

# Popular Expectations of Government: Findings from Three Areas in Bangladesh

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## Summary

This paper presents findings from research into expectations of government, based on focus group discussion sessions with over 100 poor and very poor people in rural and urban Bangladesh. The research was designed to help improve our understanding of the political constraints shaping public policy with respect to poverty. In particular it aimed to understand the following: if, as is commonly asserted, the interests of the poorest do not make it onto the public policy agenda, why do the poor appear to tolerate this relative neglect? What is the least a government must do for the poorest in order to retain the level of cooperation and legitimacy necessary for it to function? In brief, what do the poor and the very poor expect from their government?

The risks and difficulties of conducting research of this kind were addressed through a careful process of testing research tools detailed in the report. The team finally developed a semi-structured discussion guideline that incorporated participatory discussion tools. Even then, the analysis of the research findings is cautious and tentative.

The main research findings include that government was widely perceived as positive for the poor, and there was an unexpectedly clear understanding of the structure and operations of government, and of the mechanisms of political process and change. Findings about sources of information about government and politics highlight the continuing significance of community ‘brokers’, while also confirming the overpowering role of the public television in shaping perceptions of government. There seems to be considerable faith in the capacity of the poor to influence the government, and of the government to respond to the needs of the poor. Despite a generally positive appraisal of the role of government, the poor public is attuned to and critical of the actions of government which affect them directly. In their role as chief guarantors of the welfare of the poor, then, government fails when it fails to control the prices of essential goods. Respondents tended to find it difficult to prioritise between different issues, and supported more governmental action in most areas. There was a reasonably clear sense of what made government legitimate, as well of the conditions under which different types of political protest are acceptable.

The paper concludes that there is a high degree of awareness and involvement among the poor with respect to matters political. Sources of such awareness appear to include some voter education, but more important are regular participation in various aspects of politics; the print and broadcast media; election campaigns; and mediated knowledge garnered through efforts to access government services. Government is seen as inherently pro-poor, and there was no sense that government might curb private initiative or interfere with traditional norms and practices. If anything, government was frequently contrasted favourably with local actors such as community leaders or local government representatives. Problems with government such as corruption were strongly associated with these latter groups. The paper concludes with a discussion of this finding, offering some preliminary conclusions about its implications for political process and the poor.

## Introduction

This paper presents findings from research into what poor and very poor people in Bangladesh expect from their government. It is based mainly on evidence drawn from 22 structured discussion sessions with different groups of over 100 people in rural parts of Nilphamari and Chapainawabganj districts, and in Dhaka city, conducted in the second half of 2005. It also draws on learning from other recent empirical research by the authors and their colleagues in RED into political aspects of extreme poverty at the village level.

### 1.1 Background: the political limits to neglect of the poor

The overarching question driving this research was the desire to understand why the needs and the interests of the poor and the poorest have so little influence on policy and political outcomes. But while we wanted to contribute to understanding this problem, we decided against direct research into the policy process and the nature of party political competition in Bangladesh on the grounds that a) the policy process itself is weak (ad hoc, centralized, frequently personality-driven)<sup>1</sup> and b) the character of contemporary party politics makes little space for competition over poverty policy. These qualities of the policy-political environment meant, we felt, that any new research on these topics was likely to uncover facts about the policy process and about party political competition, but that it could quite feasibly do so without shedding much more light on the relationship of those processes to poverty. We also felt that we should use the opportunity to develop approaches to researching the politics of chronic poverty that would a) help move thinking on in new directions, rather than merely reconfirming the findings of other researchers and b) be methodologically feasible.

Gaps within the literature show that there remain interesting and serious questions to be asked about the political beliefs and practices of the poor. Useful and informative sample surveys relating to political attitudes had been conducted in the recent past<sup>2</sup> but these had not generally focused on poor people, nor had these been subject to much analysis beyond the statistical. How could we interestingly and usefully frame research into the politics of poverty?

One possibility for framing the research had emerged from a review of the literature on resistance and revolt in Bangladesh that had been undertaken a few years previously.<sup>3</sup> This had encouraged the authors to conclude that while the political weight of the poor in sheer number-terms arguably does not show up in the details of policy, their overall tolerance of the state and the political regime is still likely to prove vital to political capital in Bangladesh. The question that arises is to do with popular quiescence and the legitimation of political rule: if the interests of the poor are inadequately taken into

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<sup>1</sup> Kochanek (2003) provides a good account of the policy process from start to finish. A useful recent description of policymaking in the health sector is by Osman (2004). Mahmud's (2003) account of the budgeting process highlights its incremental nature, as opposed to any strategic or policy-orientation. Ongoing efforts by the major donors to encourage a shift by the Government of Bangladesh towards using a Medium Term Expenditure Framework highlight the significance of this particular failing in policy-making.

<sup>2</sup> For example, CDL 2001; Democracywatch/PPRC 2001.

<sup>3</sup> See Hossain (2005, chapter 5).

account politically and on the policy agenda, what is their response to this neglect? Why, for example, do we see so little recent evidence of revolt or resistance? The literature on this issue as summarised in Hossain (2005a) yielded a number of potential answers. One answer is that the poor do not organise to resist their neglect in public policy because they have been unable to do so:

- a) fear of violent repression preempts resistance.<sup>4</sup> It is true that political authority tends not to rest sustainably on coercion alone, and it is not clear that the Bangladeshi state is unusually repressive or even particularly successful at controlling its poor citizens. However, while there may be little centrally-directed violence, fear of reprisals from local party functionaries may operate as an effective barrier to local horizontal political organisation in Bangladesh.
- b) The organised political left in Bangladesh has been weak. An institutionalist perspective on the problem highlights the feeble, fragmented quality of left political organisation since its 1970s' heyday. It is possible that development NGOs have filled the pro-poor political-institutional vacuum, representing the needs and interests of the poor in a contained, safe mode of politics.

A second answer is that the poor may not have had any overwhelming reason to pay the price of resistance because:

- c) The state has not made itself an important target of discontent, by, for example, taxing heavily.<sup>5</sup>
- d) Some action has been taken to reduce poverty, reducing the motivations for revolt. Government may not always have been the most effective actor in this area, but it has made space for other actors. Public programmes guarantee a minimum degree of security for the poorest through regular public works and relief and development programmes (RMP, VGD, FFW, VGF; an expanding social safety net since the mid-1990s of small pension schemes for the elderly, the widowed and the disabled). What this many also mean is that the 'political' energies of the poor may be directed towards making individual claims on patrons to gain access to such schemes (see Matin and Hulme 2003). Nevertheless, the direction of change in terms of the material wellbeing – if not the political empowerment - of the poor is broadly positive.

What these last two points highlight is that while public policy may be relatively neglectful of the poor, it cannot afford to be entirely so. Instead then, of asking why the needs and interests of the poorest do not make it onto the public policy agenda, we wanted to try to understand the limits to their tolerance of this relative neglect. What is the least a government must do for the poorest in order to retain the level of cooperation and legitimacy necessary for it to function? What do the poor expect politically?

