

Interview – Mohammad Tarikul Islam

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Dr. Mohammad Tarikul Islam is an Associate Professor of the Department of Government and Politics at Jahangirnagar University in Bangladesh and a Visiting Scholar at The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He has been a Visiting Scholar at the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. Before joining the university, Dr Islam worked with the United Nations Development Program for seven years. Dr Islam is a regular contributor to the London School of Economics and Political Science's *South Asia Blog*, and the *Oxford Political Review*. He is the Editor of *Oxford Transitional Justice Research* and has a forthcoming book entitled *Local Government in Bangladesh: Contemporary Issues and Challenges* from Routledge. He has been researching different aspects of local government and sustainable rural development in South Asia since 2014. Dr. Islam has given lectures at different universities in the UK, India, Indonesia, Nepal, and is frequently cited in media and press articles.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I was born in a typical remote village of Bangladesh. I remember reading social affairs in high school, and thought it was very interesting – some of the stories told by my teacher pertaining to the role of Union Parishad (the local government body in the rural area of Bangladesh) still stick with me after all these years. I remember one of my relatives who was the Chairman of the local Union Parishad telling me about his passion to serve the interests of the general people. I had to observe, as a young child, major problems the rural community was facing. One afternoon in the village, a ward member of Union Parishad had come for a dispute resolution in a neighboring house. Without any motive, I was in and around the arbitration and the experience was devastating for me; it suddenly made me aware of the menaces of rural dispute resolution where might takes the place of right. I witnessed two major floods affecting my village where I hardly noticed the assistance of the Union. One fine morning, I was moving towards my school 2.5 km away from my home and I met the local Chairman on my way. With due respect, I asked him why he did not provide adequate relief support to the flood victims and in reply, he told me to grow up first and explore why our vulnerable community is being mistreated despite our strong will. Since then, it strikes me that it is important to understand the role of local government in ensuring the welfare of local people. I believe creating a sense of ownership among the community over local government will help bridge the gap between the government and rural people in Bangladesh.

My scholarly work has been greatly influenced by socioeconomic, environmental, and political events that shaped my personality and character. To me, for development to be truly sustainable, it is necessary to ensure the political commitment of all the world's states, as well as the greater collaboration of state and non-state development actors in the economy, environmental protection, human security and social development. Human security, focusing on the opportunities to make choices, presupposes that people have influence over the processes that shape their lives, including decision-making processes, implementing these decisions, and monitoring them. Security, at any level, is about individuals. Thus, sustainable development through people and for people highlights an important dimension of

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human security – that of citizens' participation in the creation of a peaceful, stable, and justifiable global system.

You have written extensively on local governance, grassroots political participation, human security, and sustainable rural development in Bangladesh. What is the role of rural politics in participatory rural development?

Bangladesh has been an advocate for empowered local governance, actively promoting it by utilizing the multi-stakeholder approach. It has long shared the importance of achieving equitable rural development. Rural community development in Bangladesh not only led to socioeconomic improvement, but it also had implications for social, economic, and environmental systems. The population of rural Bangladesh faces critical issues such as a significant decrease in water supply caused by a loss of water resources (springs), recurrent natural disasters, and the probable impact of climate change. These issues lead to threats to agricultural and community livelihood. However, rural development in Bangladesh is found to be less progressive as most community-based organizations are reported to be inactive. Furthermore, increasing community dependency on outsiders' help and the absence of community perceived development has contributed to the underdevelopment of rural Bangladesh, resulting in human insecurity, discrimination, and poverty.

The political security of the rural community is truly reflected only when they have access to the decision-making process of local government, with freedom of choice over the selection of their representatives to the Union Parishad. In 2015, there was a paradigm shift in the local government system when the Cabinet decided to hold local polls on a partisan basis, creating new challenges for political parties. The formal justice system in Bangladesh is under tremendous pressure with a high workload and an inadequate number of officials and staff members. As a result, the case backlogs equals the existing number of pending cases which currently stands at about half a million. The Village Court under the Union Parishad has been the alternative and reachable podium for the justice seeker in rural Bangladesh. The Village Courts Act of 2006, which replaced and updated the 1976 Act, provides for the establishment of a village court in every Union Parishad. A related criticism of the village court is that it has little appreciation of the rule of law and serves as an enforcer of often retrogressive norms. I think that a genuine quest for sustainable development depends on prioritizing effective and inclusive participation in development planning and enforcement. It also entails political elites' willingness to allow a platform where people – irrespective of party affiliation, race, gender and profession – will work for the betterment of society.

