 3)** in a simple definition state: *"Public policy is what ever governments choose to do or not to do."*
- **Clarke E. Cochran et al (1999: 1):** *"The term public policy always refers to the actions of government and the intentions that determine those actions."*
- **Charles L. Cochran and Eloise F. Malonec (1995: 9):** *"Public policy consists of political decisions for implementing programs to achieve societal goals."*

- **B. Guy Peters (1999: 12)** stated most simply: *“Public policy is the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens.”*

Public Policy making Process: A Theoretical Perspective

Making public policies is a complicated process. It involves different activities within the political system. An Introduction to the Policy Process explains how policies are influenced by social, political, economic, and other factors. Traditionally, public policy books have followed the “textbook model” or “stages model” to explain this process. Dye (1981: 34) presented a model, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Policy-making as a Process

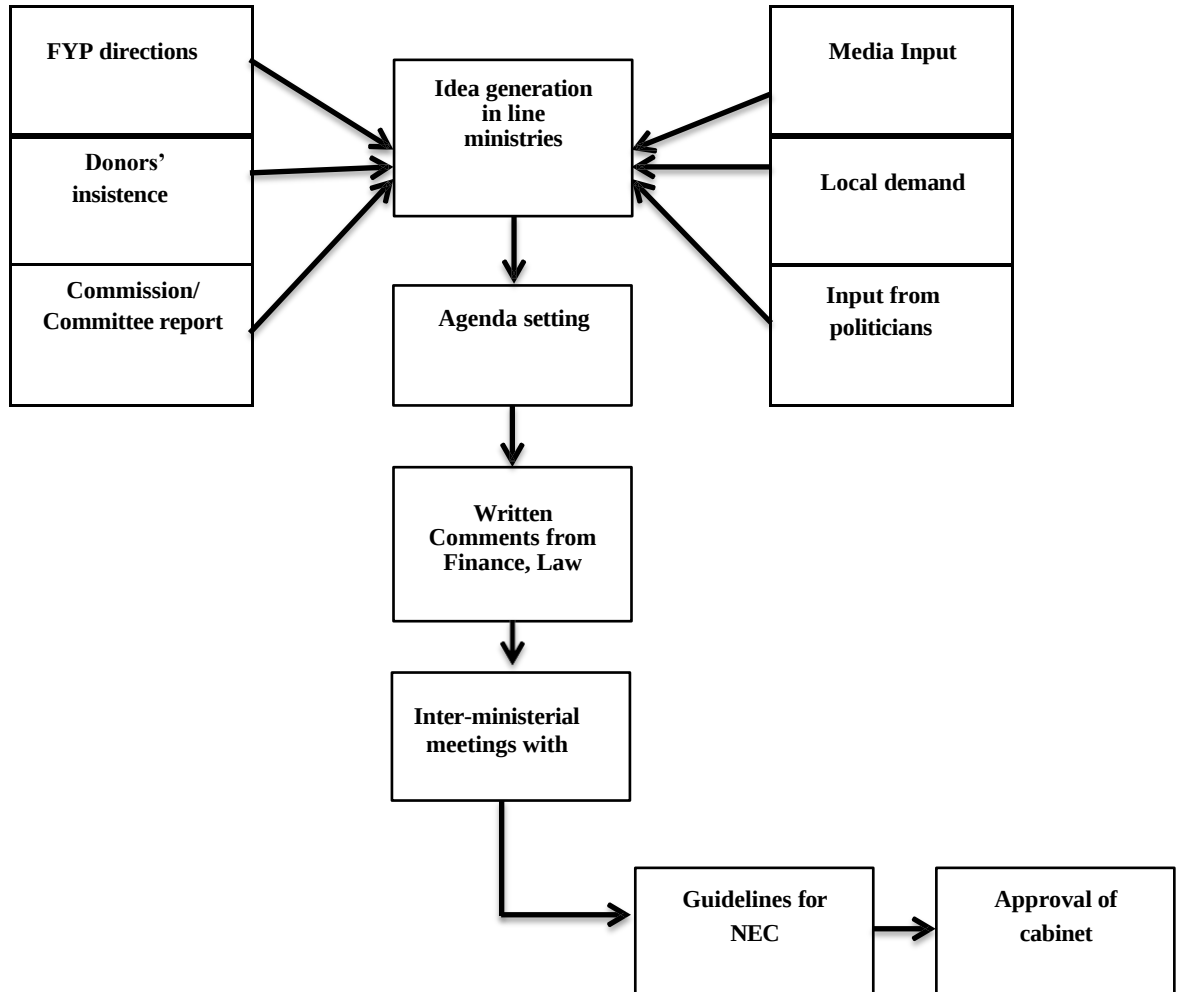
Policy-making can be viewed as a step-by-step process of creating policies. However, in reality, these steps often overlap and connect with each other.

