

Pathways for reforms in Bangladesh Perspectives from public administration and local government



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In 1971, the people of Bangladesh earned their independence through blood and sacrifice. Since the Liberation War, repeated attacks on our sovereignty have been rejected by the general populace, who have built resistance against authoritarian rule. Likewise, July 2024 will remain etched in our memory as another mass uprising to protect that hard-won freedom. Moreover, in this struggle for human rights and liberty, history has presented us with brave figures such as Abu Sayeed and Mir Mugdho, as well as opportunities to dismantle and restructure the systems built by fascists and despots.

The politicised administrative system, a major obstacle to good governance, has impaired state operations and eroded public trust in Bangladesh. Despite numerous promises of reforms across all sectors, various commissions have failed to deliver substantive solutions, often stirring controversy instead. They tend to overlook the fact that, to fulfil the aspirations of the people, a strong and capable local government system is essential. If we balance investments

between administrative and local government reforms, it will enable a more contextualised approach to local needs, ensuring tangible benefits for the people.

The administration of Bangladesh is deeply rooted in history and has undergone political, social, and economic transformations over time. However, the

the Republic.

The politicisation of administration has not only diminished the quality of public services but has also obstructed transparency and accountability within the government. The growing distrust and disconnect between government officials and the public highlight the urgent need

and March 1973—recommended a 'Unified Grading Structure' and a 'Classless Civil Service' to create a bureaucracy that would serve an independent nation. However, this groundbreaking proposal, led by a renowned political scientist, was never implemented. The report remained shelved due to opposition from the elite Pakistani civil service class, the 'CSP' officers, who sought to maintain their privileged positions and obstruct administrative changes.

Later, with the establishment of the Pay and Services Commission in 1976, the civil service—particularly the administrative cadre—was further reinforced. The influence of the CSP and PSP groups became more entrenched in civil and police administration, a trend that continued until 1981. Subsequently, during the Ershad regime in 1982, some changes were introduced through the Committee for Administrative Reform/Reorganisation (CARR) to decentralise power. Around 60 circle officers, along with other administrative cadre officials, were given expanded responsibilities and deployed to 'upgraded police stations' at the grassroots level. This initiative laid the groundwork for the Upazila system, aimed at bringing administrative authority closer to local communities.

Between 1983 and 1990, under the Ershad regime, Brigadier Enam oversaw the formulation of a new administrative structure. In the years that followed, various reports were prepared with financial support from the United Nations and other development partners, yet their recommendations were seldom implemented. After the restoration of democracy, Khaleda Zia's government in 1991 attempted another round of administrative reforms.

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- » The highly politicised administrative system, a significant barrier to good governance, has undermined state operations and eroded public trust in Bangladesh.
- » Local governments should be granted financial autonomy, including the ability to collect taxes, to ensure the provision of civic services.
- » The concept of self-government should be revitalised to strengthen local governance in a new Bangladesh.
- » The true purpose of local government is to serve the people with its own agency—an aspiration that remains unfulfilled.
- » If local public representatives take proactive measures to address local issues, it could reinforce the country's democratic framework.


structural weaknesses and challenges that have emerged over the past few decades have severely impacted its effectiveness today. Key administrative functions such as recruitment, promotion, posting, retirement, and discipline of civil service officials are carried out in the name of the President. In reality, however, these decisions are dictated by the political government. Consequently, the civil service has become subservient to political interests. It is important to remember that the civil service is not merely an administrative tool of the political government but a strategic institution of

for a mindset shift among administrative officials. However, the current crisis did not arise from a single regime; rather, it is the cumulative result of decades of partisanship, weak oversight, and rampant corruption.

Several initiatives have been undertaken in the past to establish a pro-people administration, but none have materialised. After independence, in 1972, the Administrative and Services Reorganisation Committee (ASRC), headed by Professor Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury, proposed the first set of reforms. The report, submitted in two phases—in October 1972



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