Introduction

The literature on link between civil society and democracy have own root in early liberal writings like those of Tocqueville,\(^1\) 20\(^{th}\) century political theorists\(^2\) like Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba. They identified the role of civil society in a democratic order as vital. They argued that political elements of many civil society organizations facilitate better awareness and a more informed citizenry, who make better voting choices, participate in politics, and hold government more accountable as a result. More recently, Robert Putnam\(^3\) argued that non-political organizations in a civil society are vital for democracy. This is because they build social capital, trust, and shared values, which are transferred to political sphere to help to bind the society together, facilitating an understanding of the interconnectedness of society and interest within it. Others, however, question what democratic civil society actually is?

\(^1\) Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville (July 29, 1805 – April 16, 1859) was a French political thinker and historian best known for his work, 'Democracy in America'.

\(^2\) Gabriel A. Almond (12 January, 1911-25 December, 2002) was an American political scientist best known for his pioneering work on comparative politics, political development, and political culture.

\(^3\) Robert David Putnam is a political scientist and Professor at Harvard University.
Some scholars noted that civil society actors hold power without anyone directly electing or appointing them.

A vibrant civil society is one that is able to monitor government and private business and provide alternative form of political participation in order to ensure the democratic governance at all levels affecting the lives of the citizens. These institutions come in many shapes and forms. The level of capacity and the leadership of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) determine civil society's roles in a democracy. The democracy of a nation chooses to develop depends on its history and circumstances; countries will necessarily be "differently democratic". But in all countries democracy is about much more than a single decision or hastily organized election. It requires a deeper process of political development to embed democratic values and culture in all parts of society – a process never formally completed. So the scope of works in consolidating democracy by the civil society will never be formally end rather increase gradually.

However defined, civil society has played an important role in the history of East Bengal from the East Pakistan period through modern times. It was active in the Bengali language movement of the 1950s, the independence movement that led to the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, and the popular unrest that led to the collapse of military regime in 1991. Civil society plays an increasingly active role in strengthening democracy in Bangladesh, through education, monitoring, policy advocacy, training of candidates, elected members, and government officials at the national and local levels, and facilitation of public-private dialogue on national development issues. NGOs generally enjoy public recognition and support at certain level for their role in national development efforts. While the media continues to be generally supportive of NGOs, there is scope for more thoughtful reporting on NGO activities and their impact and opportunities for NGOs to take a lead role in sharing information on the nuances of their work.
Neither CSOs nor NGOs are homogeneous. While pages could be devoted to fine point distinctions without resolving the debate, for practical purposes it is often difficult to delineate significant differences. At the simplest level of taxonomy, CSOs tend to focus on civil and political issues such as election monitoring or citizen participation in public decision-making, while NGOs tend to concentrate on social and economic development initiatives such as non-formal education, improved health service delivery, and access to credit. Many NGOs are also beginning to engage in business development and related activities. In recent years, there has been an increase in individual organizations and civil society coalitions that focus on specific issues, such as election monitoring or violence against women. Beyond these general distinctions the lines blur, with the work of some civil society organizations spanning both poles and working at virtually all points between.

Definitions, Elements and Framework of Analysis on the Civil Society Role in a Democracy

Defining civil society and democracy is a first step to articulate their role in a democracy. We need a framework that inclusively deals with the elements and identifies the areas of democracy where civil society roles are critical to deepening and consolidating democracy.

Defining Civil Society

There are myriad definitions of civil society. The London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society’s working definition is illustrative:

Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family
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and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.4

Civil society becomes more difficult to define as the currency and scope of use of the term increases, not least in Bangladesh. While there is general agreement that civil society comprises that part of society that is not under the direct control of the state, its nature, composition, and role are subject to a range of views beyond this broad definition. For some, civil society refers to an array of independent, voluntary groups, associations, and institutions. In Bangladesh, there is a tendency to use the term interchangeably with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This is understandable given the sheer number of local NGOs and the important role they play in national development. Although much of the discussion that follows focuses on governance issues associated with the legal status, regulation, and role of NGOs, civil society in Bangladesh actually encompasses a multitude

4 The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) is a specialist constituent college of the University of London. It describes itself as the world’s leading social science institution for teaching and research.
of actors beyond NGOs. A comprehensive list of CSOs\(^5\) includes development NGOs, professional associations such as the Bangladesh Bar Council, the print and broadcast media, community-based organizations (CBOs), women’s forums, local research organizations and think tanks, student organizations, trade unions, and cultural groups whose work helps to advance civil and political rights, equal access to justice, and the rule of law, or the development of institutions of democracy, pluralism, and good governance.

