Administrative Decentralization: A Bangladesh Perspective

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Development administration requires decentralization and delegation of authority as well as the acceptance of the concepts of decentralization and delegation by senior administrators both in theory and in practice. The administration of British India was extremely centralized; Pakistan failed to accomplish the decentralization it aimed at; and Bangladesh inherited a centralized administration from Pakistan.
At first, Bangladesh tried without success to accomplish decentralization, and later on introduced village self-government which was discontinued after two years' experience.
The present government has taken a new step towards decentralization through the formation of the Upazila (Sub-district) which is a new administrative unit of government. The increased role of the Upazilas constitute a far-reaching policy of decentralization, but it is still too early to comment on its success.

Keywords: decentralization, delegation, people's participation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh became an independent entity on 16 December 1971 before which it was a province of Pakistan, East Pakistan, a state created through the partition of India in 1947. In terms of immediate historical antecedents, the public administration of Bangladesh has been largely shaped by the public administration of Pakistan.

Pakistan inherited the legacy established by the British colonial rulers, including their administrative and bureaucratic structure, which the British probably took over from the model of bureaucracy developed by the Mughal administration.[1, 2]

Although it was natural to expect that after independence the newly-born state would develop a suitable administrative system of its own in order to meet the requirements of the time, this did not happen. In its attempt to reorganize its administrative structure, Bangladesh was only able to create the Union Council, the Thana Council and the District Council to replace the Thana Panchaet, the Thana Development Committee and the District Board.

Given the new socio-political and economic conditions the system remained inadequate, although several attempts were made to change the administrative system to make it more responsive to the people's needs. In an attempt to develop the socio-economic condition of the country, the present government has taken the initiative to decentralize the administrative system to bring the administration to the grass-root level and to carry out its ambitious rural development programs.

2. DECENTRALIZATION: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Decentralization can be analysed in the terms of *Talcott Parsons's* »value/goal» levels. In this sense decentratlization involves the division of governmental power between a central ruling group and other groups, each having authority

within a specific area of the state. At the level of »norms» decentralization indicates the existence of several formal political structures, each covering a definite area, representing local interests as well as the interests of the central rulers. The local share of allocating power is protected by formal and normative rules which are accepted by the center. At the level of »collectiveness and rules» decentralization means that the unit of local government for formal decision-making is primarily exercised by local representatives.

If we study public or private management, »decentralization» might reasonably be taken to cover any shift in »decentralizedness». But when a political element is brought in, as we must do in a study of government, the sharp difference between the two categories vanishes. This makes it relatively easy to arrive at an appreciation of the situation in the industrialized countries. However, the most common form of decentralization in the developing countries has been »deconcentration»,[3] and Bangladesh is no exception.

3. THE EVOLUTION TOWARDS DECENTRALIZED ADMINISTRATION IN BANGLADESH

The present administrative system of Bangladesh is mainly a British legacy even though the system in Bengal developed much before the arrival of the British. The existence of a strong military power suggests there was also a sound civil administration[4] during the regime of Maura Gupta around 326 B.C. when Bengal was a part of the kingdom of »Ganghridi».

During the rule of the Mughals the ancient administrative system of Bengal took a definite shape when an institution called Vakil was developed especially during the rule of Emperor Akbar at the end of the sixteenth century who shared the responsibilities of the state among four ministers beside the Vakil: (1) Revenue and Finance by the Divan (Chief Divan); (2) Military by the Mir Bakshi (Chief Bakshi); (3) Factories or Stores by the Mir Samam (Chief Executive Officer); and (4) Ecclesia or Judiciary by the Sadr.

The system granted only a limited degree of autonomy, delegation was strictly limited, and there was definite control from the center. The Shipahsalar[6] received a delegated power of general supervision within a specified area but most administrative matters were directly supervised by the special minister at the center. In approximately 1575 the administrative structure was given a permanent shape, which established a systematic hierarchical chain between the officers and the system known as »munsabdari» (See Appendix, Figure 1.).[7]

The administrative system built up, maintained and developed over many generations by the British colonial rulers by 1947 had become an integral part of the socio-political structure of British India: over the years the British rulers set up no less than 65 comittees to restructure the administrative system of the sub-continent.[8]

Important changes were made during British rule: the Indian Council Act of 1861 authorized the provinces to make local laws and to take financial measures; provincial and district councils were elected to look after local needs; in response to increasing interest, a resolution on local self government in India was issued in May, 1918 which recognized local self-government as part of the official machinery of District Administration.

