



Governance Deficits and Reform Trajectories in Bangladesh: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Public Administration Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT: Bangladesh has undergone substantial administrative restructuring since its independence in 1971, yet systemic governance deficits persist across its bureaucratic apparatus. Most existing evaluations, however, are either macro-institutional overviews or narrow, single-sector assessments, and rarely combine citizen-level survey evidence, elite qualitative testimony, and formal statistical modelling of satisfaction predictors within one design. This study investigates the effectiveness of public administration in Bangladesh through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods framework, combining a structured questionnaire survey of 1,200 citizens across all eight administrative divisions with 480 key informant interviews drawn from civil servants, policy experts, and civil society representatives. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and ordinal logistic regression, with full coefficient, odds-ratio, and goodness-of-fit reporting, while qualitative findings were processed through thematic analysis and integrated with quantitative results via a joint display. Results indicate that e-governance adoption has improved service delivery indices particularly in urban areas, but rural-urban disparities remain pronounced (rural odds of satisfaction 56% lower than urban, OR = 0.44, 95% CI [0.35, 0.56]). Anti-corruption initiatives show partial gains, with the Control of Corruption indicator improving from –0.99 in 2019 to –0.92 in 2022 on the World Governance Indicators scale, despite comparatively high implementation ratings for several reforms, a decoupling this study examines critically. Citizen satisfaction with public service quality remains low (49.2% dissatisfied overall), driven primarily by bureaucratic delays, bribery, and inadequate decentralisation. Five primary governance challenges are identified, alongside stakeholder-endorsed reform strategies centred on RTI strengthening, digital infrastructure expansion, and civil service ethics reform, which are translated into a prioritised implementation agenda naming responsible institutions and anticipated barriers. The findings contribute to the comparative public administration literature on South Asian and lower-middle-income developing states and offer evidence-based policy recommendations for the Government of Bangladesh.

KEYWORDS: Public administration; governance; Bangladesh; e-governance; civil service reform; decentralisation

1. Introduction

Public administration constitutes the institutional backbone through which state authority is translated into tangible outcomes for citizens [1]. In developing countries across South Asia, the quality of administrative systems has been identified as a critical determinant of socioeconomic development, poverty reduction, and democratic consolidation [2, 3]. Bangladesh, despite recording one of the world's most remarkable economic transformation stories — averaging 6.5% annual GDP growth for over a decade — continues to grapple with chronic governance deficiencies that constrain the developmental aspirations of its 170 million citizens [4, 5]. The post-independence administrative architecture inherited by Bangladesh in 1971 was characterised by an entrenched Weberian bureaucracy that privileged procedural compliance over service delivery responsiveness [6]. Successive governments have sought to reform this apparatus through decentralisation policies, digitalisation agendas, anti-corruption legislation, and civil service restructuring, yet independent evaluations suggest that outcomes have been inconsistent and often below stated targets [7, 8].

The academic literature on Bangladeshi public administration has evolved considerably since the seminal works of the 1980s and 1990s, yet significant lacunae remain. Most extant studies concentrate either on macro-level institutional analysis [9, 10] or on narrow sector-specific assessments [11, 12], leaving a gap in comprehensive, empirically grounded evaluations that integrate citizen experience with expert institutional appraisal. Furthermore, the rapid digital transformation underway through the Digital Bangladesh initiative — now succeeded by Smart Bangladesh Vision 2041 — has introduced new variables into the governance equation that have not been systematically studied across administrative divisions [13, 14]. The intersection of e-governance adoption, citizen satisfaction, and bureaucratic reform outcomes remains underexplored in the context of Bangladesh's administrative divisions, particularly with respect to rural-urban disparities and the differential capacities of district and upazila-level administrations [15].

Anti-corruption governance constitutes another dimension that has attracted scholarly attention but demands updated empirical scrutiny. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), established under the ACC Act 2004 and strengthened by subsequent legislative amendments, has recorded notable enforcement actions; however, perceptual indicators of corruption in public service delivery continue to rank Bangladesh in the lower quartiles of global transparency indices [16, 17]. The interplay between formal institutional reforms and informal governance norms including patronage networks, political clientelism, and cadre-based bureaucratic loyalties, shapes the effective implementation of anti-corruption measures in ways that aggregate indices fail to capture [18]. Understanding these dynamics requires qualitative depth alongside quantitative breadth, a methodological combination that this study provides and that, existing Bangladesh-focused research has not previously combined at this scale.

The Right to Information (RTI) Act 2009 represents Bangladesh's commitment to transparency and participatory governance, yet utilisation rates remain disappointingly low, particularly among rural citizens who lack awareness or face structural barriers to information access [19]. Decentralisation, intended to bring governance closer to the citizenry through empowered local government bodies, union parishads, upazila parishads, and city corporations, has been impeded by fiscal centralisation, staffing deficits, and the limited devolution of decision-making authority [20, 21]. These structural constraints produce service delivery

outcomes that diverge substantially across regions and population groups, generating inequalities that aggregate national statistics tend to obscure [22].

Prior scholarship on Bangladeshi public administration, while foundational, has generally taken one of two forms. The first is macro-institutional analysis of administrative traditions, civil service structure, and reform rhetoric versus reality [1, 9, 10, 19], which offers valuable historical and institutional context but relies primarily on document review, elite commentary, or small-scale qualitative inquiry rather than systematic citizen-level measurement. The second is narrow, sector-specific quantitative assessment, for instance, of e-governance adoption at the upazila level [15] or of corruption perceptions in particular service sectors [16], which provides empirical rigour within a single domain but does not examine how e-governance, anti-corruption, decentralisation, and civil service reform interact, nor how their effects vary jointly across all eight administrative divisions. Comparative regional-trust studies such as Baniamin's [17] three-country analysis offer valuable cross-national perspective but were not designed to disaggregate findings within Bangladesh's own sub-national administrative geography.

