

# **Making Government Work: An Analysis of the Regimes and Reforms in Bangladesh, 1971-2021**

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the trajectory of public sector reforms, presenting a historical and critical analysis of administrative or governmental management reforms in Bangladesh from 1971 to 2021. It categorizes reform efforts focusing on how various political regimes and institutional actors have approached the challenge of improving management in government. The analysis reveals that despite a multitude of reform commissions and policy interventions over the decades, actual improvements in the quality of governance and service delivery have been limited. The work highlights systemic challenges and failures in implementation. A central argument is that reforms in Bangladesh have largely been top-down, fragmented, and disconnected from the realities of administrative practice and citizen service. The paper emphasizes that these reform efforts often lacked continuity, political ownership, and a citizen-centric focus. It also highlights the need for a shift from externally driven, prescriptive models to citizen-centric, context-specific strategies grounded in management principles. The recent reforms of the post-2024 revolution are out of scope for the current paper and are subject to further research.

## **Keywords**

Reforms Commissions, Public Sector Reform, Civil Service, Bangladesh Government Reforms, Management in Government, Policy Implementation.

## **1. Introduction**

Improving management in government requires grounding in the evolving discourse of Management as a Discipline (MAD) — a field traditionally applied in the private sector, now increasingly adapted in public sectors to address inefficiency, promote performance, and enhance accountability (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Hughes, 2012; Kettl, 2002). This conceptual shift marks a transition from classical public administration to management-oriented governance.

When these principles are applied within the bureaucratic and institutional settings of government, we encounter Management in Government (MIG). MIG represents the strategic use of managerial tools — such as performance metrics, strategic planning, and human capital optimization — within public institutions (Osborne, 2010; Christensen & Lægheid, 2007; Khan, 2009). The aim is to make government not just functionally operative, but responsive, accountable, and citizen-centric (UNDP, 2005).

When it comes to the idea of ‘improving management in government’ in Bangladesh, we need to look at the ‘management in government research’. One starting question is from where this idea of ‘management as discipline (MAD)’ in ‘management in government (MIG)’ comes, and what constitutes the ‘theory of improvements’ or ‘reforms’ in ‘government’. Another starting question is – what do we know so far about the reforms and MIG improvement initiatives? What

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kind of documented experience, research, studies, and reports are there that constitute what we call the ‘evidence’? This article focuses on the second one - the analysis of the ‘reforms’ documents (and action) so far to make government work better.

Past reform commission or committee reports may be categorized based on the *lead initiator of the reforms document or report (who initiated, commissioned or investigated the study)*.

- Reports by Government of Bangladesh (GOB) commissions, with or without Donor assistance (ASRC, PARC, etc.)
- Reports by International Organizations (IO) and Donor Agency with or without association with GOB (UN, WB, DFID, etc.)
- Reports by Non-Government Research or Think Tank organizations (BIDS, CPD, PPRC etc.)

On the academic side, an inventory of research and writing on the Bangladesh context of managing government for good governance or making government work, during the past two decades, showed varied topics have been covered (Ahmed, 2014; Hoque & Zafarullah, 2014):

role of the state, governance issues (transparency and open government, public accountability, integrity management), the civil service system (structural, functional and cultural dimensions), decentralization and local government, civil society and third sector organizations, access and public service delivery, e-government, public-private interface and so on

Also, several shifts and movements can be identified as scholars have covered new and more challenging issues of global innovation, like:

New Public Management (NPM), deregulation, downsizing, public-private partnership (PPP), citizen engagement (CE), e-government, participatory management, gender and human development, network governance, public policy and poverty analysis, citizens' trust and service delivery system, administrative culture and ethics. (Aminuzzaman, 2013)

In this paper, we will analyze the reform reports and recommendations of the government commissions and also the studies of International Donor organizations, drawing from various authoritative ‘secondary sources’ as mentioned above. These ‘sources’ are comprised of both practitioners and academicians. In the following sections, a brief account of past regimes and their associated reform commissions is given. Then each reform commission and their major recommendations are consolidated, to give a glimpse of the focus of each ‘reform’. Finally, an overall critical analysis is done before concluding and identifying the need for further research.