The Bengal Village Self-government Act of 1919, which gave them a legal status, introduced the post of the Circle Officer as the lowest unit of general administration: Circle officers had first been appointed on the basis of the recommendations of the Bengal District Administration Committee of 1913—14.

Until 1937 the government of India was invisible. All government functions were legally under the control of the Governor General in Council who could issue administrative orders which the Council was bound to carry out. If there was a conflict of opinion on any question between a provincial government and the central government, the central government decided the matter administratively, and the decision was binding on the province. The Government of India Act of 1935 divided the functions of government between the provinces and the center: every province was divided into a number of districts and the controlling authority over all departments in the district was the collector. Administration in the provinces was carried out by Governors and at the centre by the Governor General.

Before partition the administration of Pakistan was divided into two main divisions, the central administration and the provincial administration. The central government of Pakistan was ultimately responsible for the administra-

tion of the whole country, even though according to the federal principle the provincial governments were independent to administer the provincial subjects.

Although the government nominated 28 commissions to decentralize the administrative system of Pakistan between 1948 and 1964, the centralized character of the administrative system remained unchanged except for the introduction of the Thana Training and Development Centre in 1962, when a Thana Secretariat was established under the Circle Officer (Appendix, Figure 2.).[10]

Bangladesh inherited the pattern of central administration of Pakistan. The same hierarchial setup prevailed, although some reforms were introduced and more were suggested. (Appendix, Figure 3.).[11]

In the process of decentralization, the Local Government Ordinance of 1976 was an important step. Under the Local Government Acts of 1975 and 1976, the Village Committee became the lowest organizational unit for local development activities. In 1980 the Village Committee was changed into Village Self-Government. The Second Five Year Plan proposed the spread of this innovation as an instrument for rural planning and for the participation of the rural population in development activities (Appendix, Figure 4.).[12]

The program for developing village self-government was never worked out in detail, although a large number of self-governments were nominally set up. Neither the organizers nor the village self-government officials were given training to perform their duties. Like many other experimental models of rural development, the village self-government was alandoned by the government after two years' experience. The present government has taken new decentralization steps through the formation of the Upazila, new administrative units (Sub-District), to bring the administrative offices nearer to the people (Appendix, Figure 5.).[13]

4. THE UPAZILA ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

In April 1982 the Bangladesh government set up an Administrative Reorganization and Reform Committee for recommending an appropriate and effective administrative system with the objective of taking the administration to the grass-rootlevel. The committee emphasized the popular participation of the rural population in the administrative activities of the government and highlighted the need for local leadership in the process of rural development. Among the major committee recommendations were:

- the direct election of chairmen at various levels of local government institutions — district, thana and union
- the election of councils with full functional control over the field level officials
- the adequate devolution of administrative, judicial and financial power at district and thana level
- the development of infrastructure at the thana level
- the elimination of unnecessary levels, such as sub-divisions and divisions.

The government accepted the key recommendations of the committee to upgrade the Thanas, the focal point of administration, and to reduce the number of tiers of administration. In November 1982 the implementation of the Thana upgrading scheme began with 45 Thanas throughout the country.[14] To give effect to the new system, a new Local Government Ordinance was passed on December 23, 1982.

The decentralization of decision-making responsibilities to the Upazilas is perhaps the most important and far-reaching policy initiative of the Government of Bangladesh on decentralization: it provides scope for popular participation, it provides for improved technical capability service to the people by upgrading staffs at Upazila, and it enables local government to plan and implement projects of local interest and importance.

The structure of the Upazila presents a dual leadership pattern. On the one side there is the elected official, the Chairman of the Upazila Parishad, while on the other side there is the Upazila Nirbahi Officer, who is the Chief Executive Officer of the Upazila and the member secretary of the Upazila Parishad. The Chairman of the Upazila Parishad is the coordinating officer of the different officials stationed at the Upazila.[15]

The Upazila Parishads are corporate bodies consisting of elected, appointed and administrative officials. The Chairman of the Upazila Parishad is directly elected. All Chairmen of the Union Parishads (the lowest tier of local bodies) will be representative members, and 12 specified Thana level field officials will be members. In addition, there are three non-official female

and one official male member appointed by the government.