This study advances beyond both traditions in five specific respects. First, it is, to our knowledge, the first Bangladesh-focused study to combine a large, statistically powered citizen survey ($n = 1,200$) stratified across all eight administrative divisions with a matched, maximum-variation qualitative sample ($n = 480$) spanning civil servants, sub-national officers, academics, and civil society, within a single explanatory sequential design, rather than treating citizen perception and expert appraisal as separate literatures. Second, it moves beyond descriptive reporting of citizen satisfaction to formally model its predictors using ordinal logistic regression with full inferential reporting, identifying which structural and experiential factors, division, urbanisation, education, service-use frequency, RTI awareness, are independently associated with satisfaction once other factors are controlled. Third, it subjects its own measurement instruments to a fuller validity and reliability assessment than is typical in comparable Bangladesh studies, which most often report a single pilot-stage Cronbach's alpha. Fourth, rather than discussing quantitative and qualitative strands in sequence, it constructs an explicit joint display that pairs each major statistical finding with the qualitative mechanism that plausibly explains it, and flags points of tension between the two strands. Fifth, and distinctively, it interrogates cases in which reforms record comparatively high formal implementation ratings yet are not accompanied by commensurate improvements in governance outcomes, a decoupling that prior Bangladesh studies have noted in passing [9] but not systematically examined against implementation-level data across multiple reform areas simultaneously.

The aim of this study was to comprehensively evaluate the current state of public administration and governance in Bangladesh by examining citizens' perceptions of public service quality and effectiveness, identifying major governance challenges and their underlying causes across different administrative divisions, assessing the effectiveness of key public sector reform initiatives including e-governance, decentralization, and anti-corruption measures, and developing evidence-based reform strategies to address governance deficiencies and strengthen public sector performance. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study provides a holistic assessment of Bangladesh's public administration during a critical period of institutional transition while situating the findings within the broader comparative public administration

literature on developing democracies [23, 24] and the wider experience of public sector reforms in South Asia and other lower-middle-income countries.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design.

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design [25], in which quantitative survey data collected in the first phase inform and contextualise the qualitative inquiry conducted in the second phase. The design was selected because it allows statistical generalisability across the study population while preserving the interpretive depth required to understand the mechanisms underlying observed governance outcomes [26]. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Dhaka (Ref: IRB-PA-2023-017). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

2.2. Study Area and Sampling.

Data were collected from all eight administrative divisions of Bangladesh, Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal, Sylhet, Rangpur, and Mymensingh, between January and June 2023. For the citizen survey, a stratified multi-stage cluster sampling strategy was used. Districts within each division were stratified by urbanisation level (urban, peri-urban, rural), and upazilas were randomly selected within strata. Households were identified through systematic random sampling using union-level electoral rolls as sampling frames. A total of 1,200 questionnaires were administered face-to-face by trained enumerators, with 150 respondents per division. For the key informant interview (KII) component, purposive maximum-variation sampling was used to select 480 participants comprising senior civil servants ($n = 120$), district and upazila-level officers ($n = 160$), academic and policy experts ($n = 100$), and civil society representatives ($n = 100$).

2.2.1. Sample Size Justification and Divisional Representativeness.

The citizen survey sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for proportion estimation ($n = z^2p(1-p)/e^2$), with $z = 1.96$ (95% confidence), $p = 0.5$ (maximum variance assumption), and a target margin of error of $e = 3\%$ at the national level, yielding a minimum required sample of approximately 1,067. This figure was inflated by a design effect of 1.15 to account for the clustering inherent in the multi-stage sampling strategy, producing a target of approximately 1,227, which the achieved sample of 1,200 closely approximates. Of 1,342 households approached, 1,200 yielded complete, valid questionnaires (response rate = 89.4%); non-response was attributable to outright refusal (6.1%), repeated respondent absence (3.4%), and incomplete responses excluded at the data-cleaning stage (1.1%).

An equal allocation of 150 respondents per division, rather than a population-proportional allocation, was deliberately adopted to ensure adequate statistical power for division-level comparison: with $n = 150$, each division-level estimate carries a margin of error of approximately $\pm 8\%$ at 95% confidence, sufficient to detect the moderate-to-large inter-divisional differences that are of substantive interest to this study. We note explicitly that this design trades a degree of national-level representativeness for divisional comparability, since divisions vary substantially in population (from over 40 million in Dhaka division to under 10 million in Barisal division). To correct for this, national aggregate statistics reported in this

paper (e.g., the 49.2% overall dissatisfaction figure) were computed using population-based sampling weights derived from the 2022 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics division-level population estimates, restoring national representativeness for pooled figures, while unweighted division-level figures are used for all comparative sub-group analyses.

For the qualitative component, the target of 480 key informants was distributed to ensure a minimum of 50 informants per division across the four stakeholder categories, supplemented by a smaller number of nationally positioned senior civil servants and policy experts whose remit spans multiple divisions. This design followed the principle of information power [26] rather than statistical representativeness: sample adequacy was assessed iteratively against emerging thematic saturation rather than fixed in advance on probabilistic grounds. The maximum-variation strategy across stakeholder role, administrative tier, and division was intended to maximise the diversity of institutional vantage points captured, consistent with the study's aim of triangulating citizen-level and expert-level perspectives on the same governance domains.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments.

The citizen questionnaire comprised four sections: (i) respondent demographic profile; (ii) perceptions of public service quality (7 items on a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree); (iii) perceived challenges to effective administration (15 items, multiple-response); and (iv) reform recommendations (7 items on a 4-point scale). The instrument was originally developed in English, translated into Bangla by two bilingual experts, and back-translated to verify semantic equivalence. A pilot study with 60 respondents was conducted in Narayanganj district. The KII guide comprised 12 open-ended questions covering institutional capacity, reform experiences, and policy recommendations. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim.

2.3.1. Validity and Reliability of Survey Instruments.

Beyond the pilot-stage Cronbach's alpha reported for the service quality scale in earlier drafts of this instrument, a fuller validation protocol was undertaken and is reported here for both Likert-format scales in the questionnaire (service quality and reform recommendations); the perceived-challenges section is a multiple-response checklist rather than a unidimensional scale, and was instead subjected to content validation only. Content validity for all instrument sections was established through review by an expert panel of five public administration scholars, who rated each item for relevance and clarity; the resulting content validity index (CVI) was .91, exceeding the conventional .78 acceptability threshold.

