

## Restructure local governance from a presidential to a parliamentary system

In conversation with Dr Tofail Ahmed, head of the Local Government Reform Commission (LGRC) and an expert on local government.



Tofail Ahmed

**The Daily Star (TDS):** What are the commission's core recommendations for reforming local government?

**Tofail Ahmed (TA):** Comprehensive reforms require time, but certain critical areas, particularly the legal and structural framework of local governance, demand immediate attention. In the past, even less-educated local chairmen and members maintained ethical standards, with limited funds keeping corruption in check. However, in the post-independence period, credibility declined, and corruption became more widespread. This has resulted in an increasingly centralised, single-person (Chairman or Mayor)-dominated administration, with mayors making decisions without formal council meetings. Dhaka City Corporation, for instance, rarely held discussions for years, and councillors often passively accepted decisions for personal gain. Large-scale projects funded by the ADB and WB are poorly planned, leading to mismanagement and wasted resources due to city corporations' lack of capacity to manage these projects once completed.

Given these challenges, our report presents concrete recommendations, particularly where urgent reforms are necessary. One key proposal is to establish a permanent Local Government Commission to oversee and implement reform initiatives, as most will require gradual implementation.

An immediate reform is restructuring local governance from a presidential to a parliamentary system, ensuring participatory decision-making and collective leadership. Currently, councillors lack authority, discouraging capable individuals from these roles. Empowering them to elect the Chairman or Mayor would attract more qualified candidates. This will also indirectly

incentivise competent individuals, creating a natural progression—those aspiring to become mayors would first serve as councillors, fostering leadership development at the grassroots level.

We also propose allowing government employees to contest local elections, provided they do not assume chairman role, as it requires full-time commitment. However, structural changes alone are insufficient—political culture must also evolve. While a commission report cannot achieve this immediately, it must establish a process that initiates lasting cultural change.

despite this not being legally sanctioned. Instead, budget allocations should be based on strategic planning, ensuring funds are used for specific initiatives rather than individual discretion.

One of the key proposals is to replace the single-person-dominated model with a collective parliamentary system. In the current Union Parishad (UP) structure, a legislative system is absent. We propose a separate legislative body comprising all elected members, led by a *Sabhadhipati*, who will function as a council moderator. Decisions made by this body will be implemented by the executive body,

Under this framework, the legislative council will deliberate and make decisions, the executive body will implement them, and the legislative wing—through standing committees—will provide oversight and feedback. Currently, standing committees exist in name only, but under our proposed system, they would function as active, full-time oversight bodies. Additionally, a secretary would be appointed to support committee operations, a role that was previously absent. Moreover, the parliamentary system will facilitate debates among equal candidates competing in elections.

Another key reform is the removal of judicial responsibilities from the UP. Instead of the existing Village Court (Gram Adalat) system, we propose a structured legal framework comprising a Civil Court, a Criminal Court, and an ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) Magistrate to oversee *Salishi* practices. The Constitution mandates the separation of executive and judicial functions, and we aim to extend this principle to local governance. Regional disputes would be resolved through formal judicial processes rather than by a politically appointed chairman. Removing Village Court duties from the UP will allow for a greater focus on governance, reinforcing cultural change. Under the new system, the rule of law will be firmly established, preventing chairmen from passing verdicts at their discretion in regional disputes.

Additionally, we propose expanding UP staff by adding five to six administrative personnel while maintaining the current number of village police officers. Each upazila-level officer should oversee a specific Union—not for administration but for guidance and monitoring. They would attend legislative council meetings to ensure proper governance.

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- » The Constitution mandates the separation of executive and judicial functions, and we aim to extend this principle to local governance.
- » Currently, different structures exist for zila, upazila, and union levels, requiring separate elections, which is not a viable system. We propose a unified structure for all tiers.
- » The commission will resolve inter-organisational disputes, such as conflicts between bureaucracy and local government. Moreover, it will define the services provided by local government, which are often unclear.

Local government currently operates in a de facto system, where many practices persist as traditions rather than legal mandates (de jure system). For example, in Union and Upazila Parishads and City Corporations, project budgets are often distributed among members who act as both contractors and implementers,

consisting of the Chairman, executive officers, and field extension staff. Ensuring that the *Sabhadhipati* leads council meetings is essential to prevent undue influence from the Chairman. This model should be extended to all levels, including Upazila, Union, and City Corporations, to ensure more accountable governance.

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শরীয়াহ্ ডিক্রি ইসলামী ব্যাংক

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