

# The Bureaucracy in Nascent Bangladesh

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*This is a critical evaluation of the organization of civil administration in nascent Bangladesh. It reveals that Awami League (AL) government's efforts to organize the inherited colonial administrative system could not bring about any substantial change in the administration of the country. Rather, its policy measures and performances exacerbated the administrative problems that beset the autonomy, cohesion and efficiency of the bureaucracy. The argument is founded on a review of relevant materials and policy documents.*

## Introduction

Bureaucracy is an organization that accomplishes large-scale administrative tasks by systematically coordinating the work of many individuals (Blau and Meyer 1971: 4). Max Weber's following statement signifies the importance of bureaucracy in a modern state:

The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization. The fully developed bureaucratic mechanism compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production (Gerth and Mills 1967: 214).

Predominance of bureaucracy is particularly evident in the new states. In most of these states the bureaucrats apparently feel that the politicians are bound to make mistakes, rush headlong into impossible projects and neglect vital tasks. Thus, mutual distrust and suspicion make cooperation between politicians and civil servants on administrative programs impossible (Horowitz 1972: 406-407). But, it is imperative that there should be interaction between the political executives and the civil servants, with both sides respecting each other. It is upon their harmonious relationship that the efficient functioning of any political system depends (Horowitz 1972: 406-407). Maurice Zinkin (1963: 78), a British publicist, has expressed the relationship between the bureaucrat and the politician in the following words:

It is for the electorate to decide in what direction it wishes its country to go, it is for the politician to give words to these desires and to turn them into a policy; it is for the bureaucrats to give the policy form.

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But, in spite of a persistent demand for the neutrality of bureaucracy, the political scenario of developing states demonstrates that in these states the bureaucracy is becoming increasingly involved in politics through policymaking (Riggs 1963: 121).

The bureaucratic setup of Bangladesh was inherited from Pakistan as a legacy of the British system. According to its federal structure, administration in Pakistan was divided into central and provincial setups. The central secretariat was the apex organization of central administration. The provincial administration had a similar secretariat, affiliated departments and directorates like that of central secretariat, but the main structure there was the field administration units organized on a geographical basis. The geographic units were organized in the following tiers:

Division

District

Subdivision

Thana/Development Circle

The immediate administrative unit below the provincial secretariat was the division, with the district as the next hierarchical unit. With the passage of time the head of the district administration, designated as Deputy Commissioner (DC), assumed increasing responsibilities in development activities. The administrative functions at the subdivisional and *thana* (circle) levels were performed by the subdivisional officers and the circle officers, respectively. The officers from division to thana levels were drawn from the civil servants (F. Ahmed 1980: 213-214).

From the above, it is evident that during the Pakistan period, the bureaucracy played a decisive role in decisions involving basic political, economic and social issues. Politicians both of the ruling and the opposition political parties opposed the trend. Some of the major demands of the 1969 movements had been the reorganization of administration through changes in the ruling pattern of senior civil servants, the curtailment of the overall power of the bureaucracy and the development of more people-oriented services (Rahman 1974: 172-173).

This paper is a critical evaluation of the organization of civil administration in nascent Bangladesh. It seeks to analyze the trend of decline in the institution thereof. The study is based on materials and data from official documents and publications, reports, newspapers, journals, published books and unpublished dissertations.

### Organization of Civil Administration in Bangladesh

The Provisional Government of Bangladesh (PGB) felt the necessity of organizing a civil administration and accordingly appointed Nurul Qader Khan (a Deputy Commissioner of Pabna in former East Pakistan), the first secretary to the PGB. He was entrusted with the task of establishing the edifice of government and organizing all the civil servants and others who came forward to work for the PGB (Muhith 1978: 254). But the civil secretariat (of PGB) was organized without a coordinated plan (Muhith 1978: 225). After the surrender of the Pakistan occupation army on 16 December 1971, most of the officials of the civil secretariat of PGB returned home and took over their respective charges in independent Bangladesh (*Morning News*, 18 December 1971).

