

Administrative Decentralization Program and the Emergence of a New Local Government System in Bangladesh

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Giving importance to the problems of underdevelopment, the successive governments in Bangladesh from its independence in 1972 prioritized the development of the rural population but short of developing a viable local government system. Hence, the quality of life of the people of Bangladesh further degenerated. Realizing this, President Ershad upon assuming office in 1982, introduced an administrative decentralization program with an objective of transforming their local government units into self-reliant ones. This decentralization measure was implemented through the democratization of the rural local government units with elected chairmen and the territorial reorganization of the administrative units of districts and sub-divisions. Significant administrative and political changes are now being observed in the local government system. However, to achieve a faster and more effective rural development, adequate time and continuity in direction must be insured.

Introduction

As a country, Bangladesh is characterized by the predominance of a vast and underdeveloped rural sector. More than 85 per cent of its population of nearly 110 million, lives in 68,000 villages and pursues agriculture as main occupation. Majority of the rural population belongs to the landless and marginal farmers categories. The incidence of landlessness is estimated to be nearly 55 per cent (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 1985:47). Even a cursory glance at the history of the sub-continent reveals that for the past two centuries since the beginning of the British rule, the part of the Indian sub-continent that constitutes the present Bangladesh, has been afflicted with misfortunes. Initially looted by invaders, this vast alluvial plain land, criss-crossed by hundreds of rivers, had been ravaged, time and again, by natural calamities like cyclones, floods and famines. As if to make the socioeconomic situation worse, throughout the British colonial rule, Bengal suffered a weak administration in comparison to most other provinces of the Empire (Etienne 1985:173). The fact that no significant industrial development and urbanization took place in Bangladesh during the British rule speaks about the neglect that the region suffered at the hands of the British. The same holds true about the Pakistan era. From 1947 until December 15, 1971 when Bangladesh was the eastern wing of Pakistan, no de-

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liberate state policy for industrialization and urbanization was undertaken by the Pakistan rulers. As a result, when Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation on December 16, 1971, what she inherited was a rural agrarian country ravaged by war, damaged physical infrastructure, dislocated institutional and organizational framework and a war-torn economy.

Problems of Underdevelopment in Bangladesh

Immediately after the liberation of Bangladesh, the government was faced, along with the urgent task of reconstructing the physical infrastructures and rehabilitating the millions of refugees who returned from India after the surrender of the Pakistani army, with the responsibility of managing an economy that had all the symptoms of underdevelopment. Poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, high population growth, traditional farming practices, endemic unemployment, weak industrial infrastructure and above all, acute dependence on the vagaries of nature, were some of the indicators of underdevelopment of the nation. The urgency for reforming the local government system so that the immediate task of rural development could be undertaken was therefore felt immediately after the nation was born.

Successive Governments' Failures in Instituting Viable Local Government System

The successive governments in Bangladesh, from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Ziaur Rahman and Sattar accorded a very high priority to rural development. But they did not attach corresponding importance to the restructuring of a viable local government system. Hence, the policies and strategies pursued through centralized and bureaucratically dominated public administration system, coupled with chronic political instability, could little alleviate the sufferings of the people of Bangladesh. Landlessness, poverty, rural-urban dichotomy, government-people distance and rich-poor gaps continued. Though massive foreign aid was available and many developmental programs were launched, lop-sided development took place in the country under which the capital city and other metropolitan areas flourished with a few elite classes. However, villages with millions of toiling masses struggling for their subsistence, further degenerated. In the absence of a dependable local government system, there was no way for the people to participate in the decision-making process of development administration. The result was that the government did not repose confidence in the masses nor did the masses trust the government. All these accentuated the process of degradation of the quality of life, particularly of the rural masses.

Introduction of Administrative Decentralization Program

In 1982, the government of Lt. General H.M. Ershad took a decision to introduce an administrative decentralization program. By February 1984, all the rural *thanas*¹ of the country were upgraded into *upazilas* (sub-districts) with the *Upazila Parishad*²

at the helm of decision-making process (Ali 1986:200). An elaborate administrative and institutional arrangement had been effected to provide necessary support, supplies and services to the Upazila Chairman and the institution of Upazila Parishad. A large number of officers and staff belonging to different ministries, departments, semi-autonomous and autonomous organizations with responsibilities of undertaking development tasks, who had been hitherto accountable to their organizational hierarchies at the district and central levels, had been deputized to Upazila Parishads to work under the administrative control of the elected chairmen of the Parishads.

