

# Decentralization for Development: Experiments in Bangladesh

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*Like many other Third World countries, the successive governments in Bangladesh after gaining independence, adopted several decentralization policies as their primary tools in the development of the rural population. The Mujib Government (1972-1975) which inherited a strong centralized administration from Pakistan, introduced changes largely limited to a redefinition in the nomenclature of components of local administration. The Zia Government (1975-1982) on the other hand, introduced a scheme called self-reliant village government which ironically depended on the central government for its survival. The present Ershad Regime (1982-present) gives emphasis on administrative decentralization through the creation of upazilas in the hope that the condition of the rural folks would improve.*

## Introduction

Decentralization is a well-known and widely-applied concept in the present-day world, and the popularity of decentralization as a policy to promote development is increasing. In fact, reformers of very different ideological backgrounds are attracted to the idea of decentralization. Contrariwise, centralization is associated with most of the evils of the modern polity: delay, red tape, constraints on individual initiative, and restraint of spontaneity (Furniss 1974:958-59).

The pursuit of administrative decentralization by the governments of developing countries is a demonstration of its popularity, in theory, as an instrument of welfare administration (Rondinelli 1981; Conyers 1983; Rondinelli 1983). Many governments have begun to realize the difficulties in administering lower-level units from the capital, and this realization is essential for the promotion of effective administration, particularly in countries where communication systems are poorly developed and the population is poorly mobilized. In fact, centralized administration is now often considered to be a hindrance to progress and decentralization, real or imaginary, is often regarded as a panacea for all ills (Huque 1986:79).

Decentralization as a policy for rural development is popular in many Third World countries which were under colonial rule. The colonial rulers of these states were reluctant to implement real administrative reform which would interfere with their

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exploitative policies. Gradually however, these states gained independence and the new governments that emerged, in many cases, adopted decentralization policies when they reorganized local government.

Military involvement in politics is a common phenomenon in Third World countries, and the number of military takeovers has been continuously rising. The military rulers of these countries come to power through an undemocratic process, and usually do not fully control the political infrastructure after coming to power. They usually try to establish a supportive infrastructure by adopting a variety of supposedly welfare-oriented policies. Among these policies, decentralization is heavily favored.

Decentralization is now a popular topic of research in public administration, and in Bangladesh, it received renewed attention after the latest attempt to decentralize administration was promoted by the government through the creation of a new administrative unit, the *Upazila*.<sup>1</sup> This paper examines the decentralization experiments under the Mujib, Zia, and Ershad regimes.

### Decentralization Under the Mujib Government

Bangladesh achieved its independence after a liberation war in 1971. The country was initially governed by the Awami League (AL), and in its first year of rule, the AL established a new central administrative system. Thus, little attention was paid to decentralize administration and the previous structures stayed in place. During this period, many people hoped that the new government would reorganize local administration for the good of the people. However, for a variety of reasons, only a few cosmetic changes were taken.

Most of the AL ministers had no previous experience in running government departments. They depended entirely on the senior government bureaucracy in the initial stages of reorganization after the liberation war (Huque 1988:46) and the inexperienced political leaders in this newly independent country were not able to control the powerful and well-organized bureaucracy. The bureaucratic elites in post-colonial states tended to be dominant not only because these states inherited an overdeveloped bureaucratic apparatus and institutionalized practices, as suggested by Hamja Alavi (1973:145-47), but also because of the nature of bureaucratic organization (Ahmed 1979:30). In such a newly liberated country, the implementation of any administrative reform depends on the cooperation of the bureaucracy. However, most bureaucrats were reluctant to change their routines. Thus, the immaturity of the political elites, and the bureaucracy's reluctance to change, created an atmosphere which was not conducive to the decentralization of authority.

The political leaders could not readily change the dominant bureaucratic ethos. Mujib and other political leaders of the AL frequently voiced grave doubts about the patriotism of these government bureaucrats and charged them with having a

"Pakistani attitude" (*The Dainik Bangla* November 5, 1972). Their speeches implied that these officials were not only inefficient, incompetent and uncaring, but were also unable to reconcile themselves to the radically changed circumstances following independence. Mujib threatened that unless they changed their attitude and helped in achieving government goals, they would face severe punishment (Barua 1978:60).

