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## Role of Civil Society in Democratic Consolidation Process in Bangladesh

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### Introduction

In Bangladesh, there are many CSOs, and these are involved in poverty alleviation and in the achievement of MDGs by delivering their services to the poor of the country and by working to improve the country's infrastructure and to solve common problems. In the present context of Bangladesh, CSOs are being recognized as effective actors to the donor agencies and at the same time, to both the central and the local government of the country as an implementing partner. But on the contrary, civil society may be a frustration in terms of private and public interests. For example, as election is one of the main components of democratic consolidation in the modern arena, a question may be raised to what extent the elections of Bangladesh are free, fair, and competitive and what role civil society in Bangladesh plays during the national or local elections to achieve a successful democratic consolidation by acting as a pressure

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group for free, fair, and competitive election. This is why the role of CSOs of Bangladesh in creating democratic consolidation can be measured on the scale of minimal normative standard using some procedural indicators. Bangladesh has become a dynamic developing country in the contemporary globe, and her economy is very resilient with GDP growth rate at an average of 7% over the last years and the poverty rate declining to 31.5%, although Bangladesh is now the seventh largest country in the world with 160 million people. Bangladesh has accepted a parliamentary form of government for its democratic progress after the independence in 1971 and has entered into the process of democratic transition in 1990. During the 1990s, Bangladesh slowly freed itself from the clutches of military rule and the people began to struggle for a new journey in search of democracy. Despite regular parliamentary elections and transfer of powers among political parties from 1990 and onwards, the country continues to face obstacles on the road to democratic consolidation. Democracy is a continuous political process which can be sustained and developed by giving due attention through its responsible citizens. From this point of view, it is being said nowadays in academic texts, studies, seminars, and politics or in every field of the country that civil society can play a role in democratic consolidation. But concern is that, although “civil society in Bangladesh is recognized for its vibrant performance in social development, it is often criticized for its inability to influence good governance and democracy” (Tasnim 2017). Therefore, this chapter assesses the role of the CSOs in the democratic consolidation process in Bangladesh.

## Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine how civil societies can contribute to the consolidation of democracy and why they cannot play their desired roles in the consolidation of democracy in Bangladesh. Other objectives of the chapter are to discuss some separate but interrelated points and these are the conceptual frameworks of civil society and democratic consolidation and their interconnection, the approach by which civil society plays a positive or negative role in safeguarding democratic consolidation in Bangladesh.

## Research Methodology

The study is descriptive and suggestive in nature and mainly based on secondary data and those data have been collected from concerned books, journals, periodicals, websites, daily newspapers, published research work, and other materials related to the research topic.

## Definition of Key Concept

### Democracy

The concept of democracy has been rooted in Greece which consists of two words: *demos* (the people) and *kratos* (power). In this sense, the term democracy indicates 'power of the people.' US president Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) defined democracy as: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people"—which demands a high degree of consciousness of the people for its success. According to Gilchrist (1962), "Democracy is the government of the people as distinct from the government of an individual or of a class by giving them a voice in legislation, it educates and enables the individual citizen; it gives each a sense of responsibility which gives a new meaning to his personality." Development and democracy are inter-dependent. In this sense, democracy may be of different forms such as: direct, liberal, industrial, proletarian, representative, social, bourgeois and so on. Direct democracy is established when the people themselves directly express their will on public affairs. Though direct democracy was established in ancient Greek, at present it is impracticable; the reason is, large and complex societies have emerged and the area of the state is very extensive. On the other hand, according to John Stuart Mill "Indirect or representative democracy is one in which the whole people or some numerous portion of them exercise the governing power through deputies periodically elected by themselves." David E. Apter (1981, p. 141) points out some basic principles of democracy and these are power, justice, law, representation, equality, liberty, rights, authority, order, and power. He opines that, justice provides power to

law; law provides representation to the equality of access to all citizens. This series of power is compulsory for the better democratic process in any country as democracy gives liberty, liberty gives right to the citizen, and then the state provides order to show its commanding power. If this chain of power is weak in any country, the democratic process also becomes weak in that country. So, it is clear that, democracy has several connotations and there are several features of it.