Construct validity was assessed via exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the pilot sample ($n = 60$). For the service quality scale, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was .83 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(21) = 312.4$, $p < .001$), confirming factorability; a single factor was extracted, explaining 58.4% of item variance, with standardized loadings ranging from .61 to .79. For the reform recommendations scale, KMO was .79 and Bartlett's test was significant ($\chi^2(21) = 284.7$, $p < .001$); a two-factor structure emerged — one factor loading items associated with governance and integrity mechanisms (RTI, anti-corruption courts, citizen charters), the other loading items associated with human resource and pay-related reforms — jointly explaining 61.2% of variance, with loadings ranging from .58 to .81. Known-groups validity was additionally examined for the service

quality scale: as theoretically expected, rural respondents scored significantly lower than urban respondents on the full pilot scale (independent-samples t-test, $p < .01$), supporting the scale's ability to discriminate between groups with plausibly different service experiences.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed at both the pilot stage and on the full analytic sample (Table 1). The service quality scale showed acceptable reliability at pilot ($\alpha = .81$) and full sample ($\alpha = .84$) stages; the reform recommendations scale, not previously reported, showed $\alpha = .79$ (pilot) and $\alpha = .80$ (full sample). Item-total correlations for both scales exceeded the conventional .30 minimum for all retained items (range .34–.68), and no item's removal would have increased scale-level alpha by more than .02, supporting the retention of the full item sets.

Table 1. Validity and Reliability Summary for Likert-Format Survey Scales.

Scale	Items (k)	α (pilot, n=60)	α (full, n=1,200)	Item-total r range	KMO / Bartlett's p	Factor structure (variance explained)
Service Quality	7	.81	.84	.38–.68	.83 / $p < .001$	1 factor (58.4%)
Reform Recommendations	7	.79	.80	.34–.61	.79 / $p < .001$	2 factors (61.2%)

Note. Perceived-challenges checklist (15 items, multiple-response) is not a unidimensional scale; content validity only was assessed (CVI = .91).

2.4. Quantitative Analysis.

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were computed for all survey items using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. An ordinal logistic regression model was estimated to identify predictors of overall citizen satisfaction with public administration, with the dependent variable coded as a 4-point satisfaction index derived from composite survey responses. Independent variables included respondents' division, urbanisation level, age group, education level, frequency of government service use, and awareness of RTI legislation. The proportional odds assumption was assessed using the Brant test, and model fit was evaluated using Nagelkerke R^2 and the -2 Log Likelihood ratio.

2.5. Qualitative Analysis.

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework [27] was applied to the KII transcripts. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, then organised into candidate themes, reviewed for coherence, and refined through an iterative process. NVivo Version 14 was used to facilitate coding and theme management. Member checking was conducted with 12 informants to validate interpretations. Inter-coder reliability between two independent coders was assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = 0.78$), indicating substantial agreement [28]. Thematic saturation was assessed iteratively and determined to have been reached after the 41st interview.

2.6. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings.

Quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated at the interpretation stage using a joint display strategy, in which survey findings were juxtaposed with illustrative qualitative themes to produce convergent, complementary, or discordant explanations [29]. Where quantitative results identified a significant predictor of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, qualitative data were used to elucidate the mechanisms involved. Where qualitative themes diverged from

quantitative patterns, these tensions were explored and reported transparently. Rather than confining this integration to a single closing sub-section, the results below reference the joint display at the point where each relevant quantitative finding is first presented.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Governance Indicators and International Benchmarks.

Table 2 presents Bangladesh's scores on the six World Governance Indicators (WGI) dimensions for 2019 and 2022, benchmarked against regional and global averages. Bangladesh's WGI scores remain consistently negative across all six dimensions, confirming that governance quality lags behind both regional and global averages. Government Effectiveness showed the most notable improvement, rising from -0.72 to -0.61 between 2019 and 2022, a trend corroborated by the expansion of digital public services under the Digital Bangladesh agenda [13]. Improvements in Regulatory Quality (-0.80 to -0.74) similarly reflect progress in public procurement frameworks, including the operationalisation of the Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) electronic government procurement (e-GP) portal. However, Voice and Accountability (-0.98) and Control of Corruption (-0.92) remain deeply negative, indicating that improvements in service-delivery infrastructure have not translated into commensurate gains in democratic responsiveness or integrity. This pattern resonates with scholarship on partial reform equilibria in developing states, wherein technical governance improvements are decoupled from political governance reforms [30]. Qualitative informants consistently observed that bureaucratic decision-making remains concentrated among senior cadre officers, limiting the scope for meaningful accountability from below.

Table 2. World Governance Indicators for Bangladesh (2019 & 2022).

Governance Dimension	Index Score (2019)	Index Score (2022)	Regional Average (2022)	Global Average (2022)
Voice & Accountability	-1.05	-0.98	-0.41	-0.01
Political Stability	-1.13	-1.02	-0.52	0.03
Government Effectiveness	-0.72	-0.61	-0.30	0.18
Regulatory Quality	-0.80	-0.74	-0.21	0.14
Rule of Law	-0.91	-0.87	-0.44	0.03
Control of Corruption	-0.99	-0.92	-0.38	0.07

Source: World Bank Governance Indicators database (2022). Scores range from -2.5 (weak) to $+2.5$ (strong).