The AL's basic commitment was to build an exploitation-free socialist state. To this end, in March 1972, the government nationalized 254 enterprises accounting for over three-quarters of all modern industries. In addition, all banking and insurance companies, except for those owned by foreigners, were also nationalized (Barua 1978:63).

This nationalization program was publicized as promoting public welfare, but it failed. There was a number of reasons why nationalization was unsuccessful. Administrators and workers were not motivated by socialist zeal to increase production, or to control waste, corruption and the misappropriation of funds (Holiday 1973). Various critics (in the academe, opposition parties, etc.) pointed out that the Awami League's socialist policy, particularly the nationalization program, was premature, ill-conceived and politically motivated. They countered that the Awami League was not a truly socialist party and thus, could not come up with a coherent political and economic program which would bring genuine socialism. This was demonstrated by the inconsistent policies followed in agriculture, education, development planning, budgeting and administration (Barua 1978:64).

The political leadership took several steps to change the structure of local government. The Bangladesh Local Council and Municipal Committees (Dissolution and Administration Amendment Order 1972) proclaimed the dissolution of local government councils throughout the country. As a result, the chairmen, vice-chairmen, members and administrators of such bodies ceased to hold office. The union councils were renamed *Union Panchayats* and their functions were to be performed by a committee appointed by the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO). Thus, the aim of decentralization was defeated by transferring power from elected representatives to government officials. This caused resentment among members of the political opposition, but the government promised that local government elections would be held soon and the elected representatives would be brought to power (Huque 1988:47).

Following a notification from the Ministry of Local Government in 1972, *Thana* councils were restructured and renamed Thana Development Committees (TDC). Each committee, composed of *Union Parishad* representatives and thana level bureaucrats, was initially headed by a member of the Constituent Assembly. However, his functions were later transferred to the circle officer, the head of the thana administration (Ahmed 1988:815). The function of the TDC was the same as that of the thana council under the basic democracy system of Pakistan. The only new development was that the Circle Officer became more powerful since he was given the sole responsibility for performing development functions.

The Awami League government appointed the Administrative and Services Reorganization Committee (ASRC) in March 1972 under the chairmanship of an eminent pedagogue, Professor Muzaffar Ahmad Chowdhury. The objectives of the ASRC were:

- (1) to consider the structure of various services, both technical and non-technical, and determine their future structure, keeping in view the functional needs and requirements of the government;
- (2) to consider the question of the amalgamation of the civil services into a unified service;
- (3) to determine the principles of integration of the personnel of various services into the new structure, and to determine the seniority of personnel of different services with similar academic backgrounds and job experience in the process of merger or amalgamation, in case structural changes were envisaged;
- (4) to determine the future recruitment policy in government services at various levels, keeping in mind educational and other job requirements; and,
- (5) to prepare and recommend a comprehensive scheme for administrative reorganization (Khan 1984:151-52).

The committee submitted its report in two parts in April and October 1973 and its recommendations included the democratization of administration at all levels. It also called for an increase in the devolution of authority to elected local government officials (Khan 1984:152).

In June 1975, the AL abolished the parliamentary system and introduced a single party, the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL), and presidential rule. BAKSAL was controlled by the AL and Sheikh Mujib, who appealed to all other political parties to join the BAKSAL. The AL government decided to reorganize the district administration, and the whole country was divided into fifty administrative districts headed by district governors who were to be appointed by the single political party, BAKSAL. The government claimed that this system would bring both the ruling party and administration closer to the people. The number of districts was later increased, and on July 16, Mujib announced the names of 61 district governors who were to take over district administration from September 1, 1975. However, this scheme did not materialize, as the Mujib government was removed from power by a bloody military *coup d'etat* on August 15, 1975 (Huque 1985a:208). In any case, this scheme was not linked to a decentralization of administration from the grass roots upward, since the district governors were political appointees and probably would have always followed the party's central direction.