## Democratic Consolidation

Robert Dahl (Dahl 1971, p. 3) in his seminal book *Polyarchy* sets out the eight criteria as the ideal type democracy and these are: “(1) right to vote, (2) right to be elected, (3) right of political leaders to compete for support, (4) free and fair elections, (5) freedom of expression, (6) alternative sources of information, (7) freedom of association, and (8) public policy institutions depending on votes and expressions of preference” (cited in Gustafsson n.d.). Taking Dahl’s theory into consideration, Linz and Stepan (1996) provide the five major arenas of a modern consolidated democracy—civil society, political society, rule of law, state apparatus, and economic society. Democratic consolidation is a matter of ensuring rule of law, human rights, fundamental freedoms, and promotion of political participations within governmental process, free and fair election, and so on. These are the major areas of democratic consolidation. Since democracy is a continuous political process, it can only be sustained and developed by giving due attention to the above-mentioned issues and these issues cannot be ensured relying only on political parties or governmental institutions but also can be ensured by the active performance of CSOs.

## Civil Society

The term ‘civil society’ originated from the Ancient Greece and was used in a Western sense for the first time. It then passed on to many other countries. Coonrod (2009) says that, “the concept of *societas civilis* is thought to have been first applied by Cicero in Rome to mean a ‘good

society' ensuring peace and order among the people. At the time, no distinction was made between the state and society; rather, it was believed that the state represented the civil form of society and that 'civility' was the requirement of good citizenship." The term 'civil society', translated into Bengali as *shushil shamaj*, which literally means 'gentle society' (Lewis 2016). Considering these concepts, civil society can be defined as the collection of institutions or groups that are free, voluntary, self-reliant, and self-generating as well. Some examples of CSOs are trade unions; charity organizations; religious organizations; community-based organizations; civic movements or advocacy groups; issue-oriented, community and social groups; professional associations; self-help groups; social and political movements; advocacy groups; non-governmental organizations (NGO); independent mass media; think tanks; private voluntary organizations (PVOs); educational interest groups (universities); and social and religious groups. Some of the CSOs are actively engaged in business and some play a pro-active role towards the government.

## Understanding the Theoretical Framework of Democratic Consolidation

The concept of democratic consolidation and civil society has stimulated the scholars to debate around various interesting questions. For this very reason, in recent years, a number of models have been proposed. In this chapter, some theoretical models have been presented to understand the theoretical framework of democratic consolidation and civil society.

### Apter's Model of Democracy

Apter (1981, p. 170) provides the precondition of democracy and these are population and their participation in democratic government. He also suggests that democracy results from the form of legislation, because legislation provides the societal basis for stability of order and control. From this point of view, Fig. 6.1 describes the Apter's model of democratic government:

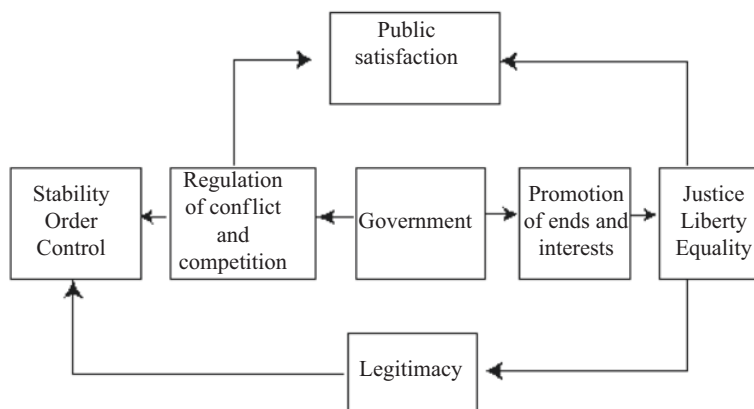


Fig. 6.1 The model of democratic politics

## Schedler's Model of Democratic Consolidation

Schedler presents his model based on the different notions of democratic consolidation and these are “avoiding democratic breakdown and avoiding democratic erosion” as negative notion, “completing democracy and deepening democracy” as positive notion and finally “organizing democracy” as neutral notion (Schedler 1997, p. 26). He indicates the first two notions as the original connotation of democracy, the next two notions as the movement towards a high-level of democracy, and the last notion as structural changes of democracy (ibid.).

## Merkel's Level of Consolidation

Another concept was formulated by Wolfgang Merkel (1996). This concept includes four different levels of consolidation—one at the macro-level, two at the intermediate-levels and one at the micro-level. As per this theory, democracy is consolidated only if these four levels are consolidated.

## Understanding the Theoretical Framework of Civil Society

The functions of CSOs are divided into two broad aspects—vibrant and vigilant. The vibrant civil society ensures that citizens have the means to influence public policies freely. On the other hand, vigilant CSOs have an active oversight role in monitoring and assessing the activities of government. So, CSOs must be both vibrant and vigilant to be able to contribute to democratic consolidation. According to Sievers, B (2009) civil society as a singular social construct has evolved through the seven conceptual streams which reinforce each other in the operation of civil society. The following model places civil society in constant interaction with the other actors in the political system and democratic consolidation (Fig. 6.2).