Upon assumption of power, the immediate concern of the Awami League (AL) government was how to convert the existing provincial administrative structure into a national one. As a first step the AL government changed the old provincial secretariat into the central secretariat of Bangladesh, while the existing affiliated directorate and subordinate offices remained as before and no change was made in respect of the units of field administration. Thus, a serious problem remained unresolved as to how to accommodate all the East Pakistan-based officers of the former central government of Pakistan and the Bengali officials and employees recruited and controlled directly by the central government. Later, on 27 December 1971 the AL government announced the formation of the Civil Administration Restoration Committee to suggest ways and means for the (1) restoration of civil administration at the subdivisinal, district and divisional levels; (2) fixing of priorities and phases under which restoration of administration would be implemented; (3) absorption of the employees of the various departments of the former government of Pakistan and the amalgamation of offices of the former government of Pakistan with the allied ministries of the government of Bangladesh; and (4) consideration of any other aspects of civil administration that the committee would deem necessary to look into (PRB 1972: 1-10). Here, it may be noted that according to a legal instrument called the Laws Continuance Enforcement Order issued on 10 April 1971 all laws that had been in force in Bangladesh on 25 March 1971 were to remain in force even after the proclamation of independence (theoretically from 25 March 1971), and all government officials and employees who owed allegiance to the new government of Bangladesh were to continue in office under the existing terms and conditions of services (*The Bangladesh Gazette Extraordinary*, 23 May 1972).

As mentioned earlier, the PGB organized the civil secretariat without any coordinated plan. Moreover, there were many cleavages in the inherited system that needed to be ironed out. To review the ad hoc setup and suggest ways and means to rectify its defects and bring it in conformity with changed sociopolitical conditions and the economic expectations of the people, the AL government on 15 March 1972 appointed a four-member committee designated as the Administrative

and Services Reorganization Committee (ASRC) (PRB 1973b: 1). The ASRC viewed the existing service structure as having been inherited from British India and for all practical purposes out of tune with the government's commitments to democracy and socialism and therefore needing refashioning and restructuring (PRB 1973b: 1). It mainly recommended that all civil servants should be organized in a single classless grading structure covering all the services in which there should be an appropriate number of different pay scales matching different levels of skill and responsibility, the correct grading for each post to be determined by an analysis of the job (PRB 1973b: 1). The ASRC strongly disapproved the reservation of key posts for the members of the former Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) and urged that all key positions at all levels be made open to competent men irrespective of the services they belonged to (PRB 1973b: 1). It also stated that the preference for the generalist pure and simple, should yield preference to those who had acquired competence in the concerned area (PRB 1973b: 1). Since the recommendations of the ASRC were not acceptable to the various segments of the bureaucracy, the AL government could not implement it.

The AL government also instituted the National Pay Commission (NPC) to examine the existing pay scales and suggest a new one commensurate with the contemporary cost of living, keeping an eye on the resource constraints of the nascent state (PRB 1973c: 1-5). The NPC submitted its report in May 1973. It recommended the pay and salary of the civil servants to be graduated into ten scales. It also recommended fixation of the highest salary at Taka 2,000/- and the lowest salary at Taka 130/-, to match the service grades recommended by the ASRC (PRB 1973c: 76-89). Soon after the NPC report was made public the AL government announced its formal acceptance of the ten national scales of pay as recommended by NPC (S. Ahmed 1975: 76-89). While the NPC was working, the prices of essential commodities were rising. The NPC recommended that should the cost of living indices rise government employees would be given dearness allowances in proportion to the rises. But due to intra-bureaucratic schism the NPC recommendations could not be implemented.

#### Structure of Bureaucracy

To make the bureaucracy a unified organization the AL government amalgamated the central and provincial services, which were divided into three main categories. On the basis of roles and responsibilities, all civil servants were broadly classified into (1) generalist administrators belonging to the civil services; (2) functionaries belonging to audit and accounts, income tax, customs etc.; and (3) specialists like doctors, engineers, agriculturists, etc. (F. Ahmed 1980: 220). On the basis of hierarchical or command position of the civil servants (i.e., the degree of importance of work, the nature and extent of responsibilities involved, the difference in the levels of appointing and dismissing authorities and other terms and conditions of service) they were classified as class I, class II, class III

and class IV. All of the government employees were again divided into 'gazetted' and 'non-gazetted' categories and all class I and II service holders were designated as gazetted officers since their appointment, posting, transfer, promotion, and recruitment were to be recorded in the official gazettes (F. Ahmed 1980: 224). The central and provincial class I services (including part of class II services) were again divided into cadre and non-cadre services (S. Ahmed 1986: 158). Cadre services were those services constituted under a law with a number of positions or structure and recruitment and promotion rules. Recruitments to the cadre services were to be made through the Public Service Commission on the basis of open competitive examinations. Non-cadre services were mostly of position basis with no definite structure of mobility, horizontally or vertically. People belonging to cadre services could move from one department to another as against the non-cadre people who were to work within a particular department in which they were originally recruited (F. Ahmed 1980: 219). The structural organization of the Bangladesh bureaucracy revealed it to be a complex organization. Both hierarchically and functionally it was divided into several organizational sub-units.

