

# STRONG INSTITUTIONS FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE

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## Good governance: How the media and the public see it



MEER AHSAN HABIB

The world at present is encountering remarkable challenges in promoting governance, democracy, transparency, press freedom and economic development. For sustainable development, good governance is a must for any nation. Media is an important source of information and it plays a critically important role in shaping a healthy democracy and bolster good governance. But there is always a dilemma in understanding good governance. Actors of good governance include government officials, politicians, bureaucrats, development partners and civil society members, who tend to define and analyse governance within their interests and scope of work. But in general, governance refers to the ability of the government to adopt and enforce laws and policies and deliver public service regardless of the fact that the government is authoritarian or democratic. From the viewpoint of the United Nations Development Programme, good governance, in conjunction with democracy and the rule of law, is essential for sustainable development including sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty and hunger (UNDP, 2014).

In Bangladesh, there has been little or no research to understand the direct relationship between media and governance. Whether we talk about the conventional print, electronic or social media, an independent and unfettered press is a prerequisite for democratisation and guaranteeing good governance which comprises a pluralist platform for political expression, transparency, accountability, rule of law and, last but not the least, freedom of expression.

Definitions of both governance and good governance are varied. Governance is variously considered as an end in its own right. For instance, international assistance agencies state

the goal of good governance is to protect and advance human rights. According to UNESCO (2005), good governance includes notions of greater participation by civil society in decision-making, instituting the rule of law, anti-corruption, transparency, accountability, poverty reduction and human rights. As for political scientists or international relations scholars, good governance is often seen as a means of sustainable development and the reduction of poverty. For instance, rule of law is helpful for economic growth (Reed, 2004); reducing corruption is considered an effective strategy for increasing the assets and therefore wealth of the poor (Gupta, S Davoodi, & Alonso-Terme, 2002). The concept of governance is contested. In terms of the usage of good governance, scholars usually express approval not only for a type of government (often democracy) and its related political values (e.g. respect for human rights) but also for additional components (e.g. political policies in the economic sphere). In fact, good governance is not merely about government itself, but usually means government plus additional components. For instance, the United Nations (2012) defines good governance as policies for sustainable human development; a government that is democratic, decentralised, empowering and accountable, which includes functioning legislatures, legal and judicial systems to protect the rule of law, the adoption of human rights and various electoral processes.

### Why media matters in guaranteeing good governance

In a democracy, it is commonly understood and agreed that an independent and free media is an integral part of governance. UN agencies and all the multilateral development partners strongly promote a free press and civic freedom. For instance, the year 2005 marked a significant development in the history of press freedom. UNESCO World Press Freedom Day was observed

with the theme "Media and Good Governance" and emphasised the role the media could play in bolstering good governance around the world. It called on member states to spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law at the international level. Since then press freedom has been discussed as an integral part of good governance. Democracy and media walk side by side in ensuring good governance. In doing so, there is no other alternative but the existence of an environment conducive to freedom of expression guaranteed by the state. However, Bangladesh at present obviously appears not to fit the mould—thanks to formal restrictions through legislations like ICT Act 2006 and Digital Security Act 2018. Regardless of the situation, the question remains as to how the media should portray any government as accountable, responsive and effective to the social needs of the citizens whether it is authoritarian or democratic. If we want an answer, the state and the government must acknowledge that the media play three key roles in the modern day.

First, the notion of the press as a watchdog has lasted for more than 200 years (Coronel, 2010). Public offices must remain transparent and accountable and it is only the media that can act as an information source, whether these offices are running in line with the principles of good governance. It acts as a watchdog and ensures checks and oversight, on the political leadership in particular, both in public and private domain. Hudson (2008) contends that the media performs six important functions in a democratic society, including information, investigation, analysis, social empathy, public forum and mobilisation. The media exposes abuse of power, maladministration and corruption and thus promotes accountability and transparency. But there is an opposite view that too much exposure results in

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lack of confidence and public trust in public institutions which triggers instability within the governance system.

Second, media is a civic forum for informed policy discussion and debate involving government, its critics, informed citizens and other actors. It thus works as a channel between the governed and government and provides a public forum to discuss any issues that affect their lives. Thus, the media connects the state and citizens by promoting debate and discussions about any political development or contemporary issues and informs the public about the stance of the policymakers on such issues. If channels of commu-

nication reflect the cultural and social pluralism and diversity of society, then various opinions and different voices could be represented and heard in the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). Thus, a media in society or state that is independent and free from government interventions plays a central role by offering a public domain, public realm or public sphere and contributes in shaping up rational and balanced state power.

The third is somewhat even bigger than the first two and that is the role of the media as a national agenda setter. As an agenda setter, media has the power to direct public attention to any contemporary political or economic issue. Media here does not remain as a mere source of information but influences the citizens to involve themselves to a specific issue. In democracies, the agenda-setting role of the media involves informing the elected officials and public servants about public concerns so that their aspirations are addressed properly and in a timely manner. So, in countries like Bangladesh, elected officials, policymakers and public servants acknowledge the media's role as a bridge between them and citizens—media will report or highlight any critical issue that needs urgent attention. For instance, during emergencies like a natural calamity, media provides vital information to the government officials and helps them make informed and timely decisions to combat the disaster. But this role becomes useless if the government tries to conceal the actual scenario and launch a counter narrative. The agenda-setting role of the media may also influence the government to fast track its response to any news related to politics, corruption or scandal etc. It also tells the government what the people are thinking about a contemporary issue.