Apart from the above model, it is clear that democratic consolidation stands on several pillars and these can be developed by the real performance of CSOs. These factors are minimally the necessary indicators that play a vital role for upholding democratic consolidation. According to

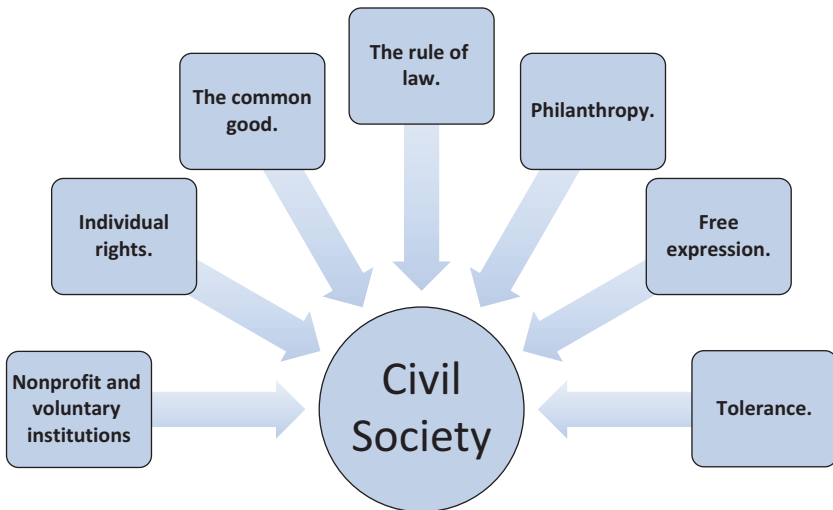


Fig. 6.2 Bruce Sievers' approach of civil society

Ahmed “the conditions for the success of democracy, from that standpoint, are related more to social norms than to political activities and institutional support.” Though Bangladesh was founded on the basis of democratic aspirations and democracy (Riaz 2016), despite this, democracy has been hampered since independence in 1971.

## Relationship Between Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation

Civil society is necessary to ensure democratic consolidation and the proper functioning of government. Not only that, civil society is an important agent for promoting good governance like transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness, and accountability (Ghaus-Pasha 2005). Where the civil society is strong, the democracy is strong. However, to check the relationship between civil society and democratic consolidation, this can be testified through comparison between democracy in democratic countries (European Countries) and democracy in less democratic countries (Asia, Africa, and Latin America), where a significant upsurge of organized private, non-profit activity are witnessed (ibid.). Enkevort (2010) said, “Civil society is made up by very different organizations, networks and associations. From football clubs to debate groups, from women’s networks to labor unions, from book clubs to political parties (as long as they are not in government) and from environmental lobby groups to religious groups. Although some organizations will have a much clearer influence on political processes and democratization than others, all are included in the civil society and all do have some influences on democratization.” Sievers (2009) examines that the development of modern civil society has been inextricably linked to the development of liberal democracy. Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that “a robust civil society, with the capacity to generate political alternatives and to monitor government and state can help transitions get started, help resist reversals, help push transitions to their completion, help consolidate, and help deepen democracy. At all stages of the democratization process, a lively and independent civil society is invaluable.”



Lionel Bopog (Bopage 2016) examines that, “civil society has played an extremely active and valued role in fostering civic and political participation with mixed results.” For example, he mentions, “Germany’s pro-democratic civil society of the 1920s and 1930s failed to safeguard democracy.”

## **Evaluating the Role of CSOs to the Socio-economic Development of Bangladesh**

The role of CSOs to Bangladeshi society and the economy are very significant. Many CSOs are involved in poverty alleviation, in improving Bangladesh’s infrastructure and common problems. For example, in 1943 when a famine took more than 3 million lives, Ranada Prashad Shaha (R.P. Shaha) built the Kumudini Hospital in 1947 with a view to offer free quality health, free education and employment opportunities, and treatment for rural populations. At the same time, village-based small large cooperative societies were replaced between 1947 and 1970. For instance, the State Bank was established in 1955 that provided agricultural loans and the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) was established in the following year that provided rural development programs supported by major bilateral and multilateral development partners around the globe. In 1970, a typhoon killed more than 500,000 people; in 1971, floods and droughts destroyed on average 1.7 million tons of food crops; this was followed by the independence war that resulted in millions of people’s deaths and refugees; in 1974, famine killed another 3 million people; and throughout 1980s, 1.46 million tons of food crops were damaged; however, in response to these phenomena, the civil society began to task with a view to cooperate with the backward section of the country. As a result, after the independence of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) was founded in 1972 to resettle returning refugees from India. Later, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) to aid in agriculture, the Grameen Bank (GB) to help in economic and social development among