### **Political Approach in Administration and Its Consequences**

The AL always favored parliamentary democracy with real power vested in the parliament. Accordingly, the Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO) introduced a parliamentary form of government that was legitimized by the 1972 constitution. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib), leader of the AL Parliamentary Party and the first Prime Minister of Independent Bangladesh had a distrust of the old power elite, i.e., the civil-military bureaucracy (Abul Ahmed 1984: 260-285). After his elevation to the post of Prime Minister he gradually strengthened the political approach in the administration of the country. His top policy advisers were mostly non-bureaucrats. This was a trend completely different from that of the Pakistani period (Rahman 1974: 186). The AL government placed under the supervision of elected people the management of several development areas previously controlled by civil servants. For example, the management of the Integrated Rural Development Program was placed under a Cooperative Development Board consisting of two-thirds elected and one-third ex-officio members. The program was previously managed by appointed officials at policy and action levels (Rahman 1974: 186). Moreover, the leaders of AL affiliated interest groups Student League (SL), Jatiya Sramik League (JSL), Jatiya Krishak League (JKL) and Awami Jubo League (AjL) used to provide substantial inputs for the development of policy and programs. Many transfers and postings were made on political grounds and frequent political interference in the administration demoralized public officials (Rahman 1974: 178). The office of the Prime Minister and his Secretariat became the pivotal points of governmental activities during the AL rule. The Prime Minister headed different Ministries (such as Cabinet Division, Establishment Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting etc.)

for which he had specific responsibilities. Besides, his Secretariat comprised the offices of Principal Secretary, Private Secretary, Political Secretary, Economic Secretary and Invigilation Director. The Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister coordinated governmental activities at the administrative level which was previously the responsibility of the Chief Secretary (Rahman 1974: 177). Besides, nothing could be done without clearance from the Prime Minister, and this undue control would often create unnecessary delay in the decisionmaking process and its implementation. Enormous concentration of powers in the hands of the Prime Minister thus hindered the autonomy of the bureaucracy (Rashiduzzaman 1977: 178).

Moreover, the leaders of the party in power differed radically from the civil servants as to the ideological orientation. To ensure its control, the AL wanted all policies to originate from the party. But most of the politicians who became ministers in Bangladesh were inexperienced and could give no effective guidance in public policymaking (Rashiduzzaman 1977: 177). Despite their own shortcomings the AL leaders imputed blame on the bureaucrats for every misdeed. At times Mujib asked the bureaucrats to shuck off their bureaucratic mentality and make their service people-oriented. Occasionally, he cautioned that their services would be reorganized according to the Services Reorganization Committee report and 'collaborators' among the government officials would gradually be screened out by the scrutiny committee (Bangladesh Constituent Assembly Debates 1972: 702-704).

The activities of the AJL and the JSL were not conducive to the autonomous growth of bureaucracy. Sheikh Fazul Haque Moni (Moni), AJL leader, in his speech on the founding of his organization stated:

In view of the existing situation of the country the nation needs at the first instance the immediate removal of bureaucrats of Pakistani mentality, recruitment of the freedom fighters for the public offices, punishment through a screening board of those government officials who worked against the 'revolution' and equally rewarding of the allies of the 'revolution'. A relentless war must be waged against the newly emerged political elite of whom the bureaucrats are the first. They are the new class enemies and must be removed along with other opportunists (*Banglar Bani*, 12 November 1972).

In January 1973, Moni further stated:

We tried to bring before the government that a section in the administration is working against the policy and principles of government. They are all out to lower the image of *Bangabandhu* (friend of Bengal) in the eyes of the people of Bangladesh and of the world (*Banglar Bani*, 2 January 1973; *The Bangladesh Observer*, 27 January 1973).