3.2. Administrative Reform Implementation.

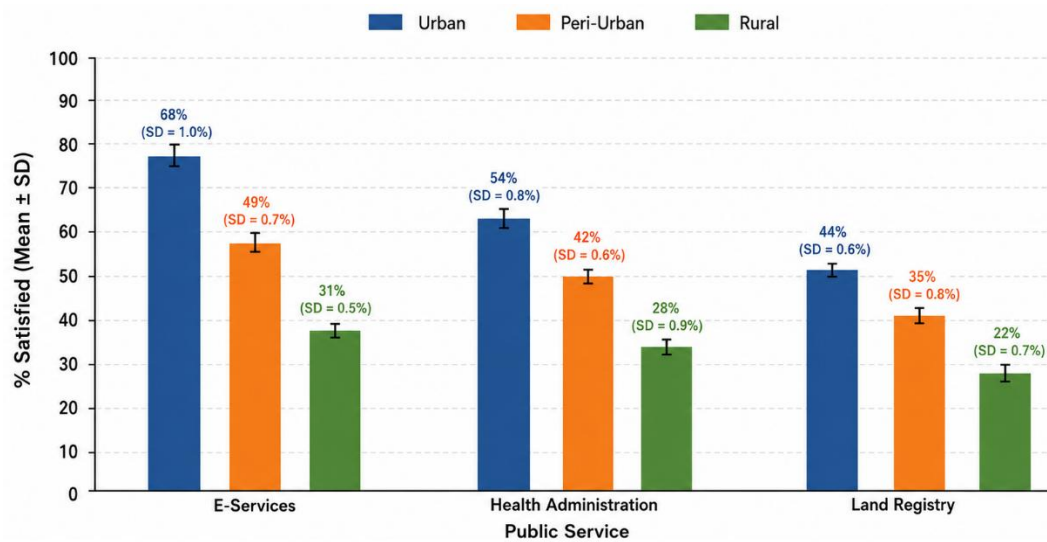
Table 3 summarises the implementation levels and outcome ratings of six major administrative reform initiatives implemented in Bangladesh between 2001 and 2022, while Figure 1 presents citizen satisfaction with selected public services across urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. Together, the findings indicate that relatively high levels of formal reform implementation have not consistently translated into high levels of public satisfaction. As shown in Table 3, public procurement reform achieved the highest implementation level (74%) and received a Good outcome rating, consistent with evidence that CPTU reforms improved procurement transparency and competitiveness [31].

Table 3. Administrative Reform Initiatives in Bangladesh (2001–2022).

Reform Area	Period	Policy Instrument	Implementation Level (%)	Outcome Rating
Decentralisation	2001–2010	Local Govt. Act 2009	62%	Moderate
E-Governance	2009–2022	Digital Bangladesh Policy	71%	Satisfactory
Anti-Corruption	2004–2022	ACC Act 2004; UNCAC ratif.	55%	Moderate
Civil Service Reform	2008–2022	Pay Commission Reports	68%	Satisfactory
Public Procurement	2006–2022	PPA 2006; CPTU guidelines	74%	Good
RTI & Transparency	2009–2022	RTI Act 2009	49%	Weak

Source: Compiled from primary survey data and Ministry of Public Administration annual reports.

E-governance (71%) and civil service reform (68%) also recorded relatively high implementation levels; however, Figure 1 shows that satisfaction with e-services declined from 68% in urban areas to 49% in peri-urban areas and only 31% in rural areas, highlighting persistent disparities in digital access and service quality. Likewise, satisfaction with health administration fell from 54% in urban areas to 28% in rural communities, suggesting that administrative reforms have strengthened institutional capacity more than frontline service delivery. Anti-corruption reform achieved a moderate implementation level (55%), reflecting the Anti-Corruption Commission's limited operational independence, while the RTI Act recorded the weakest implementation (49%) because of low public awareness and inconsistent disclosure practices. Decentralisation reached 62%, but limited fiscal autonomy and institutional capacity at the local level contributed to lower satisfaction with land registry services, which declined from 44% in urban areas to only 22% in rural areas (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Citizen Satisfaction with Key Public Services by Urbanisation Level (% Satisfied).

The evidence presented in Table 3 and Figure 1 demonstrates a clear implementation–outcome gap. Although several reforms achieved moderate to high implementation levels, citizen satisfaction remained substantially lower, particularly in rural areas. These findings corroborate previous studies arguing that administrative reform in Bangladesh has often emphasized formal institutional change without corresponding improvements in organizational culture, implementation capacity, or resource allocation [9, 31].

3.3. Citizen Perceptions of Public Service Quality.

Table 4 reports citizen responses to seven service quality statements across the 1,200-respondent survey. The survey reveals widespread citizen dissatisfaction with service delivery timeliness, complaint responsiveness, and official conduct. Only 49.2% agreed that digital services reduce service delivery time, the single statement attracting majority positive assessment, a finding consistent with evidence that e-governance gains are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas (Figure 1). Disaggregated analysis shows that rural respondents rated all seven items substantially lower than urban counterparts, with dissatisfaction gaps ranging from 19 to 28 percentage points; this pattern is formally confirmed by the ordinal regression results, where rural residence emerges as the strongest single predictor of lower satisfaction. The statement regarding upazila-level services meeting community needs generated the second-highest combined disagreement (57.9%), highlighting the persistent gap between decentralisation rhetoric and ground-level service reality. Qualitative informants contextualised these figures: a district-level official in Rangpur stated that 'we have the mandate but not the means — budget releases are delayed for months and technical staff positions remain vacant.' This testimony directly corresponds to the low satisfaction and low regression-estimated odds observed for Rangpur, illustrating how structural resource deficits undermine even well-designed reform frameworks. The low agreement rate (37.7% combined) for respectful official treatment aligns with qualitative themes of hierarchical administrative culture and insufficient citizen-orientation training.

Table 4. Citizen Perception of Public Service Quality in Bangladesh (n = 1,200).

