Administrative Reform in Bangladesh: Challenges and Policy Recommendations

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Contents

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Introduction

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This chronic stagnation has coincided with Bangladesh's transformation from a low-income country to an emerging lower-middle-income economy, suggesting that outdated administrative systems now constrain the nation's ambitions.

In late 2024, Bangladesh's caretaker administration accelerated reform talks by forming new commissions on public administration and local government[3]. These groups quickly drafted large recommendation sets (over 200 proposals in one case) for improving governance[4].

This white paper, prepared for the Jagoron Foundation, provides a balanced analysis of four key reform dimensions – public service delivery, decentralisation, bureaucratic efficiency, and anti-corruption – and offers evidence-based recommendations for each. The aim is to inform policymakers, civil society, and other stakeholders, without representing any official position. We draw on the latest data and reports (2019–2024) from government, academic, and media sources to highlight challenges, international comparisons, and practical solutions.

"By making government portals reliable and citizen-centric, these reforms can reduce red tape and corruption in day-to-day services. A practical step is to "save the life of a laptop," as one editorial urged, by using technology to eliminate manual filing and cash transactions[11]. Experience from the e-procurement rollout shows that technology can cut costs and raise transparency; similar gains are possible in health, education, and other sectors if digitisation is scaled up."

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Public Service Delivery

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Public Service Delivery

Effective service delivery – in health, education, utilities and other areas – is crucial for citizen welfare. Bangladesh has made notable strides in some sectors (e.g. reducing poverty and improving school enrolment) thanks to sustained government attention. Nonetheless, public satisfaction remains mixed and rural-urban disparities persist. To modernise services, Bangladesh has embraced digital government tools under its "Digital Bangladesh" vision.

For example, a nationwide electronic government procurement (e-GP) system was launched in 2012 with World Bank support, moving all stages of public tenders fully online[5]. This e-GP platform has reportedly "made procurement more efficient, transparent and accountable" and increased competition[6]. As one World Bank study notes, moving from paper to electronic tendering "facilitated a remarkable shift" in public projects, reducing errors, delays and rent-seeking[7].

Beyond procurement, Bangladesh has launched various e-governance initiatives. Online portals and mobile apps now allow citizens to pay utility bills, submit passport applications, and access land records digitally.

However, an EU-supported assessment finds persistent obstacles: ministries often work in silos, digital platforms can be under-developed, and many citizens (especially in rural areas) lack the skills or connectivity to use online services[8]. In practice, access to ICT remains uneven; for example, while urban officials increasingly use e-office systems to track files, lower-level staff may still rely on paper records.

At the local level, Bangladesh introduced Union Digital Centres (UDCs) in the late 2000s to bring basic services to rural residents, and more recently has extended digitisation to services like mobile banking and e-learning. It has also created one-stop service kiosks for social safety net registration and support. Still, many frontline services (e.g. local clinics, schools, utility connections) continue to face delays and informal fees. According to surveys, a large majority of citizens report paying bribes to obtain routine services. The 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index underscores this: Bangladesh scored only 24/100 (ranked 149th of 180 countries), its lowest score in 12 years[9]. The result is that public programs do not always deliver outcomes efficiently or equitably.

Comparative Perspective: Other countries illustrate both pitfalls and promises of service reforms. South Asian neighbours like India and Sri Lanka have pursued e-government portals for tax filing and citizen services, with mixed results depending on implementation. Bhutan (CPI score 68) credits much of its low corruption to stringent digital payments and bureaucratic professionalism.

Meanwhile, smaller developing countries (e.g. Estonia, Singapore) have shown how national ID systems and high-speed internet can enable nearly paperless government. Bangladesh's experience is intermediate: it has built some infrastructure (national ID cards, some broadband) but must accelerate usage and ensure inclusion.

Policy Recommendations: To improve delivery, Bangladesh should expand and integrate its digital platforms while making them user-friendly. This includes:

• **Building ICT Capacity:** Continue training civil servants under initiatives like the "Government-to-Employees" (G2E) program to raise digital skills and enable fully paperless processes[10]. Likewise, invest in citizens' digital literacy so people can use online portals (e.g. for health records or school admission).

• **Strengthening E-Services:** Complete ongoing projects to extend e-government (e.g. e-office,

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Public Service Delivery continued...

e-filing, e-payment) across all ministries. Emphasise mobile accessibility (since mobile penetration is high) and local language interfaces.

