

## **People power and Fall of authoritarianism: Opportunities and Challenges for Democratic Transition and Accountable Governance**

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank Dr. Iftekhar and my friends at Transparency International Bangladesh once again for their kind invitation to visit them and your country. Our global movement is present in more than 100 countries, and Transparency International Bangladesh is our biggest chapter worldwide, which says a lot about how dynamic they are and have been, also about how vibrant civil society is in Bangladesh. TI Bangladesh has always been an extremely inspiring national chapter, playing a very important role both in the Asia-Pacific region and globally.

I would also like to thank all our friends from civil society, the representatives of the government and of the Consensus Commission, various Reform Commissions, the representatives of foreign governments, the business leaders, media all of you who have come here tonight to show your commitment to a New Bangladesh.

It is a great honor for me to have had the opportunity to visit your country and to address you tonight at this historic moment for Bangladesh. We live in a world where authoritarianism is on the rise, and I have spent the last few days in a country that, last year, in a very long month of July, in 36 days, heroically overthrew authoritarianism—I was going to say “corrupt authoritarianism,” but authoritarianism is corrupt in itself, and contrary to what we sometimes hear, there is no authoritarian solution to corruption; concentration of power is always a concentration of abuse of power.

There are many images that I will keep from a short but intense stay in Bangladesh. The enthusiastic and so committed staff of TI Bangladesh, all the Presidents of the Committees of Concerned Citizens, the elected representatives of the the Youth Engagement and Support Groups who made me the immense honour to come from all over the country and talk to me, and I could feel how vibrant civil society in Bangladesh is. I could also measure the strength, the heroism of this civil society when I visited the exhibition of the Daily Star on the 36 days of July 2024, and when I saw in the faces, in the eyes of the demonstrators, many of whom were killed, the fearless refusal of abuse of power, the desire to re-build a country on integrity and peace.

The authoritarian regime that was overthrown last August stole massive amounts of money (\$16 bn a year during 15 years) and contributed significantly to the global economy of corruption, as still illustrated less than two months ago by the seizure in

London of real estate worth £185 million following a joint advocacy by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), Spotlight on Corruption, and our British chapter.

There is indeed a global economy of corruption, with massive flows of stolen public money or bribes paid to political leaders, amounting to around \$1 trillion each year, leaving most countries to go through poorly regulated offshores or cryptocurrency platforms and ultimately be invested in just a few countries, with the complicity of legal and financial enablers mainly from the North. There are physics of dirty money, which leaves countries with weaker institutional settings to go to countries with stronger institutions. This global economy of corruption transforms useful public money, that could be used for education, health, renewable energies, infrastructure, into useless corrupt money which only inflates real estate and capital market prices in a few countries. It destroys societal and economic value at the global level where it prevents us from achieving the sustainable development goals, prevent us in particular from addressing the climate crisis which is a matter of survival for a country like Bangladesh.

It also destroys economic and societal value in every country where money is stolen.

Indeed the global economy of corruption, in all countries where money is stolen, is fueled by politics of extraction, politics where power at almost every level is seen as a means of extracting private benefit from common goods.

In a well-functioning democracy, power should be exercised for the benefit of the people, not for the benefit of the powerholders. Those in power have a duty to preserve and improve our common goods, namely the environment and climate, but also the common goods created over time by our societies, such as education, healthcare, infrastructure and, of course, public money from government revenues. Judges have a duty to render justice and bring criminal cases, including corruption cases, to conclusion, with the active cooperation of prosecutors and investigations. And when it comes to the political parties and leaders, there may be, and indeed there are, differing views about what it means to improve these common goods and serve the people, and that is what normal political competition between parties at election time is all about.

But in most countries, elections are not competitions between differing views on how to serve the people. They are competitions between individuals or parties who want to seize power in order to extract profit from power. And appointments at many levels of power may also be considered by certain individuals as opportunities for enrichment at the expense of innumerable victims.

