Exploring the Reasons for Autocratic Leadership in Bangladesh's Underdeveloped Humanitarian NGOs

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Abstract
This qualitative study delves deeply into the underlying reasons for the widespread occurrence of autocratic leadership within underdeveloped humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Bangladesh. By utilizing semi-structured interviews conducted with a total of 15 participants, including NGO leaders and staff members from various small-scale organizations, the research meticulously identifies and analyzes several critical factors. These include severe resource constraints that limit operational flexibility, intense political pressures stemming from the country's governance environment, founder-centric organizational structures that prioritize individual control, and deeply ingrained cultural norms that traditionally support centralized forms of decision-making. The findings of this study illuminate how autocratic leadership styles, while providing the advantage of enabling swift and decisive responses in environments frequently plagued by crises such as natural disasters or economic instability, ultimately undermine the long-term sustainability of these organizations and hinder the empowerment and development of their employees. Furthermore, this research makes a valuable contribution to the broader understanding of leadership dynamics in developing contexts, offering nuanced insights that can inform strategies for adopting more inclusive and participatory leadership practices in the future.

Keywords: Autocratic Leadership, Humanitarian NGOs, Bangladesh, Underdeveloped Organizations, Qualitative Research, Leadership Challenges

1. Introduction

Bangladesh, as a densely populated nation in South Asia with a population exceeding 160 million people, has historically depended heavily on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to tackle a wide array of humanitarian challenges, including poverty alleviation initiatives, rapid disaster response efforts following frequent floods and cyclones, and essential healthcare services in underserved areas [1,2]. The NGO sector in Bangladesh is robust, boasting over 2,500 officially registered organizations that collectively play an indispensable role in bridging the significant gaps in public services left by the government, especially in remote rural villages and densely packed urban slums where state resources often fall short. Nevertheless, a considerable number of these organizations—particularly those classified as underdeveloped, with annual budgets typically falling below $500,000 and employing fewer than 50 staff members—tend to exhibit autocratic leadership styles. These styles are marked by a high degree of centralized authority, minimal opportunities for employee participation in key decisions, and a predominant top-down approach to management and operations [1,3,4]. This paper undertakes a comprehensive investigation into the root causes of this prevalent phenomenon, with a specific focus on humanitarian NGOs that function under such constrained financial and human resource conditions. Through an in-depth examination of various contextual, operational, and cultural factors influencing these organizations, the study seeks to provide clarity on why autocratic leadership continues to persist, even in the face of international advocacy for more democratic, inclusive, and transformational leadership models within the nonprofit sector worldwide [5,6].

1.1. Problem Statement/Research Gap

Although the topic of leadership within NGOs has been explored in

great detail within Western academic and practical contexts, where resources are often more abundant and institutional frameworks more supportive, scholarly attention to similar issues in developing countries such as Bangladesh remains notably limited. This is especially true when it comes to examining autocratic leadership styles in underdeveloped humanitarian organizations that operate under constant pressure [3]. Much of the existing body of literature tends to emphasize and promote transformational or servant leadership as the most effective and ethical approaches for nonprofit entities, highlighting their potential to inspire teams and drive positive change. However, real-world empirical evidence from resource-scarce settings consistently demonstrates that autocratic models, with their emphasis on command and control, continue to dominate the landscape [1,4-6]. In the specific case of Bangladesh, where NGOs must navigate a complex web of stringent government regulations, heavy reliance on international donors, and fluctuating political climates, there exists a substantial research gap concerning the motivations behind leaders' preferences for autocratic control over more collaborative and participatory methods [10,13,14]. This lack of in-depth analysis not only restricts a fuller comprehension of how these leadership styles influence overall organizational effectiveness, employee morale, and long-term sustainability but also overlooks the unique challenges posed by Bangladesh's ongoing economic transition away from least-developed country status, which has intensified competition for funding and resources [15].

1.2. Significance of the Study

This research holds considerable importance for multiple stakeholders and contributes meaningfully across several dimensions. Firstly, it offers actionable and practical insights that can guide NGO leaders, managers, and policymakers in Bangladesh toward cultivating more inclusive leadership environments. Such shifts could lead to improved employee retention rates, greater innovation in program delivery, and enhanced overall organizational resilience in the face of adversity [2]. Secondly, on a broader academic level, it enriches the global literature on nonprofit management by bringing to light the context-specific factors that shape leadership in developing countries. In these settings, autocratic leadership may not merely represent a managerial shortcoming but rather a pragmatic survival strategy adapted to harsh realities [3,7]. Finally, in the context of Bangladesh's recent political transformations following the events of 2024, gaining a deeper understanding of these leadership dynamics becomes crucial. It can directly inform policy reforms aimed at diminishing authoritarian influences within civil society organizations, promoting greater transparency, and fostering a more vibrant and democratic nonprofit sector [8,11,12,14].

