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# Building Trust amidst Corruption in Bangladesh

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**ABSTRACT** *Bangladesh's parliamentary elections in December 2008 witnessed a landslide victory for an alliance led by Sheikh Hasina's Awami League following two years of a caretaker government backed by the military. The country's beleaguered population faced the twin challenges of natural disasters and pervasive poverty. One of the key factors influencing trust in the government of Bangladesh is stability, which has been in short supply because of confrontational politics between the two largest parties and accompanying violence. This paper considers efforts to rebuild trust by examining the work of a social movement, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), at two levels: strengthening the pillars of the national integrity system (with a specific focus on parliament), and holding public bodies to account for corrupt practice in delivering key services. People's experiences of services delivered through schools, hospitals and local government have resulted in a complete collapse in trust in public bodies. The commitment of the democratically elected government to tackle corruption at all levels will be a key determinant of whether trust and stability can emerge from the volatility of Bangladesh's politics.*

**KEY WORDS:** Bangladesh, corruption, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), trust, National Integrity System, voice, accountability

## Introduction

The People's Republic of Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, became an independent state after the civil war of 1971 and joined the Commonwealth in 1972. It is a densely populated South Asian country with some 142 million people who commonly experience natural disasters in the form of floods and cyclones in the flat land and delta of rivers on the Bay of Bengal. Poverty is widespread with GDP per head estimated at just \$444 in 2007, or almost half the population living on less than one dollar per day (Oxford Economics, 2008). Since independence, Bangladesh has experienced political turbulence and spent 15 years under military rule until democracy was restored in 1991. Continuing unrest and violence have been a major impediment to economic growth set alongside the increasing strength of Islamic fundamentalism.

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Politics have been dominated and polarised by the two largest political parties, long-time rivals the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The October 2001 elections produced a BNP victory in the form of a four-party alliance. The opposition party, Awami League, refused to accept the result and from 2001–2006 their attendance at parliament was sporadic, claiming discrimination by the BNP speaker. Violence and political strikes/hartals have accompanied the political turmoil. In August 2004, 20 people were killed and more than 100 injured in a grenade attack at an Awami League political rally. In January 2005 the former finance minister, Shah Kibria, was assassinated along with four colleagues and over 70 injured in an attack at an AL rally in Northern Bangladesh. Since summer 2006 opposition parties, directed by Awami League, claimed that the BNP-led government was seeking to manipulate the electoral infrastructure and announced in January 2007 a boycott of the general election. The parliamentary elections were cancelled. On 11 January 2007, the President declared a state of emergency and a reconstituted unelected military-backed caretaker government was put in place. Parliamentary elections were held on 29 December 2008 to a new civilian government after two years of emergency rule.

One of the most fundamental obstacles to building trust in Bangladesh is the pervasiveness of corruption at many levels: parliament, elections, and the delivery of core public services. People feel powerless to address the excesses of corruption and have lost faith in the democratic system. The role of the caretaker government was to: move Bangladesh beyond the entrenched politics of the two main parties, improve governance structures, tackle patronage and the abuse of political position and, in so doing, to establish trust in the democratic process. This paper considers the ‘success’ of building and maintaining trust in Bangladesh’s parliamentary democracy.

### **Conceptualising Trust in Bangladesh**

Trust is an ambiguous and multi-faceted concept. Bovens and Wille (2008) argue that trust can be considered a litmus test of how well government is perceived in the eyes of citizens. Low trust “is usually understood as an indication that some elements of the political system—politicians, institutions, or both—are functioning poorly; or that the expectation of citizens are too high” (Bovens and Wille, 2008, p. 284). Other writers see this combination as problematic in operationalising the concept of trust. Catterberg and Moreno (2005) claim it is difficult to differentiate between trust in political institutions and government, and the evaluation of government performance. Their empirical work on measuring trust in new and established democracies focused on political institutions, rather than government performance, on the basis that confidence in the institutions reflected people’s evaluation of the political environment.