The July revolution began with students and turned into a mass uprising, in which women and working-class citizens, all victims of corruption, played a very important role. I can only admire the immense courage of those who risked their lives, and many

lost them, to create a New Bangladesh, and I praise the efforts made so far to thoroughly reform the way power is exercised in Bangladesh.

Transparency International Bangladesh published recommendations for reforming the state in the very month that the authoritarian regime fell. In November, it published a new report reviewing the first 100 days after the regime's fall, and last month it published a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the work undertaken by the authorities and of the main political and institutional developments over the past 12 months.

The work accomplished so far is impressive, and I would like to congratulate all the members of the reform commissions who have worked day and night to advance towards the New Bangladesh. It would not be appropriate for me to comment, let alone judge, what has been done and what remains to be done until the elections next February. However, I am an avid reader of Transparency International Bangladesh's publications, and I note that their recommendations for the New Bangladesh have many similarities with what we demand in many other countries, namely what we believe will enable a thorough reform of the exercise of power so that it is exercised at all sectors and levels in the interest of the people.

Most importantly, the judiciary system must function properly, not only to judge crimes against humanity committed in the past and recent past, but also to fight corruption. It must be free from political interference, both from the government and from the various political parties. Like the law enforcement bodies, it must have sufficient staff and resources. It has to work in integrity at every level.

State reform is very ambitious and for right reasons, as are often the anti-corruption plans undertaken by various governments. In our global experience, these can only succeed if they never lose sight of the goal of comprehensive structural reform, at a sustained rhythm and with a clear roadmap.

Political parties have a crucial role to play in the political debate on how best to serve the public. They should not have a say in public appointments or in the awarding of public contracts.

Civil society oversight is essential to the success of the entire process, as well as to the effectiveness of very important measures such as the submission of asset declarations of public officials and representatives.

Still on the subject of assets, and stolen assets, one of the main drivers of the global economy of corruption is the secrecy afforded to corrupt individuals by the legal entities behind which they hide. The public has a right to know who the beneficial owners of legal entities are. Without transparency on beneficial ownership, public

money will continue to be stolen, sent to London, Paris, or elsewhere, and will be lacking for all basic services for citizens.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, true democracy cannot emerge in a context of violence, of harassment of journalists who play a crucial role in informing the public about abuses of power, and of discrimination against any individual or community on any grounds.

Our global movement fully shares and supports Transparency International Bangladesh's analysis of what has been done and what remains to be done. Many people around the world, both within and outside our movement, are passionately following what Bangladesh is doing. The global civil society that we form within Transparency International in more than one hundred countries, a global civil society which is needed to defeat the global economy of corruption, is passionately supporting the civil society in Bangladesh in its fight to create a new Bangladesh grounded in integrity.

What the civil society and the current authorities in Bangladesh are doing also has to be supported by the international community. All countries, those where public money is stolen or where bribes are paid in the public sector, and those where stolen money is supposedly safe, have a common interest in cooperating for a world with better-being for all. Confrontation is never, has never been the right approach to address global challenges.

Bangladesh has a historic opportunity to set an example for the world in breaking the vicious circle of authoritarianism, - where authoritarian regimes in many countries steal so much money that citizens become desperate and are still more victims of abuse of power and corruption. Bangladesh has the historic opportunity to create a new democracy—not a democracy of the past, which in many countries consisted and still consists solely of more or less regular elections held to select those who will extract profit from power, but the democracy of the future, with the full participation of the young people, of the women, of the marginalised communities like waste workers in Dhaka with whom TI Bangladesh engages, the full participation of the young women from remote indigenous communities with whom our chapter also works, a democracy where power, in the true sense of the word, at last belongs to the people, where all the citizens are considered as who they are, - the public officials, private sector employers and political leaders are accountable, and finally, citizens have the right to know and to voice their demands and concerns about everything that may affect their lives without fear or intimidation.

Thank you very much for your attention.