the country's poorest, and the Association for Social Advancement (ASA) in 1987 were established. Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) (that represent poor people and work to enlarge public interest litigation), Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar (Child Rights) Forum, Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition (BWHC), Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), Proshika, Thengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha (TMSS) started their work toward social and economic development of vulnerable groups with a view to the delivery of services in the fields of health, education, environmental conservation, gender equity, trafficking of women and children, good governance, and aid conditionality. Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik, or "Citizens for Good Governance"—known as SHUJAN has become a significant actor in shaping the activities of civil society in Bangladesh. In the health sector, establishing of GK (*Gono Shahshtha Hendra*) as a people's health movement was particularly significant. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) highlights corruption in various sectors of society, the inherent strengths, and weaknesses in the functioning of the EC and Parliament. Thus, the civic tradition was reinforced to undertake relief activities in Bangladesh after her independence in 1971 from Pakistan when she got the opportunity to develop socio-political institutions and then in 1990, as the main channel of international aid and delivery of basic services, particularly education, health, and micro-credit when the parliamentary form of government has established. Beyond service delivery, NGOs have also played a role in influencing policy in some key areas (Lewis 2016). For examples, according to Lewis, 'TIB' played a role in helping to pass and implement the Right to Information Act, 2009, 'Action Aid Bangladesh' in challenging the top-down approaches to climate change adaptation, 'Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity' in supporting labor rights for garment workers, 'Young Power in Social Action' for laborers in the ship-breaking industry, and 'Flood Action Plan' (FAP), in solution to water control management. He further states that, due to the active role of some NGOs, a new land reform law was passed that required new *khas* land to be redistributed to landless households. Consequently,

access to *khas* land by the landless has been ensured. Moreover, many important international NGOs such “Action Aid Bangladesh, Care, Caritas Bangladesh, Concern Bangladesh, Concern Universal, Damien Foundation, Handicap International, Helen Keller International, Leprosy Mission International, Pathfinder International, Plan International Bangladesh, Practical Action, Save the Children USA, Save the Children UK, Save the Children, Sight Savers Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind, Swedish Free Mission, Terre Des Hommes” (ADB 2008) perform their functions in Bangladesh. Thus, the role of NGOs in Bangladesh society and its economy can be marked as being significant. This must be evaluated positively for the citizens of Bangladesh and its democracy.

## Measuring the Role of CSOs in Democratic Consolidation in Bangladesh

There are many factors that can be considered as main aspects of ensuring democratic consolidation, and in these factors, CSOs have a specific role to establish democratic consolidation. According to Linz and Stepan (1996), for democratic consolidation political parties, legislatures, elections, electoral rules, political leadership, interparty democracy, rule of law are, minimally, the necessary yardstick for judging democratic consolidation. Thus, democracy has several connotations and there are several features of it. It is really difficult to find a country in which all features of democracy exist. In case of middle-income countries like Bangladesh, the situation is worse rather than working with all features. This is why, it is important to mention here to identify one or more important features to be representative of democracy in the context of Bangladesh in which CSOs can play roles in different ways to consolidation. So, in this chapter, the focus is on some crucial issues which can be sustained and developed by the active performance of civil society with the governmental institutions and political parties towards consolidated democracy and then it has been identified whether CSOs are able to play their expected role in democratic consolidation in Bangladesh.

