

# Bangladesh

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## Introduction

Bangladesh emerged as an independent state through a bloody struggle in 1971. It is a unitary state with parliamentary form of democracy. Bangladesh has a nationwide local government system from big cities to rural villages to provide service to the doorstep of citizens. They are the entry point for the people to receive services ranging from issuing birth certificates to works during emergency and disaster. Moreover, various voluntary and community organizations, philanthropists, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide social services (such as education, health, and housing) to disadvantaged and marginalized people. Despite much potential, local governments' existence and functioning are hampered by sudden and arbitrary change and elimination and using it as a tool for political support by the central government. Local governments' institutional capacities are weak due to over-centralization of authority, power, and finance, which leads to dependence on the central government. Besides, governance issues such as ensuring equality, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, accountability, proper coordination and reducing corruption is critical for their effective functioning (Begum & Chowdhury, 2012).

## General country analysis

Bangladesh political development has gone through ups and downs of both autocracy and democracy. After independence, Bangladesh

### About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organisation is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

*This brief covers events up to 28 February 2021.*

*Events occurring after this period are not considered.*

introduced parliamentary democracy, which was replaced by a one-party government in 1975. However, the new government was overthrown by the military within a short period and Bangladesh would see several military regimes replacing each other up until 1990. In 1991, parliamentary democracy was restored through a popular uprising and it remains till this day. Bangladesh has a multiparty system, but two parties and their coalitions dominate national politics. Bangladesh Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have ruled over the country for the last three decades. The central issue is rivalry between both parties on conducting a credible election. In 1996, a non-party caretaker government (an interim government) was established to conduct national elections through constitutional amendment, and it succeeded in arranging three national elections. It was abolished by the Awami League government in 2011. The subsequent national election in 2014 was boycotted by the main opposition party (BNP) and its alliance on the issue of holding credible election. Awami League re-elected in the consecutive elections and it has been in power for the last 12 years (from 2009-2021). Since 2014, the Awami League government has also dominated local government elections, which had previously been more contested. While

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opposition parties do participate, they most often end up either losing or boycotting elections due to intimidation and vote rigging. The future of democracy is uncertain as there are allegations against the government of mass arrests and harassment of opposition, forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and control of media.

Bangladesh has an emerging economy, and it is continuing its drive from lower-middle-income status to middle-income country (World Bank, 2020). The economy is dependent on agriculture, export-oriented and labor-intensive industries, and remittances from migrant workers. Although Bangladesh is maintaining economic growth, the gap between rich and poor as well as rural and urban are wide. While Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in poverty reduction, around 39 million people (14.8% as in 2016) remain below the poverty line. There is an increased demand for energy, transport, and urbanization. Bangladesh is implementing some mega projects like Padma Bridge, metro rail, and a nuclear power plant to cope with these demands. However, the success has been overshadowed by insufficient planning and investment and allegations of rampant corruption resulting in severe infrastructure bottlenecks, congestion, pollution (World Bank, 2020), and cost overruns of projects.

## Political decentralisation

The constitution of Bangladesh (CoB) has enclosed the provisions to form elected local government in every administrative unit of the government to perform works of public officers, maintain public order, prepare, and implement plans to provide public services and economic development. It also mentions budgeting and taxation power, and maintenance of funds by local government to perform its assigned functions according to legislation (CoB, articles 59, 60).

Bangladesh has two types of local governments. One type for urban areas with two tiers (City Corporation for big cities and Paurashava for

small towns) and another for rural areas with three tiers (From top Zila Parishad, Upazila Parishad at the middle and Union Parishad at the bottom). Local governments follow a dual-supervision model, like France and Britain, where local governments are to coordinate their activities under the control of central government bureaucrats along with sectoral and functional ministries that control at the field level. Bangladesh has elected local governments through popular voting formed under the laws passed by the national parliament. The term for each is five years. Public service delivery related to people-oriented service such as health education, and social welfare is mainly provided by central government agencies and local governments have a limited range of autonomous service delivery responsibilities related to property-oriented service such as garbage collection, water, sewage etc. (Shah, 2006). The main sources of local government funds are taxes, tolls, fees, and government grants. In practice, the funds from local governments' own sources are inadequate and they largely depend on the central government for grants. In 2016-17, local government spent 8% of the total government expenditure (CLGF, 2018). Bangladesh government has been implementing some donor supported projects that serve to strengthen local government through fiscal decentralization with performance-based budgeting and auditing (World Bank, 2017).

There are provisions to keep reserved seats for women (one third of the total) in all local government bodies. However, despite such efforts local government bodies remain male dominated and female voices are hardly taken into account. (Chowdhury, 2016; Daily Star, 2017). In addition, because of the wider gap between rich and poor, local government representatives tend to be influential local elites that support systems based on patron-client relationships. The allocative justice also affected by 'vote bank' considerations and party affiliation. Although women participation in voting is remarkable, male domination is evident and women hardly go against their male custodians.

## Accountability and transparency

There are both horizontal and vertical mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability of local government. Central government monitors and inspects local government works. Local governments have provisions to formulate standing committees, citizens' charters, provide information, conduct open budget meetings, and showing the councils' budget on billboards. In practice, central inspection and monitoring becomes a formality and standing committees are dominated by the supporters and relatives of representatives. A study reveals counter opinions on the effectiveness of these mechanisms as representatives reported positively while citizens opined negatively (Chowdhury, 2021). Although media is independent on paper, in practice journalists face obstacles in the form of threats, attacks, snatchings, destruction of equipment, and even murder.