1.3. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to thoroughly explore and elucidate the various reasons contributing to the prevalence of autocratic leadership in underdeveloped humanitarian NGOs in Bangladesh. To achieve this, several secondary objectives have been outlined, which include:
• Identifying and analyzing the key contextual factors, such as economic, political, and social elements, that significantly influence leaders' choices in adopting autocratic styles.
• Examining in detail the broader implications of these autocratic leadership approaches on organizational performance, including aspects like efficiency, adaptability, and employee satisfaction.
• Proposing a set of practical and feasible recommendations for NGOs to gradually transition toward more balanced and hybrid leadership models that incorporate elements of participation and empowerment.

2. Literature Review

Leadership styles within nonprofit organizations can vary widely depending on the context, with transformational leadership—characterized by its focus on inspiring followers, encouraging intellectual stimulation, and promoting visionary change—frequently being lauded as particularly effective for fostering creativity, motivation, and long-term innovation among teams [4-6].On the other hand, autocratic leadership, which relies heavily on unilateral decision-making by a single authority figure, can prove highly efficient in situations requiring immediate action, such as during emergencies, but it also carries the inherent risk of suppressing individual initiative and stifling overall organizational creativity [1,4]. In the unique environments of developing countries, NGO leaders often confront a host of distinctive challenges, including chronic shortages of financial and human resources, as well as pervasive political instability, which collectively tilt the balance toward a preference for centralized control mechanisms to maintain order and direction [3]. Specific studies centered on Bangladesh have underscored how the country's historically authoritarian political landscape, particularly during the tenure of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has exerted a profound influence on the NGO sector. This includes instances of government crackdowns, restrictive funding policies, and regulatory oversights that have compelled many organizations to adopt hierarchical structures as a means of ensuring compliance and operational survival [8,10-13].

Underdeveloped NGOs in Bangladesh, in particular, must contend with persistent funding shortages, exacerbated by the nation's NGO-driven development model that increasingly competes with emerging state-led alternatives. This competition often results in heightened dependencies on external donors, who prioritize rapid, top-down project implementations to achieve measurable outcomes quickly [9,14,16,18,19]. Additionally, deeply rooted cultural norms, which are steeped in traditions of paternalistic hierarchies and respect for authority figures, serve to further entrench autocratic leadership practices. In many cases, founders of these NGOs maintain tight control to leverage their personal networks for securing essential funding and navigating complex bureaucratic obstacles [3,7]. Broader cross-cultural analyses indicate that in regimes with authoritarian tendencies, NGOs frequently mirror the prevailing governmental practices as a strategy to evade scrutiny

and potential sanctions, thereby constraining the development of more democratic internal governance systems [10,13,15]. Regrettably, this mirroring can give rise to secondary problems, such as diminished accountability mechanisms, increased risks of elite capture where power concentrates in the hands of a few, and overall challenges to equitable resource distribution [17,20].

3. Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

This study employs a contingency theory framework as its foundational lens, which asserts that effective leadership styles are not universal but rather dependent on a variety of environmental factors, including the availability of resources, the prevailing political context, and the stage of organizational maturity. Within the setting of underdeveloped NGOs, autocratic leadership emerges as an adaptive and necessary response to conditions of high uncertainty, limited funding, and external volatility. This perspective is complemented by elements of institutional theory, which helps explain how pressures from the external environment such as governmental regulations and donor expectations, shape and mold the internal structures and practices of these organizations. Moreover, the framework incorporates relevant cultural dimensions, drawing attention to how societal traits like collectivism and high-power distance in Bangladeshi culture inherently reinforce tendencies toward centralized authority and hierarchical decision-making processes [3,7].

3.1 Hypothesis

Although this study is primarily qualitative in nature, focusing on interpretive insights rather than statistical validation, it nonetheless tests the following hypothesis: Autocratic leadership in Bangladesh's underdeveloped humanitarian NGOs is primarily driven by external political pressures and internal resource constraints, rather than inherent leader preferences.

4. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, grounded in an interpretive paradigm that prioritizes the exploration of subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings held by participants. Primary data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected group of 15 individuals, comprising 8 NGO founders or senior leaders and 7 mid-level staff members, all affiliated with underdeveloped humanitarian organizations located in both urban Dhaka and various rural regions across Bangladesh. The selection criteria ensured a diverse representation from NGOs specializing in areas such as disaster relief operations, community health programs, and poverty reduction initiatives. Each interview session, which typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, was carried out either virtually through secure online platforms or in-person at neutral locations, spanning the period from June to September 2025. The interview questions were designed to probe deeply into current leadership practices, the rationale behind autocratic tendencies, and the perceived impacts on daily operations.