## Political Participation and Electoral Procedure

In a modern democratic government system, the first and foremost feature of a better democracy is the holding of contestable elections held by the regimes “that are free; that is, contested by meaningful opposition, and fair; that is, not rigged or biased from the process of voting through counting and the declaration of results” (Alamgir 2007). A mature democracy should have an electoral process that ensures free and fair elections. According to John Coonrod (2009), “civil society can play important roles in this regard by providing a *supply* of ideas for electoral and institutional reforms and, at the same time, by advocating or acting as a pressure group for the adoption of such reforms.” He further added that, civil society “can create a *demand* for reform by mobilizing public opinion,” “collect information about candidates’ backgrounds and *supply* the relevant information,” “play a *watchdog* role to ensure that everyone concerned adhere to the prevailing laws and thus perform their appropriate responsibilities” (ibid.). In Bangladesh, national elections are held every five years and Bangladesh has been trying to develop democratic consolidation, but the question is whether democratic norms and values are upheld in the election years or whether the general populations can participate in governmental decision making. According to Emajuudin Ahmed, “Elections are held, though not regularly in all cases, and quite often these are rigged. The political leaders, instead of competing for people’s votes, try either to purchase them with their black money or cajole them to vote for them through questionable means. In some cases, they use their muscle power, often with hired goons, to force the recalcitrant voters either to abstain from voting or to vote for them, for getting them elected. They take election as the veritable gateway to political power and win they must, by means fair or foul.” For example, during the Khaleda regime, a by-election in Magura in 1996 was rigged by the ruling party, (Zakaria 2013) and similarly, the present Hasina government won the 2014 election handily where a majority of the parliament’s 300 seats were uncontested (Landry 2016). The elections on 5 January 2014 were boycotted by the major opposition and took place in a climate of unrest; they were not recognized by the international community as having been free, fair, and transparent (Coonrod 2009). Without free and fair elections, the

government cannot be held accountable. On the contrary, just holding elections alone do not necessarily ensure an accountable democracy and rule of law. This has been truly proved during many government regimes. Although some of them come into power by free and fair elections, after coming to power they become dictators and appeared to have manipulated many institutions with the judiciary of state. For example, the international community has always put pressure on Bangladesh's politicians to reign in human rights violations committed by government agents. In this milieu, "it is necessary that even when democracy is established, civil society action is needed for keeping its quality intact..." (Bopage 2016). Most probably, for this very reason, free and fair elections require an informed citizenry whose participation in politics or in an election procedure at the national or international level can enhance democratic qualities. It is well known to all that, a participatory civil society is necessary to achieve democratic consolidation. A participatory civil society has three main functions such as: "promoting voluntarism, building social capital, and creating an enabling environment for policy input" (Hyden et al. 2003). In case of voluntarism, the performance of the civil society can be found that CSOs are involved in some types of "collective action coming about as a product of individuals combining their private interests in pursuit of a common good" (Olson 1965 cited in Hyden et al. 2003). Moreover, the role of CSOs can be found also in civic education, advocacy, service in exercising legal and political rights and raising social and political awareness at the grass-roots level. Raising political awareness at the grassroots projects during the 1996 and 2001 elections in Bangladesh gave the opportunity to influence a large section of the voters' decision regarding whom to vote for.

## Protection of Fundamental Human Rights and Rule of Law

Rule of law is essential in the advancement and preservation of citizens' rights of a modern democratic country. The rule of law means from the highest in the country to the lowest, all must submit to law and law alone. On the other hand, human rights are those basic rights which are

enjoyed by every human being from birth. Fundamental human rights or rule of law can be yardsticks for judging the reality of democracy on the grounds that these are the major criterion of democratic consolidation. Since “modern democratic government is a party government. The party winning majority in the election forms the government. But coming into power, the government may turn itself into a dictatorial one violating the basic rights of people and oppressing the opposition. The aim of having a declaration of fundamental rights in the constitution is to prevent such a possible danger” (Halim 1998, p. 87). However, there are various proxy measures for how rights are protected under a democratic government but the minimal indicator must concern the first and foremost fundamental rights of a man—‘*right to life*’. Considering this observation, Mahmudul Islam (Islam 2012) said that “no right can compare with the right to life without which all other rights are meaningless and the rule of law can play its most significant role in this respect.” This is particularly a powerful indicator because of three factors, as researcher Jalal Alamgir (2007) stated, “firstly it concerns the right to life. Secondly, it points to violation by those (i.e., an elected govt.) entrusted to protect it. Thirdly, it also provides a measure for the violation of due legal procedure.” *The rule of law and democracy are interlinked*. The rule of law is a critical factor for the advancement of democracy for the protection of human rights of all people and accountability. The advancement, protection, and preservation of the rule of law and human rights are always left in the hands of the organs of the state. Despite the state organs, the CSOs also perform the delicate task of ensuring these. The reason is, CSOs are regarded to be ‘watch-dogs’ and struggle to ensure the adherence to human rights and rule of law. The violation of human rights and rule of law can be blamed by CSOs, as much as possible, on the grounds that the state organs have failed to protect these rights of the people. CSOs are to focus on particular issues which destabilize the society and to aid the government and its institutions to find out the ways to overcome the situation. Civil Society can create public awareness conducting debates, seminars, and dialogue between people from various backgrounds and government agents for the implementation of the rule of law and human rights and can pressure the government to remove the defects constantly that remain on the path of these. The CSOs can emphasize human rights education and awareness