In the final analysis, we find that during the Mujib regime (1972-75) the centralized administration which the country inherited from Pakistan continued in force. There were some minor changes, but they were largely limited to a change in the nomenclature of components of local administration instead of introducing major changes in its structure, powers and functions.

### Decentralization Under the Zia Government

After the Mujib government was overthrown, Khondokar Mustak Ahmed, a former member of the Mujib cabinet, was declared President by the army. However, he was in power for a very short time (August 16, 1975 to November 3, 1975), and a coup on November 3, 1975, led by Brigadier Khaled Musharraf, brought Justice A.M. Sayem to power. Mustak and General Zia were placed under house arrest. However, a counter-coup, popularly called the "Sepoy Mutiny," eliminated Brigadier Musharraf, who was brutally killed by the mutineers and was replaced by General Zia. President Sayem was allowed to continue in power as he was not strongly attached to any political party, and Ziaur Rahman (Zia) emerged as the strongman of the new regime (Zahman 1984:103-106).

Zia was the first military ruler of Bangladesh. He had no clearly-defined plan to decentralize administration, but the need to increase his base of support encouraged him to attempt some reform.

After coming to power, the military government issued a new Local Government Ordinance in 1976 which allowed for a retention of the Union Parishads with some changes in their composition. The office of the vice-chairmen was abolished, and the Union Parishads were to consist of twelve members, including two women and a chairman (the chairman and members were elected by the public but the women members were selected by the chairman and other members). The term of office of the Parishad was five years, and the chairman was vested with all executive authority (Government of PRB 1976 as quoted in Huque 1985). However, these local government units were not given any additional powers. Rather, they were placed under the clear control of the central government (Ahmed 1979:174).

General Zia undertook a number of measures to encourage rural reform toward the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s. The most important measures were the establishment of a new Thana Development Committee (TDC) in each thana, composed only of elected Union Parishad chairmen, the member of parliament for each district as District Development Coordinator (DDC), and the *gram sarkar* (village government) in each village of Bangladesh.

#### *Gram Sarkar*

The local government system of the Zia regime is best known for its introduction of a new administrative scheme called *swanirvar gram sarkar* (self-reliant village

government). In May 1980, the government officially announced that a new gram sarkar village government would be organized for each of the country's 68,000 villages by the end of the year (Huque 1984). The members of the gram sarkar would not be chosen by means of a general election; the method of choosing the members of the new unit was as follows. The thana level Circle Officer was to convene a *gram shava* (village meeting) at which the selection would be made on the basis of consensus. According to the government order:

A Swanirvar Gram Sarkar shall consist of a gram pradhan (head) and eleven other members of which not less than two shall be women. The gram pradhan and other members chosen through the consensus of the persons in the meeting in such a manner as may be agreed upon, shall ensure representation in the swanirvar gram sarkar of people of all walks of life and of different functional interest groups [Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (PRB) 1980].

The gram sarkar would undertake such functions as it considered necessary for overall development of the villages and, in particular, promote:

- (1) an increase in food production;
- (2) mass literacy;
- (3) population control and family planning; and,
- (4) law and order by holding *salish* (local judicial councils) to settle disputes.

A *gram pradhan* or a member of the gram sarkar should have the following qualifications:

- (1) be a citizen of Bangladesh;
- (2) have attained the age of 25 years;
- (3) be listed on the electoral roll of the village concerned;
- (4) not be a sitting member or chairman of a Union Parishad; and,
- (5) reside permanently in the village (Government of PRB 1980).

A bill was prepared to legislate the creation of gram sarkars, but the introduction of the bill in parliament coincided with the introduction of several other controversial bills. The members of parliament were busy discussing the annual budget when suddenly, on June 21, 1980, three bills were introduced on the same day (Huque 1985b:212-225). All those bills were passed on the same day and the opposition was not allowed enough time for discussion. Opposition members expressed doubts about the government's sincerity in introducing the bill, which was supposedly in the interest of ordinary villagers, and expressed apprehension that the government was planning to create a class of village swindlers through gram sarkars (Huque 1985b:220).