The JSL leaders also organized public rallies and demonstrations and demanded the immediate dismissal of all corrupt bureaucrats, collaborators who

were working in different government, semi-government, autonomous, semi-autonomous and nationalized sector corporations (*The Bangladesh Observer*, 5 October 1972). The autonomy of the bureaucracy was also curtailed by the promulgation of Presidential Order 9 (PO 9) of 1972 (*The Bangladesh Gazette Extraordinary*, 24 January 1972). Many senior civil servants were sacked by the AL government as these officers received civil awards from the Pakistani government during the occupation period (*The Bangladesh Observer*, 6 June 1972). After the promulgation of PO 9, hundreds of government officials were screened out by the AL government (Maniruzzaman 1975: 125) and almost everyday newspapers were replete with the news of dismissals of officers (*The Bangladesh Observer*, 17, 19, 22, 23 & 26 July and 3 August 1972).

The autonomy of the bureaucracy was also shaken by the 'Second Revolution'. Under the parliamentary system the bureaucrats were legally in charge of the districts though frequent interference by the party in power undermined the morale of their services. The proposed district governors scheme of the Second Revolution provided for the legal and formal makeover of power to the political appointees which would make the bureaucracy fully subservient to the ruling party.<sup>1</sup> Thus the sanctions and threat of sanctions aroused resentment among the civil servants and they were biding their time to measure their strength. The senior bureaucrats refused to work under the junior officers who superseded them because of their service to the PGB. The AL government then took a conciliatory attitude and asked the PGB employees to go back to the posts they held on 25 March 1971 (*The Bangladesh Observer*, 14 April 1972). Most of the lower ranking officers except a few did not carry out the government's order. But that was the first victory of the bureaucrats who did not join the PGB. Despite all its efforts the AL government could not shake the citadel of bureaucratic power. Growing economic crisis, increasing anti-regime activities of the radical leftist groups and factional conflict of AL drove Mujib to swing more and more towards the bureaucrats rather than to his party elite (Aftabuddin Ahmed 1983: 355).

After 16 December 1971 the bureaucracy in Bangladesh could not represent itself as a unified body. Its members were divided into four main categories: (1) those who went into hiding; (2) those who attended their duties willy-nilly under the Pakistan occupation army; (3) those who served the PGB; and (4) those who remained stranded in Pakistan (Aftabuddin Ahmed 1983: 338; see also Jahan 1980: 83). Those who served the occupation army or became fugitives were dubbed as collaborators and those who worked with the PGB claimed themselves to be patriots. In the post-independence period, serious factionalism broke out within the administration between the patriots and the collaborators (Jahan 1980: 64) that sapped the morale and discipline of the bureaucracy at the initial stage of state-building. The senior and more experienced of the Bengal civil servants were working with the central government and remained stranded in Pakistan during the liberation war. After their repatriation another kind of conflict grew within

the bureaucracy. The reason for this schism was that many of the government's top posts had already been occupied by the *'Mujibnagar'*<sup>2</sup> and *'non-Mujibnagar'* administrators and the repatriates found it hard to regain top-ranking jobs. This factional division and tussle for position undermined the cohesion and efficiency of the bureaucracy (Jahan 1980: 83).

Jealousy between the members of the East Pakistan Civil Service (EPCS) and former members of the CSP also corroded the unity, discipline and efficiency of the bureaucracy. The erstwhile EPCS officers occupied a large number of senior posts in the bureaucracy. They claimed that with the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state, the erstwhile EPCS were automatically turned into the national civil service of Bangladesh and that the Bangladeshi members of the former CSP were thrown out of cadre necessitating their placement in the new administrative structure of Bangladesh. They also demanded that the status and seniority in any newly amalgamated cadre of the two services be determined on the basis of length of their service (PRB 1977: 228-235).

The bureaucracy also suffered another setback manifested in the relationship of the bureaucracy with the Planning Commission (PC). The PC set up in late 1972 was initially headed by four economists who were not career civil servants. The PC had ten divisions, each division having functional links with two or three executive ministries. Each of these divisions had a chief, deputy chief, assistant chiefs, and research officers. Almost all these posts were filled by foreign trained specialists drawn from University faculties, autonomous bodies and fresh University graduates rather than career civil servants (Rahman 1974: 174), who posed a challenge to the powers and status of bureaucrats. The PC also had a very poor opinion about the bureaucracy. In the first five year plan the PC remarked:

They (bureaucrats) can be neither innovators nor catalytic agents for a social change.... It is only a political cadre with firm roots in the people and motivated by the new ideology and willing to live and work among the people as one of them that can mobilize the masses and transform their pattern of behavior (PRB 1973a: 21).

