



VISUAL: SHEIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

## ANTI-CORRUPTION

### drives fail, not inevitably but deliberately



IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

Executive Director,  
Transparency International  
Bangladesh (TIB).

Corruption is too insidious a menace to be controlled by ad-hoc, pick-and-choose measures, the way chronic cancer cannot be helped by some selected painkillers. Our successive governments have been high on rhetoric against corruption, but low on delivery, and efficient in enabling and protecting it by piecemeal and frivolous measures, making a mockery of the purpose. In the process, the state was transformed into Kleptocracy during sixteen years since 2009. Public expectation was high of the Interim Government (IG) that it would initiate the much-needed strategic, legal, and institutional foundations against corruption that their successor regimes would carry forward. It has been just the opposite.

The IG will be remembered for unprecedented ad-hocism in governance, lacking a strategic approach, that created numerous counterproductive legal and operational risks contradictory to the core mandate of state reform in general and anti-corruption in particular. Too often, the IG allowed itself to be held hostage to internal resistance as well as forces that it considered to be its powerbase, and thereby damaged the prospects of unprecedented opportunities created

Commission Ordinance, for instance, is just an eyewash for police reform that will be no more than a rehabilitation resort for retired civil bureaucrats and police officials who will hold the key to sabotaging its stated purpose. An otherwise excellent National Human Rights Ordinance has been stabbed in the back by conspiratorially inserting a provision to ensure bureaucratic control in its formation, shattering the dream of an independent and effective commission. The Ordinances enacted under the IG related to cyber security, digital space, personal data protection, and data management have ensured mutually reinforcing, unaccountable surveillance power in the hands of the government and relevant agencies to enable targeted violation of the right to privacy, free media, dissent, and civic space. Aspirations of an effective and accountable Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), parallel with independence, have been sabotaged.

It should be recalled that the transformation of an elected government into authoritarian Kleptocracy during 2009-2024 was primarily an outcome of the regime's hunger and design to unaccountably abuse power. All forms of abuse of power, including corruption, were facilitated and granted impunity by politically biased, professionally bankrupt, and dysfunctional state institutions. State power was captured by kleptocratic syndication. In order to sustain authoritarian control, various repressive measures were adopted and systems were created not only to plunder public resources, including illicit transfers out of the country, but also for widespread, multi-dimensional, and often ruthless violation of human rights and deprivation of people's access to justice. The state itself, in cohort with other state institutions like law-enforcement agencies, civil-military bureaucracy, security agencies, and judiciary, was deeply politicised and used with the same purpose of reinforcing kleptocratic control of the state structure. It was most appropriate, therefore, that the Interim Government (IG), that was entrusted with the responsibility to create the foundations of state reform, the main aspiration of the historic July movement, selected ACC reform among the first six reform commissions to be set up. But just that much.

The IG has not done anything substantive about the recommendations they collected from the ACC Reform Commission (ACC-RC), as well as from the other 10 Commissions, with a commitment to implement them

"urgently" by executive authority and in collaboration with the relevant institutions, ACC in this case. The ACC itself has also been complicit and even catalytic in this failure. Soon after the ACC-RC report was launched, the ACC at its top level confirmed their unqualified endorsement of all 47 recommendations. Both the ACC and the IG also knew that in the national consensus negotiations nearly all political parties endorsed almost every ACC-RC recommendation.

As the only stakeholder formally involved with the IG in the drafting process of the Ordinance to amend the 2004 Act, the ACC colluded with the forces of resistance in the government that took control of the reform process and conspiratorially prevented the inclusion of the provision to create the independent Review Committee to ensure accountability of the ACC. Parallel with ACC's full independence, including its internal governance and financial autonomy, this provision was proposed to enable ACC's accountability through periodic review, public hearing, and reporting on which allegations of corruption have been selected for action, on what basis, and which have not, and why. At an advocacy meeting held on November 19, 2025 involving the relevant Adviser and other stakeholders, including the ACC and relevant senior bureaucrats, everyone was persuaded about the strategic importance of the provision and agreed to retain it. However, subsequently, the joint ACC-bureaucracy forces of resistance prevailed, and the provision was finally dropped. The Cabinet of Advisers gave in, as some influential Advisers acquiesced. This showed that, despite being perceived to have no political bias or ambition, the IG succumbed and in fact upscaled the long sustained governance deficit for which bureaucracy determines what the Cabinet Ministers (Advisers) approve. This is also just one example of how the reformist government acted against reform and set the precedent for future political governments to undermine the blood-written July Charter.