**Defining Democracy\(^6\)**

Democracy is a form of government in which state authority is derived from the citizen. There are two types of democracy - Direct Democracy (popular assemblies, popular legislative initiatives, recall, referenda, etc.) and Representative Democracy (parliamentary democracy, presidential democracy). Most existing democracies combine these types of democracy and feature elements from all forms. The key characteristics of democracy must have majority rule and minority rights (Obligation of the majority to take the rights and needs of minority groups into account), rule of law and fair trial (ensuring that a state has an autonomous legal order), respect for human rights (assuring the respect, protection and fulfillment of all human rights free from fear and free from want), political pluralism (diversity of ideas and opinions to secure structures flexible enough to adapt to changing needs but still remain stable) and free and fair elections (elections are democracy’s most fundamental and unique characteristic. They leave the decision on political

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\(^6\) Defining democracy is framed by author by reviewing standard text of democracy
leadership to those primarily affected by the Governmental system – the people).

Analytical Framework for Civil Society Role in a Democracy

Analysis of civil society role in a democracy constitutes of first, identifying essential elements of democracy and then finding how civil society works and interacts with those elements. It derives from framework, UK democratic Audit and International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in Stockholm, Sweden. The framework follows:

Table 1: Inclusive List of Democracy’s Elements and Search for Civil Society Role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Elements</th>
<th>Sub-list under Main Elements</th>
<th>Linkage and Value in Democratic Process</th>
<th>Relevance for Bangladesh ‘s Democracy and Civil Society Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship, Law, and Rights</td>
<td>National and citizenship. The rule of law and access to justice. Civil and Political rights.</td>
<td>These are the fundamental elements of the democratic state and without dealing these elements a country could not be assessed democratic.</td>
<td>In Bangladesh, nationhood, citizenship, civil and political rights have passed several junctures; still it needs more inputs for democratic consolidation. Civil society could provide legal aid and other inputs especially to increase access to justices and organize campaign to improve the rule of law.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 Democratic Audit is an active research organization which audits democracy and human rights in the UK and internationally.
8 IDEA, an intergovernmental organization, supports sustainable democracy worldwide.
9 The Table is constituted by the Author on the basis of IDEA’s introduced elements of democracy.
| Representaive and Accountable Government | Free and fair elections. Democratic role of political parties. Government effectiveness and accountability. Civilian control of the military and police. Minimizing corruption. | These elements are related to democratic governance including the governance of state, private and civil institutions. So these elements are closely related to good governance. A democracy could not sustain without good governance. | In Bangladesh, these elements are directly related to the crisis of democracy. Political parties will be the main actors to deal with these elements to develop democratic process and the democratization of government institutions. Civil society role is catalyst to strengthen the process. |
| Media and Popular Participation | Media in a democratic society. Political participation. Government responsiveness. Decentralization. | These are mainly the demand and citizen side elements of democracy. These also include interactive dimension between the government and citizen and is crucial for consolidation of democracy. | In Bangladesh, media and free press are frontline actors in campaign for consolidation of democracy. Media and NGOs could facilitate mobilization and popular participation of citizen which is critical for Bangladesh democracy. |
| Democracy beyond the state | Globalization and other international actors. UN system. World Bank, IMF, WTO. Donor community. International NGOs. Treaties, Agreements and Declarations. | External elements or international environment are crucial for the consolidation of democracy in a country. Under economic and political globalization democracy in a country faces positive and negative pressure beyond state. | Pressure from external actors is powerful for Bangladesh's political change. In shaping democracy, external actors have influences in decision-making process regarding both economic and political governance. Civil society including NGO sectors is highly coroneted with these elements. Specially, in the area of resources, knowledge and information sharing and supports. |
Role of Civil Society in a Democracy

If we conceptualize the civil society's role in more operational way, then objective of civil society role will be to expanding capabilities of the citizens to enlarge the choices to claim democratic governance. The link between democracy and civil society is described in figure 1.