Process	Activity	Participants
Problem Identification	Publicizing societal problems Expressing demands for government action	Mass media Interest groups Citizen initiatives Public opinion
↓	↓	↓
Agenda Setting	Deciding what issues will be decided, what problems will be addressed by government Candidates for elective office Mass media	Elites, including president, Congress
↓	↓	↓
Policy Formulation	Developing policy proposals to resolve issues and ameliorate problems	Think tanks President and executive office Congressional committees Interest groups
↓	↓	↓
Policy Legitimation	Selecting a proposal Developing political support for it Enacting it into law Deciding on its constitutionality	Interest groups President Congress Courts
↓	↓	↓
Policy Implementation	Budgeting and appropriations Organizing departments and agencies Providing payments or services Levying taxes	President and White House staff Executive departments and agencies Independent Agencies and government corporations
↓	↓	↓
Policy Evaluation	Reporting outputs of government programs Evaluating impacts of policies on target and non-target groups Proposing changes and “reforms”	Executive departments and agencies Congressional oversight committees Mass media Think tanks

A Framework for Public Policy making in Bangladesh

Part II of Bangladesh Constitution outlines public policies. It includes 25 articles about fundamental principles of state policies (**Aminuzzaman 2013: 445**). The policy-making process, which applies to all sectors, including education, is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Public Policy making Process in Bangladesh



Case Study

In order to point out recent trends of public policy-making process we need to look into very recent public policies adopted by the government.

a. Digital Security Act (DSA), 2018

The Information and Communication Technology Act was first passed in 2006. Later in 2013, the law was tightened by increasing the punishment. The approval came from a regular cabinet meeting chaired by Sheikh Hasina (Erstwhile Prime Minister) on August 13. Bangladesh's Parliament passed the DSA in October 2018 (**Daily Star 2018**). There were intense criticism and condemnation from various social and political organizations against this act. Amnesty International (2018) mentioned in a press release: *"The Act provides absolute power to the government's Digital Security Agency to initiate investigations into any one whose activities are deemed harmful or a threat."*

b. Abolishing Quota System, 2018

The quota system reserved 56% of government jobs for specific groups. In April 2018, students at Dhaka University started protests demanding reforms, which quickly spread to other universities (**Dhaka Tribune 2018**). On October 4, 2018, the government issued a gazette notification removing the quota system for first- and second-class government jobs (**Daily Star 2018**).

c. Road Transport Act, 2018

Two students of Shaheed Romijuddin Cantonment College were killed by a speeding bus at Airport Road on On 29 July 2018 (**Daily Star 2018**). The failure of government to take action and the indifferent attitude of then transport and shipping ministers led to a nationwide student protest demanding better traffic laws and road safety. For nine days, thousands of students brought the capital, Dhaka, to a standstill. As a result, the new *Road Transport Act 2018* was introduced and approved by the President on October 8, 2018 (**Daily Star 2019**). The Road Transport Act introduced the death penalty for bus drivers found guilty of negligence causing fatal road accidents.

d. Recognition of Dawrae Hadith (Takmil) Certificate in Qawmi Madrasa as Equivalent to a Master's Degree in Islamic Studies and Arabic (2018)

The recognition of Qawmi madrasa education first gained attention during the BNP-Jamaat government (Daily Star, 2018). On August 21, 2006, just three months before leaving office, then-Prime Minister Khaleda Zia announced the government's decision to recognize Dawra certificates. However, the implementation was stalled due to incomplete procedural formalities. Despite this, a group of Qawmi madrasa teachers and Islamic scholars continued to push for recognition. On April 11, 2017, Sheikh Hasina (Erstwhile Prime Minister) declared that Dawra certificates would be recognized as equivalent to master's degrees. Just two days later, the education ministry issued a circular formalizing this decision (Daily Star, 2018).