Decentralization Process

The government of Ershad came to power through a bloodless coup on March 25, 1982. Immediately upon assuming office, the President declared that he wants to make the government closer to the people. To identify the problems that stood in the way of effective functioning of rural administration and government and of people getting access to participation in decision-making in government administered development programs, the government appointed a high-powered committee known as Committee for Administrative Reorganization/Reform (CARR) on April 28, 1982. The goal of administrative decentralization was to transform every thana of the country into a self-reliant unit where people's representatives would oversee and direct developmental activities performed by the civil servants who would be responsible to the former for their actions (Ershad 1982). CARR was made responsible to undertake the task of inquiring into the problems and suggesting appropriate policy measures to remedy the situation.

Findings of CARR

Nine major problems were identified by the CARR in the course of its deliberations. These are (CARR 1982:vii-viii):

- (1) Lack of appropriate, consistent and uniform personnel policies with regard to recruitment, promotion and training of public services;
- (2) *Tadbir*³-based approach to decision-making;
- (3) Difficulties of the common man to comprehend the compartmentalized functions and complexities in governmental decision-making;
- (4) Absence of sound and durable political process to give appropriate, consistent and uniform policies with regard to public welfare;
- (5) Vertical functional departmentalism that vitiates area-based coordination;
- (6) Weak local government system rendered weaker by lack of appropriate political directions;

- (7) Weakening of traditional administrative and representative institutions at different levels of administration;
- (8) Conflict in jurisdiction brought about by the creation of parallel political and administrative institutions; and,
- (9) Reluctance on the part of the political authority to develop the representative institutions at the local level.

The Committee report made it clear that previous governments in Bangladesh had clear inclination towards centralization of power and hence, did not take much effort to establish participatory administrative and political system. In the opinion of the Committee, "Bangladesh did not have the benefit of mature, consistent and appropriate political leadership" (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 1982:31). To the question why previous governments were not keen on local government and administrative reforms, the Committee further notes, "if free and fair elections are given, many of the *Zila Parishad* and *Thana Parishad* Chairmanship may go to the opposition political parties . . . will mean loss of votes for the people that are at the national level" (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 1982:64-65). In other words, the CARR viewed that crude political expediency rather than anything else dictated actions taken at the center to deny majority of the population residing outside metropolis the right to govern themselves through their chosen representatives (Khan 1985:44).

Recommendations of CARR

CARR submitted its report on June 30, 1982, two months after its constitution. Based on the assessment of people's perceptions⁴ of a reorganized system of local administration and local government, the committee recommended that:

- (1) Thana should be made the basic unit of administration;
- (2) Sub-division should be upgraded into districts; and,
- (3) Elected local government officials at the district, thana and union levels should take over all functions of development administration while functions of regulatory administration may be transferred to the elected councils within a time-bound frame.

The Committee thus came to the conclusion that only within a framework of elected local government system can devolution of authority be meaningfully achieved and made effective. Singling out the alleviation of poverty as the overriding goal of development administration, the Committee recommended a package of measures consisting of effective devolution of authority to an elected body of local government

with wide scope for people's participation. The Committee felt that democratization of elected local government at district (zila), thana (upazila) and union levels should be supported by a decentralized planning and budgetary system. In its absence, it was feared that the measures for devolution would not be fully effective. Simultaneously, deconcentration of administrative functions should take place for which the committee recommended identification and itemization of various administrative functions which can be transferred to the elected local government officials. Dwelling upon the issue of central-local relationship, the committee recommended that basic principles governing this should be the adoption of a policy of non-intervention by the national government in matters which are within the purview of the elected local government. It emphasized that "the national government must also be committed on a continuing basis, to the substantive concept that good government is no substitute for self-government" (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 1982:iv).

