

## Pathways for reforms in Bangladesh

**If the local self-government structure cannot be properly implemented now, then abolishing it entirely may be a more appropriate course of action. The concept of self-government should be revitalised to strengthen local governance in a new Bangladesh.**

FROM PAGE 26

In 1993, the 'Administrative Reorganisation Committee (ARC)' was formed under the leadership of former secretary Nurun Nabi to overhaul the civil service and administrative structure. However, this initiative, too, failed to materialise. Similarly, the Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC), established by the Sheikh Hasina government between 1997 and 2000, put forward various recommendations, but these were never fully implemented. During the caretaker government in 2007, additional reform efforts were undertaken, but they also failed to achieve meaningful success.

Various commissions established during the 2007-2008 caretaker government were intended to promote public welfare. While their policy drafts were well-structured, they ultimately became tools for manipulation. As the next government assumed power, the effectiveness of these commissions gradually diminished, with bureaucracy becoming further entrenched. Although many commissions remained active, the local government commission seemingly disappeared, as the bureaucratic machinery, driven by self-interest, prioritised expanding its control at the local level over facilitating the election of public representatives.

Furthermore, our local government system remains shrouded in opacity, with 'accountability' existing in name only.



▲ People waiting in line to access essential public services.

PHOTO: STAR

When unrest and apprehension abruptly destabilise the country's law-and-order situation, the local government becomes virtually dysfunctional—reduced to a mere puppet under the enduring dominance of central political and administrative power. The Local Government Division's decision to grant Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs) full authority in the absence of elected chairmen only reinforces the perception that local government is nothing more than an extension of the central administration. However, the true purpose of local government is to serve the people with its own agency—an aspiration that remains unfulfilled. At this critical juncture, if local public representatives take proactive steps to address local issues, it could strengthen the country's democratic framework.

If the local self-government structure cannot be properly implemented now, then abolishing it entirely may be a more appropriate course of action. The concept of self-government should be

revitalised to strengthen local governance in a new Bangladesh. It is time to distribute government-allocated funds more judiciously. Local governments should be granted financial autonomy, including the ability to collect taxes, to ensure the provision of civic services. The shortcomings of previous local government systems can be rectified by renovating the existing structure rather than overhauling it completely—because change does not always necessitate starting from scratch.

Some issues, however, must be reconsidered in response to present demands. For example, the presence of elected representatives in the local government structure is crucial, alongside the cooperation of administrative officers. A dedicated office and some permanent institutions should be established through this framework. Planning, tax collection, local development, and social protection initiatives can be effectively tailored to regional characteristics through such

coordinated efforts. Additionally, local governments should conduct social surveys to ensure policies are informed by ground realities. These surveys could be managed by expert advisors in social research, involving students in the process. If state reforms can be structured around the interests of the younger generation, they can be directly engaged in policymaking.

Notwithstanding, governance in Bangladesh is experiencing a deep crisis, exacerbated by entrenched partisanship, politically motivated appointments, and internal divisions. In political science, government consists of two core components: a permanent government (bureaucracy) and a provisional government (political leadership). The permanent government—comprising bureaucrats—implements and supervises state policies, whereas the provisional government leads political decision-making. However, prolonged political interference has destabilised the permanent government, leading to widespread instability and disorder. Therefore, it is imperative to establish a transparent and accountable recruitment process by adopting and implementing short-, mid-, and long-term plans for administrative reform in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, the unelected segment of local government—namely divisional commissioners at the divisional level, deputy commissioners (DCs) at the district level, and UNOs at the upazila level—should be integrated into a balanced governance structure. First, their designations should be standardised, either as commissioners or executive officers. Second, the division of power and responsibilities between elected and unelected officials in local government should be clearly defined, ensuring that people receive services through a unified framework. Implementing such reforms will take time, but the groundwork must be laid now to facilitate the transformation of state structures. Perhaps this is the horizon of a new vision for progress. Now is the time to reshape the governance landscape. The journey of change may be long, but it must begin here and now.



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