This contrasts with research conducted by Kim (2005, p. 615) who argued that “confidence in government performance, along with credible commitment and fairness in procedure, is an important variable for attaining the trustworthiness of government”. For the purposes of this paper, we adopt a classification developed by Nye (1997) who attributed economic, social-cultural, or political factors as causally linked to changes in trust in government. The detail of these factors are summarised

by Chanley *et al.* (2000). First, trust in government is influenced by the performance of the national economy and citizens' evaluations of the economy. Negative perceptions of the economy promote greater distrust in government. Second, declining trust has been attributed to social-cultural factors such as rising crime and child poverty. Finally, changes in trust in government have been linked to numerous political factors, including citizens' evaluations of incumbents and institutions, an increasing number of political scandals, ever more media focus on political corruption and scandal, and the end of the Cold War. We return to this classification as a way of trying to understand the causes of declining trust in Bangladesh.

There are two key ways of conceptualising trust in Bangladesh—at the macro and micro levels. At the *macro level* one useful model is the National Integrity System developed by Transparency International (see Figure 1). The National Integrity System is like a Greek Temple, the foundations of which are an active and engaged Bangladesh citizenry who can participate in free and fair elections and hold government to account (voice and accountability) by exhibiting core values such as democracy, justice and freedom of expression. The roof of the temple is the nation's integrity system buttressed by a series of mutually reinforcing pillars whose strength determines whether Bangladesh will have key societal outcomes: sustainable development, quality of life and the rule of law. If some of the pillars are weak then the national integrity system will suffer, although trade-offs are possible—restricted media freedom might be compensated by an efficient civil service or strong civil society. Alamgir *et al.* (2006) describe the model as the sum total of the institutions and practices within Bangladesh that address aspects of maintaining honesty and integrity of government and building trust amongst its citizens. They argue that while the pillars are interdependent, each contributing to the strength of the other, the role of an effective parliament is a *sine qua non* for the national



Figure 1. Conceptualising trust in Bangladesh.  
 Source: Adapted from Pope (2000).

integrity system to function properly and to gain the trust of the population of Bangladesh.

Yet in a study of national integrity systems in South Asia, Aminuzzaman (2006, p. 6) concluded:

In Bangladesh, confrontational politics, a poor parliamentary culture and the dominant and sometimes intolerant attitude of the party in power tend to mar the spirit and modality of its operational business—which in many cases has resulted in continuous boycotting and abstinence by the major opposition party.

Iftekharuzzman (2007) described the roles of the parliament of Bangladesh (*Jatiya Sangsad*) in a representative democracy as: a forum for debate on behalf of citizens on matters of public interest; a law-making body; and an institution for ensuring accountability of the government by oversight through properly functioning committees. On all three counts he argued, “parliament within 15 years of its restoration managed to badly damage its credibility and public trust” (Iftekharuzzman, 2007, p. 1).

At the *micro level* one of the more obvious manifestations of trust between citizen and the state is their direct experiences of public services delivery (Swedish International Development Agency, 2008). The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh (Government of Bangladesh, 2004, article 15) enshrines a duty of care on the State to provide basic public services. We can capture people’s direct experiences of the public provision of health and education services and the state’s betrayal of trust from data gathered through the 2007 National Household Survey (a 5,000 household interview probability survey selected across 52 districts, out of 64, within Bangladesh—see also additional data: BRAC University, 2008). Data from the survey revealed that 72.6% of respondents ( $n=3,629$ ) had used education services in the previous 12 months (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2008). This level of service usage represented the highest interaction between citizen and the public sector examined in the survey. Other services examined were: electricity, health, NGOs, banking, tax, land administration, local government, law enforcement and the judiciary. In terms of the experiences of education service users, 34.7% of them ( $n=1,260$ ) had encountered corruption in education under various guises: bribery, negligence of duties, nepotism, embezzlement or deception. The breakdown of these figures is shown in Figure 2. The largest form of corruption in the experience of users was negligence of duties by teachers involving such things as: poor time keeping, irregular classes (absenteeism), delays in releasing exam results and lack of interest and motivation by teachers in their jobs.