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<sup>4</sup> An excellent account of how this works in practice is Adnan (1997).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the unenviable reputation for corruption the Government of Bangladesh has earned itself may have made it such a target. But this does not appear to have happened, or not to date. It is interesting to speculate why: it may be that corruption is widely tolerated by Bangladeshi society - perhaps because there are many beneficiaries from what has become a comparatively widespread practice. Alternatively, it may be that either levels of corruption or – more importantly – levels of corruption as perceived by the general public – are lower than the discourse around the issue would suggest.

The review of the older literature (mostly from the 1970s and 1980s) suggested that during that period, it had been possible to identify at least two minimum political expectations of poor Bangladeshis - or sets of limits to their obedience. The first was that government was to be judged on its success in feeding its people during crises. It was seen as vital to political leadership, local and national, that efforts to do so were at least seen to be made (Jahangir 1995, Huque 1986; see Hossain 2005b on how local leadership is constructed around such issues in rural Bangladesh). The second was that the poor expected to receive at least those state resources which are, by law, their 'rights'. This second point, it should be noted, was drawn primarily from sponsored accounts of events such as NGO-led mobilisations of groups for collective activities. That they appeared to be organising specifically around 'rights' may say more about the authors and sponsors of such literature than about the political beliefs of the poor activists themselves. Most such acts of resistance involved examples of resistance against blatant and outrageous acts of corruption by local elites when these deprived local groups of publicly-mandated 'rights' (e.g. relief goods, irrigation, medical treatment). Exemplars of this tendency are in Chen 1986 and Kramsjö and Wood 1992. But even if the notion of 'rights' more closely reflects the needs of donor-funded social science than local conceptions, it does seem to be the case that a 'legitimising notion' of some kind is in place when poor people rebel; unless this is transgressed, case after case suggests the default political mode is likely to be acquiescence.

The two political expectations outlined above constituted (some of) the normative substance of the political beliefs of the poor, and are likely to have informed their political behaviour during that time. The present research attempted to explore this issue further: have two or three decades of development and poverty reduction, and the successful avoidance of major food or economic crisis altered poor people's expectations of government? Has the minimum expectation of government risen after a decade and a half of multiparty democracy? Or has the enduring disappointment of post-liberation regimes lowered the bar, so that expectations are suitably low of a government that relies substantially on other actors to provide for its poor?

## **1.2 Research questions and methods**

We felt it was necessary to try to focus on particular areas of governmental activity. We retained food security to explore because it focuses attention on the poorest. The research also focused on popular expectations with respect to education and law and order, on grounds that they were examples of relative success (education) and relative failure (law and order) with respect to pro-poor governmental action. In the end, we discovered that both were considered to be areas of comparative success, and food security was a slightly more complex issue. These findings will be discussed later.

Our main research question was as follows:

- What do poor people – and the poorest, in particular - expect from government?

Additional questions the research attempted to address were as follows:

- What are the beliefs of different social groups about the responsibilities and capacities of different actors to provide food security, education and law and order? How do different social groups prioritise between different responsibilities of government? Do these priorities show signs of having changed over time?
- How much is expected from government (with respect to food security, education and law and order), at which levels (national, local, community)? Are there notions of citizen's responsibilities (to work, attend school properly, pay taxes, obey laws) that correspond to expectations from government?
- What do the poorest think are the characteristics of good local and national leadership?
- To what extent can popular expectations of government be said to constitute a local discourse or theory of rights? How live are these in shaping political action and/or discourse at local levels and beyond? How is political support campaigned for locally? How do ultrapoor people view political process and their own roles within it?

Other research was drawn on to design the methods and is being analysed or developed to further explore initial findings from this research. However, the main method finally adopted was the use of focus group discussions (FGDs) with small groups (usually four to six participants) of similar occupations and backgrounds in three parts of the country. A structured list of discussion points was used to guide the FGDs, after having been pilot-tested with groups in two different communities. An English version of the discussion guide is attached in the annex. The discussion involved a number of attempts to encourage a sorting or ranking of priorities. The discussion groups usually took around three hours to conduct. Groups were selected from three different regions of the country and from different class groups in an attempt to understand which aspects of political discourse are exclusive to the poor, and which have a more universal character. The discussions were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

**Table 1 Profile of the discussion groups**

Area	Occupation of the group	Poverty profile
Dhaka city, Old Town	Working children (mixed girls and boys)	Poor
Dhaka city, Karail	Day labourers and domestic workers (women)	Poor and very poor
Dhaka city, Solmide	Rickshaw-pullers (men)	Poor
Dhaka city, Shahjadpur	Dropouts, small shopkeepers (teenage boys)	Moderate poor and lower middle class
Dhaka city, Shahjadpur	Educated boys, dropouts, aspiring migrant workers (young men)	Lower middle class
Dhaka city, Mohakhali	BRAC microfinance programme members, petty traders (women)	Poor
Nilphamari, Domar	BRAC Targeting the Ultra Poor programme members	Very Poor
Nilphamari, Domar	BRAC Targeting the Ultra Poor programme members	Very Poor
Nilphamari, Domar	BRAC Targeting the Ultra Poor programme members	Very Poor
Nilphamari, Domar	BRAC Targeting the Ultra Poor programme members	Very Poor
Nilphamari, Domar	BRAC Targeting the Ultra Poor programme members	Very poor
Nilphamari, Domar	BRAC microfinance programme members	Poor
Nilphamari, Domar	Rickshaw-pullers	Poor
Nilphamari, Domar	Members of RDRS popular theatre troupe	Moderate Poor
Nilphamari, Domar	Small businessmen - fish-traders	Poor
Chapainawabganj, Nachole	BRAC Targeting the Ultra Poor programme members	Very poor
Chapainawabganj, Nachole	BRAC Targeting the Ultra Poor programme members	Very poor
Chapainawabganj, Nachole	BRAC Targeting the Ultra Poor programme members	Very poor
Chapainawabganj, Nachole	BRAC microfinance programme members	Poor
Chapainawabganj, Nachole	Trinomul NGO members	Poor
Chapainawabganj, Nachole	<i>Shantal</i> men	Moderate poor
Chapainawabganj, Nachole	Rickshaw-pullers	Poor

There are risks involved in the collection and analysis of data of the kind presented here, and the analysis below should illustrate how these were addressed. Throughout we kept in mind the possibility that views articulated by focus group participants were shaped by what they thought we wanted to hear or felt it was appropriate for them to say. However, our methods were – and we felt, moderately successfully - designed to maximise the free flow of opinions and discussion. First, we used focus groups of people from similar backgrounds in neutral settings, and facilitators with some personal or reputable professional connection to the group. The sessions were frequently long enough for the participants to become comfortable and relaxed with each other and with the facilitators. Second, we made it clear at the outset that we were more interested in participants' views on the scope and nature of government than in assessing the performance or merits of different political parties in office. This was achieved by starting the discussion by mediating the construction of a political timeline to discuss the point that government is always present, even if parties in power change. This appears to have put some participants at their ease. However, it did come at some cost, including, potentially, of views on the interesting issue of partisan competition. Discussion of different parties' performance inevitably emerged spontaneously in some sessions, but our findings are comparatively more detailed on the blander theme of political theory – what the state should do, and how – than on the juicier issue of party politics.