Before the introduction of partisan elections and electronic voting machines, local government elections were held in a festive mood with spontaneous participation resulting in high voter turnout and competition among candidates. The elections are now becoming less competitive with low turnout and participation, full of fear and mistrust. There are allegations against the ruling party of intimidation and harassment of opposition and independent candidates. In many cases, opposition and independent candidates do not dare to appoint polling agents in election booths. In the Zila Parishad election, there were allegations of persuasion by members of parliament and of candidates buying votes (Daily Star, 2016). Many candidates from ruling parties are now standing for election unopposed. Government has also passed arbitrary orders like suspending an elected representative and appoint an administrator in their place. The election regulating body is weak at both national and local level, and there is a general sense of mistrust about free and credible elections.

Turnout in national and local elections in Bangladesh is in a declining trend. In the rural

Upazila Parishad election turnout declined from 68% in 2009, 60% in 2014, and 43% in 2019 (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2009; Uddin, 2016; Dhaka Tribune, March 11, 2019). Urban City Corporation elections are not doing better. For example, the Chittagong City Corporation saw voter turnout decline from ~55% in 2010 to a mere 22.5% in 2021 (Daily Star, 2015; Dhaka Tribune, 2021). This general decline may be linked to the introduction of electronic voting machines (EVM), partisan elections, boycott by opposition, and intimidation that has caused people to lose confidence in the electoral system (Rahman & Abdullah, 2020).

Local governments have three associations: the Bangladesh Union Parishad Forum (BUPF), the Upazila Parishad Foundation of Bangladesh (UPFB) and the Municipal Association of Bangladesh (MAB). They assist the chairman of Union Parishads, Upazila Parishads and municipalities with their rights, privileges, and welfare. They raise a united voice for the decentralization and democratization of the local government system of Bangladesh. Membership is voluntary and local laws do not require to form associations (CLGF, 2018). For example, MAB is an association of Mayors of municipalities, which organizes seminars and workshops.

## Spaces for local democracy

There are variations between local governments in terms of democratic governance. Although Bangladesh follows parliamentary forms of government, the local governments are presidential. As a result, the Mayor/Chairman dominates the local government activities. Moreover, partisan elections have influenced their position depending on their party affiliation. If they are from the ruling party, councilors or members do not dare to speak against them. In local governments where both the Mayor/Chairman and councilors/members are strong, they are more accountable and transparent, and perform better.

Participation in decision making, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and sharing benefits ensure legitimacy, acceptability, accountability, and transparency of local government. The mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency are practiced by the Union Parishads including asking questions to representatives, getting feedback from citizens, displaying billboards, report to supervising authority, finally through voting. A study by Chowdhury (2021) reveals that Union Parishads invite influential people when a problem arises. They invite party men, families to representatives, and their relatives to participate in their activities (Chowdhury & Aktaruzzaman, 2016). In the case of Union Parishads, there are provisions for citizens to participate in standing committees, ward *shava*, open budgeting, ward development committee, union development committee, and project implementation committees. In most cases, these committees are formed to comply with legal provisions and ensure funding for projects.

### Local governments and disaster management

It is worth noting that Bangladesh is a disaster-prone zone and vulnerable to natural calamities such as floods, cyclones, and other natural disasters that often breach coastal embankments to result in dirty and saline water, homelessness, and urban migration. Government has formulated Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) in 2009 and implementing some projects in coastal areas through local government engineering departments to strengthen disaster committees, ensure fresh water, and reduce risk. For example, the government has implemented Reducing Vulnerability to Climate Change Project (RVCC) in 630 Union Parishads in selected districts to incorporate disaster risk management into their local development plans. However, institutional linkages between local governments and other agencies are not well articulated. There are disaster management committees from national to grassroot level to mitigate risk and assist people to climate change adaptation (Asia Foundation,

2012). Local governments build roads, bridges, and cyclone shelters for communication and to protect agricultural land from salination. They also take measures to ensure drinking water through deep tube well and tube well (Groom, 2012). Municipalities are also implementing some initiatives with support from donors such as solar street lighting (by Sylhet City Corporation), environment friendly waste management (making biogas and electricity from waste by Jessore municipality with support from Asian Development Bank)

### Conclusion

Local government in Bangladesh is a centuries-old institution with strong linkages to local citizens. Local governments can implement development programs and provide services with local support by adopting inclusive strategies. However, they face many hurdles in the form of institutional weaknesses, lacking autonomy, and dependence on central government for finance and execution of development programs. Moreover, corruption among elected representatives and officials reduces access to and efficient delivery of services, hampers development programs, and vulnerable groups access to welfare. The decline of voter turnout implies citizens are losing their confidence in the electoral system, which may threaten local democracy. Local councils are not well balanced due to the power delegated to the Mayor/Chairman. Moreover, local councils are dominated by men despite reserved seats for women. Local government along with communities can respond to local needs and development utilizing local resources if their working barriers can be overcome. Effective service delivery depends on how the mechanisms for ensuring accountability and transparency can be made more active. Local government can be more effective if their institutional capacities are strengthened through national and international support programs for training, finance, digitalization of service and reduction of corruption.

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