The Upazila Parishads have been assigned a wide variety of functions including the preparation of annual Upazila development programs. The planning guidelines emphasize that the Upazila should give priority to projects promoting employment and local development. In addition the Upazila Parishads are expected to carry out socio-economic surveys in order to provide a basis for identifying non-farm activities that could be promoted.

The Upazilas are expected to raise their own resources, especially for maintenance and recurrent expenses. There are 23 items on which the Upazilas have been authorized to levy fees. Nevertheless, the Upazilas must rely heavily on government funds as the local collection are unable to mobilise significant funds. Moreover, the Upazila Parishads must have government clearance on all decisions, including the budget. This dependence of the Upazila Parishads may create barriers to the devolution of authority to local bodies.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of administrative decentralization in Bangladesh points to the fact that there are contradictions between promise and performance. As in the British and Pakistani tradition, commissions and committees have been established for examining, evaluating and improving the administrative system, which has however remained unchanged.

Most of the members and chairmen of the reform commissions and committees or review boards have been bureaucrats or ex-bureaucrats and the general population has had very little chance or opportunity of becoming associated with what is going to be the future shape of the administration.

In the name of institution building, many efforts have been undertaken to strengthen the central administration by stretching its arm to local areas. Political instability has increased the power of the military and civil bureaucracy and lead to a situation of »bureaucratic absolutism». The participation of the people and the devolution of authority remain a myth. Within a framework of centralized administration and centralized planning, decentralisation seems to have a tendency to undo itself. The reorganization of development efforts so as to make them more responsive to the people's needs requires a major reorientation of the bureaucracy.

NOTES

1. Lawrence Ziring, *The Ayub Khan Era, Politics in Pakistan.* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1971), pp. 114—141. Henry Goodnow, *The Civil Service of Pakistan, Bureaucracy in a New Nation,* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1964).
2. Hugh Tinker, *India and Pakistan, A Political Analysis,* (New York: Praeger, 1962), pp. 16—17.
3. Anisuzzaman M., *Bangladesh Public Administration and Society,* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Book International, 1979), p. 131.
4. *World Bank Report 1983,* (New: York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 120.
5. Anisuzzaman M., *Public Administration of Bangladesh* (in Bengali), (Dhaka: C.S.S., 1976), p. 26.
6. Sipahsalar was the provincial chief in the Mughal administration. Each province was divided into Sarkars under the Faujdar who was appointed by the King and acted both as an assistant to the Sipahsalar and the direct agent of the court.
7. Ibn Hasan, *The Central Structure of the Mughal Empire,* (Oxford: OuP, 1936). Source of Figure 1.: »Bangladesh Political Studies», Vol. 1, 1978.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Mia Mohammed Ayub, *Prashashanik Bikenndrikaran and Upazilla Prashason,* (Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1983), p. 1.
10. A.N. Haque Samsul, *Subnational Administration in Bangladesh and its Role in Development, An Overview,* (Rajshahi University, Department of Political Science, 1982). Source of Figure 2.: »Bangladesh Political Studies», Vol. 1, 1978.
11. Ahmed Ali, *Role of Higher Civil Servants in Pakistan,* (Dhaka: National Institute of Public Administration, 1968), p. 104. Source of Figure 3.: »Bangladesh Political Studies», Vol. 1, 1978.
12. Chowdhury Hasan Imam, »Bangladesh Political Studies», Vol. 1, Department of Political Science, University of Chittagong, 1978, p. 21. Source of Figure 4.: *Village Self-Government Manual,* 1980, p. 7.
13. *Village Self Government Manual,* (Dhaka: »Local Government Studies», 1980), pp. 7—13. Source of Figure 5.: Bangladesh National Institute of Public Administration, 1980, p. 108.
14. Nazmunessa Mahtab, »Administrative Decentralization and Rural Development in Bangladesh: A Review of Upazila Administration», *The Journal of Public Administration,* (Delhi, 1985, 31: 4, 1305).
15. *Ibid.,* p. 1307.