The survey data also showed that 44.7% of respondents ( $n=2,234$ ) had used health services in the previous 12 months. In terms of their experiences as service users, 41.8% of them ( $n=934$ ) had encountered corruption in health under various guises: bribery, negligence of duties, nepotism, embezzlement or deception. The breakdown of these figures is shown in Figure 3 where bribery and negligence are the highest forms of corruption experienced by health service users. These will take the form of: doctors charging for writing prescriptions, referring patients to their private clinics and having to pay extra fees for pathological tests in government health facilities.

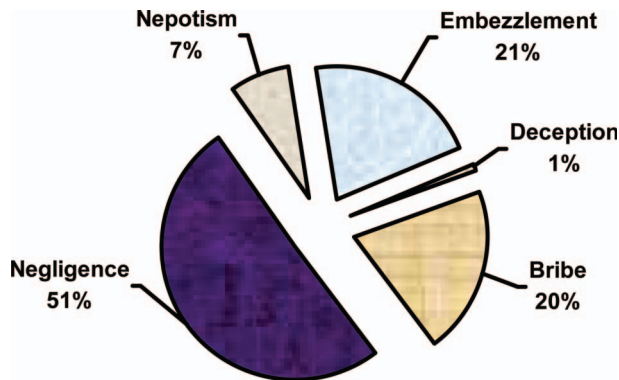


Figure 2. Corruption in education (n = 1260).

### How is Trust Measured?

If trust is conceived in Bangladesh as a strong national integrity system and tackling corruption, how is it measured? Because trust is an amorphous concept, there are two possible surrogate indicators—Worldwide Governance Indicators (World Bank) and the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International).

Worldwide Governance Indicators measure six broad constituents of what has been defined in its broadest sense as ‘governance’, that is, voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2008). The most relevant indicator when considering trust in government is ‘voice and accountability’. This indicator measures the extent to which a country’s citizens are able to participate in selecting their government—free and fair elections, trust in parliament, satisfaction with democracy, as well as freedom of expression and association, and a free media. Figure 4 shows the percentile rank of Bangladesh, compared with other South Asian countries, measured on the variable ‘voice and accountability’. Percentile rank indicates the percentage of countries worldwide that rate below these countries. Higher values indicate better governance arrangements. In the case of Bangladesh therefore, 28.8% of countries rate worse on ‘voice and accountability’ in 2007. Figure 5 shows the declining levels of trust in Bangladesh from 41.8% to 28.8% over the period 1998–2007.

Given the potential for corruption in Bangladesh to destroy trust in government, the annual Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is a surrogate indicator of whether there is a perceived improvement or deterioration in trust. The CPI ranks countries on a scale of 0–10 (1 = highly corrupt; 10 = highly clean). In the most recent results (2008), Bangladesh scored 2.1 and ranked 10th from the bottom among 180 countries (Transparency International, 2008). During the period 2001–2005, Bangladesh was bottom of the list for five successive years. It has improved its score from 2.0 to 2.1. There has been criticism of the validity of the index (Sik, 2002), not least because it is measuring perceived rather than actual corruption, but when set alongside the National Household Survey (discussed

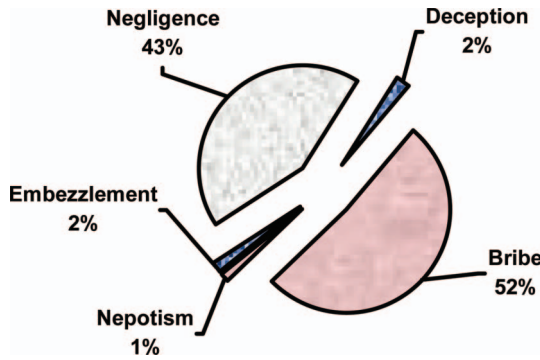


Figure 3. Corruption in health (n = 934).