Figure 1: Democracy and Civil Society: The Links

Role of Civil Society

Expanding capabilities of the citizens to enlarge the choices to claim democratic governance

- Increased access to justice
- Build campaign for political reform & reduce corruption
- Citizen monitoring responsible media
- Strengthen cooperation with International democratic movement

Citizenship Law, Rights

Representative and Accountable Government

Media & Popular Participation

External Actors

Democracy
Democratic institution and practice characterized by
- Contestation of power
- Participation of citizens
- Accountability of the powerful

The four major elements of democracy jointly contribute to democratic institutions and practices characterized by three indicators: contestation of power, participation of citizens and accountability of the powerful. Contestation of power is for creating protection against monopolization of power,

10 Derived and customized by the author.
participation of citizen is for democratization of political process and governance, accountability of powerful guarantees rule of law and justice. Civil society actors especially, NGOs work relating to citizen's increased access to justice affect citizenship, law and rights and eventually also affects democracy. The same way by building campaign for political reform and reducing corruption, citizen monitoring and linking international democratic movement affect democracy in both national and international context.

**Civil Society more specifically NGO Sectors' Role in Promoting Democracy in Bangladesh**

The role of most of the NGOs in Bangladesh is not directly related with the political process of democracy though some key advocacy NGOs touch all the elements of democracy like citizenship, law, representative and accountable government, media and popular participation. Advocacy NGOs are specialized in different areas of democratic political process. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) deals with corruptions; Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) works on free and fair election monitoring, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) and Ain-O-Shalish Kendra (ASK) works on public litigation, legal aid, legal advocacy & violence against women. LARD and Samata are working on land rights. Most of the development related NGOs involve themselves differently in promotion of democracy. But the effectiveness of such involvement still remains questionable.

**Service Delivery or Development oriented NGO-MFI: Profile and Roles**

The registration with the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) can serve as a reasonable indicator of development. By late 2004, some 1882 NGOs were registered with NGOAB, with approximately 1100-11200 of them receiving foreign fund. But
civil society is larger than that of NGOs. In Bangladesh, civil society includes 45,000 clubs, local level organizations, religious organizations, foundation and development oriented NGOs (mostly NGOAB registered) and also registered primarily with the department of social welfare. It also takes in national and local trade unions, professional and business associations and numerous local community based organizations. Among these, a small group of organizations stands out as having grown to unprecedented size and importance. Among the branches of development NGOs (according to the World Bank NGO survey), 40% were branches of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Association for Social Advancement (ASA). In another sample of 720 NGOs, 90% has programs in less than five (out of 64) districts and only two NGOs (BRAC and ASA) had programs in all districts. The dominance of very large NGOs is even more pronounced within the micro credit sector. There are about 1200 micro finance institutions (MFIs) in Bangladesh, most of which are NGOs, but the industry is dominated by four large MFIs viz. BRAC, Grameen, ASA and Proshika. They combinedly serve about 14.2 million clients, and 87% of all non-government micro credit borrowers. After the above-mentioned 'big four', there are only 10 MFIs, which have more than 100,000 borrowers.

NGO health expenditure has expanded over the past decade but remain relatively small in comparison to private health spending. NGOs’ spending on health and nutrition activities are 9% of the total health expenditure and 0.3% of GDP, which is a three-fold growth between 1996 and 2002. It indicates the health services targeting poor has been increased.

NGO education services are targeted to the poor covering around 46% child education services, with a further 25% involved in adult education. As many as 1.5 million children or around 8% of all currently enrolled primary students are in
NGO primary schools. Of these 1.2 million alone are enrolled under BRAC network.

Education is key to building democratic society. Civic and political education is directly related with democratic process. Without functional and effective literacy, civic or political education could not be possible. NGOs' education service is creating precondition for civic and political education that are essential to democratic transition and consolidation in Bangladesh.

Advocacy NGOs: Contributions to Democracy

NGOs' involvement in advocacy work in the 1970s and 1980s was sporadic and mainly limited to the "demonstrative effect," that is instance when NGOs own activities highlighted the need for policy shift. The emergence of multi-party electoral democracy made space for the scaling up of advocacy. The FEMA was set up as an independent election monitoring alliance watchdog in 1995. The year 1996 saw the establishment of Bangladesh Chapter of Transparency International, which focused on anticorruption activities. The scope and nature of NGO advocacy is influenced by (a) official control over NGOs through formal registration requirement and other legislation (b) perception of the fine line between party political activism and advocacy from within civil society, and (c) an NGO's ability to protect its political space through support from donors, NGO champions, and influential individual within government and through media activism.

Emergence of Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB)

Emergence of CPD and TIB has significance in the current context of understanding the role of civil society in Bangladesh. CPD is seen as policy and knowledge institute to
democratize policy formulation. TIB exclusively works for building "citizen movement" against corruption.