Figure 1. The Mughal Administrative Structure

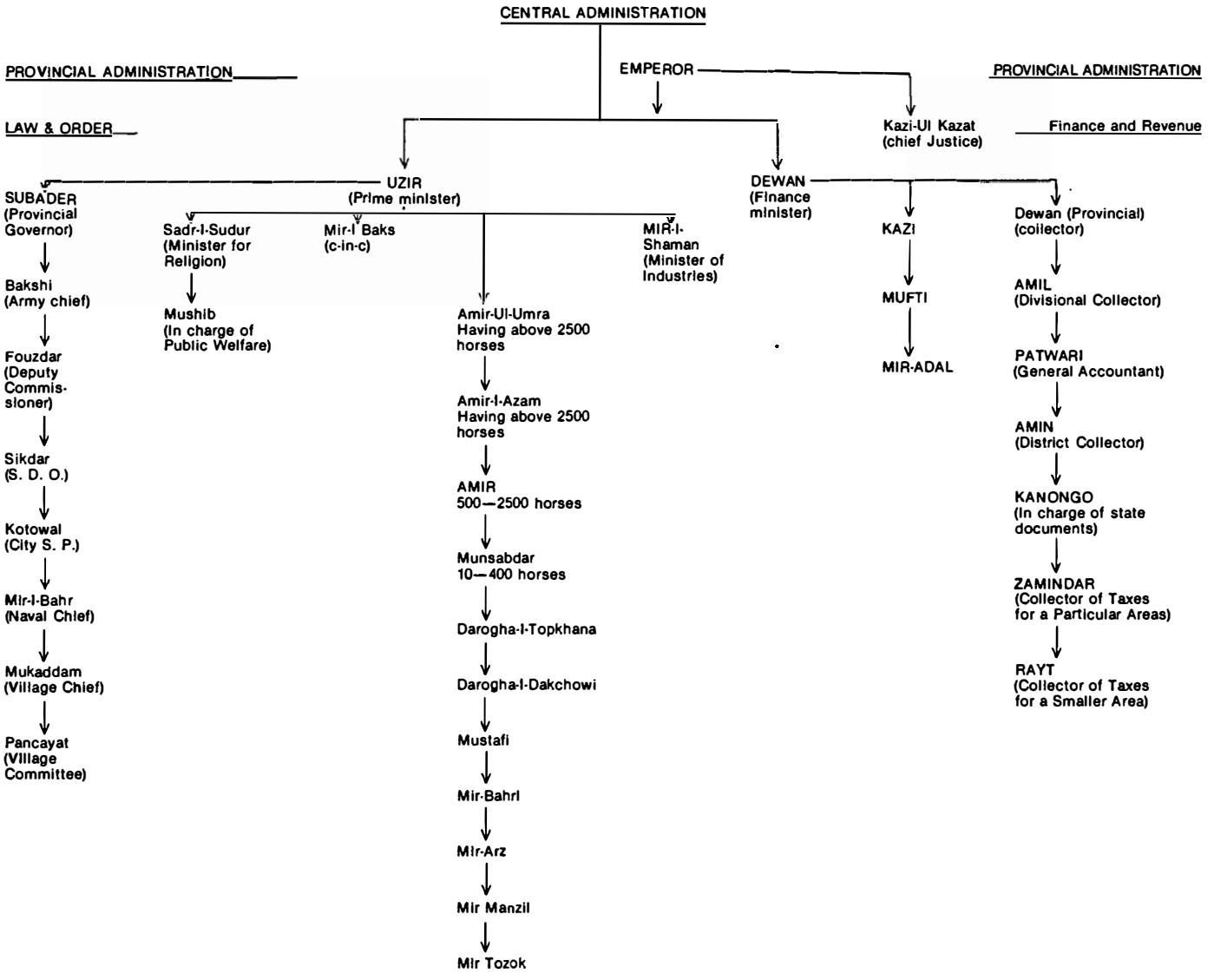
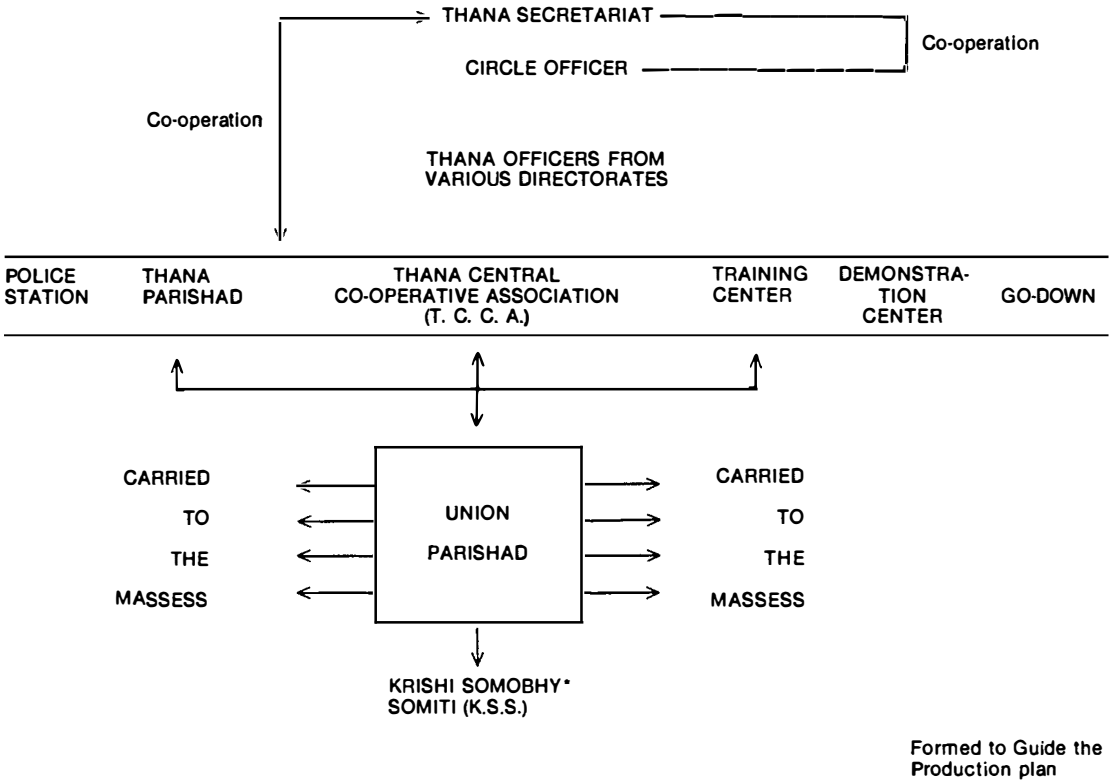