We also recognised early on that participants might merely repeat catchphrases or expressions commonly used in the media or political rhetoric, and present these as their own opinions. The 'tide of development' is an example of an expression that appears to have caught the public imagination in a number of regions. However, our discussions were sufficiently detailed and varied for us to be able to assess when these were being reproduced verbatim and when they had been absorbed as meaningful ideas. In most cases, political messages were repeated if and when they had appeal or meaning. The adoption of the language and ideas of political and media professionals was not simply about manipulation, then, as to be successful, political language must have resonance for poor people. As we became aware of the need to listen out for such language and to raise questions about its origins and meaning early on in the process, we were closely attuned to the impact of the mass media and political activism.

## **2. Findings**

The research findings are organised as follows. Section 2.1 looks at discussants' views on the structure, character and nature of government, including of the relationship between different branches of government. Section 2.2 presents findings about accountability, transparency and responsiveness. These include findings about sources of information about government, respondents' feelings about their capacity to influence government, and the unexpectedly widespread belief in the intrinsically pro-poor character of government. Section 2.3 looks at perceptions of the scope of governmental responsibility. We show how governmental action is, almost by definition, a source of 'good' things for

the *jonogon* ('the people' or 'the general public'). The vital exception to this general truth is food prices. Section 2.4 discusses perceptions of governmental legitimacy and the appropriate place and character of protest.

## 2.1 What is government?

### *a Government is a good thing*

Our discussions yielded unexpectedly detailed awareness of and interest in the structure, functioning and process of government. It strongly suggests that the poor are engaged with politics and that their participation is well-informed, although the same could not be said of the very poor, who displayed less – in some cases no – engagement and awareness. Government is evidently a more distant and nebulous entity for the very poor women with whom we spoke than for other groups. But for the most part, and even among some very poor women, our discussions left us with a palpable sense of personal empowerment with respect to engagement with government.

Definitions of government often stressed its moral attributes: government's role was that of primary protector of the poor. Traders in Domar defined government as 'those who have taken full responsibility for looking after us', while Dhaka rickshaw-pullers saw government as 'for poor people, for making sure poor people can eat and survive decently'. Normative notions of government were also at times accompanied by more neutral notions of statecraft '*rashtro porichalona*' (rickshaw-wallahs in Domar), or running the country ('*desh chalay*') (BRAC members in Domar).

In their moral definition of government as chief welfare provider to the poor – a kind of very big patron – the political discourse of the Bangladeshi poor prioritises tangible welfare and development outcomes rather than the protection of civil and political rights (e.g. to vote, to due justice, to free speech and equality before the law, and so on). This distinction between government's role in ensuring practical needs as opposed to guaranteeing civil and political rights supports the point made by Partha Chatterjee, who detects a contrast between the civic and political rights stressed in Western forms of citizenship as compared to the emphasis on government as a source of welfare among postcolonial populations. A Western citizenship rooted in 'civic rights in civil society' evolves into 'political rights in the fully developed nation-state': for the erstwhile colonial populations of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, citizenship is foremost a matter of 'governmentality' – classification, enumeration, and (hopefully) the subsequent receipt of welfare goods, immunization, schools, and so on (Chatterjee 2004: 36). As many of our discussants made clear, getting your name on 'the list' – for whatever purpose – is a kind of recognition as a citizen, a goal in its own right. But this also suggests, curiously and unexpectedly, that there is some acceptance of bureaucracy as a good thing. Perhaps for poor people accustomed to having their welfare allocations at the community level decided on the basis of face-to-face relations with all their potential for personal bias, it may be entirely rational to view the prospect of (relatively) rational, impersonal administration with optimism.

Government is seen as all-powerful. Its power is also believed to be rising. It is widely understood that this power comes from the votes of the *jonogon*, and that it is strictly limited to a five-year period. By far the majority of discussants felt that the power of government was greater now than during independence, pointing to the greater numbers of schools, roads, and the presence of more government workers as evidence of increased power. Power is also clear from the ‘peace in the country’. *Shantal* men were alone in arguing that governmental power had declined, on the grounds that people were less fearful of government, less simple (*shoja*) than they used to be. Most, including the *Shantal* men, felt that the rise in governmental power was positive.

***b The structure of government***

Metaphors are widely used to explain government, so that for many, that the head of the government was like the head of a very very large family. Equally common was the description of the Prime Minister as ‘*desh’er raja*’. While the literal English translation may suggest hereditary ruler or king, this use does not in this context mean that our discussants lack an understanding of democracy – although they are also aware of (and uninterested in) the dynastic character of their political parties. Begum Khaleda Zia is widely known to be the *bortoman raja* (current ruler), but it is also known that Sheikh Hasina was the previous *raja*. It is understood that there will be a new *raja* after the next elections, and that there have been other *rajases* in the past. The popularity of the term *raja* has historically been used in the Bengal context to refer to a range of types of rulers, including landlords, and does not necessarily suggest the right to rule based on ritual, material, heredity or other forms of power. At the same time, however, *raja* carries connotations of respect and authority which do appear to go beyond the conventional contemporary cynicism towards government, obvious both in the attitudes of western voters and among the educated middle classes of Bangladesh.

There was a high degree of sophistication with respect to knowledge of the structure of government and of how power is exercised through a chain of command. As BRAC members explained it:

Khaleda Zia gives an order (*nirdesh*). This is made into a circular (*sarkular*) by the MPs and Ministers. TNO (Thana Nirbahi Officer: chief implementing officer at the sub-district level and the most significant field administration officer) follows this circular. It goes to the member chairmen (local government representatives) and they take the circular to the TNO. Under the TNO, there are other officers – education officer, AC land. They do the government’s work.

Everyone appears to know that the Prime Minister sits with her MPs and ministers in the *Shangshad Bhabhan* (Parliament building), where they discuss and have meetings.<sup>6</sup> In Parliament, we were told, MPs tell the Speaker that their areas need roads, schools, hospitals, and so on. They then pass bills and endorse budgets. It was also widely recognised that government has workers – *shorkari kormochari* – who are paid

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<sup>6</sup> It is possible that the distinctive architecture of the Parliament building and its prominence on BTV (state TV channel) news broadcasts help in this recognition. Our use of pictures of Shangshad Bhabhan were particularly useful in kick-starting discussions.

employees, and different from government *per se*. MPs, ministers, and the Prime Minister change, but *kormocharis* do not. The *kormocharis* include the bureaucrats, the police, and the army, right down to thana- or upazila-level bureaucrats who implement what the MPs and Ministers budget for in the parliament. *Shantal* men in Nachole explained:

The Education Officer controls the entire budget for education in his area. He keeps accounts of how much money he was given, where he has spent how much money, and how much money is left. Until our MP makes the budget and gives permission, the government worker does not start working.