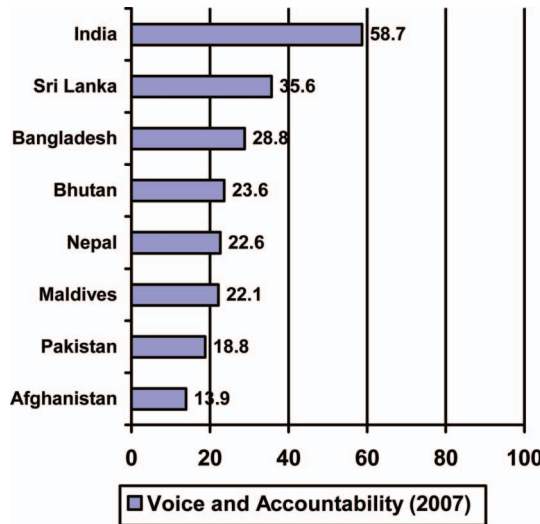
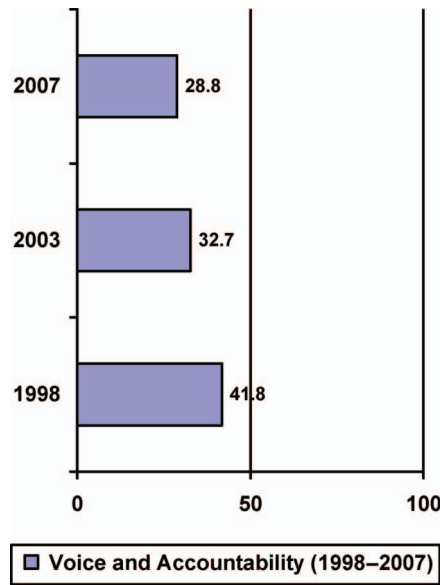


Figure 4. Trust in South Asian countries.

above) both indicate that “pervasive corruption remains unabated in Bangladesh” (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2008, p. viii).

### Building Trust—Macro Level

It is clear from the discussions so far that there is a significant trust deficit in Bangladesh due largely to political instability, lack of confidence in the democratic process and the pervasiveness of corruption. It is ironic that a military-backed caretaker regime which seized power in January 2007 saw its main task as building trust in the democratic process to prepare for parliamentary elections. A state of emergency was declared and citizens’ constitutional rights suspended. The caretaker government believed they could deliver better government than the



**Figure 5.** Bangladesh: declining trust over time.

notoriously corrupt Bangladesh politicians. There were allegations from Awami League that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party had compiled a list of up to 14 million fake names and was planning massive electoral fraud in the 2007 elections. The caretaker government launched a major anti-corruption drive by detaining more than 200 politicians and business leaders. By the end of 2007 the Ministry of Home Affairs had arrested almost ½ million people. The two former prime ministers (Sheikh Hasina Wajed and Khaleda Zia) were jailed on corruption charges.

The caretaker government also worked hard to establish trust through major institutional reforms of the country’s national integrity system. The Election Commission was reconstituted following allegations of partisanship and electoral laws amended to tackle fraud. The Public Service Commission, the appointments body for civil servants, was reformed to include procedures which make the entrance examination system more transparent and credible with the right of appeal. The inept Bureau of Anti-Corruption was abolished and replaced with an independent Anti-Corruption Commission. In a historic move, the Judiciary was separated from the Executive demonstrating the importance of a strong and independent judiciary to ensure fair and transparent trials for all. As the tenure of the caretaker government lengthened however, foreign governments and donors which had supported the army’s intervention became increasingly worried about the rising number of human rights abuses and the slow pace of electoral reform, and called for lifting the state of emergency and early elections. Public support for the caretaker government also evaporated in the second year due to poor economic management which was in part hampered by natural disasters and a fall in domestic and foreign investment as a result of political uncertainty.