The gram sarkar faced many difficulties. Blair, an American political scientist, examined various criticisms of the gram sarkar, and agreed that the program was too vague and nebulous (Blair 1980). This was bound to have complications in the relationship between the gram sarkars and union parishads, and also with other rural development activities. In addition, new avenues of corruption were opened up (Huque 1985b:222). Another drawback of the gram sarkar was that it had no statutory authority to impose and collect taxes. Thus, it had to depend on central grants for its survival.

Although there were various drawbacks to the gram sarkar scheme after it was introduced, there were apparently some improvements in food production in the rural areas. A survey of 118 sample swanirvar villages out of 68,000 showed that compared to the levels of pre-swanirvar days, the average agricultural production went up by thirty per cent. Furthermore, there was twenty-eight per cent rise in the per capita income of the villagers in the sampled areas.

### **Decentralization During the Ershad Regime (1982-Present)**

In March 1982, another coup was staged by the Bangladesh military. Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad led the coup and captured state power. As in the case of previous governments, Ershad took steps to change the structure of local government, but his emphasis was on administrative decentralization. This emphasis received preference because other rural development and administrative reform efforts were tested by the previous rulers, but were known to the population as unable to produce expected results. A desire to reorganize administration is reflected in Ershad's first address to the nation after coming to power. He stated that:

We have to make a drastic change in the administration. We have to establish a new public welfare-oriented administrative structure which will be able to eliminate the existing distance between the people and the administration. We are to ensure mass participation in administration, and overall we have to reorganize local administration as the servant of the people (Ershad 1982).

The Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) appointed three high-powered reform committees between April 1982 and May 1984: (1) a Martial Law Committee (MLC) to examine the organizational setup of ministries/divisions, departments, directorates and organizations subordinate to them; (2) the Committee for Administrative Reorganization/Reform (CARR); and, (3) a National Pay Commission (NPC II) (Khan 1987).

Approximately one month after coming to power (April 28, 1982), the military government appointed a seven-member Committee for Administrative Reorganization/Reform (CARR), under the leadership of the Deputy Chief Martial Law Admin-

istrator and Communication Minister Rear Admiral M.A. Khan. He was tasked to come up with a new local government structure. The committee was asked to review the structure and organization of the existing civilian administration and to recommend an appropriate and effective administrative system based on devolution of authority and responsibility with the objective of bringing public administration closer to the people (Khan 1985:246). The committee examined published sources, conducted discussions and interviews, and after visiting eight thanas in seven districts, submitted its recommendations. The committee identified several deficiencies in the existing administrative structure, namely:

- (1) popular participation in administration was lacking;
- (2) coordination of field services was totally absent, especially at the thana level;
- (3) administrative levels were too many, creating problems of communication and access to government services for the common man;
- (4) appropriate, consistent and uniform personnel policies with regard to recruitment, promotion and training of public servants were lacking;
- (5) a *tadbir-based*<sup>2</sup> approach to decision-making was adopted;
- (6) the compartmentalized functions and complexity of governmental decision-making were difficult for the ordinary citizen to comprehend;
- (7) a sound and durable political process to develop appropriate, consistent and uniform policies with regard to public welfare was absent;
- (8) area-based coordination was vitiated by vertical-functional departmentalism;
- (9) a weak local government system was rendered weaker by a lack of appropriate political direction;
- (10) traditional administrative and representative institutions at different levels of administration was weakened;
- (11) conflict in jurisdiction was led by the creation of parallel political and administrative institutions; and,
- (12) political authorities were reluctant to develop power to representative institutions at the local levels (Government of PRB1982).

The committee felt that local government must possess effective authority to ensure people's participation in the development process, and emphasized the need for elected local government at the district, thana and union levels. The committee recommended the transfer of certain administrative functions from the district administration to elected local government, and also recognized the role of public servants in the development process, stating that dedicated civil servants trained in management were needed to live and work among people in the rural areas (Khan 1984).