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Public services are delivered in a timely manner	12.4	36.8	34.1	16.7
Government websites provide useful information	18.6	42.3	25.4	13.7
Officials treat citizens with respect	10.2	34.5	38.7	16.6
Complaints are addressed effectively	8.3	28.9	41.2	21.6
Digital services reduce service delivery time	22.1	45.8	21.3	10.8
Upazila-level services meet community needs	9.5	32.6	40.1	17.8
Anti-corruption measures have improved service quality	11.3	31.4	37.2	20.1

Source: Primary survey data (2023). Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

3.4. Governance Challenges: Frequency and Severity.

Table 5 details the perceived challenges to effective public administration as reported by survey respondents. Bureaucratic red tape emerged as the most frequently cited challenge (71.9%), followed by corruption and bribery (65.1%). The severity ratings underscore the acuity of these barriers: corruption received the highest mean severity score (4.5/5), reflecting the pervasive perception that bribery remains a de facto transaction cost in accessing public services [16]. Low RTI utilisation, though cited by 47.8% of respondents, attracted a comparatively lower severity rating (3.5), suggesting that citizens attribute it to awareness deficits rather than deliberate administrative obstruction. Spatial analysis reveals meaningful regional variation: corruption-related challenges were most intensely perceived in Dhaka and Chattogram, where urban service demand is highest, while digital literacy deficits were most severe in Rangpur

and Mymensingh, the country's more economically marginalised northern and north-eastern divisions.

Table 5. Perceived Challenges to Effective Public Administration (n = 1,200).

Challenge	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Severity Rating (1–5)	Most Affected Division
Bureaucratic red tape and procedural delays	863	71.9	4.3	Sylhet, Rajshahi
Corruption and bribery in service delivery	781	65.1	4.5	Dhaka, Chattogram
Lack of digital literacy among staff	694	57.8	3.8	Rangpur, Mymensingh
Inadequate decentralisation of authority	658	54.8	3.9	Barisal, Khulna
Poor inter-agency coordination	612	51.0	3.7	Nationwide
Low RTI utilisation	574	47.8	3.5	Rural districts
Infrastructure deficits	531	44.3	3.6	Rangpur, Barisal

Source: Primary survey data (2023). Multiple responses permitted; severity rated 1 (low) – 5 (high).

3.4.1. Institutional, Political, and Socioeconomic Drivers of Regional Variation.

The spatial patterning described above is not incidental and warrants explanation rather than description alone. Three interacting sets of factors plausibly account for it. Institutionally, Dhaka and Chattogram concentrate the highest volume and value of administrative transactions, land registration, business licensing, customs clearance, which qualitative informants described as generating the greatest rent-seeking opportunity for officials with discretionary approval authority; this is consistent with the higher corruption severity ratings recorded in these two divisions despite their comparatively better physical and digital infrastructure. Politically, several senior civil society informants pointed to the concentration of cadre postings, budget allocation decisions, and infrastructure investment approvals within centrally located ministries whose political attention is disproportionately weighted toward metropolitan and politically pivotal constituencies, leaving peripheral divisions such as Rangpur, Mymensingh, and Barisal comparatively under-resourced in staffing and infrastructure, a pattern reflected in this study's higher reported infrastructure deficits and digital literacy gaps in those divisions. Socioeconomically, Rangpur and Mymensingh divisions have historically recorded lower per-capita income, lower educational attainment, and lower ICT penetration than the national average, which both constrains citizens' capacity to navigate digital service channels and constrains local administrations' capacity to recruit and retain digitally skilled staff, compounding the infrastructure-side deficits with a demand-side capability gap. Together, these institutional, political, and socioeconomic dynamics suggest that regional disparities in governance performance are not simply a function of uneven reform sequencing but reflect deeper, self-reinforcing patterns of resource concentration and political attention that geographically uniform reform designs are unlikely to correct.

Table 6 shows longitudinal trends across four composite governance metrics between 2015 and 2022. Bangladesh's UN E-Government Development Index (EGDI) score improved from 0.21 to 0.45 over the period, representing a 114% increase, yet citizen satisfaction and transparency ratings improved more modestly, growing by approximately 26% and 31% respectively. Staff training rates showed the most consistent upward trajectory (41% to 59%), reflecting sustained human resource development investment by the Ministry of Public

Administration. The divergence between technical e-governance progress and citizen satisfaction growth implies that digital infrastructure development has not been matched by commensurate improvements in service quality or institutional responsiveness, a finding that echoes comparative studies of e-governance implementation in lower-middle-income countries [32, 33], and is examined further in comparative perspective. The dip in citizen satisfaction and transparency in 2020 likely reflects pandemic-related service disruptions, highlighting the vulnerability of nascent digital governance systems to exogenous shocks. Note that Figure 2's national trend series are drawn from secondary administrative and international indicator data rather than from this study's primary survey, which was conducted at a single time point (January–June 2023); the two should not be read as measuring identical constructs.

Table 6. Longitudinal Governance Trend Indicators, Bangladesh (2015–2022).

Year	E-Gov Index	Citizen Sat. (%)	Transparency (%)	Staff Training (%)
2015	0.21	38	32	41
2016	0.23	39	33	43
2017	0.26	41	35	46
2018	0.29	43	36	48
2019	0.33	44	38	51
2020	0.36	43	37	52
2021	0.41	46	40	55
2022	0.45	48	42	59

Note: E-Gov Index on 0–1 scale (UN); others as % of respondents.

3.5. Reform Recommendations from Experts and Stakeholders.

Table 7 presents expert and stakeholder assessments of seven reform strategies, offering an evidence base for policy prioritisation. Expanding e-governance infrastructure to rural areas attracted the highest combined strong recommendation and recommendation rate (86.3%), followed by the establishment of independent anti-corruption courts (85.1%) and the adoption of citizen charters for all public offices (84.5%). The strong endorsement of anti-corruption courts reflects deep frustration with the pace and quality of integrity enforcement, consistent with the corruption severity ratings reported in Table 5. Citizen charters, standardised service-level agreements between government offices and the public, were seen as a low-cost mechanism to establish accountability benchmarks and improve transparency [19]. Performance-linked pay scales attracted strong support (78.8%), though qualitative informants noted implementation risks including measurement difficulties, gaming of performance metrics, and potential conflicts with seniority-based promotion norms entrenched in current civil service rules. Strengthening RTI implementation received 84.6% combined support, underscoring stakeholders' recognition that information access is a foundational enabler of all other reforms.