In December 2008, ahead of the parliamentary elections, the President of Bangladesh (Iajddin Ahmed) lifted curbs on political and civil rights and press freedom, ending the state of emergency which had lasted for almost two years. The interim government failed in its attempt to create an alternative to the two main political parties and sideline the two 'battling begums' (Muslim women of high rank: Sheikh Hasina and Zia) whose political tenure had been characterised by rampant corruption and entrenched politics. The Anti-Corruption Commission has had little success with its concentration on high profile cases, due to a mix of poor legal work and inadequate training amongst its investigators. Legal procedures were breached during investigations and cases were rejected by the courts. The Commission has also been unable to tackle the systemic patronage which affects the daily lives of most Bangladeshis. The caretaker government raised expectations in its anti-corruption drive but ordinary citizens were extremely frustrated by its failure. The military's vision of a reformed state remained unfulfilled.

### **Building Trust—Micro Level**

If building trust at the macro level has been unsuccessful, there is evidence of effective micro level activities. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has worked throughout the country as a social movement at the grassroots level to build trust amongst public service users. They do this through various mechanisms: committees of concerned citizens; volunteer youth groups; advice and information desks; report cards; and people's theatre. Considering just one of these initiatives, Committees of Concerned Citizens (CCCs) are local-level watchdogs and a key pillar in TIB's social movement against corruption. The CCCs are groups of citizens with a high degree of moral and social standing/credibility who motivate and mobilise citizens in various activities designed to curb corruption and promote good governance. Apart from various anti-corruption awareness activities, the focus of the CCCs' watchdog functions is normally on key public services such as education, health, and local government. There are 36 CCCs working in 34 districts across all six divisions in Bangladesh. We consider their activities in these three sectors. Evidence of the effectiveness of this grassroots trust building work is drawn from a wider study on the impact of their work across Bangladesh which included in-depth case study work in schools, hospitals and municipalities (Knox, 2009).

#### *The Health Sector*

CCC members and volunteer youth groups have worked consistently with hospitals in districts throughout Bangladesh to improve health services. They have met with the authorities and identified gaps in their provision. They prepared information booklets about the nature and types of health care services available which they distributed through satellite advice and information desks. In addition, youth groups have organised public theatre shows to access illiterate people and raise awareness of their rights to public health provision. As a result, there have been some significant developments in health provision such as an improvement in the ticketing system (each patient entering a hospital receives a ticket as a form of queuing system). Previously, the price of a ticket for services in the out-patients department was 4.40

taka, but patients paid 5.00 taka due to 'lack of change' being available (a form of corruption). Now a fund has been created for patients in poverty with the extra 60 paisa received from each ticket. Medicine supplies were also very low. Following interventions by the CCC, supplies have increased and the list of medicines available is on public display. The behaviour of doctors, nurses and ancillary staff towards patients has also improved. An ambulance service is available for which patients do not make additional payments, patients tests are carried out in the pathology departments of the hospitals (as opposed to a private clinic) and toilet facilities have been significantly improved. Finally, the issue of cleanliness is a higher priority although has still some way to go.

### *The Education Sector*

The CCCs actively engage with primary schools in districts throughout Bangladesh, a key improvement being the significant number of eligible students now enrolled in schools. Student attendance had not been satisfactory and CCCs intervened to address this and other issues. They met with school management committees and guardians, organised workshops and promotional campaigns along with awards aimed at incentivising attendance. As a result, student enrolments have increased and text books are available for free distribution to students. The scholarship pass rate has also improved. Teachers, the school management committees and guardians are now jointly engaged in providing better education for the children in an accountable and transparent way. Teacher attendance and performance in their jobs are being closely monitored by CCCs.