Hilsha Fish Production Policy

Hilsha, the national fish of Bangladesh, is one of the most important fishery resources can be categorized as a common pool resources. In the past, it was found that the production of Hilsha declined due to unregulated fishing by fishermen in breeding season and catching of the Juvenile (Jatka) Hilsha fish. To revive the Hilsha production, the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, Department of Fisheries under the Government of Bangladesh maneuvered some important policies (**BBC Bangla 2020**) mentioned below-

- Ban on catching Jatka from March-April and November-January in all sanctuaries
- Ban on catchings pawn (mother Hilsha) during October-02 November in all roaming areas.
- Ban on sanctuaries such as Lower Meghna, Shanbazpur Channel, Tentulia river during March to April.
- Ban on and harmanic river from November to January.

Hence, individual action of the fishermen has been maneuvered by compliance of the individual, to protect Hilsha fish and institutions and the fishing community to protect Hilsha fish. Such a policy increased Hilsha production by 150% according to a report. To compensate for not fishing in these affected areas, fishing communities or house holds received sacks of rice or microcredit to start small businesses and replace their lost income.

Findings

The following sections contain an analysis of recent trends of policy-making process in Bangladesh. This is done by based on the framework and case studies presented above.

Bangladesh as an example of “Iron law oligarchy”

Public policy-making process in Bangladesh can be explained with “The iron law of oligarchy” of the German sociologist Robert Michels. It asserts that in any political party, only a few people make decisions at the end of the day (**Hyland 1995: 247**). No matter whether the country is democratic or undemocratic. This is so true in case of Bangladesh. At the end, some selected persons from the ruling party come to a decision and make most policies.

Policy as an Elite Preference

It is now evident from the above discussion that Bangladesh is slowly moving towards an elite model. There are basically two types of people living in every society - elite and non-elite. In public policy, we call them “controlling elite.” It is because elite has the ability to allocate values.

In elite model, people are powerless. Public officials merely carry out these orders of the controlling elites. For example, there are actions, criticisms, opinions against Digital Security Act, 2018 but all are symbolic. With regard to public policy-making process, everything is driven by them.

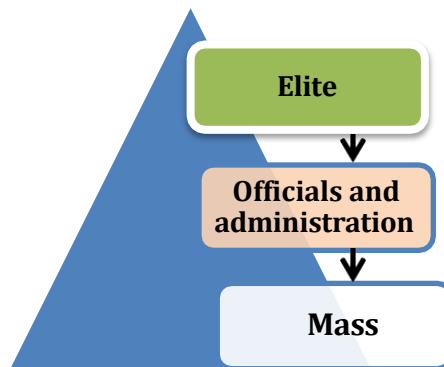


Figure 2: In Bangladesh, public policy does not flow upward from demands by the people, but rather downward from the interests, values, and preferences of elites.

People Maintain Status Quo

Aforementioned case studies imply that Bangladeshi people are maintaining status quo. It generally applies that people in Bangladesh are trying to comply with existing public policy debate. People are not concerned about what happens inside the “black box” of government, parliament, ministers, and bureaucrats, or how much power and influence they have.

Non-Performing Cabinet

In Bangladesh, like in many other parliamentary systems, the central cabinet is the highest policy-making body. According to the Rules of Business 1996, section 4(ii), “No important policy decision shall be taken except with the approval of the cabinet” (**Banglapedia**). This means the cabinet has the final authority to approve policies, and all policy matters must go through it. However, some policies proposed by the prime minister’s office or powerful cabinet members often get approved more quickly through a fast-track process (**Aminuzzaman 2013: 447**).

Parliament is not Functioning

The case studies suggest that Bangladesh’s parliament is not functioning effectively. While it holds a constitutional role and responsibilities, it has largely become a law-approving body. Important policy issues are rarely discussed in parliament or its committees (**Ahmed 2012**) but it is an irony that debates on public policy are limited. Over time, the parliament has turned into a tool for maintaining the ruling regime’s authority rather than an active platform for policy debate, review, and analysis (**Aminuzzaman 2013: 448**).