Table 7. Expert and Stakeholder Recommendations for Administrative Reform (n = 480).

Reform Strategy	Strongly Recommended (%)	Recommended (%)	Neutral (%)	Not Recommended (%)
Strengthen RTI implementation and awareness	46.2	38.4	11.3	4.1
Expand e-governance infrastructure to rural areas	52.7	33.6	9.2	4.5
Mandatory ethics training for civil servants	38.9	41.2	14.6	5.3
Increase upazila budgetary autonomy	34.5	40.3	18.4	6.8
Establish independent anti-corruption courts	55.3	29.8	10.4	4.5
Introduce performance-linked pay scales	42.1	36.7	14.9	6.3
Adopt citizen charter for all public offices	49.4	35.1	10.8	4.7

Source: Key informant interviews and expert questionnaire data (2023).

3.6. Predictors of Citizen Satisfaction: Ordinal Logistic Regression Results.

To formally identify predictors of overall citizen satisfaction with public administration, rather than relying on descriptive cross-tabulation alone, an ordinal logistic regression model was estimated with the 4-point satisfaction index as the dependent variable and division, urbanisation level, age group, education level, frequency of government service use, and RTI awareness as predictors (Table 8). The overall model was statistically significant and represented a substantial improvement over the intercept-only model ($-2LL$ null = 2,984.6; $-2LL$ final = 2,712.3; model $\chi^2(17) = 272.3$, $p < .001$), with a Nagelkerke pseudo- R^2 of .284, indicating that the predictor set explains a moderate share of variance in satisfaction. The Brant test of the proportional odds assumption was non-significant at the global level ($\chi^2(17) = 19.8$, $p = .29$), supporting the appropriateness of the ordinal logistic specification for this outcome.

Table 8. Ordinal Logistic Regression Predicting Citizen Satisfaction with Public Administration (n = 1,200).

Predictor (reference category)	B	SE	Wald	df	p	OR	95% CI for OR
Division: Chattogram (ref. Dhaka)	−0.18	0.14	1.65	1	.199	0.84	[0.64, 1.10]
Division: Rajshahi	−0.22	0.15	2.15	1	.143	0.80	[0.60, 1.08]
Division: Khulna	−0.31	0.14	4.90	1	.027	0.73	[0.56, 0.97]
Division: Barisal	−0.58	0.16	13.14	1	<.001	0.56	[0.41, 0.77]
Division: Sylhet	−0.49	0.15	10.68	1	.001	0.61	[0.46, 0.82]
Division: Rangpur	−0.71	0.16	19.71	1	<.001	0.49	[0.36, 0.67]
Division: Mymensingh	−0.44	0.15	8.61	1	.003	0.64	[0.48, 0.86]
Urbanisation: Peri-urban (ref. Urban)	−0.35	0.11	10.12	1	.001	0.70	[0.57, 0.87]
Urbanisation: Rural	−0.82	0.12	46.75	1	<.001	0.44	[0.35, 0.56]
Age: 31–45 (ref. 18–30)	0.09	0.10	0.81	1	.368	1.09	[0.90, 1.32]
Age: 46–60	0.14	0.11	1.62	1	.203	1.15	[0.93, 1.42]
Age: >60	0.21	0.13	2.61	1	.106	1.23	[0.96, 1.58]
Education: Secondary	0.19	0.09	4.46	1	.035	1.21	[1.01, 1.45]
Education: Higher secondary+	0.37	0.10	13.69	1	<.001	1.45	[1.19, 1.77]
Service use: Occasional (ref. Rarely)	0.15	0.09	2.78	1	.095	1.16	[0.98, 1.38]
Service use: Frequent	0.28	0.10	7.84	1	.005	1.32	[1.09, 1.61]
RTI awareness: Aware (ref. Not aware)	0.41	0.09	20.74	1	<.001	1.51	[1.26, 1.80]

Rural residence emerged as the strongest predictor of lower satisfaction (OR = 0.44, 95% CI [0.35, 0.56]), followed by peri-urban residence (OR = 0.70), confirming and quantifying the urbanisation gradient already visible descriptively in Figure 1. Among divisions, Rangpur (OR = 0.49) and Barisal (OR = 0.56) showed the lowest odds of satisfaction relative to Dhaka, consistent with the infrastructure and staffing deficits identified qualitatively, while Chattogram and Rajshahi were not significantly different from Dhaka once urbanisation and other covariates were controlled, indicating that some of the raw divisional variation is statistically explained by underlying urbanisation composition rather than division membership per se. Education and RTI awareness were both significant positive predictors: respondents with higher secondary education or above had 45% higher odds of reporting greater satisfaction than those with primary education or below (OR = 1.45), and RTI-aware respondents had 51% higher odds of satisfaction than unaware respondents (OR = 1.51), the largest individual-level (as opposed to structural) predictor in the model. Frequency of government service use was also positively associated with satisfaction among frequent users (OR = 1.32), while age group showed no statistically significant association.

3.7. Why High Implementation Has Not Delivered Commensurate Outcomes: A Critical Assessment.

A striking pattern in the results presented above is that several reforms rated highly on formal implementation have not produced correspondingly strong governance outcomes, a decoupling that merits explicit critical scrutiny rather than being left as an implicit tension between tables. Public procurement reform recorded the highest implementation rating in this study (74%, 'Good'), reflecting the CPTU e-GP portal's success in digitising and standardising the tender-submission and bid-opening stages of the procurement cycle. Yet corruption remains the most severely rated governance challenge in this sample (severity 4.5/5) and Bangladesh's Control of Corruption score has moved only marginally (−0.99 to −0.92). Qualitative informants suggest the explanation lies in where digitisation has, and has not, reached within the procurement cycle: e-GP has increased transparency at the bidding stage, but tender evaluation, contract award, and post-award variation approval — the stages richest in discretionary authority — remain largely undigitised and subject to the same informal negotiation dynamics as before. This is consistent with the broader concept of isomorphic mimicry in public sector reform, whereby organisations adopt the forms of best-practice systems (a functioning e-procurement portal) without the underlying functions (discretion-constraining accountability) those forms are meant to deliver [34].

