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IFES Bangladesh: Election Commission Secretariat

Election Commission Secretariat Act, 2009

In 2009, Parliament passed a law to separate the Election Commission Secretariat from the government. Before enacting this act, the Election Commission Secretariat was under the prime minister's office. According to this act, the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) now has control over its Secretariat.¹

The Secretary

The BEC has its own Secretariat in Dhaka, currently headed by Secretary Helal Uddin Ahmed, a senior civil servant. The BEC can request the government to withdraw the secretary if they are not satisfied with her or his work.

The Structure of the Secretariat²

The Secretariat has several wings: administration, election operations-1, election operations-2, law, information technology and national identity registration. Aside from the information technology wing, the other five wings are headed by an additional/joint secretary or a director general with the rank of an additional/joint secretary I. Each wing has several branches headed by a deputy secretary/director. Each branch has several sections headed by a senior assistant secretary/assistant secretary/deputy director/assistant director. The Secretariat also has a number of support staff.

The BEC has an Electoral Training Institute (ETI) located in Dhaka, which is headed by a director general and has two directors and support staff. The ETI plans and conducts staff and election-related training, such as training for returning officers, judicial officers, police officers and polling personnel.

Under the Secretariat's administration wing, 10 Regional Electoral Offices are located in Chattagram, Cumilla, Sylhet, Dhaka, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Barishal, Rajshahi, Khulna and Rangpur. The head of the office is the regional electoral officer and each office has two additional regional electoral officers and other support staff.

Under the Regional Electoral Offices, 64 District Election Offices are located in the district headquarters and the head of the office is the district election officer. The 19 largest districts are headed by a senior district election officer. Each office has one or two election officers, depending upon the size of the district, and other support staff.

Under the 64 District Election Offices, more than 500 Upazila (sub-district)/Thana (police station)³ Election Offices are located in the Upazila/Thana headquarters, and the head of office is called an Upazila/Thana election officer. Each Upazila/Thana Election Office has one support staff member.

Administration of Elections

The administration of elections and related tasks is subject to overall superintendence, direction and control of the BEC, through the secretary. The BEC determines the schedule for conducting general elections, by-elections, and local government elections, and determines the location of polling stations and the assignment of voters to polling stations.

1 Election Commission Secretariat Act, 2009.

2 Information based on interviews with BEC staff in 2016 and from http://www.ecs.gov.bd/bec/public/files/1/office_reorganize.pdf

3 In rural areas, the administrative unit is called an "upazila," and in urban areas, the administrative unit is called a "thana."

The BEC normally appoints the deputy commissioners, senior civil servants who serve as the administrative head of each district, as returning officers for parliamentary elections. In most cases, the BEC appoints their own officers as returning officers for local government elections. The BEC also hires approximately 600,000 temporary election workers to administer parliamentary elections.

Budget and Expenditures

Based on a proposal prepared by the BEC, the government allocates a budget to the BEC through the Ministry of Finance.⁴ The BEC does not need approval from the government for spending funds and is the final authority for approving expenditures.⁵

Administrative Autonomy

The BEC currently has around 3,000 staff positions. All the field offices have their own buildings, and construction of BEC and ETI buildings in Dhaka was recently completed.

Like other civil service officers, the BEC recruits its officers through the Public Service Commission. The BEC has the power to promote its staff but does not have the power to create or abolish existing posts. New posts are created by the Ministry of Public Administration with the consent of the Ministry of Finance and Cabinet Division. For this purpose, the BEC established a committee under the chairmanship of the chief election commissioner comprised of representatives from the Public Administration and Finance Ministries to recommend the creation of new BEC posts. Their recommendations are then approved by the government. The same procedure is followed to upgrade a post.

4 Election Commission Secretariat Act, 2009, Section 16.

5 Ibid., Section 17.