The recommendations of the committee were as follows: The chairman of the *Zila Parishad* (ZP), *Thana Parishad* (TP) and *Union Parishad* (UP) should be directly elected; the government officials should be members of the councils at the appropriate levels; an elected chairman should be the chief coordinator at all levels; the elected councils should have full functional control over the officials working at their level; an elected chairman should be provided with full and adequate staff support in the form of a senior officer to be called the Chief Executive Officer; the chairmen of the UPs should be members of TPs; and, the chairmen of TPs should be members of ZPs. Further it was suggested that there should be adequate devolution of administrative, judicial and financial powers to the district and thana levels; the authority and training of the members of village courts should be strengthened; the infrastructure at the thana level should be developed to give it greater authority; and, unnecessary administrative levels such as the subdivision and division should be eliminated (Government of PRB 1982).

The committee suggested the establishment of a truly decentralized and democratic system of administration, and recommended that a high-powered National Implementation Committee (NIC) be constituted to implement its suggested measures (Government of PRB 1982). The major task of the NIC would be to: identify functions of the various departments which could be transferred to the elected local government at various levels within a time-bound framework; work out the principles of the mechanism of control of elected parishads over government functionaries; immediately work out a decentralized budget and planning mechanism for elected local governments so that the release of ADP funds under the present centralized planning process could be further decentralized to suit local needs and requirements; identify and elaborate the structure and content of training for both appointed and elected officials so that the new framework of local government administration would work to the best advantage of the people (Khan 1984).

The government accepted the major recommendations of CARR, and within two and a half months after the submission of its report, a high-powered National Implementation Committee for Administrative Reorganization/Reform (NICARR) was created. However, the government did not agree with the recommendations of CARR concerning the functions of NICARR (Khan 1985). The government did not allow NICARR to deal with basic and substantive issues of reform and organization including the transfer of power from the national to subnational governments, the

nature of the control mechanisms to be used in the relationships among elected representatives at the local level, the extent of decentralization of financial and planning functions, and the identification of planning needs for elected and appointed officials (Khan 1987:353).

However, the government readily agreed to a rather formal attempt at decentralization, creating 64 new administrative districts out of the existing 21, and announcing that "thana will be the focal point of administrative activities" (*Bangladesh Gazette Extraordinary* October 23, 1982). The subdivisions<sup>3</sup> were abolished, and the government started upgrading the thanas step by step. The Local Government (Thana Parishad and Thana Administration Reorganization) Ordinance 1982, described the details of the constitution of Thana Parishads for the upgraded thanas. Later, these thanas were designated as upazilas. The local government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administrative Reorganization, Third Amendment Ordinance of 1983) provided details of the structure and functions of the new council.

By February 1984, 460 thanas were designated as upazilas and the court system at this level had begun to operate (Bertocci 1985:159). The Upazila Chairman (the chief executive of the Upazila Parishad) was to be elected, and before the holding of upazila elections, the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) was to administer all the activities of the Upazila Parishad. The government scheduled upazila elections for March 24, 1984. By late February 1984, for example, a canvass of twelve districts showed that of the 1,337 candidates for 262 upazila chairmanships, a quarter had declared themselves members of Janadal, the pro-government party (Bertocci 1985:159). Ershad's strategy was to win over the local elites through these elections, but this was criticized by the opposition which campaigned for a postponement of the upazila elections. Among the major political parties, only the pro-government party supported the upazila elections (Rob 1986). The military government used a variety of strategies in an attempt to weaken its opponents. Ershad introduced more civilians into the cabinet, and accepted some of the demands of the opposition. However, the opposition was not ready to compromise, and the scheduled parliamentary and upazila elections were postponed. Finally, Ershad arranged for a referendum in early 1985 which gave him an overwhelming majority, and subsequently, upazila elections were held throughout the country on May 16 and 20, 1985 (Haque 1985). Although individuals from a variety of political parties participated in these elections, a government announcement claimed that the elections were non-political (*The Dainik Ittefaq* May 16, 1986). (In Bangladesh, political parties are not allowed to participate in local government elections.) Thus, through the upazila elections, people's representatives came to occupy the top positions (e.g., chairman) of the upazila administration, and the decentralized units of administration achieved, at least theoretically, a representative character.