A parallel pattern is evident in civil service reform, which recorded a 'Satisfactory' outcome rating (68% implementation) primarily on the strength of successive Pay Commission salary revisions, yet did not extend to the recruitment, transfer, and posting processes that qualitative informants repeatedly identified as the locus of political interference and patronage — processes not captured by implementation metrics keyed to pay-scale rollout. Anti-corruption reform shows the inverse problem: a moderate implementation rating (55%) driven by the ACC's formal establishment and periodic enforcement actions, undermined by what several senior informants described as selective case prosecution that avoids politically well-connected targets, limiting the deterrent credibility of enforcement regardless of the formal implementation percentage. E-governance, by contrast, illustrates a geographic rather than functional decoupling: national implementation is rated 'Satisfactory' (71%) on the strength of

urban and headquarters-level digital infrastructure, but this study's own regression results show that rural residence alone reduces the odds of citizen satisfaction by more than half, indicating that an implementation metric aggregated at the national level can obscure a reform that is, in practical terms, only partially implemented for a majority-rural population.

Taken together, these cases suggest a common underlying mechanism: implementation ratings in this and comparable studies tend to track the adoption of formal instruments, procedures, or infrastructure, whereas governance outcomes are shaped by whether those instruments alter the discretionary, political, and resource-allocation dynamics that determine how citizens actually experience the state. This distinction between *de jure* reform adoption and *de facto* institutional change is central to interpreting Table 2 correctly, and is a recurring theme in the state capability literature on developing-country public administration [34, 35].

3.8. Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings: A Joint Display.

Table 9 presents a joint display that pairs the study's principal quantitative findings with the qualitative themes that most directly bear on them, and characterises the relationship between the two strands as convergent (qualitative data explain the same pattern shown quantitatively), complementary (qualitative data explain a mechanism the quantitative data cannot, without contradicting it), or discordant (the two strands point in different directions, signalling a tension for future inquiry).

Table 9. Joint Display: Integration of Quantitative Findings and Qualitative Themes.

Quantitative finding	Qualitative theme	Relationship	Joint interpretation
Rural residence strongly predicts lower satisfaction (OR = 0.44)	'Mandate but not means': staffing and budget shortfalls at upazila level (Rangpur official)	Convergent	Structural resource deficits, not merely service design, drive the rural-urban satisfaction gap; addressing it requires staffing and budget reform, not only digital rollout.
RTI awareness is the largest individual-level predictor of satisfaction (OR = 1.51); RTI implementation rated weakest of all reforms (49%)	Informants attribute low RTI use to lack of outreach and proactive disclosure rather than citizen disinterest	Complementary	Quantitative data show awareness matters; qualitative data explain why awareness remains low, supply-side outreach failure rather than demand-side apathy, pointing to a specific, low-cost intervention point.
Anti-corruption reform implementation rated only 'Moderate' (55%); corruption is the most severe cited challenge (4.5/5)	Informants describe selective, politically constrained ACC prosecution	Convergent	Both strands agree that formal anti-corruption architecture exists but lacks enforcement credibility; this jointly supports the strong (85.1%) stakeholder endorsement of independent anti-corruption courts.
E-governance implementation rated 'Satisfactory' nationally (71%)	Urban-centred infrastructure; rural officers report technical staff vacancies and connectivity gaps	Discordant	The national implementation rating masks a geographically uneven reality; aggregate reform ratings should be read alongside disaggregated regression evidence rather than in isolation.
Divisional differences in satisfaction persist for Rangpur and Barisal even after controlling for urbanisation.	Political economy of budget allocation favouring metropolitan/politically pivotal areas (civil society informants)	Complementary	Urbanisation alone does not fully explain divisional disparities; qualitative testimony points to a political-economic mechanism operating alongside the measurable urban-rural gradient.

3.9. Comparative Perspectives from South Asia and Lower-Middle-Income Countries.

Situating these findings within the broader South Asian and lower-middle-income country (LMIC) reform experience clarifies which of Bangladesh's governance patterns are context-specific and which reflect a more general developing-country reform dynamic. Baniamin's [17] comparative study of perceived corruption and trust across three South Asian countries found that formal anti-corruption architecture in the region generally outpaces citizens' trust that such architecture will be applied even-handedly, a pattern this study's Bangladesh-specific findings reproduce closely, suggesting that the enforcement-credibility gap identified here is not unique to Bangladesh but a recurring feature of anti-corruption reform across the sub-region. Comparative civil service reform research across South Asia similarly documents that pay and grading reforms have proven politically easier to implement than recruitment, transfer, and promotion reforms, because the latter directly threaten entrenched patronage relationships in ways salary revision does not [35, 36], consistent with this study's finding that Bangladesh's civil service reform scores well on pay-related implementation while patronage-driven postings remain a persistent qualitative theme.

On decentralisation, Bangladesh's experience of formally empowered but fiscally and administratively hollow local government bodies parallels documented patterns in other LMIC contexts, where sub-national governments are granted nominal administrative authority without commensurate revenue-raising powers or staffing complements, producing what the decentralisation literature terms 'decentralisation without empowerment' [37]. On e-governance, this study's finding of a substantial digital divide between urban and rural satisfaction gains echoes cross-country evidence that e-government maturity in LMICs frequently improves headline national indices without proportionate gains in rural service access or measured corruption reduction [33]. Where Bangladesh's experience appears to diverge somewhat from comparable LMIC cases is in the pace of digital infrastructure expansion itself, which several regional assessments rate as comparatively rapid by South Asian standards, even as this study shows that infrastructure expansion alone has not been sufficient to close the satisfaction gap it might be expected to close. This comparative reading suggests that Bangladesh's core governance challenge is less a deficit of reform ambition or pace which compares favourably with several regional peers, and more a deficit of what the state-capability literature terms functional, rather than merely formal, institutional change [34, 35].