Implementation Process of Administrative Decentralization/Reform Measures

The key element in the implementation measures was the attempt at what may be called the democratization of the rural local government and administration with an elected thana, later renamed Upazila Parishad. From the viewpoint of structure, this was the first time in the history of rural local government in Bangladesh, that a directly elected chairman was installed as the head of Upazila Parishad with the Union Parishad chairmen being made members with voting rights. The officers of the national government working at the upazila level (field officers) were made non-voting members. They were made responsible and accountable to the Upazila Parishad in the discharge of their functional duties. Functionally, the Upazila Parishad became more important than the old Thana Parishad which was headed by the sub-divisional officers (SDO) (Ali 1986:28). Another noteworthy structural change was the attempt of the government to territorially reorganize the administrative units of districts and sub-divisions. All the sub-divisions were abolished and converted into districts.

The Committee (CARR) suggested the constitution of a small but high-powered National Implementation Committee for Administrative Reorganization/Reform (NICARR) for deciding upon implementation policies and devising measures for execution. It was made clear by the Chief Executive of the country that NICARR would be a continuing body and its decisions were to be acted upon by the respective ministries and their affiliated agencies. Only the Chief Executive of the state had the power to rescind or modify NICARR's decisions (Ali 1986:31).

In the recommended decentralized system of administration and local government, the thana emerged as the focal point of administration and development. It was also the level where people's participation had greater scope. The implementation of reorganization/reform measures, therefore, started with the thanas. The implementation policy and measures had the following immediate objectives:

- (1) To determine and operationalize an institutional framework at the thana level for decentralized administration and planning;
- (2) To create a mechanism for integration of the government machinery with the local government institutions at the thana level;
- (3) To determine the power and roles of the local government institutions at the thana and union levels;
- (4) To allocate subjects to the thana level;
- (5) To decentralize planning, budgeting and resource allocation; and,
- (6) To coordinate the inter-departmental activities at the thana level and determine the relation between ministries/ departments with the thana level functionaries.

The implementation of the decentralization program started from November 1982 when the first phase thanas were upgraded. Earlier, on October 23, the government passed a resolution which stated that responsibilities of all development activities at the local level would be transferred to the Thana Parishad, while the National government would retain the regulatory functions and those development activities which have national and regional coverage.⁵

The resolution also passed order placing the transferred functions to the Upazila Parishad. The officers dealing with retained subjects were also made answerable to the Upazila Parishad. If the Resolution of October 23, 1982 was instrumental in laying down the basis for a new administrative structure with changed functional relationship vertically and horizontally, it was the Local Government (Thana Parishad and Thana Administration Reorganization) Ordinance of 1982 that provided the legal framework for a new local government system in Bangladesh.⁶ It provided for the constitution of Upazila Parishads with an elected chairman (on the basis of adult franchise), representative members (chairmen of Union Parishads of the Upazila as ex-officio members), three nominated women members, the chairman of the Upazila Central Cooperative Association (UCCA), one nominated member and such number of official members as might be specified by the government. Until the holding of the elections in May 1985, the Upazila Nirbani (Executive) Officer acted as chairman of the Parishad. With the holding of Upazila Chairman election on May 16 and 20, 1985, the elected chairmen took overall charge of all the 460 Upazila Parishad in the country.

Implications and Impact

With the implementation of the administrative decentralization measures as recommended by the CARR and NICARR, significant changes are being observed in

the local government system in particular and rural development scenario in general. Few of these changes are discussed below.⁷

From the viewpoint of organization and institution-building, the administrative decentralization program implied reform of the local government and public administration system in Bangladesh in a way which contributed substantially to ensure accountability of local level bureaucracy to the elected chairman and through him, to the Upazila Parishad. From a purely administrative point of view, it implied a number of changes in the system of central government, rural public administration and local government institutions. It abolished sub-districts previously known as sub-divisions. These were converted into districts. Concurrently, the upazilas were accorded the status of sub-districts with wider freedom in decision-making by a popularly elected body. This was a departure from the past tradition of local government and rural development in a number of significant ways. First, the upazila gained its importance as an administrative unit especially in the sphere of development administration. Second, implementation of administrative decentralization program facilitated greater transfer of authority and power in decision-making, particularly in matters pertaining to planning and execution of local rural development projects from the central government to the Upazila Parishads. Third, with the implementation of the upazila system, more resources in terms of finance and trained manpower were getting transferred to the upazilas. Fourth, departmental lines of hierarchical control over field level functionaries were for the first time broken by placing the latter's services at the disposal of the Upazila Parishad with the elected chairman directly commanding their services. Fifth, the central-local relations underwent significant changes as a result of transfer of subjects from the center to the Upazila Parishads. Sixth, the system of monthly review meetings (these were obligatory on the part of the Upazila Parishads) contributed to better management of rural development project. Seventh, the decentralization system of planning and management helped in ushering of norms of participatory decision-making process.⁸