### Formal Objectives of the Upazila System

The formal objective of administrative reforms in developing countries is almost always the welfare of the public. However, often there is a strong partisan political

motive behind such reforms, and this was the case with the administrative reforms introduced under the Ershad military regime. The informal objectives of this reform included the breakup of the age-old forms of traditional centralized administration and the transition from bureaucratic to democratic methods in local government (Ahmed 1988:819). The objectives also included the election of an Upazila Parishad (UZP) chairman (the chief of the Upazila Parishad), and the abolition of voting privileges for administrative personnel. These would serve to make this new body an organ of true local self-government (Schroeder 1984:3). Further objectives were to bring the administration and judiciary closer to the people in a spirit of devolution, and to decentralize administration, thereby leading to greater mass participation in administration. Finally, local level planning through the upazila system to meet local demands and developmental needs was also an objective.

### Criticisms and Hopes

The formal objectives of the upazila system all sound positive, but their implementation has faced many difficulties. In practice, the government has been successful in establishing its control over local administrative elites through this system. These elites have been happy to gain access to significant new positions in the new administrative units. However, the system is far from achieving the decentralization of authority and increased mass participation which are the main foci of the new system. Participation is limited to certain local elites rather than the adult population as a whole. Still, there has been an increase in the primary consciousness of non-political groups.<sup>4</sup> If the upazila system can gradually achieve some of its formal objectives, it will probably play an important role in the development of rural society in Bangladesh. Thus, although the government and the party in power are exploiting the policy of decentralization for their own partisan purposes, it has had a positive impact on rural society.

After the upazila elections were held, President Ershad stated that attempts to establish a happy and prosperous Bangladesh would be expedited if the newly-elected Upazila Parishad chairmen fulfilled their duties with fresh enthusiasm. He stated that a great opportunity had been created to improve the welfare of ninety per cent of the people of the country through direct participation in the upazila system. By engaging local leaders in nation-building activities, Bangladesh had shown the way to other third world countries.

### Nature of Decentralization During the Ershad Regime

Theoretically, decentralization has been favored under the Ershad regime. The administrative reforms under the Mujib and Zia governments did not emphasize decentralization of administration, but were intended to change the structure of local government. From the very start, however, Ershad has emphasized administrative

decentralization, and in his first address to the nation after coming to power, he stressed the reorganization of administration at the local level.

However, the real motive of the Ershad government was not to introduce participatory decentralization; rather, the government's intention was to use the upazila to further its own political interests. The government has expanded the bureaucratic machinery at the local level through the upazila system, and the activities of local level bureaucrats have been tightly controlled by the central bureaucracy. "The respective ministers and divisions utilize highly centralized control mechanisms to direct and guide the activities of their officers working in upazilas" (Khan 1987:361).

In a decentralized system which stresses public participation and devolution of authority, local government must be autonomous and clearly distinguished as a separate jurisdiction over which the center exercises little or no direct control. However, the upazilas in Bangladesh are far from attaining such autonomy, and are almost fully dependent on the center for financial allocations.

Administrative decentralization requires authoritative local level planning, and the Upazila Parishad has had the formal authority to prepare its own development plan and budget. However, "copies of this budget had to be forwarded to the government and Deputy Commissioner in charge of the district. The government retained the authority to modify the budget within thirty days of the receipt of a copy of a UZP budget (Government of PRB 1983).

Although Upazila Parishads have put together their own development plans, all those plans "shall be subject to the sanction of the government." Thus, although Upazila Parishads have been established with the intention of formulating thana-level development plans and programs, and the Upazila Parishads are involved with their implementation, monitoring and evaluation, the government continues to exercise complete control over all development activities of the Upazila Parishad (Huque 1985:184).

Thus, the decentralized units function under heavy supervision from the center. If the local government is concerned about developments which run counter to national policy, the national government can issue instructions to quash the proceedings of the Upazila Parishad, suspend the execution of any resolution, and require the parishad to take such action as may be specified (The Government of PRB 1983). The government also has the power to inquire into the affairs of the Upazila Parishad (Government of PRB 1983).