It is widely recognised that political parties are not part of government, until and unless they are voted in. Working women in Dhaka told us: ‘political parties ask us to come to processions (*michils*) and ask us to make them government, telling us that they will build roads, schools, madrassahs if we vote for them.’ Even locally powerful, but unelected, political leaders – such as a nephew of Khaleda Zia in Domar – are not considered government. Whether or not Union Parishad counts as government is not clear. Although some seemed familiar with the term *sthaniyo shorkar* (local government), it was not a term commonly used, nor did it seem to link Union Parishad to government (*shorkar* proper). The terms for UP officials are ‘chairman’ and ‘member’, and they are *elaka’r protinidhi* –almost literally, locally-elected representatives. Overall, it seems they are not seen as part of government, even they draw a salary from the government and are related to government because they distribute various resources received from government. Police and army are similarly seen as separate but related to government. They are almost mirror images of each other in the public imagination, with the police cast as a bribe-taking semi-criminal body, compared to the army’s largely positive role in ensuring honest relief distribution.

While there was some fuzziness about precisely how far down the chain officialdom and representatives stopped being ‘*shorkar*’, it was clear that local community or village elites of the *matbar/dewan/morol* type were not accorded that title. There is a sense that there are *shorkarer lok* and *shorkari lok* (the government’s people or the people of government) who may not be precisely part of government, but who may be employees or supporters. There are hints, too, that some of the ‘government’s people’ may do a bit of spying on the population. This suggests that there is some reluctance for government to be too closely apprised of local happenings.

When pressed on the identity of *shorkarer lok*, and on the differences between that group and the *jonogon*, the major distinguishing factor that emerged was that of education. While education does present a barrier to poor people’s access to government, it is not insurmountable, as an educated person can act as a broker in their favour. Many also suggested that, at best, their children’s education would at least given them the chance to potentially become *shorkarer lok*.

### ***c Political process and political change***

Most groups were able to construct an approximate political history of Bangladesh, right up until the Pakistan era. There was particularly strong awareness of the parties and personalities that dominated the last three regimes. Some were aware of the current

coalition arrangements. Transitions between *rajās* prior to the 1990s' return to multiparty democracy are unclear, however. This may reflect the less participative nature of so-called elections in the military-dominated, pre-democracy period; however, it may also merely be an artefact of the longer time lag since Ershad, Zia Rahman and Sheikh Mujib were in power. Perhaps surprisingly, only isolated individuals in a few groups knew that political transitions from Mujib and Zia had occurred because they had been assassinated (although some knew it was because of their deaths). Day labouring and domestic worker women from Karail in Dhaka thought that Zia and Ershad had both come to power through elections, which suggests that efforts at civilianization of these regimes had at least some success. Similarly, few discussants appeared to be familiar with the dramatic democracy struggle that had brought Ershad down in 1990-1991. This is particularly surprising given how celebrated an episode in Bangladesh political history this is among the urban middle classes.

There is also knowledge of dynastic nature of politics. When we asked a group of ultra poor women in Nachole how a woman could be a *raja*, we were told: 'her husband used to be *raja*, after he died she became *raja*.' Although we did not set out to gather opinions on this issue, and we more often than not encountered indifference towards past leaders, Ziaur Rahman emerged as slightly ahead of the pack, in terms of having the most positive historical associations, as an example of a good leader. BRAC microfinance members in Domar told us that 'during Mujib Hindus ran away. After he died, Zia came to power and cooled the country down (*deshta thanda holo*).' Such memories are likely to play some part in present day voting behaviour, which helps explain the seriousness with which political parties take the presentation and manipulation of (what they see to be) their historical record. It is important to put this finding into the appropriate context: the party presently in power loses few opportunities to highlight their founding father's role in the history of the country, so that the voting public may simply be reflecting back what is most prominently in the media. However, it is also the case that the dominant images of Zia Rahman have him working the land – doing earthworks for canal-digging and so on – whereas the imagery of his major historical rival, the nationalist hero Sheikh Mujib, is more that of the professional politician and orator. It is entirely plausible to suggest that the labouring masses would respond more positively to political advertising of the first than the second.<sup>7</sup>

Our discussants were aware of the democratic political process. Most explained that government is formed 'from the people' or 'with the people', (*jonogon niey/ diey shorkar*), that is, that governments are formed if people support them and vote them in. There was a strong sense of empowerment: 'without my vote there is no government', said one rickshaw-puller in Dhaka. The term '*public*' (a Bengali word, we were told whenever we asked), also conveys in its context a strong sense of an active, politicised, conscious electorate, widely used in preference to *lok* or people. It seems to connote a political population, as distinct from the moral social collective that is *jonogon*.

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<sup>7</sup> When consulted on this point, the head of an established local advertising agency confirmed that Zia Rahman was seen as a pioneer in the use of advertising and the media for political purposes. His view was that – content or policies aside – the BNP remains the more effective of the major parties in terms of advertising and packaging its product.

In explaining processes through which government is formed, our groups used analogies of how a government might be formed on a smaller scale. As a group of *Shantal* men in Nachole told us: ‘think of a *mondol* (village head). He does not become a *mondol* by himself. The entire village has to give their opinion. Government is like that for the entire country.’ A group of rickshaw-pullers in Nachole took an even smaller scale: ‘think of the six of us. We decide that you can look after us and get things done. You are government.’ Elections, then, are the national-level process through which these micro-level processes work for the whole country.

## 2.2 Transparency, accountability and responsiveness

### a *Information flows*

All of our discussants got most of their information about government from television and radio, while local educated and important people, local chitchat and the print media were also cited as important sources. BRAC members in Domar explained that

the government makes a new rule, the men hear about in the bazaar. They come home and talk about it, so we find out about it. When we are outside, and we hear people talking about things, we stop to listen and find out. This is how news of the municipal tax spread to everyone.

Perhaps as a result of the major source of information being television – which in the rural areas is almost uniformly the state-run Bangladesh TV (BTV) - the impression of governmental activity is generally positive. Discussants commonly described having seen the distribution of chickens, ducks or goats, or of ribbon-cutting ceremonies to inaugurate roads and bridges. Women members of Trinomul NGO in Nachole were very impressed by having seen the Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia, personally distribute goats to the poor. The phrase, the ‘tide of development’ – a favourite slogan of the current government – was repeated by many discussants. As small businessmen in Domar said, ‘the current government is trying hard to bring peace to the country. They are bringing the ‘tide of development’ to this country.’ Images which may seem crude to those exposed to the political cultures of other countries, then, may in fact be highly effective political advertising.