The political implications of the administrative decentralization program can be summed up by stating that: (a) holding of elections for Upazila Parishad's chairmen led to the weakening of the political bases of the major opposition political parties; (b) immediately after the election, a majority of the independent candidates who won the contest joined the government party⁹ pointing to the success of the political strategy adopted by Ershad in winning political support for him and his policies of decentralized administration and participatory rural development; and, (c) this new system of local government and administration helped Ershad in establishing political base in the rural areas.

Conclusion

The building of Upazila Parishads as viable institutions of local government will be a long drawn process. However, once this can be established within the framework of administrative decentralization program of the government of President H.M.

Ershad, the goals of participatory and integrated rural development would be achieved faster and more effectively than before. However, it is important that the system is allowed to operate in such a manner that the institution of Upazila Parishad is used more for the purposes of participatory planning and decision-making than for gaining short-term political expediency from it. The system's real potential for participatory local government and rural development can be realistically realized and assessed only if the system is allowed adequate time and continuity in direction.

Endnotes

¹Originally created by the British for organizing police administration in rural India, thana as an administrative unit underwent many changes. Under the administrative decentralization program, thana was renamed upazila and emerged as the focal point of local government system and rural development administration. On the average, a thana covers an area of approximately 125 sq. miles and has a population of about 180,000 (or .18 million or one lac eighty thousand). There are 495 thanas (now upazilas) of which 460 are rural thanas.

²Upazila Parishad is the main institution created by enacting the reformed local government and upazila administration ordinances under the decentralization program of the Ershad regime. An Upazila Parishad is headed by an elected Union Parishad (council) chairman, three women members (nominated), chairman of the Upazila Central Cooperative Association and one nominated member. Upazila level officers deputized by the central government are the non-voting members of the Parishad.

³Literally, *tadbir* means informal attempts to get a decision done in one's favor. In the context of the Bangladesh Public Administration, it refers to the practice of influencing decision-making through adoption of unfair and extra-legal means which may include approaching the authority responsible for making a decision through relatives, friends or colleagues in services, politicians or through offering various advantages in return of a favorable decision. The practice has become so widespread that files do not move in the bureaucracy without *tadbir*. Even the bureaucrats are to make *tadbir* for their promotion, transfer and getting officially allowed facilities. For details, see M. Anisuzzaman (1985).

⁴Assessment was done through field visits in eight thanas, discussion with a cross-section of the public, and the circulation of questionnaires to elicit public opinion.

⁵For a list of regulatory and major development functions retained by the government and those transferred to the Upazila Parishad, see the Resolution dated October 23, 1982.

⁶The Local Government (Thana Parishad and Thana Administration Reorganization) Ordinance, 1982 was amended in 1983 to substitute upazila for thana and Upazila Parishad for Thana Parishad.

⁷Assessment of impact in terms of quantitative changes are difficult because of newness of the decentralization program. Only certain broader trends can be indicated at the present stage of program implementation.

⁸For an interesting discussion on the impact of administrative reform and upazila system on the politics and bureaucracy in Bangladesh, see Nizam Ahmed (1988).

⁹The Daily Ittefaq (A Bengali daily) reported that out of a total number of 460 upazilas, the government party-Jatiyotabadi Dal won in 207, Awami League (Sheikh Hasina Group) in 53, Bangladesh Nationalist Party in 34, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Shahjahan-Rab) in 19, Muslim League in 8, Bangladesh Krishak Samik Awami League in 4, United People's Party in 3, National Awami Party (Muzzaffar) in 6 and Jatiya Samajtantik Dal (Miza Shahjahan) 2 upazilas. In the remaining 124 upazilas, independent candidates won. See the Ittefaq, Dhaka, June 13, 1985. Majority of the independent candidates joined the government's party after winning the election.

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