

# ‘When people with integrity begin to rise, corruption fails’

Narayan Adhikari is Nepal country director and co-founder and Sanjeeta Pant is programmes and learning manager at Accountability Lab. In a conversation with Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star, they discuss the Accountability Lab’s Integrity Icon initiative, which recognises and awards public servants (across 15 countries), nominated by citizens and others for demonstrating exceptional integrity at work and their personal lives. It is an attempt to address the perception of widespread corruption among civil servants in these countries, and encourage greater integrity in the profession.

**What motivated you to create Accountability Lab and the Integrity Icon initiative?**

Narayan Adhikari (NA): When we started Accountability Lab, we wanted to do something positive, inspiring, innovative and creative, especially when we talk about working around promoting good governance. When I was working in various youth campaigns, we did a lot of anti-corruption events. But the results were not satisfactory, because if you keep pointing fingers at others, they will do the same. You are not creating an environment of trust, to co-create something that is more valuable to society. That is when we came up with the idea of Integrity Icon.

Integrity Icon aims to build an ecosystem of accountability and integrity in governance, through promoting individuals within the public service – identifying them, using their innovative ways, using the power of their personal honesty and

around what civil service needs to look like.

**What were some of the initial challenges that you saw?**

NA: Many people were sceptical about the idea. Of course, we need scepticism – it is good for a healthy conversation. But even governments asked questions like, “Do you think you are going to find anyone with integrity?” First, people doubted whether we would find anyone with integrity; second, even if we did, they were not going to continue with their good behaviour. Third, the government would push back. And finally, it would not make any difference because the whole system is so corrupt and bad.

Our conviction was, of course, that the system is not working and is corrupt. But if you want to bring change, you have to disrupt the system. And the Integrity Icon project is disrupting the process of how we fight corruption in governance, to some extent.

to think, “Amazing, I have five houses and cars and I am sending my kids to foreign universities?” Or would you like to be remembered as a person with integrity?

Compared to other jobs, the salary and benefits of government jobs are also not bad. It’s just a matter of how you manage your personal life. Some people say they have a low salary, and that is why they are corrupt. But our Integrity Icons go and explain to them: “Look, if you do your jobs with honesty, with the benefits and facilities you get from the government job, in five years, you will buy a small car with white money. In maybe 8-10 years’ time, you can buy a house because you can get a soft loan from the government, and you will also have money to pay the school fees of your children. This is how I have done it, without corruption.”

If you can do all that, what else do you need? Unless you make bad personal choices, you don’t have to do any corrupt activities. Having

# Thank you, Bangladesh, for so much passion

A letter from Argentina



Fernando José Kohutiak is a journalist and magister in international relations in Argentina.

FERNANDO JOSÉ KOHUTIAK

More than 16,000 kilometres separate the cities of Buenos Aires and Dhaka, the capitals of Argentina and Bangladesh. Two very different countries, but with the same passion: football.

The Bangalee people should know that this third championship for the Argentines brings us joy in the midst of so much sadness and restlessness caused by the political class of our country. Everyone has a certain degree of responsibility for the high rates of poverty, unemployment, and insecurity.

Sunday was a day to celebrate, to forget even for a few hours about all the problems that afflict us on a daily basis – the problems that have their roots in the greed of unscrupulous politicians.

It was and is a time to hug our families and friends to celebrate. That is why, from a distance, we Argentines must embrace the Bangladeshis, and thank them for the unconditional support they have shown to our team. Support that I hope will be rewarded, sportingly, both by the fans and by the leaders of Argentine football.

Until this World Cup, we knew little or nothing about Bangladesh, so during the World Cup, we began to search for information and learn more about this Asian country of barely 148,000 sq km, with a population of over 165 million.

We were unaware that Argentines such as Héctor Parodi, Mariano Caporale, Luciano Theiler, Hernán Barcos and Raúl Becerra had spent time in the Bangladesh league at some point in their careers. We were also unaware that Ariel Colman had been a physical trainer for that country’s team.

The word “Bangladesh” only took us back to two things. One was the benefit concert that was organised in 1971 by George Harrison, with the participation of Bob Dylan, Ravi Shankar, Ringo Starr, Eric Clapton and Billy Preston, among others. The other is an Argentine rock song called “No te enamores nunca de aquel marinero bengalí (Don’t ever fall in love with that Bangalee sailor),” by the group Los Abuelos de la Nada.

The easy and quick access to information that the internet allows us, enabled us, among other things, to discover that the love and passion that the Bangladeshis feel for our

team did not start on September 6, 2011, when Argentina and Nigeria faced each other in a friendly match at the Bangabandhu Stadium in Dhaka. On that occasion, Argentina defeated Nigeria 3-1, and Lionel Messi was applauded by the public.

To understand the madness that the Bangalees manifested throughout this World Cup for our players and especially for Messi, we Argentines should have read a little about the history of Bangladesh, about its independence from Pakistan in 1971 and, above all, about its years as part of a territory that was under occupation and

dictatorship with the approval of FIFA organised a World Cup in the country, and we were champions for the first time. Then, after the 1986 title and the 1990 sub-championship, the Argentine teams were received at the Casa Rosada by the then Argentine Presidents, Raúl Alfonsín and Carlos Menem, respectively. This time, it did not happen, at least for the moment, but President Alberto Fernández decided to decree a national holiday for the team to celebrate with the people. Celebration that was chaotic due to its disorganisation and the large number of people. Some sources estimate more than four million people had come out to the streets to celebrate.