Public Policy as Equilibrium in the Group Struggle

Dye (1981: 22) states, public policy at any given time is the equilibrium reached in the group struggle. This equilibrium is determined by the relative influence of various interest groups.

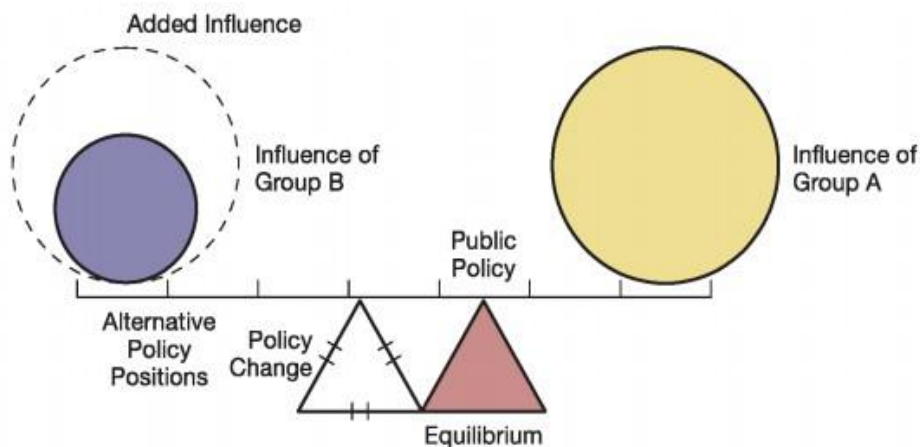


Figure 3: The Group Model

In Bangladesh, different pressure groups have played important roles in pursuing various policies. They try to influence policy outputs and institutional processes. For instance, Making Dawrae Hadith (Takmil) Certificate in Qawmi Madrasa Equivalent to Master's Degree (Islamic Studies and Arabic), 2018. In an interview with **The Daily Star (2018)** noted academician Syed Manzoorul Islam said it appears to be a political decision rather than an academic one. Islamist parties in Bangladesh that have in the past always sided with a centre-right alliance led by the BNP are now joining hands with the ruling Awami League. The incumbent party led by Sheikh Hasina (Erstwhile Prime Minister) is secular by its very manifesto. The ruling party with a Centre-left manifesto has been making a conscious effort to develop stronger ties with Islamist parties in the last couple of years. Not only has it formed strategic alliances, but it also has worked to unite like-minded Islamic clerics under the same umbrella.

Participation of Youth

According to a survey conducted by the daily **Prothom Alo (2019)**, about 56 percent of young people are uninterested in politics. The engineering of depoliticization, which began during the military rule, has been working for a long time (**Majumder 2019**). It is true that youth participation has been limited in local government to national level politics. But recent movements, for example, a series of public protests advocating improved road safety were held from 29 July to 8 August 2018 and quota reform movement have influenced public policy domain of Bangladesh in many ways.

Absence of Policy as Maximum Social Gain

According to **Dye (1981: 19)**, a rational policy is one that achieves "maximum social gain"; that is, governments should choose policies resulting in gains to society that exceed costs by the greatest amount, and governments should refrain from policies if costs exceed gains. But in the policy-making process of Bangladesh there is no institutional form of

rationalism. Again, there are no officials here to make alternate policy like the USA. As a result, policy in Bangladesh adopted without cost-benefit analysis. But it should not be.

Concluding Remarks

The discussion above gives a clear idea about how public policies are made in Bangladesh. It shows that the traditional system for making policies is weak and ineffective. Public policies are not inclusive, and decisions are mostly influenced by the elite. As a result, ordinary people suffer the most. However, in recent times, some changes have been happening in the policy-making process. New groups are becoming involved, but the political system and political institutions are still not well developed. The policy-making system remains unstable because of a “winner-takes-all” approach, where those in power control everything. Public policies mostly reflect the interests of the elite rather than the needs of the general people. Any changes in policies will happen gradually, not suddenly. A rational approach could help improve policymaking. To make better decisions, policymakers should understand society’s values, consider different policy options, and predict their outcomes carefully.

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