program among the people about the impact of human rights violation. Furthermore, CSOs can utter their voice and work for safeguarding the rights and interests of the general people and creating consciousness among the people about the high consciousness of democracy and the bad impact of human rights violation on democracy. This is why, it is important to mention here to identify respect and protection of human rights and rule of law to be representative of democracy in the context of Bangladesh in which CSOs can play roles in different ways in safeguarding these crucial issues to consolidate democracy. The following scenario appears that, rule of law for the common men in the country exist only in the pages of the constitution (Islam 2012):

The figure shows that average government agents killed almost 41 people extra judicially per year from 1993–1996, 18 from 1996–2001, 207 from 2001–2006, 177 from 2006–2008, and 134 from 2008–2014. In this regard, CSOs of Bangladesh can work towards the achievement of a peaceful society promoting social cohesion, providing services to all and taking active positions on several matters like human rights or rule of law in which all the people whatever their age, race, sex, religion, and so on will have potential human rights.

## Challenges of Civil Society

Democracy by CSOs in Bangladesh has not consolidated in real sense. According to some experts, the major reasons are most of the CSOs are interested in service delivery than in playing a part in advocacy, some of them are mainly from western countries, institutionalized, biased, growing process, not national, party supported (conditional), acting as pressure groups, and coming from an elite group. Moreover, “many of the mainstream service delivery NGOs were open to the criticism that rather than contributing to sustainable improvements, they merely let the government off the hook” (Lewis 2016). According to John Coonrod (2009), the main functions of civil society are “to inform the people of their rights, to help them to achieve those rights, and to fight for clean politics and good governance.” Bangladesh has no such type of civil society. More organizations take donor support; there are only a few non-partisan

groups in Bangladesh that played a significant role in the recent democratic transition. Civil society groups face some challenges in the democratic consolidation process in Bangladesh as follows:

## Increasing Number of NGOs

Researcher Zakaria (2013) observes that, since the 1990s, with change in donor policy to assist NGOs, the number of CSOs in Bangladesh increased exponentially. According to him, such a huge number of CSOs coupled with thriving NGO sector gives Bangladeshi civil society a vibrant look. Shakil opined that, there is a huge number of CSOs in Bangladesh, but they have their own weaknesses in democratizing state and society.

## Coming from Elite Groups

Bangladesh civil society consists of both elite and non-elite civil society groups, and most of the leaders of civil society are a group of scholars and they are from the elite section who worked as think tanks in citizens groups. For example, as Zakaria (2013) observes, “the national apex association like Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) of the businesspersons receive important attention from the government and political parties.”

## Foreign Donation

Donations and foreign funds are the key sources of survival for some NGOs, especially, the development NGOs. But “due to their excessive reliance on foreign *funds*, the development of NGOs may focus more on fulfilling the requirements of their major donors than on grassroots democratization, development and empowerment of vulnerable groups” (Quadir 1999, p. 4) on the one hand and on the other, in recent times, foreign aid in Bangladesh has been decreased considerably. Numerous foreign donation recipient-NGOs fall outside the donation privileges



and manage by their own funding. If we compare the total landscape of CSOs, the coverage of foreign donations is very limited. In Bangladesh, some “large-size NGOs rely less on foreign donations and are oriented more to market activities. This trend is more linked to a global phenomenon where the GDP of developed countries has shrunk in comparison to that of developing countries” (Ahmed [n.d.](#)).

## Anti-democratic Elements in Civil Society

Harry Blair (2000) observed that, there is also the question of anti-democratic elements in civil society. Various Islamic groups in Bangladesh are part of civil society, just as are human rights and women’s advocacy groups. But a democratic state is not required to tolerate organizations trying to subvert it in the name of free speech, nor are international donors wishing to support civil society obliged to assist each and every CSO, including those that want to destroy the state itself.

## Less Powerful

Most of the civil societies in Bangladesh are less powerful and their positions are lower than politicians or donors. The reason as identified by Zakaria (2013), emerging as dominant actors, many leaders of civil society groups (such as leaders of trade union) are being influenced by the political elites in Bangladesh. Moreover, considering White’s observation, he further mentions that, “the relationship between larger and smaller NGOs is more like particularistic patron-client ties” (*ibid.*).