## **2. Regimes and Reforms by Government: 1972 to 2015**

This section analyzes the reforms implemented by the Government of Bangladesh in different regimes. It has been found that the Bangladesh Government, since 1971, has formed several reform commissions and task force. Bangladesh has undergone the following regimes since 1971:

1. Sheikh Mujib Era (1971-75)
2. Ziaur Rahman Era (1976-81)
3. Hussain Muhammad Ershad Era (1982-90)
4. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Era led by Khaleda Zia (1991-1995)
5. Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) Era led by Sheikh Hasina (1996-2000)
6. Bangladesh Nationalist Party(BNP) Era led by Khaleda Zia (2001-2006)
7. Caretaker Government led by Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed (2007-2008)
8. Awami League Era led by Sheikh Hasina (2009 - 2024)

There are other temporary and caretaker governments in between these major periods. They were short-lived, but they also commissioned reform committees in different forms and names<sup>2</sup>. Table 1 shows various administrative reform committees and bodies constituted since the country's independence in 1971.

| <b>Table 1: List of Major Reforms Commissions dealing with Civil Service</b> |   |                            |               |                    |
|--|---|----------------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| <b>Sl.</b>   | <b>Name of Commission/ Committee</b>  | <b>Regimes</b>             | <b>Nature</b> | <b>Report year</b> |
| 1  | Civil Administration Restoration Committee (CARC)   | Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, BAL | Civil         | 1971               |
| 2  | Administrative and Services Reorganisation Committee (ASRC),  | Sheikh Mujib , BAL         | Civil         | 1972-74            |
| 3  | National Pay Commission (NPC - I)   | Sheikh Mujib, BAL          | Civil         | 1972-73            |
| 4  | National Pay and Services Commission (NP&SC)  | Ziaur Rahman               | Military      | 1976-77            |
| 5  | Martial Law Committee on examining organisational set-up of ministries/divisions, departments, directorates, and other organisations (MLC-1),                   | Ziaur Rahman, BNP          | Civil         | 1982               |
| 6  | Reorganisation Committee for Administrative Reform (CARR)   | H. M. Ershad, Military     | Military      | 1982               |
| 7  | Martial Law Committee for examining organisational set-up of public statutory corporations (autonomous/semi-autonomous bodies and allied organisations) (MLC-2) | H. M. Ershad, Military     | Military      | 1982               |
| 8  | Committee for examining irregularities in appointments and promotions of officers and staffs in the government  | H. M. Ershad, Military     | Military      | 1983               |
| 9  | National Pay Commission (NPC-III)   | H. M. Ershad, Military     | Military      | 1984-85            |
| 10   | Secretaries' Committee on Administrative Development (SCAD)   | H. M. Ershad, Military     | Military      | 1985.              |
| 11   | Special Committee (SC) to review the structure of the senior service pool (SSP)   | H. M. Ershad, Military     | Military      | 1985-86            |
| 12   | Cabinet Sub-Committee (CSC) on the Civil Service  | H. M. Ershad, Military     | Military      | 1987-89            |

<sup>2</sup> Caretaker government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed in 1991, Justice Habibur Rahman in 1996, and Justice Latifur Rahman in 2001, all were of three-month duration.

|   |  |                        |           |           |
|---|--|------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| 13  | National Pay Commission (NPC-IV)               | H. M. Ershad, Military | Military  | 1989-90   |
| 14  | Administrative Reorganisation Committee (ARC)  | Khaleda Zia, BNP       | Civil     | 1993-96   |
| 15  | National Pay Commission (NPC-V)                | Sheikh Hasina, BAL     | Civil     | 1996      |
| 16  | Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC) | Sheikh Hasina, BAL     | Civil     | 1996-2000 |
| 17  | National Pay Commission (NPC-VI)               | Khaleda Zia, BNP       | Civil     | 2004-05   |
| 18  | National Pay Commission (NPC-VII)              | Caretaker Government   | Caretaker | 2008-09   |
| 19  | National Pay Commission (NPC-VIII)             | Sheikh Hasina, BAL     | Civil     | 2013-15   |
| Source: Ahmed (2016); Khan (2009, 2013); Khan (2015); Compiled by Author. ** <i>Bold ones are the reforms that addressed the issue of comprehensive reorganization of agencies and ministries, and civil service or public management structure as a whole.</i> |  |                        |           |           |

Each new government often introduces reforms anew, often without critically assessing the outcomes of previous initiatives. So, there is an obvious political dimension to forming those commissions and committees.