• **One-Stop Service Centres:** Scale up and improve Union Digital Centres and local "citizen service kiosks" to provide internet access for remote health consultations, education (online classes) or administrative tasks. Ensuring these centers have reliable power and trained operators will make digital services truly inclusive.

• **Citizen Feedback Mechanisms:** Promote transparent grievance systems (for instance, an online Public Grievance Redress System at the national and local levels) so citizens can report service failures or corruption, and track remedies. Publicise performance data (e.g. clinic wait times, school pass rates) to create accountability.

• **Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation:** Adopt indicators to track service quality (e.g. Ministry scorecards) and use data (big-data

analytics, GIS mapping) to identify underserved areas. For example, communities lacking broadband or clean water should be prioritised in plans.

• **Leverage Public-Private Partnerships:** Consider collaborating with private telecoms and fintech to deliver services (e.g. secure digital signatures via mobile) under government oversight, as done in some countries. This can bring efficiency while still meeting public interest goals.

By making government portals reliable and citizen-centric, these reforms can reduce red tape and corruption in day-to-day services. A practical step is to "save the life of a laptop," as one editorial urged, by using technology to eliminate manual filing and cash transactions[11]. Experience from the e-procurement rollout shows that technology can cut costs and raise transparency; similar gains are possible in health, education, and other sectors if digitisation is scaled up.

"Decentralisation is not just a legal issue but also cultural. As a leading editorial argued, true empowerment will occur only when elected local leaders have real control "over the people and their elected local government representatives" instead of unelected officials[31].

These reforms – legal consolidation, synchronised elections, fiscal devolution and staffing transfers – would mark a major shift from the past. International experience shows that such changes must be accompanied by public oversight and political will; but if implemented, they could unlock more responsive governance in every region of Bangladesh."

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Decentralisation

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Decentralisation

Current Structure and Challenges: Bangladesh remains one of the more centralised states in South Asia. The country is officially unitary, with most authority concentrated in the central government and its district offices. Elected local bodies exist at three tiers – Union Parishads (smallest rural councils), Upazila (sub-district) Parishads, and Zila (district) Parishads – as well as municipalities and city corporations in urban areas. However, in practice these local bodies often have very limited powers or resources. As one analysis notes, "the chairpersons of the Union, Upazila and Zila Parishads as well as [city] mayors do not exercise real authority when it comes to implementing any project or development work… they have to be accountable to the administrative bureaucracy"[12]. In other words, elected officials must still seek approval from unelected government officers for even routine tasks, which stifles local initiative.

Historically, an Upazila Parishad system was introduced in 1982, abolished under military rule, and restored in 2009 by law. But as a recent commission report notes, although offices of central departments were physically moved to the Upazila level, functions and funding were not transferred[13]. Similar problems afflict district councils (Zila Parishads) and urban local governments. As a 2025 editorial explains, even though local chairpersons are "public representatives," in practice "the bureaucracy so far enjoyed real power and would lord it over… the public"[14]. The result is that planning and budgets remain controlled by the capital, rather than by local citizens' committees.

Local elections have also been contentious. For example, the multi-phase union, upazila and district elections held during 2021–22 were marred by violence and an opposition boycott[15]. Independent observers reported dozens of deaths and widespread irregularities, with the ruling party dominating the polls. This has deepened scepticism among many that the local system is genuinely democratic. As one analyst observes, Bangladesh's elected institutions have been largely kept "on paper" with real power retained in the hands of bureaucrats and the central government[16].

Reform Proposals and Comparative Insights: Recognising these problems, the government-appointed Local Government Reform Commission (LGRC) released a report in early 2025 with 51 recommendations to overhaul local governance. Its proposals include fundamental changes: consolidating the five existing local-government acts into a single, simplified law to eliminate legal confusion[17]; synchronising elections by holding all union, upazila, zila, municipal and city polls under one national schedule[18]; and even creating a new elected "district council" to assume traditional district administration functions[19]. The LGRC also recommends fully transferring staff, functions and budgets of 17 central departments to Upazila and Zila Parishads[20], as was originally intended by the 2009 Upazila Act. It suggests restructuring the local government ministry and merging overlapping agencies (e.g. uniting cooperative and rural development wings, merging health engineering under one cadre) to streamline operations[21]. Notably, the report proposes establishing civil and criminal courts at every Upazila to bring justice closer to citizens.