Information about government rules and procedures is widely accessed through educated or important local people. This highlights the continued importance of the role of broker or mediator with officialdom that has long been an important function of community elites (such as teachers, *dewan/matbar*, and so on). Some discussants said they would go to people they trusted, others that they would go to someone they knew to have had dealings of the kind they needed. A small minority of discussants – mostly those with more education or from the slightly better-off classes - said they would go directly to the relevant government office.

That government finds out about the *jonogon* through journalists was also clearly expressed. The belief appears to be that journalists write for their newspapers, and the

government then reads the newspaper to find out what is going on. In general this is a good thing. But in some cases, this role of the media has led to suspicion, including that, as petty traders in Domar put it, the government has deployed its journalist *bahini* – possibly a kind of spy corps. There is also a sense that the government finds out about the *jonogon* through ‘its people’ – the MP’s *chamchas* (sycophants), according to one group – who report on events in their area.

**b Influencing government**

The *malik* or ‘owner’ of government was very widely identified as the *jonogon* or *public* – those who give the government power and who can take it away if they do not like what government is doing. Some groups of men in Domar and Nachole explained that power could be withdrawn through an *andolon* (movement), whereas most other groups, including all of the women’s groups, stressed the ballot. Many people also noted that dissatisfaction with government could be dealt with when, after five years, they had the opportunity to vote the government out of power. The confidence with which respondents felt they could evict a poorly-performing government suggests that the pattern of political change over the last 15 years (each major national election resulting in a change in the party of power) has boosted the self-assurance of the electorate as citizens empowered with the capacity to affect political change.<sup>8</sup>

There was some evidence of a perception that national sovereignty was vulnerable to Bangladesh’s geopolitical weaknesses. The more politically sophisticated and articulate among the discussants, such as the *Shantal* men and the rickshaw-pullers of Domar, felt that the government’s ultimate *malik* was the United Nations: it can replace Bangladesh’s government if it fails, and GoB needs UN approval for all its activities. Others identified government’s *malik* as *bidesh*, because government has to get money from *bidesh* to run the country.

However, even though the *jonogon* is the government’s *malik*, most *jonogon* are not believed to have much sway over government directly. Lack of direct access meant that the poor were widely assumed to lack influence. Some felt that education, money and knowledge were vital to access. The government is most easily influenced by its ‘own people’ – MPs and ministers. Members and chairmen (UP representatives) may also have an impact. Some groups discussed the possibility that the rich might influence government, for example, by suing the government in the UN. A number of groups spoke of pathways through which the poor can reach government: first to their member or chairman, who then takes up the issue with the MP, who discusses it with other MPs and Ministers and finally the Prime Minister.

Paradoxically, even though the poor cannot directly influence government, the government generally does what poor people wants. This is because, according to the majority of our discussants, the poor have many votes. As BRAC members in Nachole explained: ‘Did the rich vote the government in? No, the poor did. So of course the

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<sup>8</sup> The mere fact that the party in power has changed must contribute to this confidence in a polity in which power is not lightly relinquished.

government will do what they want.’ Other groups were more skeptical, though they still emphasized the importance of their vote:

Sometimes they do what the poor want, but 95 out of a 100 times they don’t. The other 5 times is during elections, because if they don’t win the vote, they won’t be elected.

Another reason that government may take action for the poor is that they – or some of them – care about the poor, and are there to help them. This kind of response emerged more frequently than we could have expected, and may in part reflect the impact of successful political campaigns, particularly those currently being waged through BTV’s news and other programming.

## 2.3 What government does

### *a Good and bad actions*

Almost by definition, Government is a body which produces good things for the *jonogon*: building roads and bridges, bringing ‘peace to the country,’ providing schools and hospitals, and distributing relief. Government is also deemed better at doing these things than previously – an opinion which is related to government’s perceived increase in power. Our discussants universally felt education had improved as government has built more schools, made primary education free and given stipends to girls and poor children. Law and order has improved, we were told, because RAB *bahini* has struck fear into the criminals. Discussants in Domar and Nachole said that government is distributing more relief and, since the army has been called in, relief is reaching the right people. Rickshaw-pullers and small businessmen in Domar spoke of the Jamuna Bridge as government success in improving communication.

The rise in food prices, however, is the one bad thing for which government is directly blamed. The current price of rice is compared unfavourably to the price of rice during the previous AL government. The rise in food prices is bad because it affects the food security of discussants. Our discussants spoke of increasing difficulties in feeding their families, because of the rise in prices. Interestingly, the government is blamed entirely for rising prices, and not independent economic factors. A few groups, however, proposed economic explanations. Some groups said that the rise in prices is due to an increased population and a much higher level of demand. Others blamed the rise of prices on hoarding or on the rise of international oil prices. However, all discussants were in agreement that the government could lower prices simply by issuing an edict or by selling their own stockpiles of grain or grain received as foreign aid at subsidized prices.

With the important exception of food prices, however, other bad things that government does are not perceived to be their fault. Our discussants said that government wants to do good for the *jonogon*, but they are foiled by their *kormocharis*, by their *chamchas*, by *elaka’r protinidhis*, or even by a lazy and ungrateful *jonogon*. For example, innocent people are occasionally jailed but that is the fault of the police who are either corrupt or

incompetent, and not of government *per se*. Discussants also perceive corruption in the distribution of relief or the provision of medicine at government hospitals but, once more, these are the fault of the *member chairman* or of doctors – neither of whom are government proper.

***b Government priorities and responsibilities***

Our discussants found it difficult to prioritise between government responsibilities. In general, everything that is perceived to be for the good of the *jonogon* is a government responsibility. Roads, clinics, schools, law and order, relief, food prices, employment opportunities, attracting foreign aid, protecting rights, protecting religion, and so on, therefore, are all important responsibilities of the government. There is no sense from our discussions that there is a consistent and stable notion of priorities amongst these varied responsibilities.

Even when we tried to prioritise between a smaller sub-sample of government responsibilities – law and order, distributing relief, and primary education – we found that priorities were not stable, even through the length of the discussion. For example, *Shantal* men in Nachole told us that relief is the most important responsibility of the three; however, they allocated the most amount of money in a budgeting exercise to law and order; and subsequently they told us that they will pay more tax to improve education. Similar examples can be drawn from all our focus group discussions. Arguably, the above three tasks are all perceived to be equally important. During the budgeting exercise, small businessmen in Domar wanted to allocate equal amounts of money out of a total of ten units to all three, and to keep the remaining one unit for ‘the future.’

Discussants were aware of Bangladesh’s aid dependency, and described how Bangladesh’s government goes abroad asking for assistance. All groups believed that getting more aid is an important government responsibility. There does not seem to be any national ‘shame’ around aid dependency: only one of our groups argued that this was not so important because we should focus on becoming self-reliant (small businessmen in Domar). All other groups argued that as a poor and small country, Bangladesh needs foreign assistance to survive and, perhaps, deserves aid.