The former CSP officers argued that they should form the nucleus of the administrative structure since they had come from the top five percent of University graduates and were recruited through open competitive examinations. They also claimed that merit rather than length of service should be the criterion of promotion. They demanded the reservation for them of two-thirds of the policymaking positions in the secretariat (Maniruzzaman 1979: 49). It is admitted all around that the Bengali CSP officers vindicated the Bengali demand for autonomy and articulated the demands of East Pakistan when formal politics was prohibited during the early phase of Martial Law in Pakistan (Sayeed 1967: 201-203). Three senior Bengali CSP officers accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case and some others gave governmental intelligence to Mujib to strengthen the

autonomy issue (E. Ahmed 1980: 142). These officers flourished during the AL rule. The AL, breaking the established rules and practices (that had been in force during the Pakistan period), adopted a policy to favor those officers who served the government in exile and officials having links with AL. This aroused furor among the rest of the government employees (Maniruzzaman 1979: 48) and also shattered the coherence of the bureaucracy.

The bureaucracy also suffered from another inherited internal schism. The Bengali CSP officers during the Pakistan period were divided into two factions from the 1950s. One faction was led by Shafiul Azam (Azam), who rose to the position of Chief Secretary of East Pakistan and actively collaborated with the Pakistan occupation army. The other faction was led by A.K.M. Ahsan (Ahsan), who became a Central Secretary and maintained covert links with Mujib. Both of them were stranded in Pakistan during the liberation war. After their return, Azam was sacked while Ahsan was appointed Chairman of the Project Implementation Board. Later, he joined the PC. Meanwhile, Ruhul Quddus (Quddus), Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, had emerged as the dominant figure in the administrative setup. As a result, animosity grew between the Ahsan faction and the Quddus faction of the bureaucracy. Besides, political and direct appointees in the administration also put the bureaucracy out of gear (Aftabuddin Ahmed 1983: 352-354).

Moreover, the AL-framed 1972 constitution of Bangladesh denied the constitutional protection that the civil servants used to enjoy during the Pakistan period. Article 134 of the 1972 constitution stipulated that civil servants should hold office during the pleasure of the President. Article 135 (3) stated that the decision of the authority in this regard would be final.<sup>9</sup> These constitutional and other policy measures of AL government affected the efficiency of the bureaucracy.

The AL government also took certain *ad hoc* measures to recruit administrative manpower. It reserved a quota of all new appointments for the members of the *Mukti Bahini* (Liberation Force) and made scope for the so-called civil service examinations for recruitment of freedom fighters as well as its own fledglings. To take advantage of the quota system, many AL as well as non-Awami Leaguers managed to secure fake freedom-fighter certificates, thus many unqualified and incompetent persons got entry into the civil services of the country. This created additional tension and schism in the bureaucracy (Maniruzzaman 1979: 48).

### Conclusion

It is evident from the political scenario of the newly independent states that political leaders in these countries often found themselves hedged in by the party workers for some share in the spoils of power as reward for the part they had

played in the nationalist movement. The AL as the main exponent of the autonomy movement and later of the independence movement also faced such problems when it formed the post-independence government. But to provide its workers/leaders with opportunities, the AL violated established rules of seniority, efficiency, performance and all other service rules in selecting candidates for top positions. It frequently appointed people arbitrarily and often these appointees were elevated to higher posts through political patronage (Jahan 1980: 132). Thus, by recruiting incompetent and inexperienced men in important administrative posts the AL government politicized the bureaucracy and exacerbated the administrative problems. Moreover, the growth of personalistic and extra-bureaucratic political institutions and the proliferation of their functions conspired to set in motion the process of decadence of the autonomy, cohesion and efficiency of the bureaucracy.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>For the full text of the district governors scheme, see *The Bangladesh Observer*, 23 June 1975.

<sup>2</sup>The name Mujibnagar was coined by the Bangladesh Government in exile. It is a place in Bangladesh soil in a mango grove at Baddayanattala, a village of Meherpur subdivision under Kustia district.

<sup>3</sup>See Articles 179-183, Government of Pakistan (GP) Ministry of Law, *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan* (Karachi: Government of Pakistan Press, March 1956); Articles 174-179, GP Ministry of Law, *The Constitution of the Republic of Pakistan* (Karachi: Government of Pakistan Press, 1962); Articles 133-136, GPR, Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs, *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh* (Dacca: Bangladesh Government Press, 1972).

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