These recommendations resonate with international practice in varying degrees. For comparison, India's federal system gives states and (to some extent) local bodies constitutional status and significant fiscal powers, while Nepal's 2015 constitution created provinces and empowered municipalities. Sri Lanka's experience with provincial councils (13th Amendment) suggests that legal devolution alone is not enough without genuine financial autonomy.

Bangladesh's highly unitary model thus remains unusual; as one commentator observes, there is

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Decentralisation continued...

growing public expectation for more "empowering local governments", but long-standing resistance from entrenched bureaucracy[22]. In response, other countries have turned to indirect solutions: for instance, Pakistan's local governments have occasionally been given indirect electoral systems (councillors elect their chair), and Bhutan has experimented with devolving some health and education management to local gewogs. The LGRC's idea to hold indirect elections for union and upazila chairpersons – to reduce role of money and influence – echoes some of these hybrid models[23], although it remains politically controversial.

Policy Recommendations: Achieving meaningful decentralisation will require both legal reforms and practical capacity-building. Key recommendations include:

• Adopt a Unified Local Government Act: Enact a single, consolidated law as recommended[24]. This would replace overlapping statutes and allow all tiers of local government to be governed by the same democratic framework. It should clearly define the functions of Union, Upazila, and Zila Parishads (and urban bodies), preventing central

departments from undermining local authority.

• Synchronise Elections and Fiscal Years: Implement the LGRC's proposal to hold elections for all local levels on a single schedule[25]. This would reduce costs (officials estimate saving about BDT 1,600 crore per cycle)[26] and could stabilise local councils' terms. Alongside, align budgeting cycles so that unions receive block grants directly and can plan for multi-year development projects.

• Transfer Authority and Funds: Begin executing the full devolution of 17 public services (health, agriculture, fisheries, etc.) to Upazila and Zila councils, including posting staff locally and allocating operating budgets[27]. For example, Upazila Health Complexes should receive full staffing and supplies, and defunct Community Clinics should be merged into stronger facilities to avoid redundancy[28]. Similarly, empower Zila Parishads with authority over district-level projects and additional planning responsibilities.

• Strengthen Local Revenues: Increase the share of national tax revenues transferred to local bodies. The LGRC recommends doubling

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Decentralisation continued…

the budgets of union and upazila governments in the next fiscal year[29]. Even if full doubling is not possible immediately, the government should commit to a multi-year plan to raise local allocations, while requiring financial accountability (e.g. audited local accounts made public).

• **Capacity Building and Accountability:** Provide training for newly empowered local officials and staff. Set up village-level planning committees to involve citizens in budget priorities. Protect the independence of local representatives by banning interference from district magistrates or ministers in local matters. At the same time, hold elected local officials accountable through transparent processes (e.g. requiring public disclosure of development plans, citizen charters for services, and independent auditing).

• **Judicial Access:** Implement the proposal to establish courts at Upazila level for civil and criminal cases[30]. This would alleviate pressure on higher courts and make justice more accessible. It could be combined with community dispute-resolution councils for minor cases, as suggested by the LGRC.

Decentralisation is not just a legal issue but also cultural. As a leading editorial argued, true empowerment will occur only when elected local leaders have real control "over the people and their elected local government representatives" instead of unelected officials[31]. These reforms – legal consolidation, synchronised elections, fiscal devolution and staffing transfers – would mark a major shift from the past. International experience shows that such changes must be accompanied by public oversight and political will; but if implemented, they could unlock more responsive governance in every region of Bangladesh.

"Reform of the bureaucracy will require political leadership. The recent public administration commission's work has generated a large number of recommendations[47]. Moving forward, the government should engage frontline staff and citizen groups in reviewing and piloting changes, to ensure reforms (like ending preferential quotas) are implemented gradually but irreversibly. International experience suggests that persistent enforcement of merit rules – for example, transparently publishing every civil-service vacancy and promotion – is essential to shift bureaucratic culture."

4

Bureaucratic
Efficiency

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Bureaucratic Efficiency

A well-functioning civil service is the backbone of any administration. In Bangladesh, the bureaucracy is often seen as rigid, hierarchical and overstaffed in some areas, which hampers swift decision-making. The Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) traditionally has multiple cadres (administration, police, customs, etc.), but the Administration Cadre has dominated higher posts. Critics argue that this entrenched "cadre" system leads to disproportionate promotions and slow career progression for others[32].

