

**NGOs in Bangladesh:
A natural ally of the Government in promoting democracy**
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As we celebrate 4 decades of the glorious independence of Bangladesh we take pride recalling the dream and vision that inspired our independence struggle - the vision of democracy, equal rights, justice and rule of law that will be applicable for everyone without any scope of discrimination.

We also take pride that in this short period Bangladesh has achieved commendable progress in terms of several socio-economic indicators that have been nationally and internationally recognized. We have also succeeded in building some of the key democratic institutions in these 40 years to an extent that took centuries in many of the highly developed societies of the world.

We are of course aware that there is no scope of complaisance. While poverty and underdevelopment still remain our key challenge, we also have a long way to go in terms of meeting our democratic aspirations. We have the democratic structures, or what I call hardware, but not necessarily the software. We remain, as always in history, a nation that never hesitates to shed blood for democracy. But we remain far from practicing it, as we also fail to ensure that the institutions of democracy we have built deliver effectively.

The work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh, and for that matter of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) is about strengthening the hands of the Government for promoting democracy and democratic rights of the people. Like anywhere in the world, we are here as the third sector because of the space created by the deficit in delivery by the other two sectors, e.g., public sector and the private sector.

In the space so created, the non-governmental sector in Bangladesh has delivered this responsibility with measurable success. Few other countries in the world have so vibrant, active and efficient NGO sector as in Bangladesh. There is hardly any aspect of socio-economic life in

¹ Executive Director, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB). Speech delivered at the inaugural session of the day-long conference organized by the INGO Forum Bangladesh to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of Bangladesh's independence, held in BICC, Dhaka, November 24., 2011.

Bangladesh where NGOs are not present. Some of the NGO work and innovations have become international models replicated in many countries around the world.

The work of NGOs is about challenging poverty; it is about contributing to the process of development and social change. We complement the efforts of the Government in strengthening democracy, promoting democratic rights of the people and, catalyzing democratic institutionalization.

If democracy is about empowering the people, we are a natural ally of the Government in the democratic process. To the extent democracy and democratic rights mean alleviation of poverty, we have the same goal as the Government. If democracy is about ensuring people's right to life, shelter, education, health, justice, and equality irrespective of sex, religion, culture, ethnicity, ability or disability and any other marker of identity, NGOs are supporting the Government's efforts towards building democracy.

If democracy is about true empowerment of the people, as our Constitution commits, if democracy is about free and fair elections, by campaigning for electoral reform we support the Government efforts to meet the constitutional commitment. If we demand delivery of electoral pledges, if we demand our Parliament to be effective, if we demand transparency in political financing and democratic practice within the political parties, if we demand other institutions of democracy and oversight to be effective, we complement the Government's efforts to strengthen democracy.

If we demand transparency, accountability and good governance we are carrying forward the dreams and the spirit of our independence which was to ensure democratic governance accountable to the people. If we demand corruption to be controlled we specifically highlight what our beloved constitution commits about unacceptability of illegitimate income, and only remind ourselves of the strong position that the father of the nation took against this malice.

Since all we do is in the ultimate analysis about democracy and democratic rights, our work can be genuinely viewed to have political implication. If we are raising demand for human rights, strong parliament, rule of law and justice, if it is a voice against torture in custody and extra-judicial killings, if it is about democratic accountability and people's empowerment, all we are doing can be interpreted as political. And we have nothing to hide about that. What we must ensure is that we are clinically non-partisan, any deviation from which will be self-defeating.

We must also be able to practice what we preach. Since we demand transparency, accountability, integrity, equality and justice, we must ourselves be capable of practicing these values. If we fail to do so, we will have no legitimacy and moral authority to demand the same from the Government or for that matter anyone else.

As we celebrate the contribution of NGOs to the process of strengthening democracy, promoting development and catalyzing social change, and as we look beyond for better and more effective delivery in the future, we must also remind ourselves of the challenges of remaining impeccably non-partisan on the one hand, and ensuring transparency and accountability of our own work on the other.