As Argentina advanced in the tournament, the government informed, through the foreign ministry, that it wanted to reopen its embassy in Bangladesh to increase the bilateral relationship between the two countries, mainly in the commercial aspect that has great potential for growth.



PHOTO: RASHED SHUJON

Though thousands of miles apart, the celebrations in Argentina and Bangladesh on December 18, 2022 were not much different.

domination of the United Kingdom until 1947. Just like our Malvinas Islands (Falkland Islands) have been since 1833.

A common feeling towards British politics made the Bangalees feel close to the Argentines, especially on June 22, 1986, when Argentina faced England in the quarterfinals of the World Cup in Mexico and defeated them with two goals from Diego Maradona, who surely today would be proud of the Bangalee people and would appreciate so much fervour for the light blue and white.

Love that should be rewarded by the Argentines in the next qualifying rounds, with the hope that the Bangladeshi team will qualify for their first World Cup.

A sporting achievement that, if it comes to fruition, I hope will not be used politically as is usually done in Argentina. In 1978, the military

In 1978, the former de facto President Jorge Rafael Videla was the one who closed our embassy in Dhaka, which had been inaugurated on October 30, 1973, with a decree of President Juan Domingo Perón.

The current Argentine Foreign Minister Santiago Cafiero recalled that in August, he held a meeting with his Bangladeshi counterpart, AK Abdul Momen, at the UN’s 10th Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and stressed that they had added USD 876 million in exports to Bangladesh in 2021 – an all-time high.

That is why Cafiero has already confirmed that he will visit Dhaka on the occasion of the reopening of the Argentine diplomatic headquarters in Bangladesh, after participating in the next G20 Foreign Ministers’ Summit to be held in India in 2023.



Narayan Adhikari



Sanjeeta Pant

integrity as a role model to inspire more public servants, citizens and the younger generation. Then we can really have a governance system that would work for the people – one that is inclusive, efficient, effective, and pro-citizen.

**What positive results have you seen from the Integrity Icon initiative?**

Sanjeeta Pant (SP): One positive result is how the icons themselves have been able to grow within their organisations or departments. When you talk about anti-corruption in governance, it is a pretty big issue. There are very interesting stories that have come out from all over the place, of how these icons have been promoted within their organisations because of this recognition, or given certain responsibilities that relate to the transparency and accountability of their organisations, because they are seen as “Integrity Icons.”

The general perception of most people about civil service in a lot of South Asian and African countries, where we predominantly work, is that the government is inefficient and corrupt. A lot of people don’t want to go into civil service. We want to change that perception, so we identify young people who want to go and work with these icons to see for themselves – and oftentimes they come back feeling inspired. Because what we don’t recognise is that sometimes the civil servants are working in very difficult circumstances, with limited resources. A lot of people feel like that is how they can justify being corrupt. But there are people who are still showing up for their jobs, who actually sacrifice a lot to perform their duties with integrity. Our job is to create that ecosystem – and also changing norms and behaviours

**How has your initiative motivated people who are in public service?**

NA: For many people, getting a government job might be the last resort. But for some people, it’s always the first choice. But why do they want to get a government job? Because it’s a nice job, they get a lot of opportunities within the government, such as getting education scholarships. And in the end, they get a good pension. So, peoples’ motivation for getting into

**Peoples’ motivation for getting into the government is not really about making a difference and fulfilling their duties honestly. After they retire, they may own a big house, make lots of money, but oftentimes, they are not really satisfied and they are restless because, internally, they know they have done nothing other than amassing more wealth.**

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What we are saying is, imagine: after you retire, how would you like to be remembered? Would you like

integrity is not just about how you do your job; it’s also about how you manage your personal life.

**You have now expanded the Integrity Icon initiative to 15 countries. How is that working from country to country?**

NA: We basically share our experience and process, but we are also very open to incorporating the local context. Public service system is different everywhere and the context is not the same either. So, the basic idea is to find the right individuals that are honest and inspiring, highlighting them, engaging them, and to really try and make our governance system transparent and effective.

SP: And sometimes you just need one or two individuals. We have seen that in many cases, including with the Nepali electricity authority, where we had a load-shedding problem for almost two decades because of lots of corruption and mismanagement. Then we saw just one person coming in, and he changed it almost overnight. That goes to show that sometimes if you have the right person doing the right thing, they can really change the tide.

**Do you think this initiative will be a good fit here in Bangladesh?**

NA: I would really like to see the Integrity Icon in Bangladesh. It’s not really about “naming and shaming,” it’s really about “naming and faming.” And I see there is a lot of potential in Bangladesh, with a lot of young people and a vibrant civil society and media. Bangladesh is a special country with a long and diverse history of bureaucracy. And it also has many challenges. To some extent, this initiative could help to overcome them; because when people with integrity begin to rise, corruption fails.

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## বিজ্ঞপ্তি

এতদ্বারা আগারগাঁও/ফার্মগেট/ধানমন্ডি এর সন্নিহিত ভবন মালিকদের অবগতির জন্য জানানো যাচ্ছে যে, পাবনা বিজ্ঞান ও প্রযুক্তি বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের সম্মানিত অতিথিগণের চাকাতে অবস্থানের জন্য গাড়ির গ্যারেজ সহ একটি মানসম্মত পাকা ভবন / ফ্ল্যাট ভাড়া করা প্রয়োজন। যা পাবিপ্রবির অস্থায়ী চাকাসহ অতিথি ভবন / ফ্ল্যাট হিসেবে ব্যবহার হবে।

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(বিজন কুমার ব্রহ্মা)  
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