In your forthcoming book, you delve into issues of local governance and democratic development in rural Bangladesh. How are these two concepts interrelated?

With democratic values in mind, it is imperative to focus on the significance of local government to engage people throughout the entire process of community welfare. The existence of local government has always been fortified on the basis that the local government is a crucial aspect of the process of democratization. Undeniably, local government can serve as the training ground for mass political education, political leadership, and social accountability. Moreover, the democratic facet of local government conventionally unfolds in political parties, local elections, local leadership and participatory mechanisms.

The functional side of local government is explained in the policy-making and service delivery aspects taking place in inter-governmental settings. In the modern era of democracy, local governments have increasingly encountered public policy challenges spanning multiple authorities. Local representative democracy has opened up an opportunity for local people to be mindful in selecting their local leaders as well as engaging in the development process at the grassroots level in South Asia. Such party-based local government elections enable elected representatives to get the maximum benefit from the political government. The central political party in power implements their agenda at the local level with the maximum backing of local government elected representatives.

In practice, grassroots political movements enable individuals to articulate their demands for change as well as influence policymakers or relevant authorities at the local level to take a particular action for the overall development of society. Most developing nations are struggling to uproot the colonial legacy of the development paradigm by bringing about the elusive phenomenon of people's participation in development initiatives, which was ignored and

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remained only in papers as a striking slogan over the decades. It is deceptive that participation is the key to the inclusion of the community in development efforts, the human element of which promotes managing change in an effective manner.

Why is citizen participation important in development and local governance? In what ways can citizens participate in rural development planning and implementation?

Citizen's participation has been widely used in the discourse of development in the last few decades. Meaningful participation has come to be recognized as an absolute imperative for development. Since rural development is a people's program, it is essential that people should take an active part in rural development activities. As an essential pillar of democratic and public service transformation, local government is where solving the problems of democratic development has to start.

One important way of strengthening democratic institutions without weakening the executive is to ensure the active participation of the citizen in the rural development process by making the standing committees of local government effective. By and large, standing committees are small groups of representatives who are assigned, on either a temporary or a permanent basis, to examine matters more closely than could the institution. Since they operate under less formal rules, standing committee members can discuss issues informally and develop relationships with their colleagues who represent different interests—creating a collegial environment in which compromises on small matters and technical improvements in overall functioning can be agreed upon expeditiously. They help organizations to reduce their workload and perform different functions more efficiently with the formulation of rational decisions and the provision of an oversight function of governing bodies. For instance, the Union Parishad is the local government institution working to provide services to citizens at their doorstep. It is the only institution ensuring good governance, development planning, implementation, transparency, and accountability for rural areas in Bangladesh. However, these standing committees are not active in about 80% of the Union Parishad because the elected chairmen and other members are not properly aware and interested in its functions and jurisdictions.

The reasons behind the sluggish performance of standing committees may be attributed to a number of factors such as: a lack of initiatives of Union Parishad members, lack of pressure from the common people, lack of political pressure, lack of skills required for planning and implementing development programs at the local level, no specific terms of references of the standing committee, unwillingness on the part of the Union Parishad Chairman to delegate authority, and even the existence of the standing committee only on paper. The member secretary is not playing the most important role in the functioning of the standing committee as they should be setting agendas and making communication with the chair and other members. The essence of the standing committee system is still unrevealed to most of its members. Schemes recommended through standing committee meetings are not seen as urgent in the regular meeting of both Parishads. The effectiveness of these standing committees relies on a sense of ownership created among the standing committee members. Since the participation of members has not been made obligatory by the law, most of the members show reluctance in attending standing committee meetings.

Why is it necessary to localize the sustainable development goals (SDGs)? How has the COVID-19 pandemic threatened localizing the SDGs in Bangladesh?

