

## The civil society must confront its past failures



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Bangladesh's political landscape was dominated by the Awami League for the past 15 years. Under its prolonged rule, the government faced allegations of corruption, electoral manipulation, and authoritarianism. The ruling party bore direct responsibility for much of this, but I believe that civil society played a role as well. Intellectuals, academics, journalists, and human rights defenders often did not challenge the government effectually enough. Their inaction also allowed democratic values to erode.

Civil society is meant to hold the government accountable. In Bangladesh, certain individuals voiced their outrage, but civil society collectively remained passive on controversial issues. A clear example of this was the forced resignation of Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha in 2017. His ruling on executive power was significant for judicial independence, but instead of showing solidarity, many remained silent and some even distanced themselves. Though a few exceptions existed, the overall inaction of civil society left executive interference unchecked and set a dangerous precedent.

Another key event was the 2018 general election. Allegations of voter suppression and irregularities surfaced, yet civil society failed to respond with the necessary force. Organisations like Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan) raised

concerns about ballot stuffing and voter intimidation, but these warnings were largely ignored. Most public figures avoided addressing these issues, thus weakening the push for meaningful electoral reforms. Their reluctance contributed to a sense of impunity around the election, further damaging democratic norms.

Human rights violations also multiplied during this period, including a rise in extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. The abusers often targeted political nonconformists, journalists, and activists. A horrifying example was the 2018 killing of Ekramul Haque, a local political figure who was shot dead in an anti-drug operation. Chilling audio recordings of his final moments, in which he and his family were heard pleading with officers, circulated on social media, yet civil society remained muted. International organisations like Human Rights Watch condemned the act, but many domestic voices hesitated to speak out. This failure to address human rights abuses contributed to a climate of fear that silenced many who might have otherwise challenged the government.

The Digital Security Act (DSA) targeted journalists and activists. This reflected civil society's lack of sustained action. Shafiqul Islam Kajol, a journalist who covered politically sensitive issues, was

abducted in 2020. Although his case gained some media attention, only a few organisations, like Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), spoke out. However, most intellectuals failed to engage with the broader implications of the law that led to his disappearance. This lack of sustained advocacy allowed the DSA to remain a powerful tool for silencing dissent. Without consistent

pressure from civil society, the law continued to be used to suppress freedom of speech. The student-led quota reform and road safety movements in 2018 further illustrated civil society's inaction. Students took to the streets, demanding transparency and accountability, but they were met with violent crackdowns by the ruling party's student wing, the Chhatra League. The repression, especially the attacks on students

at Dhaka University, shocked the nation. But some academics, who could have supported the students, stayed on the sidelines or stigmatised the protesters. Some professors sympathised privately, but the lack of collective action from the academic community, as seen during this year's movement, reflected a broader unwillingness to challenge the

Many university authorities refused to take a clear position instead of defending free expression and debate, which allowed the dangerous status quo to persist. Corruption during the Awami League's tenure provided yet another opportunity for civil society to demand greater government accountability, but those moments passed without

issue to be framed as an attack on the nation's dignity rather than a call for oversight, civil society missed an important opportunity to push for meaningful change.

The 2015 BASIC Bank scandal, where over Tk 4,500 crore was misappropriated through fraudulent loans, further exposed civil society's lack of action. Sheikh Abdul Hye Bacchu, the bank's chairman, was widely suspected of involvement, but his connections to the ruling party shielded him from serious consequences. Civil society could have pressured the government to act, but again, the issue faded from public discourse and no significant reforms followed, and corruption continued to thrive.

These examples demonstrate that civil society has not effectively fulfilled its role as a watchdog for the people. Its failure to speak out against judicial interference, human rights abuses, electoral fraud, and corruption contributed to the consolidation of government power. Individual voices tried to resist, but the broader civil society often stayed quiet. This silence allowed the ruling party to act with minimal resistance.

Rebuilding civil society's credibility will require acknowledging these past failures and committing to holding the government accountable, regardless of who is in power. An admission of its failure would not just be a symbolic gesture; it is a necessary step towards restoring public trust. Civil society must reclaim its role in defending democratic principles, human rights, and transparency. Only by confronting its shortcomings can it regain the moral authority needed to challenge the government and truly advocate for the people. The path to accountability begins with a simple admission: civil society has not succeeded where it should have, and it must now make amends.



The ruling party often targeted political nonconformists, journalists, and activists, but the majority of the civil society remained mute.

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government directly.

A particularly tragic case was the 2019 murder of Abrar Fahad, a BUET student who was beaten to death for criticising a government policy online. While the murder sparked outrage, most university officials and intellectuals remained quiet about the broader issue of political violence on campuses. This demonstrates how deeply the culture of violence and fear had permeated even the country's educational institutions.

sustained action. The 2012 Padma Bridge corruption scandal, which led to the World Bank pulling its funding, was an opportunity to push for transparency. Although the case was never fully proven in court, it raised concerns about corruption in large-scale government projects. Yet instead of insisting on government accountability, many intellectuals and commentators echoed the government's rhetoric of national pride. By allowing the