Figure 2. Thana training and development center (T.T.D.C.)



* The K.S.S. is an organization attached to the Union Parishad

Figure 3. The Administrative Structure of Bangladesh (After Independence).

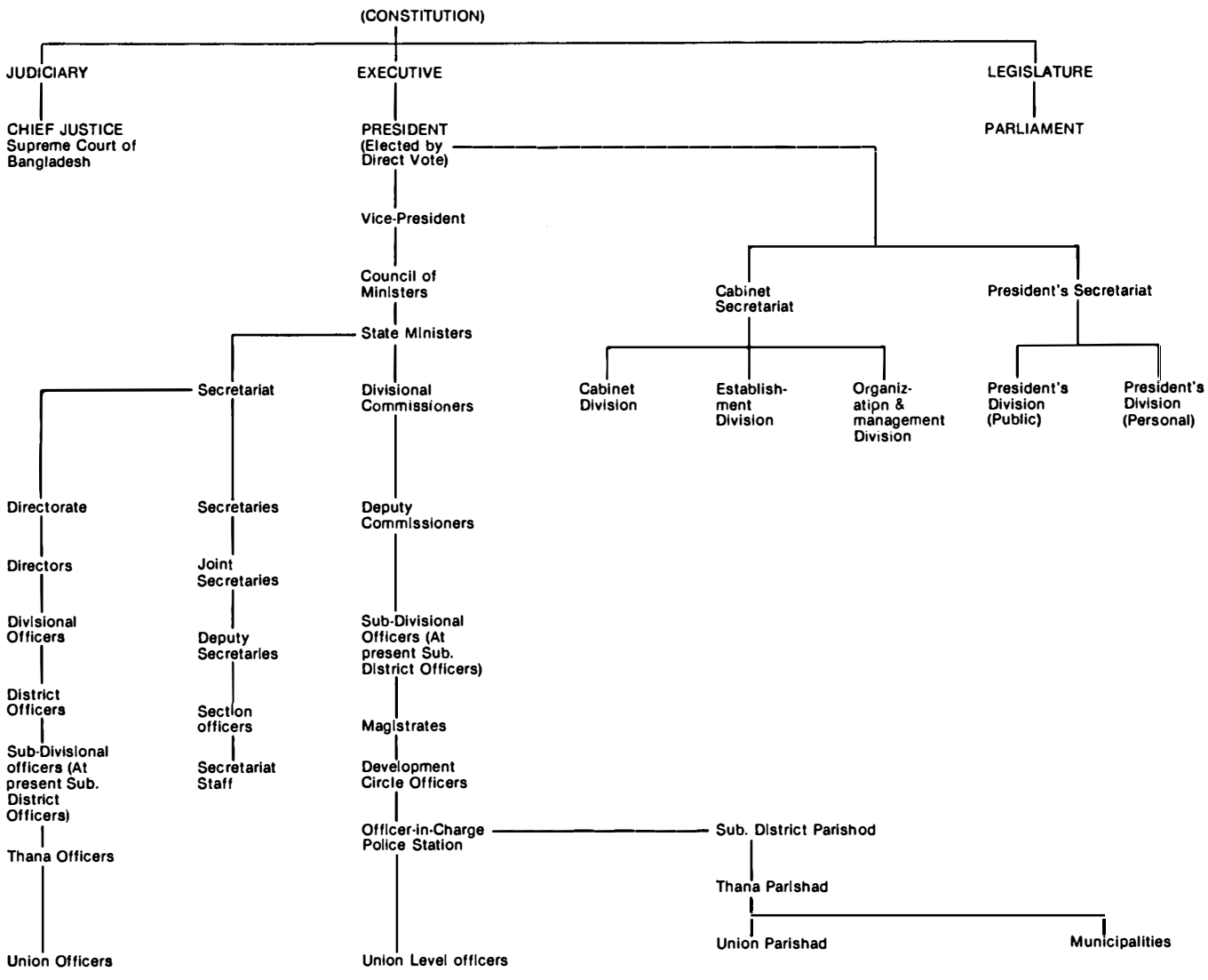


Figure 4. Administrative Structure of Village Self Government in Bangladesh.