For instance, until recently 75% of promotions to deputy-secretary rank were reserved for the Admin Cadre, sparking widespread discontent and student protests[33]. In July 2024, Bangladesh's Supreme Court ruled that 93% of government jobs must be filled on merit, effectively scrapping most of the old quota system[34].

Recognising these issues, a newly formed Public Administration Reform Commission (2024) has proposed sweeping changes. It suggests formally abolishing the use of "cadre" terminology in Favor of a single Civil Service, with standardised grade structures for all branches[35]. It advocates merit-based promotions determined by examination and performance rather than fixed quotas, aiming for "balance" across service groups[36].

These ideas have provoked resistance from vested interests – indeed, the 2024 quota protests illustrated the depth of the controversy[37] – but reflect a serious attempt to rationalise the system. The Commission is also reported to have examined high-level restructuring, including proposing division of the country into four administrative provinces (Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, Khulna) to decentralise staffing and reduce overload on Dhaka[38].

Beyond personnel rules, bureaucratic inefficiency in Bangladesh also stems from outdated processes and lack of accountability. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators rank Bangladesh in the lower quartile globally for government effectiveness. Studies note that complex licensing, opaque regulatory procedures, and uncoordinated oversight make it easy for small enterprises to get caught in red tape and extortion[39].

For example, the National Board of Revenue has at times arbitrarily reopened old tax cases on multinationals[40], while businesses report facing politically driven "harassment" from both regulators and racketeers. In the banking sector, large non-performing loans (nearly 9% of total in 2022) reflect lapses in oversight and collusion between powerful borrowers and officials[41]. Meanwhile, the day-to-day work environment remains paper-centric in many departments, even as digital initiatives like the e-office system slowly roll out.

Internationally, efficient bureaucracies often feature meritocratic culture, performance incentives, and low levels of politicisation. For instance, Singapore's civil service (ranked #1 in the World Governance Indicators) emphasises education-based selection, routine skill upgrades, and rotating leaders across agencies to prevent siloed interests. Bangladesh can draw lessons from such models: opening mid-career entry for experts, conducting transparent performance appraisals, and investing in continuous training (e.g. in technology, planning, and ethics) would help modernise the service.

Policy Recommendations: To bolster efficiency and professionalism, the government should pursue a multi-faceted reform agenda:

• **Merit-Based Recruitment and Promotion:** Remove or rationalise patronage elements (such as unwarranted quotas) to ensure entry and advancement are based on ability. For example, adopt standardised examinations for

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Bureaucratic Efficiency continued...

all promotions and widen the use of competitive testing for higher posts[42]. Legally abolish any inherited reservations that survive the Supreme Court ruling, and strictly enforce the new merit criteria in practice.
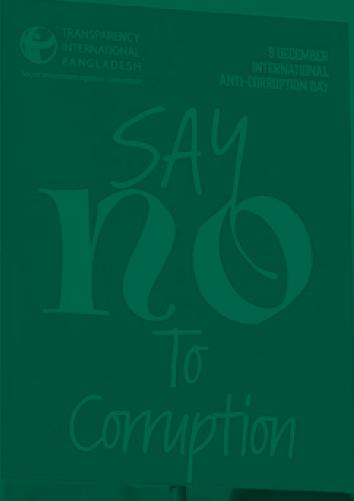
• **Unified Civil Service Structure:** Implement the proposed change to refer to the "Civil Service" instead of multiple cadres[43]. Simplify grade levels so that all officers progress under common rules, reducing inter-cadre conflicts. If needed, merge redundant cadres or agencies (as the LGRC suggested by consolidating the cooperatives department and revising engineering services)[44] to eliminate duplication.

• **Performance Management:** Introduce clear performance contracts and appraisals for senior officials, linking promotions or bonuses to measurable outcomes (e.g. project completion, citizen satisfaction scores). Publish annual performance reports for each ministry, to instill accountability.

• **Strengthen Accountability:** Assign rotational postings to prevent officials from accumulating excessive local power, and establish independent oversight (such as an empowered Public Service Commission) to review transfers and promotions. In the spirit of the Public Administration Commission's intent, consider setting up an Internal Ombudsperson or inspector-general within ministries to detect mismanagement.

