

Structure of the local government system in Bangladesh : Explained

PUNOMI RAHMAN TITIR

Have you ever wondered how decisions are made at the grassroots level in Bangladesh? Who looks after local infrastructure, sanitation, or community welfare? It is not feasible for the central government alone to manage responsibilities of entire localities across the country. Much of the general people's day-to-day interaction with the state occurs through public services and decision-making processes that affect their immediate communities. This is where the local government steps in.

In larger countries, governance is usually decentralised through provincial or state autonomy, allowing regional governments to manage local affairs independently. Bangladesh, however, follows a unitary system of government, meaning authority is concentrated at the centre. To ensure that governance reaches every corner of the country, Bangladesh relies on a layered local government system.

The key purpose of this system is to give ordinary citizens a direct role in decision-making. Through elected representatives, people should be able to voice their concerns, influence development priorities, and hold local officials accountable. This system is meant to allow communities to participate in politics without needing to engage at the national level, making democracy accessible for everyday life.

At present, our local government is primarily divided into two structures: rural and urban. These structures are spread across each of the eight divisions of Bangladesh. The rural administration ensures that essential services reach the countryside. These include birth registration, maintaining law and order, etc., and development projects relating to education, healthcare, and agriculture.

The first tier

The "union parishad" or "union council" is the lowest administrative unit, which is further divided into nine wards, each of which consists of several villages and are represented by a member who sits on the union council. Each union is headed by a chairperson and consists of members, including reserved seats for women, all of whom are directly elected by local residents.

Similarly, urban areas are governed under a separate administrative framework designed to address the challenges of higher population density, rapid development, and more complex public service requirement such as traffic management, waste management, clean water supply, and so on.

Smaller towns are administered through "municipalities" or "pourashava", while larger cities fall under "city corporations". Both are headed by an elected mayor and councillors representing different wards. Due to rapid development in rural areas, an increasing number of unions are being reclassified as municipalities.

Each city corporation in Bangladesh is headed by an elected mayor and is divided into several administrative wards where each ward is represented by an elected councillor.

City wards in Bangladesh are the smallest administrative and electoral units within city corporations and municipalities. One general councillor is responsible for each ward. One selected reserved woman councillor represents three wards. For example, Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) has 30 wards, each led by an elected councillor. In addition, RCC has 10 reserved seats for women where each elected woman councillor represents three wards.

Voters in each ward therefore cast three votes: one for the mayor, one for the regular ward councillor, and one for a reserved woman councillor.

The second tier

The union councils, city corporations, and municipalities are brought under a single administrative framework by the "upazila parishad" or "sub-district council". Each sub-district council is headed by an elected chairperson and includes two vice-chairpersons, with at least one seat reserved for women. The chairs of union councils and mayors of municipalities under a sub-district also sit on the upazila parishad.

The primary function of the upazila parishad is to serve as the second tier of local government, responsible for coordinating government services, handling the council's funds, monitoring the local security situation, and formally reporting its findings to higher levels of government. They also work with the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) who is the top government officer of the sub-district (an upazila chief executive, so to speak) to manage local administration and development.

The third tier

Above the upazila level sits the 'zila parishad' or 'district council'. Bangladesh has 64 districts, each functioning as an

to be largely autonomous and are composed of elected representatives, with reserved representation for indigenous communities. The HDCs are responsible for a wide range of subjects, including education, health, local police, land management, agriculture, tourism, and cultural affairs.

Above the district councils is the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council (CHTRC), meant to coordinate activities among the three HDCs and act as a bridge between the hill districts and the central government. CHTRC oversees general administration, development planning, and conflict resolution.

Traditional institutions also play an important role in the CHT. The region is divided into circles headed by a traditional chief (such as the Chakma, Bohmong, or Mong chiefs). They exercise customary authority over land and local disputes in accordance with long-standing practices. Each circle is divided into smaller units called "mouzas", which consist of several villages. Every mouza is led by a "headman", while individual villages are overseen by a "karbari".



ILLUSTRATION: ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA

These traditional systems coexist with formal administrative structures, making governance in the CHT distinct from the rest of the country.

Despite structural layers of administration, the local governance in Bangladesh is far less effective than it appears on paper. Many of these systems are inherited, directly or indirectly, from colonial-era administrative arrangements that prioritised control and revenue collection over democratic participation.

Elections at several tiers have often been delayed for years, weakening public accountability and reducing representative bodies to extensions of the central bureaucracy. Locally elected representatives frequently lack real authority, as key powers remain concentrated in the hands of government-appointed officials.

Ultimately, Bangladesh's local governance remains hindered by centralised control, outdated structures, and limited citizen influence, leaving communities underserved, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive reform.