CPD established in 1993 by Professor Rehman Sobhan with support from leading civil society institutions in Bangladesh, is mandated by its Deed of Trust to serve the growing demand that originates from the emerging civil society of Bangladesh for a more participatory and accountable development process. CPD seeks to address this felt need by way of organizing multi-stakeholder consultations by conducting research on issues of critical national and regional interests, through dissemination of knowledge and information on key developmental issues, and by influencing the policy making process in the country.

In the process, CPD strives to bridge the gap between empirical research and policy advocacy through a sustained effort in public policy analysis. CPD endeavors to create a national environment conducive to open public discussion on important policy issues with a view to ensuring domestic ownership over the policy agenda and also building a broad-based support for such policies. Over the years, CPD has grown as Bangladesh's premier think-tank and has established its credibility as one of the very few places in Bangladesh where the government and opposition political parties agree to sit around the dialogue table and conduct an informed discussion with the civil society.

TIB is the Bangladesh chapter of Transparency International - an International NGO that since 1996 has been exposing official corruption, advocating administrative reform to improve transparency, and conducting research on related issues. TIB is engaged in grassroots mobilization through citizen committees that work to generate demand for good governance at the local level.
Assessment of CPD and TIB in the Democracy of Bangladesh

CPD is successful in reaching policy to people and doing researches in different issues relating to policy. CPD has close relationship with both printing and electronic media to disseminate their policy position and research findings. CPD also tries to mobilize non-partisan citizen opinions about politics and governance of Bangladesh. But effectiveness of CPD's role in building democratic society is limited. They are an academic group that could play a role only in an enabling environment. CPD is not an agent for organizing and mobilizing citizen movement.

TIB, on the other hand, genuinely focuses some aspects of pervasive corruptions. But their methodology and quality of data is not beyond question. The effectiveness of TIB to minimize the corruption is limited as it is only a knowledge institution involved in anti-corruption drive nationally.

Democracy Linkage of NGOs Advocacy

Most of the advocacy NGOs focus on issues affecting the poor (e.g. violence against women, dowry, and access to justice, housing and education) and are seen as fully democratic related with civil political and social rights of majority citizens. By the mid 1990s, development NGOs began to build new alliances and new strategies for influencing and challenging official policies and practices, in collaboration with other branches of civil society. Now the question is the outcomes of NGO advocacy efforts in terms of building democratic society and democratic political system. It is difficult to answer straight. Nevertheless, some of the positive and negative outcomes are highlighted as follows:
Positive Outcomes

- NGOs generate information, knowledge relating to democratic norms and practice which empower citizens to argue with the state and political actors;
- NGOs build some specialized organizations (ex. FEMA/CPD) which are a part of institutionalization of democracy;
- NGOs' campaign for good governance also sets some democratic standards for the state actors;
- NGOs build relationship with the regional and global civil society actors, which are helpful to develop regional and global democracy.

Negative Outcomes

- NGOs' advocacy is criticized as donor dependence not home grown;
- Internal governance and financial transparency of NGOs are not beyond questions;
- In many cases NGOs are not free from partisan politics;
- NGOs could fail to prove own accountability and transparency to their targeted participants or beneficiaries including different independent actors to whom they interact.

Therefore, understanding the role and impact of NGO advocacy for democracy in Bangladesh requires understanding the political space, in which they operate, the challenges and the constraints they face. Where the "Political" line is drawn is a matter of continuous, conflict between NGOs, other civil society actors, political parties and the state. This has been demonstrated most clearly since 2001 in the form of official action to deregister or halt the activities of five NGOs (including Proshika) for taking partisan view during voter
Emergence of NGOs, Civil Society and Democracy in Bangladesh

Education campaigns in the run-up of the 1996 elections. The break up of Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) and emergence of NGO Federation Bangladesh clearly indicate differences of opinions among NGO sector. Thus, it can be said that the NGO sector itself needs democratic reform.

Current Crisis of Democracy in Bangladesh: Civil Society’s Role in Democratic Transition and Consolidations

Current crisis of democracy in Bangladesh needs new crisis studies, which clearly unfolds the root cause and give a direction of democratic transition and consolidation. We find corruption is a strong cause of current democratic crisis. Here corruption is not simple. Corruption is multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral. Political economy of corruption in Bangladesh equates power with corruption. Actually, corruption is a manifestation of erosion of values, degrading socio-political practices and ineffectiveness of law enforcement instruments.