For data analysis, the information was carefully examined step by step. The responses were organized by reading them many times, grouping similar ideas together, and finding the main themes that came up from what people said. Strict ethical rules were followed during the whole study. This included asking every participant for their permission before the interview, keeping their names and personal details completely private, and making sure all the information was stored safely and confidentially. The study has some limitations, such as having only a small number of participants, which means the results may not apply to everyone. Also, people sometimes give answers based on their own views, which can affect the results. To make the findings stronger and more trustworthy, the data was compared with information from reliable secondary sources.

5. Discussion

Through the application of thematic analysis, the study uncovered four primary and interconnected reasons underpinning the persistence of autocratic leadership in these organizations:

• **Resource Constraints:** Underdeveloped NGOs in Bangladesh routinely function under tight budgetary limitations, which demand expeditious decision-making to effectively allocate and utilize scarce financial and material resources. Leaders frequently expressed that engaging in participatory processes could introduce unnecessary delays, particularly in urgent crisis situations such as annual flooding events that require immediate humanitarian aid. As one founder poignantly articulated, "With no time for debates, I decide alone to ensure survival [16,19,17]."

• **Political and Regulatory Pressures:** The lingering effects of Bangladesh's authoritarian political history, coupled with existing NGO oversight laws and regulatory frameworks, necessitate a centralized approach to leadership in order to adhere to government mandates and avert potential crackdowns or operational disruptions. Participants recounted experiences of deliberately mirroring state-like hierarchical structures to more effectively maneuver through bureaucratic red tape, with the added layer of uncertainty introduced by the political instability following the Hasina era further complicating matters [8,10-15].

• **Founder Syndrome and Organizational Immaturity:** A significant portion of these NGOs are established and led by their founders, who often possess charismatic qualities and maintain dominant control due to their invaluable personal connections that secure funding and partnerships. Staff members commonly pointed out the reluctance to delegate authority, stemming from founders' apprehensions about relinquishing control in organizations that are still in their early developmental stages and vulnerable to external threats [2,21].

• **Cultural Norms:** Leadership practices that are paternalistic in nature, heavily influenced by longstanding societal hierarchies and traditions of deference to authority, are widely accepted and even expected within Bangladeshi contexts. Interviewees, especially those from rural-based NGOs, stressed the cultural emphasis on respect for elders and leaders, perceiving autocratic methods as not only efficient but also harmonious with collectivist values that

prioritize group stability over individual input [3,7].

Collectively, these findings lend strong support to the study's hypothesis, portraying autocratic leadership as a pragmatic adaptation to prevailing circumstances rather than a deliberate personal choice by leaders. That said, the approach is not without drawbacks, as it frequently results in elevated staff turnover rates, diminished opportunities for innovation, and a general sense of disempowerment among employees who feel marginalized in decision-making processes [5,6].

6. Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this study advances contingency theory by extending its application to the specific nuances of NGO operations in developing contexts, demonstrating how autocratic styles can enhance short-term operational efficacy while simultaneously posing barriers to long-term organizational sustainability and growth.[3] On the practical front, the insights generated could encourage NGOs to invest in targeted leadership training programs that emphasize skills in delegation and team collaboration, thereby building internal capacity. Donors, in turn, might consider restructuring their funding mechanisms to reward and incentivize the adoption of more participatory governance models [2]. For policymakers in Bangladesh, the research underscores the need to reform and relax overly stringent regulations, creating an enabling environment that supports the cultivation of democratic practices within civil society organizations and reduces the systemic pressures that perpetuate autocracy [20,22].

7. Conclusion

In summary, the prevalence of autocratic leadership within Bangladesh's underdeveloped humanitarian NGOs can be attributed to a confluence of factors, including acute resource scarcity that demands efficiency, ongoing political and regulatory pressures that enforce compliance, entrenched founder-centric structures that resist change, and cultural norms that valorize hierarchical authority. Although this leadership style facilitates prompt and effective responses to immediate challenges, it simultaneously introduces substantial risks to the organizations' enduring viability, employee well-being, and adaptive capacity. By advocating for a gradual shift toward hybrid leadership models that blend elements of autocracy with greater inclusivity, NGOs in Bangladesh could better align themselves with evolving global trends in nonprofit management, ultimately leading to more resilient and impactful humanitarian efforts [1,4].

7.1. Future Research

To build upon the foundations laid by this study, future investigations could incorporate quantitative methodologies, such as surveys or statistical analyses, to more precisely measure the tangible impacts of autocratic leadership on key performance indicators across a larger and more diverse sample of NGOs. Additionally, conducting comparative studies with similar organizations in other developing countries could reveal shared patterns or unique divergences, enriching cross-regional understandings. Longitudinal research tracking the effects of post-autocratic reforms within Bangladesh's NGO sector would also offer valuable insights into the feasibility and outcomes of leadership transitions over time.

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