Some of the reports that are more frequently mentioned in the Management Improvement discussions are described below. These reviews heavily draw from Professor Mohabbat Khan's two comprehensive papers – *From Government to Governance* (Khan, 2009) and *Administrative Reforms in Bangladesh* (Khan, 2013), and practitioners' accounts like that of A. M. M. Shawkat Ali and Akbar Ali Khan, who are themselves veteran civil servants and prolific writers on public management structural issues (Ali, 2004, 2007; Khan, 2010, 2015).

Khan (2009) examined seventeen major commissions or committees, and found that *seven reports* dealt with the entire civil service having a broad coverage; *six reports* dealt with matters of micro restructuring within the civil service. Of them, *three* bodies examined the pay structure of the civil servants exclusively. The *rest* analyzed specific aspects of the civil service, like recruitment and promotion of civil servants.

### **2.1. Administrative and Services Reorganization Committee (ASRC), 1972**

Formed in 1972, the *Administrative and Services Reorganization Committee (ASRC)* produced the first such comprehensive document on reforming civil service management and strategy, considering a newly independent country (Khan, 2013; Khan, 2009).

ASRC recommended a single, unified grading structure with an appropriate number of different pay scales matching different levels of qualifications, skills and responsibilities. The Committee recommended several measures for developing an integrated public personnel management system encompassing a rational selection process based on merit, long-term career planning, formulation of a general training policy and coordination of institutionalized training, and an employee promotion procedure based on merit-cum-seniority.

But for the following reasons, the ASRC vision could not be materialized:

Haphazard situation in political, social, and economic thoughts, right after Independence. The whole nation was war devastated, and day to day bread and butter was the main concern. There were also serious divisions in the dream of charting a roadmap for a new nation.

Widespread free reign political opportunists propped up everywhere in a new country, and corruption became pervasive. At its worst, even all-in-all Prime Minister, and later President, Sheikh Mujib could not control the situation, and became frustrated and moved to less democratic mechanisms.

Bureaucratic go-slow attitude, if not resistance, due to natural fear of change, which may put their 'colonial era' career prospects in uncertainty (Khan, 2013; Khan, 2009).

In a sense, ASRC recommendations were transformational. It was an attempt to change the whole colonial mindset and a radical redesign of the whole civil service structure in line with the People's Republic and people's expectations. But unfortunately, the transformational drive got a hard break with the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, the Founding Head of the Nation.

## ***2.2. Committee Reports in Military Backed Regimes, 1976-1990***

In 1976, the Pay and Services Commission was appointed by the then military-backed government. It recommended the creation of an all-purpose civil service; emphasis on the merit principle; constitution of a new apex cadre with experienced officers drawn from all cadres; the adoption of the cadre concept in the civil service structure; and proposed 52 scales of pay to reduce multiplicity of pay scales.

Between 1982 and 1984, two major reform bodies were appointed. One was called the Martial Law Committee (MLC), and another committee was the Civilian Committee. The recommendation included, reduction in the number of ministries, downsizing civil services, restructuring the role of the secretariat and other executive agencies, and delegating financial and administrative powers down the hierarchy.

It looked good and timely, but the recommendations were mostly unimplemented. For example, the number of ministries did not decrease, but rather increased, in an effort to popularize the administration among the politicians and through the politicians.

## ***2.3. Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC), 2000***

Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC) appointed in 1996, submitted its report in 2000. *PARC is said to be the most comprehensive document by the Government so far.* Khan (2009) mentioned that the commission, influenced by the New Public Management (NPM) concept made several significant recommendations relating to:

- **Public Management:** improvement of service delivery, creation of functional clusters of ministries; for developing professionalism and institution of Senior Management Pool (SMP) for overcoming inter-cadre rivalries and facilitating fast track promotion.
- **Civil Service Structure:** introduction of strictly merit-based recruitment and promotion in public service; decentralization, devolution of governmental authority, and reorganizational of local government bodies.
- **Institutions:** rationalization of institutions and workforce; creation of a powerful and independent anti-corruption commission; effective parliamentary oversight on administration.