The government has consistently focused on the positive aspects of administrative decentralization. However, according to Huque, the present upazila system does not suit the country. He has emphasized the great extent of central administrative control over this system, and has called it an "illusion of decentralization" (Huque 1986). The extensive control by the central government over the Upazila Parishad has been depicted in the works of Faizullah (1985), Huque (1986), Khan (1985), and

Ahmed (1988). And although the government has stressed the benefits of the upazila, these are not enjoyed by the rural population as a whole. Rather, they are enjoyed by the affluent families of society. "It is they who send their children to educational institutions and use the facilities of roads and markets. Construction of irrigation channels also is to the advantage of large landowners who produce and market more. This suggests that the poor households, those of the landless and small farmers, benefit least from building such infrastructures" (Quasem 1986:207).

The upazila system stresses, in theory, participation in local administration, and this is always emphasized by pro-government political leaders. However, the major opposition political parties do not agree with the government and argue that participation is limited to elites and opportunists. The illiterate and politically apathetic majority does not participate in administration, so participation is, in fact, limited to local elites and opportunists. Rahman identifies four factors which explain the lack of participation in the administration: the bureaucrats' disregard for democracy; ignorance of and an uncooperative attitude on the part of administrators toward popular causes; slow decision-making by officials; and, lack of public access to government officials (Rahman 1986:79).

### Conclusion

The application of decentralization policies after independence in 1971 varied considerably under the governments of Presidents Mujib, Zia, and Ershad. After coming to power in 1982, the present Ershad government was the most consistent of the three governments in promoting administrative decentralization, and in 1982, it created the upazila, a new decentralized unit of administration. The primary motive behind the creation of upazilas was the promotion of the partisan interests of the ruling party, although the government hoped that the conditions of the rural population would improve somewhat as a result of this policy.

In a decentralized system, local units should have a high degree of autonomy, especially in local decision-making. Decentralized units in Bangladesh are autonomous on paper but are controlled by the central government. The majority members of the Upazila Parishad (decision-making body) are nominated by the central government and are usually loyal to the upper level. Moreover, the government can modify the budget of an Upazila Parishad, or compel the council to spend money on specific programs. Supervision by the central government hampers the autonomy of the local units. The central government which provides money to the local units may inquire as to how this money is being spent, but it should not interfere with local decision-making or use the local bureaucracy for its own political benefits.

In most decentralized systems in Afro-Asian states, local units of administration are dependent on the center for financial resources. However, local government in a decentralized system should be capable of raising significant amounts of its own revenues subject to the approval of the center. Upazila Parishads in Bangladesh have

been empowered to raise some funds through local taxes, tolls, and fees, but these are not sufficient to meet their expenses. The lion's share of money being spent in upazilas is provided by the center. The government in Bangladesh should allow the upazilas to raise more of their own revenues in order to enable them to handle local priorities.

Typically, when new governments in Bangladesh come into office, they reject previous attempts at administrative reform which have usually stressed administrative decentralization, and they introduce a new form of administrative decentralization. These partisan political experiments with local government reform result in a substantial waste of money and energy, and lead to the public's growing disillusionment with all proposals for administrative reform.

The impact of administrative decentralization varies from country to country, and this study should increase interests in attempts of other countries where decentralization has been adopted as a state policy.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The decentralization policy of Bangladesh is characterized by deconcentration and devolution. For detailed definitions of the terms "deconcentration" and "devolution" see Alderfer (1967).

<sup>2</sup>*Tadbir* is a Bengali word which implies illegal persuasion.

<sup>3</sup>Subdivisions are tiers of administration just below the district.

<sup>4</sup>Seventy-six per cent of the population of Bangladesh is illiterate, and this illiteracy rate is extremely high in the rural areas. As a result, most of the rural population is not even aware of its socio-political and administrative rights. The term "primary consciousness" is used to refer to an individual's awareness of his/her socio-political and administrative rights and duties.

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