Define in this way, three types of corruption can be identified in democratic societies. Figure 1 highlights certain relationships between the populace and the political, administrative and judicial elite. The three types of corruption in such a system are shown in bold dotted arrows. These three types of corruption differ from each other in terms of the types of decision that are influenced by corruption, by the source of (misused) power of the decision maker and hence the types of models that can be used to explain corruption. But these types have correlation and sometimes they reinforce one another and collapse the system and exactly this is what has happened in Bangladesh.

"Grand Corruption" (relationship 1) generally refers to the acts of the political elite by which they exploit their power to make economic policies. As elected officials, or in the government’s role of a "benevolent social guardian",...
politicians are supposed to make resource allocation decisions based solely upon the interests of their principles - the populace. They, of course, have to balance the interests of various segments of society as well as their own desire to remain in power. Corrupt political elite can change either the national policies or the implementation of national policies to serve its own interests at some cost to the citizens. Public spending is diverted to those sectors where gains from corruption are greatest...little attention is paid to whether the needs of the collectivity are served by these works or services.11 "Bureaucratic Corruption" (relationships 2) refers to corrupt acts of the appointed bureaucrats in their dealings with either their superiors (the political elite) or with the public.

"Legislative Corruption" (relationship 3) refers to the manner and the extent to which the voting behavior of legislators can be influenced. Legislators can be bribed by interest groups to enact legislation that can change the economic rents associated with assets. This type of corruption would include "vote-buying," whether by legislators in their attempt to be re-elected or by officials in the executive branch in their efforts to have some legislation enacted.12

CORRUPT RELATIONSHIPS IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Elects

Political Leaders

Appointed

Legislators

Make public policy

Bureaucrats

Provide services

Enact Laws

Population

Receives benefits according to each member’s ability to influence each decision maker

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Implications of Corruption Model in our Political System

In Bangladesh, the corruption model fully worked and led to collapse of democracy. The graph shows the three ways of corruptions and in the context of Bangladesh all the three elements mutually supporting and enforcing corruptions in all sectors in our society. In current discourse on democratic consolidation we could identify five critical issues:

First: Success of Anti-corruption drive

Second: Success of political party’s reform

Third: Create enabling political environment for free and fair election

Fourth: Reconcile social and political forces for sustainable democratic systems

Fifth: Demonstration of governance capacity and skills to promise economic wellbeing for the majority of citizens

To address the critical issues relating to democratic transition and consolidation, a strong leadership is required who can form greater alliance of key actors.

Leadership Challenges for Democratic Transition and Consolidations

- Establish transparent and accountable political practices
- Facilitate anti-corruption values and practices into inner governance of political parties
- Formulate and implement national strategy of reform in democratic institutions
- Count the backlash of anti-corruption and reforms drive and take immediate measure to mitigate specially which goes against poorer section of the citizen
• Check the vulnerabilities and risks factors of the reform and emphasize on sustainability.

1/11 is now no longer a date only. It is a new historic point of change. The changes naturally trigger a process of shaping new political and power relations. It is still uncertain how far this change contributes to democratic transitions and consolidations.

Conclusions and Possible Civil Society Role in Current Phase of Crisis

Theoretically, civil society works between state and market. Civil society could take facilitating and catalyst role in shaping democracy. The following role could be suggested for civil society actors:

First, organize non-partisan citizen opinions in shaping democratic transitions and consolidations

Second, promote civil society solidarity by negotiation, liaison and networking in democratic questions

Third, provide research and knowledge support to shape democracy

Fourth, explore innovation for reconciliations in political practices to diffuse confronting behavior and attitudes

Fifth, provide civic and political training support for political worker to enhance the capacity for democratic participation in political process.
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Discussant

Emergence of NGOs, Civil Society and Democracy in Bangladesh

Professor Ataur Rahman

- The civil society should engage constructively with the political parties to strengthen the foundation of democracy.
- Civil society or civil association or the "Third Sector" has become a powerful force in democratic governance and discussion. It can play a pivotal role for a gradual movement towards democratic politics.
- Emphasis should be put on the cultural variations within or among nations in assessing the civil society role.
- Strengthening of civil society in a culture of corruption might undermine the representative politics.
Discussant

Emergence of NGOs, Civil Society and Democracy in Bangladesh

Professor M. Shahiduzzaman

- The role of external NGOs is not adequate and it does not serve the purpose of the commoners.
- Comparative perspective is missing in the paper. The figures given in the paper to understand various elements of democracy, although, a standard portrayal process, fail to capture the ground realities' picture.
- The problem with the expression of civil society is inherently a problem of entrapment.
- There should have been a roadmap in the paper regarding the proposed transition to democracy by end of December 2008.