Most of the change initiatives of successive years were based on this report or were in line with it, whether referred to it or not.

#### ***2.4. Strategic Documents by Caretaker Governments***

Apart from regular political and military governments, there were caretaker governments at different times since 1991. They also tried to come up with roadmaps for reforms.

The Caretaker Government, led by Chief Adviser Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, in 1991, allocated to Professor Rehman Sobhan the Planning and External Relations Divisions. Professor Sobhan gathered over two hundred and fifty distinguished professionals and set up twenty-nine Task Forces. These task forces dealt with the entire gamut of economic and development issues facing Bangladesh and identified the development problems and policy options (Khan 2009). Similarly, the Caretaker Government led by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmad (2007-2008), produced a '*Moving Ahead*' Strategy Document, where they identified *Strategic Blocks* and *Supporting Strategies*.

While these recommendations were comprehensive, they were too broad an overview and lacked implementation-level guidelines. Regardless of the discussion of the details of this document, which were discussed in earlier research (Khaled, 2013), we can say that these documents were purely non-partisan and ideal, and could serve as a very good starting point for any government in power in years to come.

Scholars observe that when a new government came to power in 2009, these recommendations were neither publicly acknowledged nor given policy priority, and so, despite being comprehensive and non-partisan, these were not translated into any deliberate roadmap. Each incoming administration tended to distance itself from initiatives taken by preceding governments, often abandoning previous reform roadmaps regardless of their merit (Khaled, 2013; Khan, 2015).

#### ***2.5. Regulatory Reforms Commission (RRC), 2008***

The Caretaker Government of 2006-08 also created the Regulatory Reforms Commission (RRC), led by retired bureaucrat and scholar Akbar Ali Khan, which worked on identifying the obsolete rules and regulations in the government. As detailed by Khan (2013), there happened to be more than 10,000 acts, rules, circulars, orders, etc., of which most were inoperative and many were as old as 100 years. RRC systematically identified laws and regulations that needed exclusion or modification, and also recommended using Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) to improve efficiency, transparency, and accountability of regulatory decision-making.

RRC was a wonderful and timely step to identify the shortcomings of regulations, but the commission did not continue because as soon as the Caretaker Government Era ended, a political government came into power in 2009.

#### ***2.6. Overall Analysis of Regimes and Reforms Implementation***

If we analyze these reform reports and implications, we see that some progress took place, though slow. But the benefits could not be realized as expected, since these were implemented in a scattered manner, not in a strategically holistic or synergistic manner.

So far, as Khan (2010) pointed out, Bangladesh's performance in implementing important governance reforms such as civil service reforms, judicial reforms, police reforms, local government decentralization, etc., has been disappointing. There are three main reasons for the poor performance of reforms: lack of political ownership, opposition of distributional coalitions, and lack of implementation capacity (Khan, 2010).

After the independence of Bangladesh, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Government of Bangladesh tried to reorganize the whole system. So, reform efforts were there

in the Government from the beginning, though in a more socialistic paradigm, in line with the mood of the developing country back then. The planners argued that the lack of several objective conditions could not materialize a socialist vision - absence of political cadres who were yet to emerge; and the alienation of the government bureaucracy from the people, an attitude inherited from the Colonial Period (Islam, 2003; 2004).

Thus, the unrealized part of these reforms can be traced back to British Rule. Interestingly, so democratic in their homeland, the Britons ruled with an iron hand, and ICS<sup>3</sup> 'steel frame' in colonies like India for many years, crushing different rebellions from many groups. But maybe we must agree, however reluctantly, that they built a 'system'. Some senior people who saw the British rule tell that the 'system' they built worked better in many aspects than the current 'systems' (Khaled, 2013).