The pandemic has shown us the importance of being collectively prepared when crises hit. It also allows us to take a comprehensive look at the sustainability of our environmental, economic, and social systems to create more resilient societies with the proper implementation of SDGs. The SDGs emphasize the need for an inclusive and localized approach where the promise to leave no one behind is embedded at the heart of the local government.

Achieving the SDGs requires contextualizing development priorities and programming, wherein the local government is the best fit for implementing policies and programs for improved service delivery that can address poverty, reduce inequality, climate vulnerability, and promote gender equity. Participatory grassroots local government is indispensable for delivering on the SDGs, particularly in poor and marginalized areas of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, it is far from being a reality in most developing countries. For example, the best practices recognized by the international community — like standing committees, project implementation committees, grassroots political

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participation, or open budget discussions — are not widely employed in local governments. Moreover, the pandemic has certainly intensified the vulnerabilities of local government bodies to deliver the best in attaining SDGs. If coronavirus responses are ad-hoc, underfunded, and without a view of long-term goals, decades of progress toward sustainable development stand to be reversed.

The crisis enables us to rethink uplifting human security in the lives of the people and not in the weapons that states have. The expansion of human security depends on sustainable development. The sustainable rural development approach recognizes the need to transcend fragmented responses in favor of people-centered, comprehensive, context-specific, and prevention-oriented solutions. A clear institutional framework with reinforced management and planning capacities, participatory mechanisms, and regular financial negotiations between all levels of government and local communities in developing countries are crucial in defining priorities within SDGs and plans of action accordingly. Under a comprehensive development framework, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, governments of developing countries, including Bangladesh, must strive to foster dialogue with all stakeholders: mobilizing a multi-level approach to accelerate collective efforts while setting enabling national frameworks that empower local actors to develop and lead their strategies aligned with the SDGs. Strengthening local government in developing countries is perhaps the only viable solution by which the national government can translate policies into inclusive development and prosperity.

What are you currently working on?

The scope of my current research work is based on the broader domain of local governance, grassroots political movements, human security, and sustainable development with a particular focus on social justice, participatory rural politics, and equitable development in South Asia. Above all, I adopt holistic approaches to the understanding of decentralized authority and power to participatory local governance. I am fascinated about methods that go beyond traditional perspectives, and explain the social experiences of citizen participation less from individual perceptions and more from social interactions within and among various social groups. I seek to locate these concepts and determinants of socioeconomic inclusion and injustices to help advance current understandings of social inequalities in a rural development context. My aim is to meaningfully contribute to supporting inclusive and equitable rural development that empowers local government institutions in South Asia.

In addition, I am researching the impact of geopolitics on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees. This research critically analyses the geopolitical interests of China and India in this evolving crisis. My ongoing research explores the interplay between Bangladesh's formal and informal diplomacy narratives and regional cooperation discourses on the repatriation of refugees, drawing upon theories of public diplomacy, regional cooperation, and non-conventional security studies. The research aims to inform the diplomatic approach of the government of Bangladesh under changed circumstances following Myanmar's military capture of state power in February 2021.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

I suggest that young scholars must believe in themselves and know that self-confidence is more important than they can imagine — it can change your whole life for the better. They must be devoted in creating, sharing, using and managing knowledge. Do not fear failure, as it builds stronger people in the end, so keep trying with confidence. Like many contenders, I came to higher education on a nontraditional path with ups and downs. However, for me, this journey ended with far more than a degree: it crowned in a distinctiveness that combined my life experiences and culture with the buoyancy and skillset of a promising scholar.

We are in dire need of approaches and methodologies that will better examine sustainable rural development and local governance issues, as well as identify the interplay between civic engagement, grassroots political movements, social justice, and the construction of social interactions among the social groups and communities within countries of origins and elsewhere. These include the examination of human rights, discrimination, poverty, and marginalization via the lenses of social justice. Research with this perspective has not yet been done, whereas there is extensive literature available on local governance, social justice and equitable development that explains and benefits the viewpoints of the policymakers — leaving scope for improved policy formulation in South Asia.

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