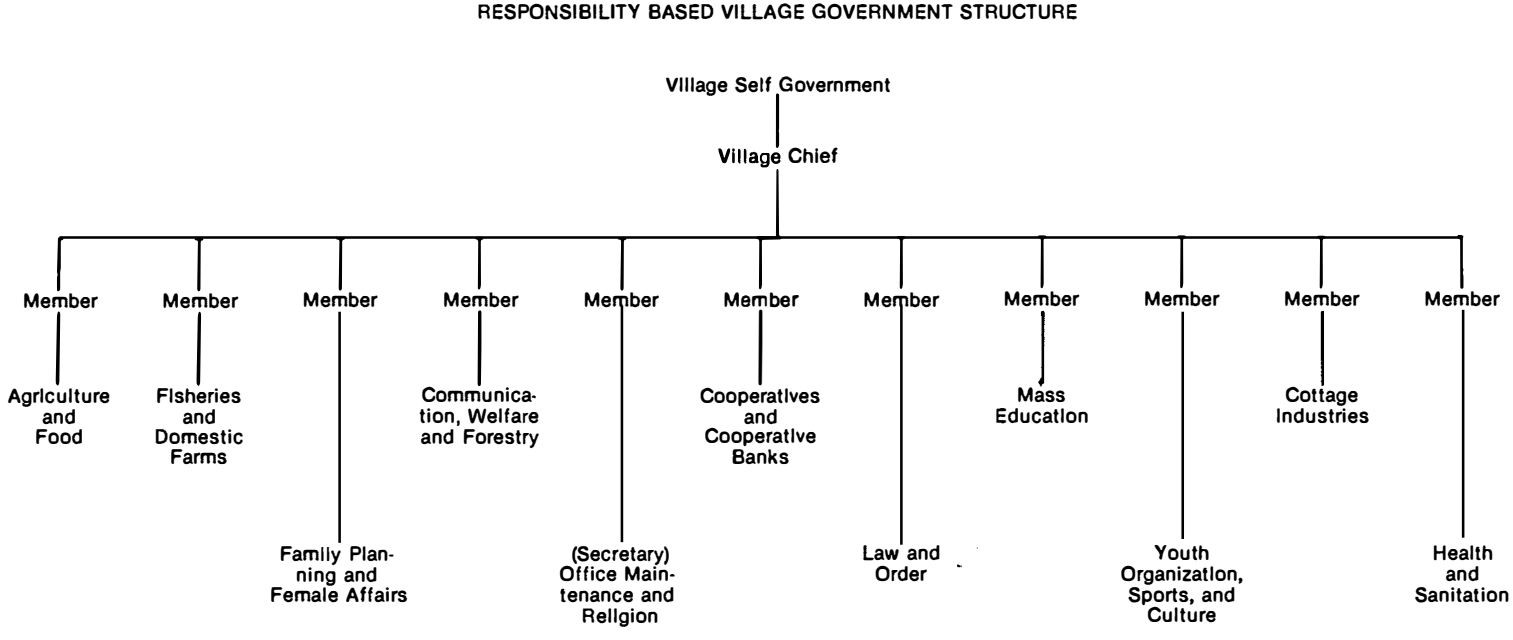
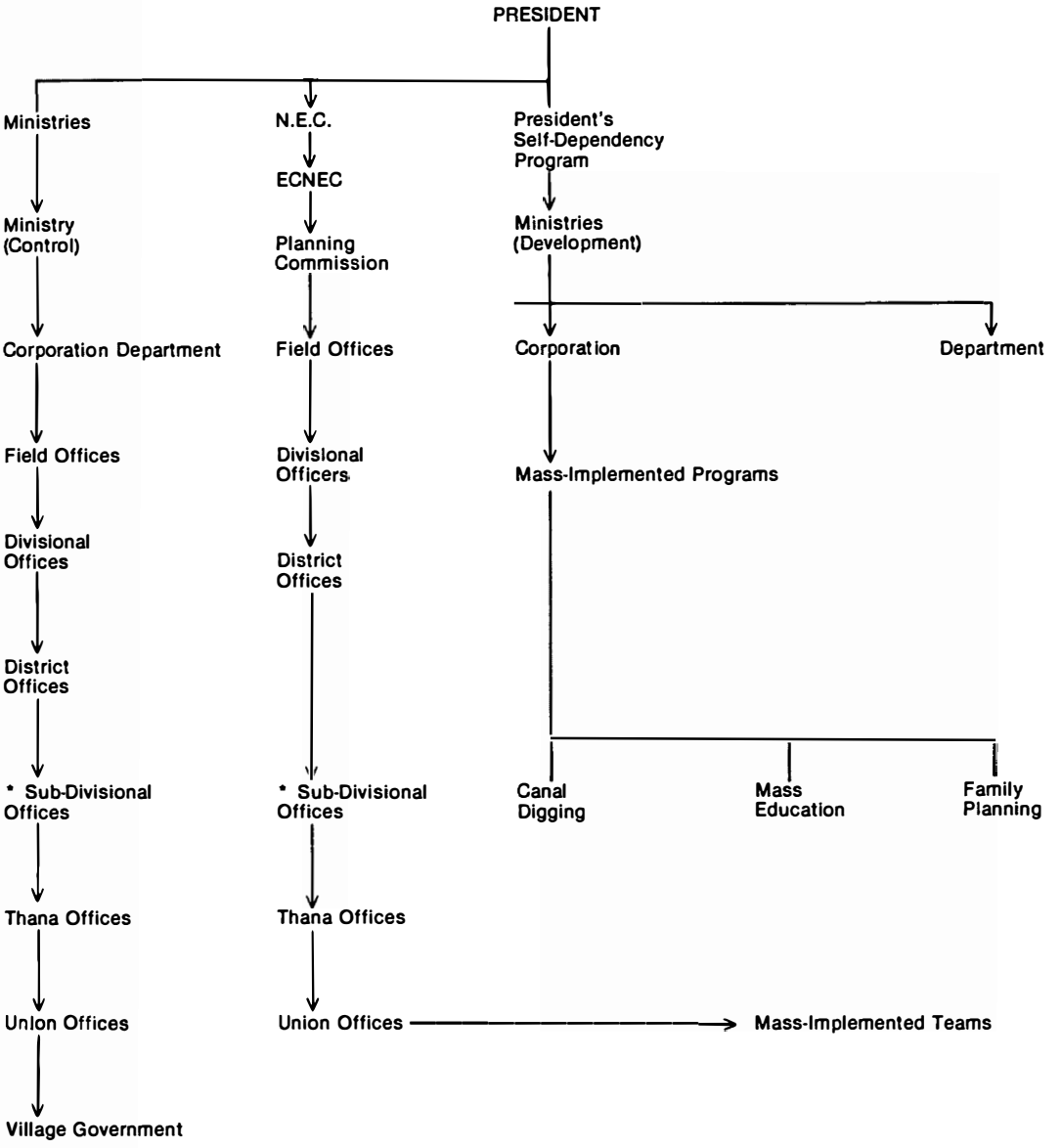


Figure 5. Linkage Structure of the Government of Bangladesh.



* At present the Sub-Divisional level is reorganized as the Upazila or Sub-District level, i.e., the Upazila officers.