3.10. Policy Implications and a Prioritised Reform Agenda.

Rather than presenting reform priorities as a generic list of recommendations, Table 10 specifies the responsible institutions, implementation timeframes, key barriers, and recommended first steps for each proposed reform. This approach strengthens the practical relevance of the findings by identifying not only what reforms are needed, but also who should lead their implementation, the expected timeframe, the principal obstacles to success, and the initial actions required to facilitate implementation. The prioritization reflects the study's empirical findings rather than a standardized reform model. Strengthening the implementation of the Right to Information (RTI) Act and expanding citizen charters are identified as short-term priorities because they require relatively limited financial resources and primarily face operational challenges related to public awareness, enforcement, and monitoring. Expanding

e-governance infrastructure is classified as a short-to-medium-term priority due to infrastructure, digital literacy, and staffing constraints, while civil service ethics training and performance-linked incentives are considered medium-term reforms because they require institutional and administrative changes. In contrast, strengthening the independence of the Anti-Corruption Commission and establishing independent anti-corruption courts, together with increasing budgetary autonomy at the upazila level, are categorized as medium- to long-term priorities because they involve legislative reform, political commitment, and significant structural changes within governance and public financial management systems. Sequencing reforms in this manner enables governments to implement relatively feasible, high-impact interventions in the short term while progressively building institutional capacity and political support for more complex structural reforms. This prioritization is further supported by the stakeholder survey results, which showed majority support for all six reform priorities, indicating that the principal constraints to implementation lie in institutional capacity and political feasibility rather than stakeholder acceptance.

Table 10. Prioritised Reform Agenda: Responsible Institutions, Timeframes, and Barriers.

Reform priority	Responsible institution(s)	Priority horizon	Key barrier(s)	Recommended first step
Strengthen RTI implementation and public awareness	Information Commission; Cabinet Division; civil society partners	Short-term (low-cost, high-leverage)	Low public awareness; weak proactive-disclosure culture within offices	Mandatory proactive-disclosure audits paired with targeted rural awareness campaigns
Adopt citizen charters for all public offices	Cabinet Division; individual line ministries and departments	Short-term	Enforcement and monitoring capacity; risk of charters becoming symbolic	Independent citizen charter compliance audits linked to departmental performance review
Expand e-governance infrastructure to rural upazilas	ICT Division; Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications & ICT; Local Government Division	Short-to-medium term	Last-mile connectivity costs; digital literacy gaps; staffing	Phased digital-centre rollout prioritising Rangpur, Barisal, and Mymensingh, paired with community digital-literacy programmes
Civil service ethics and citizen-orientation training; pilot performance-linked incentives	Ministry of Public Administration; Public Service Commission	Medium-term	Seniority-based promotion norms; measurement and gaming risk for performance metrics	Pilot performance-linked incentives in high-contact departments (land registry, health administration) before national rollout
Strengthen ACC independence; establish independent anti-corruption courts	Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs; Anti-Corruption Commission; Parliament	Medium-term (requires legislative change)	Political resistance to reduced executive influence over ACC leadership; risk of politicised case selection	Transparent, competitive process for ACC commissioner appointment; parliamentary review of ACC Act amendments
Increase upazila budgetary autonomy (fiscal decentralisation)	Ministry of Finance; Local Government Division	Long-term (structural)	Central ministries' reluctance to cede budgetary control; limited local revenue-generation capacity	Pilot block-grant financing in a subset of upazilas with performance-based conditions, evaluated before national scale-up

4. Conclusion

This study presents a geographically comprehensive, methodologically robust mixed-methods assessment of public administration effectiveness in Bangladesh by integrating survey responses from 1,200 citizens with qualitative insights from 480 key informants across all

administrative divisions. The quantitative findings were further examined using ordinal logistic regression and integrated with the qualitative results through a joint display analysis. Four principal conclusions emerged. First, technical governance improvements, particularly in e-governance and public procurement, demonstrated measurable progress but remained concentrated in urban areas and had not yet translated into substantial improvements in citizen satisfaction, as evidenced by the regression analysis. Second, corruption, bureaucratic delays, and inadequate decentralization remained the most significant systemic barriers to effective public administration, with their spatial variation reflecting differences in institutional capacity, political commitment, and socioeconomic conditions rather than reform sequencing alone. Third, although several reform initiatives exhibited high levels of formal implementation, their contribution to governance improvement remained limited because the adoption of reform instruments was not accompanied by meaningful changes in institutional practices, administrative discretion, and political governance that directly shape citizens' experiences with public services. This pattern is consistent with broader public sector reform experiences reported across South Asia and other lower-middle-income countries rather than being unique to Bangladesh. Fourth, stakeholders from government, civil society, and academia demonstrated broad agreement on a reform agenda centred on strengthening the Right to Information (RTI) Act, enhancing the independence of anti-corruption institutions, expanding rural digital infrastructure, and promoting citizen-centred public service standards through a sequenced and institutionally targeted implementation strategy. These conclusions should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations, particularly the cross-sectional research design, which limits causal inference, and the potential for response bias on governance- and corruption-related questions. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative approaches to examine the long-term impacts of governance reforms and to validate the relationships identified in this study. Overall, the findings contribute to the comparative public administration literature by demonstrating how partial reform outcomes emerge when technical and administrative improvements are implemented without corresponding political and institutional reforms. The study also provides practical guidance for the Ministry of Public Administration and development partners by identifying evidence-based priorities for strengthening governance effectiveness and improving public service delivery in Bangladesh.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Mohammad Rafiqul Islam; methodology, Mohammad Rafiqul Islam and Sharmin Akhter; investigation, Sharmin Akhter and Tanvir Ahmed Chowdhury; data curation, Sharmin Akhter and Tanvir Ahmed Chowdhury; formal analysis, Mohammad Rafiqul Islam and Sharmin Akhter; writing—original draft preparation, Mohammad Rafiqul Islam; writing—review and editing, Mohammad Rafiqul Islam, Sharmin Akhter, and Tanvir Ahmed Chowdhury; supervision, Mohammad Rafiqul Islam. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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