Just to mention a few more examples of lost opportunity, despite the ACC-RC's specific recommendation, the ACC has failed to take any initiative yet to cleanse itself of officials who are highly corrupt, by the ACC's own confession. Similarly, nothing has been done about the proposed independent Internal Discipline Division to ensure accountability and integrity within. Nor has it shown any interest in working with the Government to implement recommendations for its full operational

and financial independence, including the proposed package of positive and negative incentives for the ACC staff. Another strategic and highly important recommendation that has been sidelined is to relieve the ACC from the clutches of deputed bureaucrats as the senior-most officials after the Commission, which has been the dominant factor over the years behind failure to act against corruption of bureaucrats and anyone associated with the ruling authority.

Without ensuring the ACC-RC-prescribed upper limit of deputed bureaucrats to senior positions in the ACC, especially from administrative service, the aspiration of an operationally neutral and effective ACC will remain a pipe dream. Equally ignored are a number of other recommendations, like end-to-end automation of the ACC's overall operations, especially complaint management, investigation, undercover inquiries, and prosecution.

While these are only some of the items that both the Government and the ACC have failed to implement "immediately" as promised after the report was released, furthermore, the Government and the ACC have refrained from taking any initiative regarding the package of recommendations to build the collective strength of the key institutions of democracy and accountable governance, without which even an ideally powerful, independent, and accountable ACC cannot deliver truly effective corruption control. These are related to the corruption-friendly politico governance eco-system that has evolved over the years, and was taken to a Kleptocratic level during 2009-2024.

A National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) must be adopted through a participatory and inclusive process specifying the anti-corruption roles and responsibilities of various State and non-State institutions. NACS should include the Legislature, Executive, Judiciary, Public sector, Law enforcement, Election Commission, Ombudsman, Audit institution, Anti-corruption Commission, Local Government, Political Parties, Media, Civil society, and Corporate Sector.

An Office of Ombudsman should be established, empowered to ensure oversight and reporting, including comparative naming and shaming of the institutions on performance under NACS. A specific law should be enacted to permanently abolish the practice of legalising black money. A specific legal framework needs to be created to resolve and prevent conflict of interest of power-holders and public-interest-related decision-makers at various levels. To prevent large-scale

swindling of public money and property by banks and financial institutions, a beneficial ownership transparency law must be enacted, particularly applicable to ownership of companies, trusts, or foundations. Data on such beneficial ownerships must be publicly accessible through a Beneficial Ownership Register.

Robust and strictly enforceable legal provisions must be created to ensure transparency and integrity in political and electoral financing. It should specifically make it obligatory for public representatives of all levels to submit annually updatable itemised income and asset statements of themselves and their family members soon after taking office, which should be published on the Election Commission website for public scrutiny. Private sector bribery must be criminalised, consistent with Bangladesh's commitment under the UN Convention against Corruption.

To ensure transparency of financial transactions at home and abroad as a means to prevent tax evasion and illicit financial transfers, including money laundering, Bangladesh must accede to the Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters and implement the Common Reporting Standard. Bangladesh should join the Open Government Partnership to facilitate adoption of international best practices in transparent governance in the public, private, and non-government sectors. We also need a comprehensive set of preventive measures against corruption, including a short-, medium-, and long-term action plan to creatively and innovatively communicate to the people at large and the new generation the narrative that corruption is not only a punishable crime but also a socially, culturally, and religiously unacceptable, destructive, and discriminatory scourge.

The victory of the July movement marked the fall of the kleptocracy, but whether it will eventually transform into a true exit from kleptocracy and enable a genuine transition towards effective corruption control will depend on the commitment and capacity of reform leaders among the power-holders now and after elections, and their capacity to overcome adhocsism and forces of resistance. It will depend on whether the true spirit of the July Movement is mainstreamed in the political and governance eco-system of Bangladesh. Much will depend on whether the political forces, the key power-holders, and bureaucracy, the prime agent of the executive authority, can overcome the state of being hostage to the "our turn" syndrome.

#### KEY POINTS

1. Anti-corruption efforts failed due to ad hoc governance, loophole-ridden laws, and bureaucratic resistance.
2. The Interim Government squandered a historic reform opportunity despite broad consensus on ACC recommendations.
3. The ACC colluded in weakening accountability, independence, and internal integrity.
4. Kleptocracy thrived through politicised institutions, impunity, and abuse of state power (2009-2024).
5. Genuine reform requires a participatory National Anti-Corruption Strategy, strong institutions, transparency laws, and political will.

towards fundamental reform against corruption. In whatever reform measures they have picked and chosen, they have created self-defeating loopholes, often by design.

Specifically, in nearly every Ordinance that the IG has enacted, there are clear evidence against the true spirit and objective of the IG's own mandate of state reform. The Police

has failed to take any initiative yet to cleanse itself of officials who are highly corrupt, by the ACC's own confession. Similarly, nothing has been done about the proposed independent Internal Discipline Division to ensure accountability and integrity within. Nor has it shown any interest in working with the Government to implement recommendations for its full operational