• **Capacity Building:** Continue training programs (e.g. the G2E initiative[45]) and recruit specialists in areas like IT, urban planning, or public finance. Encourage partnerships with think tanks and foreign agencies to introduce modern management practices (procurement planning, e-government literacy, etc.). Expand use of digital tools (e-office, GIS in planning, online permit systems) to cut manual delays.

• **Explore Decentralised Administration:** In the medium term, seriously study the proposal to create provinces or regional offices[46]. Even if formal provinces are not immediately adopted, consider devolving certain ministries (e.g. agriculture extension, education) to empowered regional offices. This could speed decision-making by moving competent officials closer to local needs.

Reform of the bureaucracy will require political leadership. The recent public administration commission's work has generated a large number of recommendations[47]. Moving forward, the government should engage frontline staff and citizen groups in reviewing and piloting changes, to ensure reforms (like ending preferential quotas) are implemented gradually but irreversibly. International experience suggests that persistent enforcement of merit rules – for example, transparently publishing every civil-service vacancy and promotion – is essential to shift bureaucratic culture.

"As Transparency International observes, "immunity from prosecution" must end and corruption must no longer be viewed as normal[59]. Achieving this will take sustained political commitment. The recent judiciary rulings on job quotas show that Bangladesh can make hard decisions under public pressure[60]. A similar resolve is needed to enforce anti-corruption measures consistently. If successfully implemented, the above reforms would not only improve Bangladesh's CPI ranking, but more importantly, restore public trust and free up resources for development."

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Anti-Corruption

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Anti-Corruption

Corruption remains one of the most serious governance challenges in Bangladesh. Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index rated Bangladesh at just 24/100, placing it among the bottom ten globally. Within the Asia-Pacific region, only Afghanistan, Cambodia, Myanmar and North Korea fared worse[49].

The prevalence of bribery in everyday services is high: one study cited by the Bertelsmann Transformation Index found that in 2021, about 70.8% of people dealing with public services reported paying bribes, amounting to roughly BDT 1.83 billion (nearly 6% of the government budget) in one year. Such figures underscore the scope of the problem – from small kickbacks for school admissions or driver's licenses, to much larger scams in construction or banking.

Anti-corruption institutions in Bangladesh exist but are widely seen as underpowered. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) was created by law in 2004 as an independent body with the power to investigate and prosecute graft. In practice, however, the ACC has rarely pursued powerful officials or politicians. Stakeholders note that the ACC's top leaders are often political appointees beholden to the ruling party[50].

As one long-time commission official put it, the ACC's independence has been "only on paper", with many cases involving influential figures never initiated without government approval[51]. The 2023–24 student-led movement against quota-based job hiring, for example, revealed deep public frustration with entrenched privilege, and the ensuing police crackdown suggested broader unease about corruption and rule of law.

Functionally, the ACC suffers from backlogs and low conviction rates. The Daily Star reports that by early 2024 the ACC had over 3,300 cases pending in courts, disposing only 341 in a year[52]. Courts often issue stay orders on high-profile corruption trials, further delaying justice[53]. This undermines deterrence: when months or years pass without resolution, even honest officials may feel no fear of consequences. High-profile allegations (e.g. of illicit wealth by senior police or military officers) often fade without conclusion, fueling public cynicism.

Despite these obstacles, there have been positive steps. The government has gradually introduced e-governance tools that reduce petty graft. The success of the e-GP system mentioned earlier not only improved efficiency but also curbed opportunities for bid-rigging in public projects[54].

Similarly, online payments for taxes, fees and public utilities (e.g. through mobile financial services) can eliminate bribes that once accompanied cash transactions. Another important measure is the Right to Information Act (2009), which – at least on paper – grants citizens the power to obtain official data. Its rigorous enforcement could help expose corruption, though so far it has been inconsistently applied.

For comparison, Bangladesh can look to regional and global anti-corruption practices. Countries like Singapore or Hong Kong maintain nearly spotless reputations by enforcing strict laws and ensuring that anti-graft agencies act without fear or favour. Nepal's new constitution, for instance, includes provisions for an independent anti-corruption court.

In Bangladesh itself, civil society has been vocal: Transparency International Bangladesh has led public campaigns and called on the government to "challenge impunity" and depoliticise key institutions[55]. TIB's recommendations – safeguarding free press, preventing conflicts of interest, and shifting bureaucratic culture so that government jobs are viewed as service rather than entitlement[56] – echo international best practices.