Bangladesh Civil Service or public administration inherited the structure of Pakistan or East Pakistan Civil Service. Both India and Pakistan, including East Pakistan, later known as Bangladesh, kept many aspects of the British system intact because the British system was itself very organized and the result of many years of practice by then. That is the reason we see many terms, policies, and systems of public administration bear the British legacy till today.

As recent signposts of reforms, the Civil Service Act was drafted in 2010. With the help of UNDP project CSCMP (Civil Service Change Management Program), the Citizen Charter was introduced in all ministries and departments of the Government. Then there have been all A2I (access to information) office and digital initiatives, GIU office (Governance Innovation Unit), APA (Annual Performance Agreement), IPS-TQM (Improving Public Service- Total Quality Management), LGSP (local government support project) and similar initiatives.

But, in the end, there is progress, but it is *more in form rather than in content*. Overall, there is little qualitative change in how government works and how citizens perceive the quality of the service delivery of the governments (Khan, 2009; 2015; Ali, 2004; 2007). Ultimately, the results have remained largely unchanged, and citizens' expectations continue to go unmet because most reform measures were implemented only partially or not implemented at all, often due to the prevailing mindset and resistance to change among government employees.

### **3. International Organizations and Donor Agency Reports**

Many international organizations and donor agencies of developed countries, for whatever political or economic reasons, provided many prescriptions and assistance at different times to different governments (Table 2). Some of the most prominent and representative ones are described below:

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<sup>3</sup> Indian Civil Service was used to be called steel frame of British Rule in Indian Subcontinent.

| <b>SL.</b>  | <b>Name of the report</b>   | <b>Year</b> | <b>Key Donor</b> | <b>Main Focus</b>  |
|---|---|-------------|------------------|--|
| 1   | Public Administration Efficiency Studies                          | 1989        | USAID            | Secretariat system, relationships between ministries, departments and corporations.  |
| 2   | Report on Public Administration Sector Study in Bangladesh        | 1993        | UNDP             | Public administration reform in the government with emphasis on certain specific areas.  |
| 3   | Towards Better Government in Bangladesh (Four Secretaries Report) | 1993        | DFID             | Administrative reform of priority areas in the short term; advice on preparation of a comprehensive medium-term action plan in the context of a long-term vision of redefined role of the state. |
| 4   | Government that Works: Reforming the Public Sector                | 1996        | World Bank       | Comprehensive administrative reform, privatization, and reduced levels of government.  |
| 5   | Local Government in Bangladesh: An Agenda for Governance          | 1996        | UNDP             | Local government issues.   |
| 6   | Taming Leviathan: Reforming Governance in Bangladesh              | 2002        | World Bank       | Ensure accountability and transparency in government operations.   |
| 7   | Public Administration Reform in Bangladesh                        | 2004        | UNDP             | Civil service reform issues.   |
| Source: Ahmed (2016); Khan (2015); Compiled by Author |   |             |                  |  |

### **3.1. Public Administration Efficiency Study (PAES), USAID-1989**

Public Administration Efficiency Study (PAES) was one of the first comprehensive donor efforts to reform and redesign the civil service in Bangladesh. The study was conducted from May 1989 to November 1989. Khan (2009) summarized the significant recommendations of PAES, which included:

- strengthening supervision through training and management support;
- reducing the secretariat's operational activities through delegation of routine personnel and financial matters to departments, corporations and subordinate bodies;
- reducing layers in decision making;
- introduction of a two-tier career system to raise the quality of the senior civil service;
- increasing incentives for high performance, including wider use of merit as a criterion for promotion; and
- expanding practical, problem-solving training based on an assessment of organizational needs (USAID, 1989)



### **3.2. Public Administration Sector Study (PASS), UNDP-1993**

The UNDP funded Public Administration Sector Study, PASS study was conducted in 1993. The study made as many as fifty-two recommendations. The significant recommendations were:

- establishing results-oriented management systems through the setting up of objectives and measures of outputs and impacts throughout the Government;
- establishing units in each ministry, responsible for developing and applying performance criteria and measures and developing internal performance audit capability;
- rationalizing government structure by reducing the number of ministries and divisions;
- review and streamline Government rules and regulations to eliminate red tape and redundant functions;
- selection and promotion of officers based on merit within a transparent process,
- strengthening of the Public Service Commission;
- replacing grades and class system with a personnel management system based on a position classification system and grades; and
- appointment of a reform implementation commission (UNDP, 1993)
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### **3.3. Government that Works - World Bank, 1995**

*Government that Works: Reforming the Public Sector (GTW/ RPS)* study of the World Bank was a wide-ranging study. The main thrust was on defining the core functions of the Government and essential services to be provided to citizens. Therefore, the study recommended

- redefining frontiers of the public sector, which means rightsizing the central government
- enlarging the role of non-governmental organizations, local government, and the private sector
- enhancing the level and nature of accountability and responsiveness of public organizations to their owners, i.e., parliament, citizens and consumers
- streamline regulations
- level and process to ensure transparency, fairness and atomicity of legal and regulatory institutions, policies and practices
- overhauling rules and processes by which the government conducts its policy and decision-making functions; and
- maintain an efficient, committed and professional public service (World Bank, 1996).
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### **3.4. Opinion Survey of Government Officials, BNPP-1999**

This survey was conducted on public officials led by Professor Muzaffar Ahmed of Dhaka University and funded by the Bank Netherlands Partnership Program (BNPP). Important findings of the survey show the variety in the institutional environments within which officials work. For example, WDB (Water Development Board), PDB (Power Development Board), LGED (Local Government Engineering Department), Ministry of Fisheries are different in the management environment.

So, the report concluded with the hope that agency-level reforms might be the best hope of ‘destabilizing’ some of the ‘dysfunctional public sector equilibrium’, and might be driven by providing local communities with a greater voice in the production of local public services. (Bank Netherlands Partnership Program (BNPP), 1999).

### **3.5. Taming the Leviathan, by World Bank - 2002**

As the public-sector reform movement shifted to the ‘governance’ era, “Taming the Leviathan” by the World Bank (2002) was another initiative. The metaphor of the “Leviathan” referred to an

overextended and unaccountable state apparatus — characterized by patronage networks, elite capture, and widespread public distrust. While earlier efforts focused on improving efficiency within bureaucratic systems, this report took a broader and more systemic view of governance. The report offered a broad-based strategy to ensure better governance for the ‘state in a changing world’.

The strategy to promote good governance had *five critical dimensions*:

1. Strengthening core institutions of accountability, such as the judiciary, Anti-Corruption Commission, and parliamentary oversight mechanisms.
2. Building and empowering civil society to act as watchdogs and partners in governance.
3. Decentralization to devolve authority and improve responsiveness through local governance structures.
4. Improving administrative efficiency and effectiveness through capacity building and performance management.
5. Mobilizing national consensus for reform, emphasizing inclusive dialogue with stakeholders across sectors.

As expected, despite its comprehensive approach, “Taming the Leviathan” faced challenges in implementation: lack of political buy-in, especially from elites benefiting from the status quo; weak institutional capacity, limiting execution of reform agendas; and resistance from distributional coalitions, such as entrenched bureaucratic and business interests.

### ***3.6. Overall Analysis of Donor Agency Reforms Implementation***

As mentioned in the previous section, the implementation was slow, intermittent, and lack a consistent road map. But taken together, there were many initiatives on and off. Subsequently, in the first decade of the new century, there have been MATT (Managing at the Top) of DFID, CSCMP (Civil Service Change Management Program) of UNDP, etc. Some of the legacy projects were still running through the second decade.

All major studies, PAES of USAID, PASS of UNDP, GTW/RPS, and Taming the Leviathan by the World Bank, contained a number of suitable and implementable suggestions. But most of the things could not be implemented, due to three reasons: political unwillingness, bureaucratic unwillingness, and a lack of capability of government machinery to do what is required.

As Khan (2010, 2015) mentioned, what the World Bank observed in the 1990s is still valid. Three or more democratically elected governments completed their terms, but no significant initiative for reforms was undertaken. In this connection, the World Bank report (2002) underlines three characteristics of Bangladesh society.