## Governance Problems in NGO Sector

TIB (2007) finds out some problems on governance in NGOs in its study and these are existence of the relatives of the executive head in the governing body, lack of regular meeting of the governing body, unilateral decision making process by the executive heads ignoring opinions of staffs, lack of financial transparency, lack of accountability to the

beneficiaries on financial matters, lack of necessary information about financial details, and so on.

## Corruption

There are also corruption allegations against the NGOs in Bangladesh. Tasnim (2007, p. 108) reveals that “the percentage of CSOs contacting the ruling party and opposition party is 64% and 51% respectively and there is an existence of a vertical give and take relationship between the political parties and different CSOs” (cited in Zakaria 2013, p. 25). TIB (2007) also shows corruption allegations in the recruitment and promotion of employees and consultants in NGO sectors, as recruitment and promotion are often influenced by the politicians, donor, and government officials on the basis of nepotism or unilateral choice of the executive head or personal relationship.

## Lack of Participation in Advocacy

Tasnim (2007) points out that, the CSO’s participation in advocacy, lobby, and policy making with the government is lacking, although they are involved in social service and welfare. Holloway (1993) observed that, a few CSOs lobby or advocate for social change, try to modify government policies, see their role as changing behavior or changing government’s policy separately from specific project activities in Bangladesh.

## Politicization

A civil society can be termed as politicized when it is politically colored or when it acts as a politically motivated group or organization directed by party leaders or government executives leaving its main aims and interest on which it was formed. In Bangladesh, according to Ahmed (n.d), the depoliticized nature of NGOs in their working relations weakens their position in influencing the government in decision making processes. He reveals that, “labor unions, NGOs, chamber federations and

religious civil society are highly affected by politicization. Their autonomy is compromised by this politicized nature while on the other hand many leaders of CSOs participate in party politics” (ibid.). Besides, Zakaria (2013) reveals that, in Bangladesh, “confrontational politics played by the two major political parties through the instruments of clientelism, patronage, nepotism corruption, violence have co-opted, politicized, weakened and polarized the civil society groups and undermined their ability to participate in political process which contribute to governance and democracy”(Zakaria 2013). Such polarization has been used for political expedience that affected the growth of civil society too (ibid.).

## Interference on CSO

Tasnim (2007, 2017) points out that civil society is often found to be influenced, used, penetrated, polarized, co-opted, politicized, controlled, divided, and generated by political parties. According to Harry Blair (2000), most of the Bangladesh’s higher-profile NGOs choose to concentrate themselves on political agendas rather than on their developmental works. Quadir (2003) argues that “civil society, instead of forming bonds and bridging social capital among different groups, helps sharpen existing political divisions” (cited in Tasnim 2017). Owing to this easy politicization, “the civil society is yet to emerge as a vigilant force to uphold good governance and consolidate democracy” (cited in Zakaria 2013, p. 25).

## Other Challenges Revealed by TIB

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has in its study titled “Problems in Good Governance in the NGO Sector: The Way Out” revealed that a large number of NGOs in Bangladesh are associated with mid-level corruption, mis-governance, and absence of regulatory control. The TIB study revealed some challenges in the NGO sector in Bangladesh, and these are “(a) lack of financial sustainability; (b) shortage of efficient employees and high employee attrition; (c) inadequate infrastructure; (d)

undue interference and control by the government; (e) lengthy fund release process; (f) low level of inter-sectoral cooperation; (g) inadequate training and low level of true professionalism among employees often aggravated by lack of job security; (h) lack of information and relevant research; (i) religious conservatism and militancy, and threat of terrorism; (j) political pressure and political instability; k) Unfavorable tax regime; and (l) natural calamities” (TIB 2007).

## Facts and Findings: In-depth Analysis

The study has been conducted to understand the concept of the democratic consolidation in general and particularly to focus on the role of civil society in that process in Bangladesh. The study shows the inter-link between civil society, development, and democracy in the context of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has acquired a world reputation for its vibrant and robust civil society (Watkins 2015). Today, Bangladesh’s civil society spans the world, sharing indigenous expertise and experience, and working together towards a better society for all. As Bangladesh enters middle-income status, it is fitting to recall the best of the country’s traditions (ibid.). If we evaluate the role of civil society in Bangladesh, we must see that Bangladesh civil society is playing a pivotal role in the development process by eradicating poverty and economic progress. This development is the precondition of democracy in a country and civil society as key actor of development is playing for consolidated democracy. The study clears that, since its independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh has developed numerous civil society organizations which are considered as the key actors in development process, and by these efforts, Bangladesh has been engaged in its path to democratic consolidation. This study also revealed some crucial issues—political participation, election procedure, protection of human rights, and rule of law that can be considered as the main aspects of ensuring democratic consolidation and in which CSOs have a specific role to perform with the governmental institutions and political parties. The study also identified some major challenges for which the civil society cannot play in democratic contribution in real sense.