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Anti-Corruption continued...

Policy Recommendations: Tackling corruption requires both stronger institutions and cultural change. Policy steps should include:

• **Strengthen Anti-Corruption Bodies:** Reform the ACC to guarantee its independence. For example, amend the ACC law so that its chair and commissioners are appointed by a bipartisan committee rather than by the ruling party, and entrench fixed terms to protect them from political pressure. Equip the ACC with a prosecution wing (as provided in law) so it can directly bring cases, rather than relying on outside attorneys. Ensure the judiciary expedites corruption trials by setting up special anti-corruption courts with mandated timelines.

• **Ensure Rule of Law:** Implement a zero-tolerance policy for corrupt acts at all levels. This means promptly acting on even petty corruption cases (e.g. prosecution of bribe-taking staff) and publicly reporting outcomes. Encourage whistleblowing through legal protection (enact strong whistleblower-protection rules) and anonymous hotlines. Justice delayed is justice denied; as one editorial argues, authorities must "make sure that [corruption] cases get disposed of within a reasonable period"[57].

• **Expand Digital Transparency:** Continue and widen e-governance reforms that reduce face-to-face interactions. Extend the e-procurement and e-payment platforms to all ministries (and reinforce them with anti-fraud AI monitoring). Publish government budgets, contracts and audit reports online. For example, web-based dashboards could show real-time project spending, deterring embezzlement. Studies show such measures can substantially increase public confidence.

• **Protect Civil Society and Media:** Repeal or amend any rules that punish investigative journalism or citizen activism on corruption.

Establish a culture where the media and NGOs can scrutinise government policies without fear of reprisal. This aligns with TIB's call to preserve "press freedom and overall freedom of speech" so corruption can be challenged without repression[58]. Empower independent research organisations to audit public programs (like health clinics or school funds) on a routine basis, bringing problems to light.

• **Public Awareness and Ethics:** Integrate ethics and anti-corruption training into civil-service colleges and university curricula. Promote national campaigns (in schools and media) emphasising integrity. The government's existing National Integrity Strategy (2012) should be revitalised, with clear targets and coordination across agencies. Introducing citizen charters for public services, explicitly stating no-fee pledges and avenues for complaint, can help change expectations.

As Transparency International observes, "immunity from prosecution" must end and corruption must no longer be viewed as normal[59]. Achieving this will take sustained political commitment. The recent judiciary rulings on job quotas show that Bangladesh can make hard decisions under public pressure[60]. A similar resolve is needed to enforce anti-corruption measures consistently. If successfully implemented, the above reforms would not only improve Bangladesh's CPI ranking, but more importantly, restore public trust and free up resources for development.

"In the words of one editorial: "the sooner these recommendations on local government reforms… are made to come into effect the better for common citizens."[62]. By taking concerted action across service delivery, local governance, bureaucracy, and anti-corruption, Bangladesh can create a more responsive and efficient state. Such reforms – grounded in evidence and public support – offer the best hope for ensuring that the country's future prosperity is inclusive, sustainable, and accountable."

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Conclusion

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Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture. On one hand, its economy has grown rapidly and its people aspire to higher living standards. On the other hand, long-standing governance challenges – opaque service delivery, concentrated power, bureaucratic inertia, and pervasive corruption – continue to hold the country back. The analysis above shows that reform in each of the four dimensions is urgent and interlinked. For example, better public services and e-governance can help curb corruption, while greater decentralisation can relieve administrative bottlenecks and empower citizens.

Recent events – from nationwide protests to high-level reform commissions – suggest there is momentum for change. As a 2025 report notes, an interim government has already drafted hundreds of reform proposals[61]. The crucial next step is turning paper into practice. This will require political will, consensus-building, and genuine engagement with civil society. Policymakers must view these reforms not as optional programs but as fundamental enablers of Bangladesh's development aspirations.

In the words of one editorial: "the sooner these recommendations on local government reforms…are made to come into effect the better for common citizens."[62]. By taking concerted action across service delivery, local governance, bureaucracy, and anti-corruption, Bangladesh can create a more responsive and efficient state. Such reforms – grounded in evidence and public support – offer the best hope for ensuring that the country's future prosperity is inclusive, sustainable, and accountable.

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FOOTNOTES

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