- **Clientelism.** Powerful and pervasive societal network and muscle power takes the place of rule of law and there is widespread lack of 'public trust' in the country's formal modern institutions." The politicians, therefore, view administrative reforms as sheer wastage of time.
- **Well-organized interest groups.** Well-organized interest groups such as the military, the public bureaucracy, private business, trade unions, religious groups, NGOs, and others are frequently divided along political lines and along narrow interests.

These interest groups act as distributional coalitions and forestall any reform that may harm them. *They do not have any bottom-up pressure from common citizens.*

- **Discrepancy between the private agendas and their public agencies.** the political, business, trade union and bureaucratic power structure in Bangladesh has been partially captured by an underworld that uses "muscle-power" to enforce its authority with the connivance of the police

and even certain members of the lower judiciary. In such an environment, politicians refuse to take any risk of change.

Then came the observation of the *Bangladesh Conundrum* (World Bank, 2007; 2011), which refers to the dichotomous relationship between governance and economic development. While governance theorists postulated a positive relationship between *governance* and *growth*, Bangladesh showed a stark variation, where growth has been consistently higher despite major flaws in governance. Donors termed this unconventional relationship between governance and development as the *Bangladesh Conundrum*, and it raises fundamental questions about the efficacy of governmental reforms. If development objectives could be attained despite the slide in governance, why should the government be concerned with governance reforms?

#### **4. Top-down Reforms Model: Searching for a Breakout**

In the course of time, the government has taken significant initiative for ‘making government work’ and ‘making government work better’, based on globally accepted paradigms like NPM (New Public Management), PVM (Public Value Management), and DEG (Digital and Electronic Government), Open Government, Whole of Government, etc. A good number of initiatives are going on under the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and under different ministries and departments. Tools and mechanisms like privatization and Government Share offloading of SOEs, Outsourcing or contracting out or subcontracting, PPP, TQM, A2I, GIU, etc. The Board of Investment and Privatization Commission has been merged into the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA).

The major conclusions about reforms so far, in line with Ali (2004; 2007), can be summarized as follows:

- Bangladesh has more than enough studies on civil service reforms and their management. The net results have been less than expected.
- In the case of externally induced donor-driven reform measures, the areas of reform were seldom wisely chosen. The donors were more serious on economic reform measures centering on trade liberalization, fiscal and monetary reforms (rather than system fixing).
- The word ‘governance’ has become all pervasive and a precursor of more zealous economic, monetary, and fiscal reforms. Thus, the focus on improving management in the public sector or public sector reform (PSR) became diluted.
- The Government could not implement or showed ‘neglect’ in implementing the donor-driven recommendations for reforms. Also, the governments of different periods showed even more neglect in the case of home-grown studies on civil service reforms.

Analysis of common pattern of implementation failure shows that the MIG reforms approach has dominantly been *top-down*. That means best practices are copied from other countries, and those are pushed (trickle down) through the government agencies’ hierarchy. Or, the experts, predominantly donor-funded and foreign, with some local experts in the team, provide prescriptions or ‘solutions’. Despite all these, the capability of states remained limited in ‘making government work’ or ‘building sustainable solutions’ for poor citizen service.

About reforms in Bangladesh, Khan (2009, February 20) mentioned in an interview with ISS, Princeton University, that *‘it is a highly centralized, elitist, it is closed shop. It does not allow people to join at different levels. So it is, from my perspective, it is completely out of tune with the reality in Bangladesh.’*

Top-down reforms prescriptions were good, but when it trickled down from the top, say the President’s or the Prime Minister’s office, to ministries, then down to ministry divisions,

departments, directorates, districts, sub-districts, up to the union, little thrust and taste were left for citizens at the service delivery level. Add to this is perennial colonial structure and the mindset of the civil service cadre top-down hierarchy.

