

Rebuilding civic spaces: A new era for civil society in Bangladesh?

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Women protest for garment worker rights in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Photo Credit: [Flickr/Gerry Popplestone](#)

In the first week of August, as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina left Bangladesh ending her 15 years in power, we had just completed a draft report on the state of civil society, ready to submit to a funding partner.

Our interviews and discussions painted a bleak picture. Against the backdrop of the demise of democratic institutions under the previous government, our analysis highlighted the challenges faced by civil society in fulfilling its multiple functions – from addressing gaps in basic service delivery to protecting and promoting human rights, and fostering effective, informed, and accountable governance.

We found that Bangladeshi civic spaces had not only shrunk as a result of democratic regression, but they were also fragmented. In such contexts, as **has been well documented**, civic spaces tend to becoming narrowed, obstructed, or repressed – when powerful elites impose legal and administrative restrictions on freedom of speech and association, and target specific organisations through legal action or intimidation to force them to cease their activities. In recent years, several laws were amended or passed that **enabled the government to target journalists and human rights activists**, many of whom were jailed. By December 2023, the global civil society coalition CIVICUS **downgraded Bangladesh's civic space rating** to “closed” – its worst rating – due to the massive government crackdown on opposition and independent critics ahead of the national elections.

Over the past few years, the government's dominant narrative – of which it would brook no criticism – was that they had produced a “successful economy”. Any discussion of rising inequalities, access to justice, or the actual state of the economy itself was deemed unacceptable. Those working directly on these issues faced the greatest pressure, and many human rights organisations did not survive. The government's “successful economy” narrative limited civil society's role to basic service delivery to citizens. The government reinforced this division by imparting positive attention, and sometimes resources, to organisations working on service delivery. In response, many organisations chose to align their work with the

economic growth agenda, focusing exclusively on service delivery and avoiding any criticism of the government to protect their employees. While several alliances emerged, this only further deepened divisions and isolated rights-based organisations.

Delving into the impact on civic spaces, we found that rising anxiety and fear, coupled with reduced funding options, left civil society organisations (CSOs) deeply divided on issues of human rights versus service delivery. The government's actions had forced CSOs to choose, eliminating the possibility of engaging in both or constructively criticising government policy. Many organisations partnered with the government, aligning with its policies and focusing on improved access to services. Over time, some shifted to this role reluctantly and dispiritedly, while others remained as isolated advocacy groups. Think tanks were divided: some conducted research to substantiate government's policies, while others tried to encourage the government to address some of the bigger underlying development challenges. Some academics questioned whether the term "civil society" should be reserved only for those committed to the idea of critical opposition, given the government's effective pacification of numerous organisations and associations.

Then, in the space of a few weeks, the student-led revolution occurred, dramatically shifting the dynamics. As the Interim Government, led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus and assisted by a significant number of CSO advisers, turns its attention to challenges such as the [devastating floods](#) in the east of the country, [restoring law and order](#) and the country's [economic crisis](#), development partners will be pivoting many of their efforts to consider how best to contribute to forging a different way forward that could include serious and substantive democratic renewal.

Efforts to do this will require confronting the state of civic spaces that we found in our analysis. Some of the divisions we documented run deep and will not be overcome overnight.

But there are positives: our investigation highlighted the resilience of civil society despite government efforts to suppress dissent and criticism. The passionate and energetic discussions within civil society not only critiqued the government but also examined its own role in the country's development. Despite manifold challenges under the previous government, many organisations had continued to work strategically and politically to identify allies within government, stay under the radar to continue their work, and build coalitions and networks to strengthen civic space.

Rebuilding civil society in Bangladesh requires more than supporting individual organisations; it needs a systemic approach. This will require efforts to build bridges

and facilitate dialogue between organisations in a volatile environment when new divisions can emerge suddenly and unexpectedly.

Bangladesh's civic spaces contain an incredible diversity of organisations, including not only traditional CSOs and NGOs, but also hybrid organisations, independent and political research institutions and think tanks, and numerous youth organisations that came before and will likely emerge from the student movement. Strengthening civil society will require a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences each has had over the past 15 years. A considerate approach, for instance, to the challenges that rights-based organisations have endured which, in some cases, has involved significant personal suffering; or mindfulness of the time that some might require to adjust to an environment in which self-censorship is no longer required.

These are transformative times for Bangladesh. Efforts to revitalise the civic ecosystem will play a central role in shaping the country's future democratic institutions.

This post is part of a collaborative series with The Asia Foundation.

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