Interestingly, promoting foreign exports was seen by most as against our country’s interests. As a small country which does not produce so much, we need to make sure that our goods can be consumed by our country-men. The rising price of *hilsa* was blamed on exports. A few groups recognised that exports bring in money which can then be spent on buying what we need from abroad (small businessmen in Domar) and that exports create enterprise and jobs in Bangladesh (working women in Dhaka). While promoting exports are bad, promoting the ‘good name’ (*shunam*) of the country is good. Many discussants were aware that Bangladesh has a poor reputation abroad, where it is looked at as a corrupt country (educated youth in Dhaka) or a terrorist country (*Shantals* in Nachole). To counter this image, government should spread the word that Bangladesh is a beautiful country, with honest and hard working people.

For the most part, discussants believe that government has to perform these tasks and it cannot be delegated to anyone else – for example, the private sector, NGOs or local leaders. According to most discussants, the government has been given power and they can do these tasks best. NGOs might be able to do some of them, but only if the government gives them express permission to do so. NGOs have the advantage that they are more knowledgeable about villages, and know who the right beneficiaries are in distributing relief. Village *matabbars* and private business are not, generally, considered appropriate for any of these tasks – they will steal even more from the people. However, *Shantal* men in Nachole told us that the village *mondol* can be given some of these responsibilities because villagers would be able to ‘replace him if he fails.’ Also, BRAC microfinance members in Dhaka told us that some government tasks like electricity have been privatised, and that this ‘raises production.’

By and large, the government is perceived to be trying to do good things for the *jonogon*. They are better at carrying out their responsibilities than previously, though food prices are an important exception. Where there is failure, this is usually the fault of some branch of the government, usually the branch physically closest to the discussants. These responsibilities should remain with government, unless the government itself decides to contract out any of these tasks. Lastly, there is a limited sense of prioritising between government responsibilities amongst our discussants: government should do anything and everything for the good of the *jonogon*. This does not, however, imply that our discussants have high expectations of government. Expectations are merely that the government should enable the *jonogon* to survive and any task that furthers this aim can legitimately be recognized as government responsibility.

## **2.4 Legitimacy and protest**

The purpose of protest for most discussants is to inform and influence the government, not to overthrow government. The very notion that government can be overthrown through *andolon* (organized protest) is limited to a few groups of men in Nachole and Domar (*Shantal* men in Nachole and rickshaw-pullers in Domar). Rather, our discussants felt that if ‘ten of them got together and protested,’ the government might realize their concerns and do something about it.

Rising food prices would, discussants said, be a major reason for protest. Also, failures in providing primary education, distributing relief and maintaining law and order would lead to government losing legitimacy and protests. It is important to note that food prices are generally thought to be a more legitimate cause for protest than relief distribution, at least amongst the better-off segments of our discussants. Small businessmen in Domar told us: ‘relief is something you might or might not get. If you don’t get it, it wouldn’t be right to protest.’ Food prices, on the other hand, is affecting the food security of all our discussants and was seen across the board as a legitimate cause for protest. As an ultra poor woman in Domar told us: ‘if the price of rice goes any higher, there will be *andolon*.’

Protests also seem to be linked to group interests. *Shantal* villagers in Nachole, primarily agriculturalists, spoke of protesting against government failure to provide electricity to run their shallow irrigation pumps. Rickshaw-pullers in Nachole spoke of their protests against a decision to block off a road for rickshaws. Sometimes these protests are not even rooted in government failures. Extreme poor women in Nachole spoke hypothetically of protesting against a powerful local leader's son who is harassing women in their area.

By and large, however, our respondents said that there was really no reason to protest at present – with the important exception of rising food prices. The government will not do anything, we were told by several groups, to anger the *public* or the *jonogon*. Our groups perceive the *public* or *jonogon* as an active entity, easy to anger and dangerous when angered. Additionally, they perceive the government as being cautious in their relationships with the *public*. Hence, many of them felt, there was no need for violent protests.

However, it was still necessary to make sure that government understood the *public's* wants and needs. Towards this end, our discussants were in favour of peaceful methods of protest. Most commonly, our respondents said that they will get together enough people and go to the TNO's office or the commissioner's office. They will petition bureaucrats or politicians. For our rural discussants, they said that if they protest loudly enough, the *chairman member* or the TNO will discuss the problem higher up and devise a solution. By and large, our discussants looked at processions (*michheel*), *hartals*, and riot (*bhang chur*) as something done by opposition political parties. Some discussants said they joined occasionally, either because they felt threatened or because they were curious. However, *hartals* and *bhang chur* are not good forms of protest because they are perceived to ultimately cause harm to the *jonogon*.

The purpose of protest, by and large, is to bring pressure on the government – to influence the government into taking a particular course of action. The form of protest intensifies if government remains unresponsive. Therefore, at first they might submit a written petition to the TNO or get together a group of people and go the Union Parishad. If the government does not respond, they might get together some people and visit the TNO's office. If the government still does not respond, they might organize a procession. However, with a few exceptions, none of our discussants said that they will engage in *bhangchur*. Similarly, very few respondents saw the aim of their protests as bringing down government. Most discussants held the opinion that at some stage government will have to sit up and notice the protests and respond to them. It will not, most felt, reach a level where protests become justifiably violent and the government has to be forcibly changed.

In the final analysis, if the government does not respond to the protestor's demands at all, the *jonogon* have no choice but to wait for five years, until they can vote out the exiting government. As a group of rickshaw-pullers in Domar told us: "What can you do? For five years we will have to suffer [*joley purey thhaktey hobey*]."

### **3. Concluding discussion**

#### **3.1 Political engagement**

Perhaps our most obvious finding is a high degree of awareness and involvement, even sophistication, among the poor, with respect to matters political. A more or less accurate political genealogy could be constructed by many participants and understandings of political process and the structure and functioning of government were also fuller than we had expected. Sources of such understandings appear to include the following:

- Slight evidence of voter and civic education, albeit less than we would expect in a society where so much engagement with the poor is through NGOs and similar activists. This apparently low level of civic education may reflect sensitivities around NGO involvement in what are easily seen to be partisan political issues.
- Regular participation in various aspects of politics. The CDL study of (mostly middle class) voter behaviour found a high degree of participation through voting (2001), but our poor respondents, particularly those in Dhaka, participate in numerous other ways: they go to rallies and meetings (who ever invites them, they go, according to one woman construction worker in Dhaka); unaffiliated young men attend local party ‘clubs’ (young men in Dhaka); they watch television broadcasts, including news programmes (all discussants) and discuss politics amongst themselves; *everyone* votes.
- The print media and television and radio broadcasts are important sources of information. Few people outside of Dhaka have access to TV channels other than the state-owned BTV, which transmits more or less undiluted Government propaganda. Some report listening to parliamentary debates on the radio, just as they might listen to a cricket match, suggesting that here at least there is some scope for more equitable partisan coverage. BBC World Service (Bangla) also appears to be popular as a source of political information.
- During election campaigns a great deal of political heat is generated and participation and information flows accelerate.
- Experience of the administrative system comes from trying to get access to government services of various kinds. This tends to be mediated knowledge.