### *The Local Government Sector*

The work of CCCs in this sector starts with the publication of report cards (a review of local government services) which have highlighted mismanagement and attracted widespread and critical press coverage of local authorities. Following on from this, CCC members have actively engaged with elected bodies to take forward the recommendations outlined in the report cards. In addition, 'face-the-public' meetings have been organised between senior officials of the Union Parishad/Municipality and local citizens during which information leaflets are distributed containing details of services available to the public. Significant changes are evident in local government. These include: a number of roads in a bad state of disrepair have been fixed; new tube wells have been set up in some areas and the water is now arsenic-free. Tax collection has increased and the number of social benefits improved for the disabled, the elderly and widows. Bribes paid to obtain a trade licence have now been stopped. The Union Parishad/Municipality budgets have been published for the first time. Local citizens were dissatisfied with the opaque process of distributing vulnerable group feeding (VGF) cards. The CCCs became involved in this issue resulting in an increase in the numbers distributed and much greater transparency in the process.

External donor-assisted work by Transparency International Bangladesh at the micro level therefore provides evidence of grassroots activities working to change attitudes and behaviour amongst public service providers. Whether this work can

survive and grow in the restored democratic system remains to be seen. There is a disconnect between trust building at the macro and micro levels—a greater focus on sectoral-based public services reform may well provide bottom-up momentum for systemic change.

## Conclusion

On 29 December 2008 more than 80 million Bangladeshis went to the polls to choose a government for the first time since 2001 in what international observers judged to be free, fair and credible parliamentary elections. Voting turnout was high at over 80% and the most peaceful in decades—a stark contrast to the failed elections of 2007, which dissolved into street riots and prompted emergency rule. An alliance led by Sheikh Hasina's Awami League secured a landslide victory winning more than two-thirds (231) of the 300 parliamentary seats over her arch opponent, Bangladesh's last Prime Minister BNP leader Khaleda Zia (BNP won 29 seats). Previous experience has shown that losing parties are unwilling to accept the results leading to anarchy and a refusal to work the democratic process. The BNP alleged widespread vote-rigging and fraud and lodged a complaint with the Election Commission. One political analyst (A. Rahman, cited in Alam 2008, p. 1) commented on the election results: "Hasina has promised to bring down food prices and reduce corruption. The ordinary people *trust her more* than Zia, whose rule is fresh in their memory. They wanted to give Hasina another chance" (author's emphasis). The BNP has already engaged in previous tactics by staging walk-out protests in the new Parliament. A mutiny (February 2009) by the Bangladesh Rifles border patrol paramilitaries (BDR) over low pay and status relative to the army was quickly quashed by Hasina, enhancing her reputation as a result. That said, there are some worrying signs which may impact negatively on people's willingness to trust the new regime. Specifically, the government has drawn up plans to replace the head of the independent Anti-Corruption Commission and reorganise the body. Critics allege Hasina wants to make it a toothless organisation.

Returning to Nye's (1997) classification of factors which cause changes in trust in government is instructive when trying to understand where Bangladesh could go from here. Trust, he argued, was causally linked to economic, social-cultural or political factors. Although Bangladesh has achieved significant economic growth since independence in 1971, over the last few years its annual economic growth has been around 6% while soaring food prices pushed inflation above 10% in the fiscal year to June 2008. The new government may benefit in the short run from a global slowdown in food and fuel prices but long-term problems exist in the agriculture sector, not least because of energy shortages. The key social-cultural issues in Bangladesh are the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger and vulnerability to disasters/climate changes. Analysts suggest that the economy needs to grow by more than 7% each year for Bangladesh to become a middle-income country by 2020, and by more than 8% to halve poverty by 2015. Bangladesh remains hugely at risk from flooding and cyclones/tropical storms.

A stable government would however be an important factor in establishing trust amongst Bangladesh citizens. Confrontational politics and violence have become "a serious threat to democracy and development in Bangladesh" (Rahaman,

2007, p. 101). If the 2008 election results spark the chaos, boycott of parliament, lack of political compromise and violence which have characterised the past, then building trust in government becomes impossible. The military, having failed to break the duopoly of political leaders/parties, will want to see whether the new government moves beyond entrenched politics and associated violence, and starts to tackle endemic corruption, all impediments to foreign aid and investment in Bangladesh. Without combined progress on these economic, socio-cultural and politics factors the prospects of building trust in the new government of Bangladesh look bleak.

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