## Conclusion and Way Forward: In Search of True Role of Civil Society in Bangladesh

This chapter sketched a picture of democratic consolidation in Bangladesh through the theoretical framework of democracy and civil society and revealed the significance of civil society's involvement in the democratic consolidation process in Bangladesh. Democracy has several connotations and there are several features of it. Among these, there are some more important features to be representative of democracy in the context of Bangladesh in which CSOs can play roles in different ways, to consolidation. Besides, this chapter depicted that the civil society is essential in terms of democratic contribution because it can deal with many of the underlying drivers of consolidation by promoting economic development, alleviating poverty, fighting against corruption, advocating policy change, nurturing democratic values, bringing unity among social cleavages, contributing to good governance, and thus, democratic consolidation process. If CSOs face any challenge to the path of consolidation, they cannot work freely. So, the basic roles of CSOs in democratic consolidation process in the context of Bangladesh are very important as this chapter revealed that the main functions of CSOs are to create public awareness, to raise public concern, to control the state power, to promote political participation, to protect human rights, and to respect rule of law and so on. But the concern is CSOs of Bangladesh face some internal and external challenges in promoting democracy. The general finding of the article claims that the nature of Bangladeshi democracy is confrontational and at the same time, the vigilant nature of civil society is less participatory, politicized, and polarized. For both of these grave conditions, the main influencing factors are political parties and political leaders. The link with the political parties has become the main source of power for the civil society groups. Since almost all time, the political parties penetrate and control the civil society and since most of the civil society organizations are western-based and politicized, they can hardly act independently. And, as a result, the common desires of people have remained unfulfilled. Under the circumstances, democracy could be consolidated fully only when CSOs could do work shoulder-to-shoulder

with all the segments of the government overcoming all the challenges in its path towards democracy. In other words, where political parties and CSOs are strong, diverse citizen interests are represented, consensus is built, and economies thrive. In order to improve the role and possible contribution of CSOs in the consolidation of democracy in Bangladesh, the following recommendations could be considered:

1. The major problems that hinder civil society in creating and sustaining stable democracy should be addressed and diminished soon accordingly. The partnership between the state and the media should be increased to address the problems. In Bangladesh, CSOs are still regarded as an unrecognized sector. So ways should be found to mobilize them so that they can do as real actors of democracy. Reforms should be adopted in the education system also for encouraging NGO activities. The CSOs should be allowed to play their actual role in development and democracy.
2. In the Bangladesh context, the CSOs are politicized in line with party politics. Our politicians should pay due respect to civil society organizations. Both the government and opposition should work for the betterment of civil society instead of using them politically. Our civil society should be made positive in playing their role in the society. The economic gap should be reduced, economic prosperity and social justice should be ensured for improving the role of civil society.
3. Socio-economic progress along with political stability is necessary to improve the activities of civil society. The country is facing increasing political and social instability and corruption which are threats for congenial political atmosphere to work independently. Corruption is the main problem in Bangladesh for implementation of any development program. Corruption also has engrained in our civil society. This situation should be redeemed by political reform. Farsighted, tolerant, talented, and dedicated leaders should come forward in politics to reform the overall bad situation in the country
4. Reform within the NGO sector and civil society groups in Bangladesh is much needed. As TIB revealed, a large number of NGOs in Bangladesh are associated with mid-level corruption, mis-governance, and absence of regulatory control work under many constraints and

- challenges. So, these constraints should be diminished by improving donor coherence, internal accountability and so on.
5. Most of the CSOs depend on foreign funds instead creating domestic funds. The CSOs need to learn more about fund raising techniques and donor creation in domestic affairs. Government funds could be made also for NGOs and CSOs as government has given funds to some of the government organizations. Unconditional foreign funds could be created more by setting up more organizations like Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) and others.
  6. Another problem is that the CSOs are not specified what activities they are allowed to do and what activities are considered by them to be political. The government should specify their activities and define what activities are allowed to organizations of civil society. The role of civil society should not be limited in local and national activities; it should be promoted to the global activities also.

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