#### **3.2 Government as inherently pro-poor**

Considerable sophistication and knowledge of the way government works was accompanied by a positive perception of government. Government is widely seen as a good thing: there was no sense that governmental rules and regulations might curb private initiative, or that official policies and programmes might interfere with traditional social, community or familial norms and practices. If anything, government (particularly in the sense of central authority figures of the Prime Minister and her close colleagues and officials) was frequently contrasted favourably with community leaders, local government representatives, administrative officials at all levels of the system, and political party professionals and activists (clearly identified as not being part of government). Problems with government, corruption, for example, were strongly

associated with these groups, as well as with the *jonogon* themselves. There seems to be a preference for treating government as the champion of the poor, and as somehow above things like corruption.

This finding should not be taken solely as evidence of a positive attitude towards the present government or the party of government. There are some indications that the present government is indeed popular with the poor – bar the very important and possibly politically devastating matter of the prices of essential goods. But that may be in part a function of the fact that the party of government controls the single-best means of transmitting its message and celebrating its achievements. However, it was clear from our discussions that most, if not all, of our respondents were fully able to identify a governmental entity as distinct from the different parties and individuals who have inhabited office over the last three and a half decades. The popularity of government appears to derive in part from the fact that it emerges positively from a comparison of community and local government institutions. There is a clear sense that the overall mission of central government is less biased in favour of wealthy individuals, and regardless of the party in power, generally more committed to addressing the problems of the poor. As a poor person, it may be an entirely reasonable preference to view the distant, almost mythically caring and powerful figure of the Prime Minister more positively than those closer to home, whose interests and grubby personal affairs are known to all.

Why do we get this strongly positive finding about government? One possibility is that our methods were flawed, and predisposed to this finding. We suspect that this is not the case for a number of reasons. First, because we had introduced ourselves as BRAC staff members, and it was in almost all cases early on made clear that few people now confuse BRAC with *shorkar* – even if we look like *shorkari lok*. If a bias in the discussion of government was to be had, we should rather expect it to be against government, or at least in favour of NGOs.<sup>9</sup> Second, people were given a number of opportunities and spaces in which discontent with governmental performance could be voiced, some of which were taken. And third, it was only parts of government – mainly central government’s overarching mission – that emerged as positive or pro-poor. Other, more tangible and directly accessible parts of the governmental apparatus were more readily described as venal or as not working for the people or the poor.

Other reasons to feel moderately confident about this finding include that other observers have also found an unexpected optimism about the outcome of the political process among the popular classes (e.g. see Rahman 2001). Certainly the proposition that the Bangladeshi poor are wrong about their government, and have ‘all been fooled all of the

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<sup>9</sup> Note that the 1999 World Bank-sponsored ‘consultations with the poor’ PRA exercise in Bangladesh yielded strongly negative findings about poor people’s experiences of government. That exercise was conducted by NGO staff. There have been suggestions that the strong pro-NGO feeling in that research study was shaped by the predominance of NGO staff in the research process. It is worth noting that the BBC’s recent attitudinal survey found that NGO staff ranked low in the hierarchy of trustworthy professionals, just above the police! (see [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/docs/pulse-of-bangladesh.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/docs/pulse-of-bangladesh.pdf)).

time' needs to be rejected as untenable: if any group is closely tuned to assessing the impact of institutions on their wellbeing, it is the poor.

It is also worth recognising that long periods of comparative economic progress may well contribute to strong faith in government, particularly when this can be contrasted with long periods of crisis and economic stagnation which people also clearly recall. Bangladesh has enjoyed a spell of reasonable growth lasting around 15 years, so optimism about the economic future does not seem misplaced.

### **3.3 ... but perhaps poor people have low expectations of government**

It is possible that people are positive about government because they have low expectations of it. In comparative perspective, then, the Bangladeshi poor may have good reasons to be satisfied with their government. This might be true in two separate senses. First, because few poor Bangladeshis have any experience of government services in other countries and so may not be aware that in comparative perspective, they receive less support from their government. Of course, it is also the case that Bangladesh is superbly well-governed when compared with its regional neighbours of, say, Bihar, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan or Afghanistan. In any case, what is known about the higher living standards of other well-governed countries is easily and widely attributed to the fact that 'ours is a poor country', that is, government is not culpable. Instead, as we saw above, an implicit comparison is drawn, at times, with other sources of support: local government and community-based actors. Understandably, neither of these is seen to be as powerful or effective as central government.

A second point of comparison seems to be that of the performance of government over time. In almost all cases, it was felt that governmental power had enlarged and performance had improved in terms of services to the poor since Independence.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in her survey of attitudes towards the state among Delhi residents, Chandhoke found that the Indian state remained central to people's lives and political imagination, despite the apparent encroachment of NGOs on erstwhile governmental territory. She attributes this enduring centrality to the important - and large - role played by the Indian developmental state since Independence (Chandhoke 2004).

By contrast, the political imagination in Bangladesh has been formed in a context in which initial high hopes and expectations of a post-liberation socialist paradise were quickly and dramatically quashed in the chaos and violent turbulence of the 1970s. The poor suffered most. This may have been enough to lower expectations of government. By 1980, the poor had already lost faith in radical politics, so that '[u]nless a change is definitely proven to be a better alternative, the masses in Bangladesh prefer, for the time being at least, to maintain the *status quo*' (Jahan 1980: 217). Progress since the 1990s, including steady economic growth and better service provision, presents a strong contrast

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<sup>10</sup> The single major exception was in terms of the prices of essential goods – at the time of writing a political hot *peyaj* set to cause severe and possibly lasting damage to the popularity of the present government.

to the disillusionment of that era. Compared to before, then, it is reasonable to argue that the government is doing a good job.

### **3.4 ... and poor people feel empowered by current political processes**

Our findings also indicate that poor people in Bangladesh are remarkably confident about their ability to vote a poorly performing government out of power and are also confident that their votes matter. Their confidence is high enough for most groups to state that violent protests to overthrow government is undesirable – they will simply wait to vote the government out of power at the end of its tenure. Casting a negative vote against the incumbent is clearly a cheaper and much less riskier choice than participating in violent protests. This is also an option that Bangladeshis have exercised – voting out two governments since the transition to democracy in the 1990s. The important point, however, is that voting is perceived to be an alternative to protest. This suggests that poor Bangladeshis see the vote as a referendum on the incumbent government and their votes are based on their evaluation of the incumbent’s performance rather than the challenger’s leadership styles or policies.