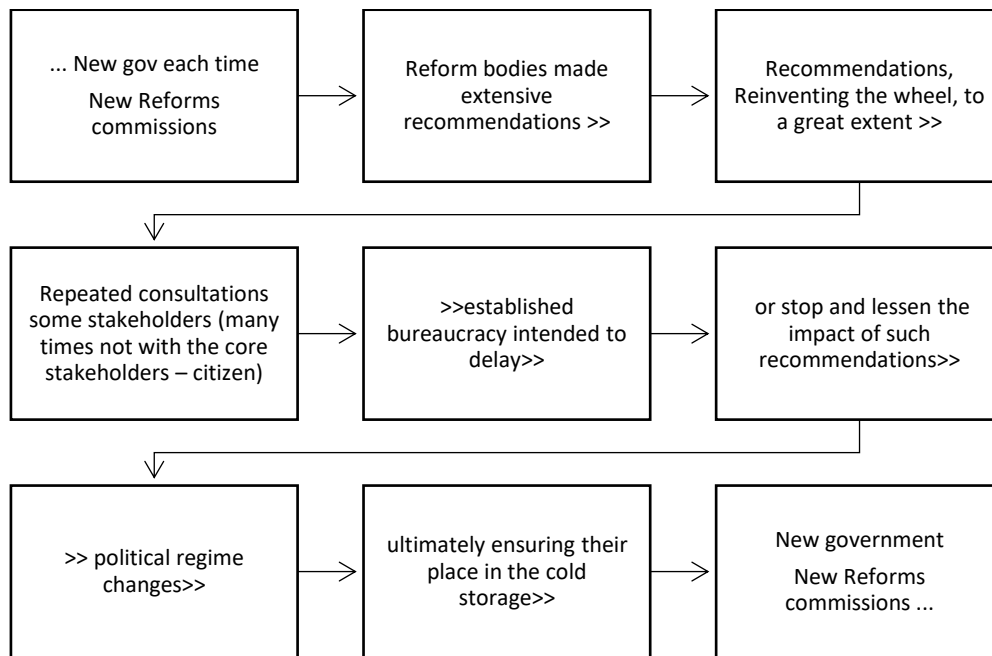


Figure 1 Repeated Cycle of TOP down Reforms in MIG

## 5. Conclusion and Further Research

This paper analyzed the public sector or civil service reforms in Bangladesh up to 2021 to mark the 50 years of independence since 1971. After 2015, no significant or formal ‘reforms’ commission had been formed. One possible reason might be the ‘criticism’ and ‘the fact’ that previous ‘reform commissions’ had always been criticized for ‘non-implementation’ or at least, ‘inconsistent implementation’. Rather, it can be observed that the government tried to improve its functions and activities, as is needed (Khaled, 2018).

Recent developments post-2015 — such as the digitization of government services under the Smart Bangladesh initiative (UNDP, 2023) increased IMF and World Bank engagement in governance and financial reform (World Bank, 2023). However, these developments also reaffirm the paper’s central argument: that Bangladesh’s reform landscape has historically lacked a grounded *management in government (MIG)* paradigm anchored in *management as a discipline (MAD)* (Hughes, 2012; Khaled, 2011). While the "Taming the Leviathan" metaphor captured the need to control the unaccountable state, truly taming it requires bottom-up, citizen-centered, and context-sensitive managerial frameworks — rooted in local realities rather than transplanted best practices (Osborne, 2010; Christensen & Lægheid, 2007).

As a whole, a clear ‘gap of knowledge’ exists in the context of ‘management aspects’ in the public administration discipline, and in the context of government agencies in business administration or management discipline, that is application of management as a discipline (MAD) in the management of government organizations, or management in government (MIG), in Bangladesh.

So much of reforms have been designed and implemented from the top, vertically downward. In government organizations, customer centricity or citizen-oriented thinking, and management by objectives are still not common, and sometimes it is not understood at all, and worse, it is misunderstood in all the wrong ways possible. Gaps remain in terms of understanding and adopting a citizen problem-centric management approach. In sum, sustainable public sector reform in Bangladesh requires a paradigm shift: from donor-driven, elite-centric models to citizen-oriented, locally grounded, and strategically implemented frameworks.

This paper does not include the recent scenario after the change of government through a people's revolution in 2024. As stated in this paper, predictably, new reform commissions have been formed, and these commissions have come up with a long list of reform recommendations. The relevance and transformative potential of these reforms are subject to future research.

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