If expectations of government are low and levels of satisfaction are generally high, why has the incumbent political party been consistently voted out of power? One explanation is that expectations are rising along with perceptions of government performance. Our discussants do not believe this to be the case: they feel that they have similar expectations from their government as their parents or grandparents expectations.

Another explanation is that the high levels of satisfaction noted above are true for governments in general, and not the incumbent government specifically. In order to obtain a positive vote, the government must therefore do something above and beyond the general. Our findings of expectations of government need, then, to be viewed contextually: high levels of satisfaction expressed during our discussions might not translate into positive votes for the incumbent government. People have different ways of evaluating government depending on whether they are voting, engaging in protest, or talking to researchers. How they ultimately vote remains a private matter, and not one lightly disclosed. As one day labourer in Dhaka explained, activists and others can attempt to influence you one way or another, but ‘nobody else can know what you put on the [ballot] paper’.

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## **Annex**

Interview schedule for Popular Expectations of government research – final English version

### **Necessary items**

Chart paper for timelines etc

Felt pens

Coloured card

Pictures

Lozenges for budgeting and priority ranking exercises

Tape recorder

### **Participants' information**

Names

Ages

Occupations

other

### **What is government?**

1. Here we have some pictures. Please say what relationship these have to government.
2. What do we mean when we talk about government/*shorkar*?
  - Is it a place or building?
  - Is it a person or people?
  - Is it a policy or programme or policies and programmes?
  - Is it a kind of power? Where, what kind of power?
  - Is it the will of the people?
  - Is government the same thing as a political party?
  - Is government the same thing as the ministers and Prime Ministers?
  - Is government the same thing as parliament/Jatiya Shangshad?
  - Is government the same thing as Union Parishad/chairmen, member or Pourashava /Ward Commissioner etc?
  - Is government the same thing as thana/police?
3. Can we make a history of the government from the time of Independence till now?
4. Where does government work? Where can you see government working?
5. Did you ever need to know something about government's rules or practices? If so, where did you go/how did you find out?

6. Where or how do you hear about government? Where can you get information about government? is it possible to go Officers?

### **Activities and responsibilities**

7. What does government do?
8. What are the most important/good/necessary things government does?  
What should government do more of?
  1. Why is government responsible for doing these things?
  2. What bad/illegitimate or illegal things does government do?
    - a. What are the things that government should not do at all?
  3. When we talk about 'rights' what do we mean?
  4. What kinds of 'rights' are there?
  5. Is there a responsibility to protect those?
  6. Are your rights protected or not? If so by whom? If not why not?
7. Here are some things that government does
  - a. Arranging food relief during famine or flood or monga or other crisis
  - b. Providing primary schools
  - c. Taking taxes
  - d. Protecting the country militarily
  - e. Protecting religion
  - f. Maintaining law and order, catching criminals, maintaining police
  - g. Providing clinics and hospitals
  - h. Building roads and bridges
  - i. Bringing aid from abroad
  - j. Selling Bangladeshi products abroad
  - k. Working to give Bangladesh a good name abroad
  - l. Keeping food prices steady
  - m. Protecting human rights

Which of these is most important?

Which of these is not important?

8. let us arrange the things that government does above in to three groups: very important, slightly important and not important.
9. Are there things that government currently does that somebody else should be doing, such as private businessmen, NGOs, local community leaders?
10. Are there things that government is not doing that are important?
11. Whom do you go to when you need to do something with the government (eg register birth, apply for a job, get a passport, go to government hospital or school, register land or property etc)?

Let us talk about three/four things that government does: primary education; law and order; and food relief/controlling food prices.

12. Which of these do you think is the most important? Which is the least?

13. Which of these do you think that government does best at providing? Which does it do least well? Why do you think there is this difference in how well government provides these three things?
14. Has there been any change in how well government provides these since Independence? What has that been, and why?
15. Let us pretend that we are ministers and the Prime Minister and that we have to allocate the budget money between these three/four things.
16. Suppose government could do these three/four things better if more tax was raised. Would you be willing to pay more taxes to improve any of these services? Which?

### **Governmental power**

17. Does government have an owner, like a business or a shop? If so, who?
18. Some people say that the government is there to serve the people. What do you think of that view?
19. Where does the government get its power? How?
20. Can anyone take the government's power away? Who? How?
21. Has government become more or less powerful since Independence? Why do you say that? Can you give me an example of what you mean?
22. Do you think it is good for your government to become more powerful?
23. Do you expect more or less from the government than your parents did?

### **Influencing government**

24. Who can influence the government?
25. If ordinary people want to let the government know how they feel or what they think, what can they do?
26. Does government listen to poor people? When and why?
27. Does government do what poor people wants it to do? When and why?
28. Whose views does government listen to most?
29. What is the purpose of elections and voting?
30. Are elections conducted well/fairly?
31. Can you get what you need from government through voting? If not, why not? If so, how does this work?
32. How does government get information about the people?

### **Citizen's responsibilities**

33. What do we understand by 'citizens'? who are citizens?
34. Do the people have any responsibilities towards the government? What are they?
35. Rank these responsibilities of citizens into most important, slightly important and not important:
  - A Not break the law
  - B Send children to school
  - C report crimes to the police/help the police prevent or solve crimes

- D pay taxes
- E not pay bribes or speed money
- F vote.

36. Why does government take taxes? What taxes does government take?
37. Should government take more taxes? If so, from whom?
38. Apart from taxes, how can government pay for the services it provides?

### **Political culture, leadership**

Here are some different types of government and political leader:

- a. Always does what they say they will do at the time of the election
  - b. Focused on tackling poverty – providing relief and serving the poor
  - c. Focused on tackling corruption, political violence, mastaani/crime, protecting legal rights
  - d. Religious, prays five times a day
  - e. Shows that they care very much for the people, goes to visit the people, listens to the people
  - f. Focused on the nation's development: emphasizes building roads and bridges and ghats, bringing in foreign companies to develop industries and create jobs
39. Which of these is best?
  40. Can they be ranked according to how good they are?

### **Legitimacy**

41. What are the ways in which people can protest?
42. In your experience, what are the reasons people protest against the government?
43. Below are some different types of protest.
  - a. Danga hangama, bhangchur
  - b. Shommelon, meeting
  - c. Michil/missile
  - d. petition
  - e. hartal, dhormoghot
  - f. gherao
  - g. human chain
  - h. andolon

When are these forms of protest used? Why do they come about and when?

44. What is the worst thing a government can do? For example, arrest the wrong people, raise taxes...
45. Among food security/food relief, controlling basic food prices, providing schools and law and order, which is it worst if government fails to do?

46. If government failed to do one of these, would you still support the government?
47. Of these three/four, which is the one if government fails to do that people will start a movement against the government?
48. In your experience, what are the reasons people will participate in a movement against the government?