'ACC must be freed from political and bureaucratic influence'

Dr Iftekharuzzaman, *executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and former head of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Reform Commission, speaks to* **Tasneem Tayeb** *of* **The Daily Star** *about the state of corruption in Bangladesh, the fate of reform efforts, and the changes needed to hold those in power accountable.*

ACC was established in 2004 as an independent institution to combat corruption. More than two decades later, corruption remains deeply embedded in the public sector. What was the original thinking behind the commission, and where did it fail in practice?

The former Bureau of Anti-Corruption, which ACC replaced, was part of the government and directly under its control. Since government departments and those in power were themselves often accused of corruption, the bureau could not function effectively. It rather became an instrument for harassing political opponents. We wanted a specialised, independent institution free from government influence.

Fighting corruption, however, needs more than one institution. Parliament, the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, and the bureaucracy must also fulfil their responsibilities. Parliamentary committees, for example, are supposed to hold the government accountable, but whether they function properly remains a major question.

Moreover, since its beginning, appointments to the commission reflected partisan political choices. Its leadership favoured the ruling authorities while targeting political opponents, allowing the bureau's culture to continue under a new identity. Bureaucratic influence compounded the problem as senior positions below the commissioners came to be dominated by deputed officials whose allegiance remained with the bureaucracy. This damaged ACC's capacity and credibility. People saw minor offenders pursued while powerful figures escaped accountability.

We recommended limiting the number of deputed bureaucrats and addressing corruption within ACC itself. Officials implicated in corruption should be removed and handed over to the relevant law enforcement agencies.

Does this chequered history suggest that policymakers failed to understand how corruption operates in Bangladesh, or that their knowledge has not translated into action?

I would not say policymakers do not understand corruption. Having engaged with those in power over the years, I know there is a clear understanding of what corruption is, how it can be combated, and what their responsibilities are. These are documented in laws, policies, codes of conduct, and reform recommendations. What's missing is execution, as those who are supposed to apply this knowledge are often beneficiaries of corruption themselves. They protect the system and thus enable further corruption.

Ironically, fighting corruption has become central to political rhetoric. Election manifestos or government statements are full of commitments. The current ruling party's 31-point agenda, election manifesto, and the July Charter, which its leaders have pledged to implement word for word, also contain specific commitments against corruption. So political will exists on paper, but it is not reflected in practice.

TIB's household surveys have found that 85 percent of respondents who paid bribes said they would not have received their service otherwise. This shows how deeply systemic corruption is. Catching individual offenders cannot solve the problem while the wider system remains unchanged. Expectations naturally focus on ACC as the institution specifically mandated to fight corruption, but other institutions responsible for strengthening the state's capacity to control corruption have also failed to fulfil their roles.

To be clear, corruption does not mean just bribery. It involves the abuse of power for private gain often through collusion among political actors, public officials, and business interests. So to tackle it, we must dismantle the wider ecosystem that allows such practices to persist.

The government has recently decided to set up separate anti-corruption committees in every ministry. What gaps could these committees fill when the existing mechanisms have failed to ensure accountability?



PHOTO: **STAR**

Dr Iftekharuzzaman

I think this may turn out to be another example of rhetoric as the government is not approaching the problem strategically. In Bangladesh, committees are often formed to deflect attention from key issues, while their reports remain unpublished and their effectiveness is rarely evident. Their work is also likely to be hampered by conflicts of interest. As things stand, the most senior officials in each ministry already have responsibilities for ensuring accountability, integrity, and corruption-free administration. There is, moreover, no clear indication of what these new committees will actually do.

Speaking of strategic interventions, we recommended a national anti-corruption strategy assigning specific responsibilities to the institutions concerned. The government has yet to act on this proposal, even though the ruling party, like other political parties, fully endorsed it. The idea is to transform the existing National Integrity Strategy into a national anti-corruption strategy. But these committees, representing an ad hoc approach, may, at best, recommend transferring a corrupt official from one ministry or department to another. Such departmental action has already proved ineffective and could become another way of protecting corrupt officials by simply shifting them around.

Higher salaries are often presented as a way to curb corruption in the public sector. How can the new pay scale help achieve this when previous increases have failed to do so?

Public officials are a fixed-income group, so we cannot expect them to perform to the best of their ability and with integrity unless their salaries and benefits are commensurate with the cost of living. Reviewing salaries periodically is also a standard practice. That said, better pay must be linked to accountability. We recommended making annual public disclosure of assets and income a condition for receiving the revised pay scale. Officials agreeing to disclose their assets and update their statements annually would receive the increase, while those unwilling to do so would not. The purpose was to make the salary revision an effective tool for controlling corruption.

But the proposal was not accepted because of resistance from bureaucrats. Without accountability, I fear that higher salaries could simply lead to demands for higher bribes rather than help curb corruption.

The interim government established reform commissions but left many of their recommendations unimplemented. Where did it fall short, particularly in relation to the ACC reforms you proposed?

Forming the commissions was a positive step, but the interim government lacked a clear vision for what to do with their reports. It committed to implementing the recommendations that could be acted upon immediately through executive authority or by the relevant institutions, without needing to wait for a new government or constitutional changes. But most recommendations were left aside, apart from a few selected on an ad hoc basis as a token gesture. Where legal changes were made, they often reflected the government's own ideas rather than the commissions' recommendations. The ACC ordinance left out critical recommendations of the ACC Reform Commission.

We wanted ACC to have full independence alongside accountability. Independence cannot mean the absence of accountability. ACC must answer for protecting those in power or harassing political opponents. Our proposed reforms sought to address both political influence and bureaucratic control, but those critical changes remain unimplemented. The promise that cabinet members and public officials would disclose their wealth statements was also delayed until shortly before the interim government stepped down. What was eventually disclosed was controversial, to say the least. These examples raise questions about the seriousness of the interim government's commitment to transparency and the foundation it left for reform.

What should the current government prioritise to give substance to its commitments against corruption?

It must abandon the mindset that "it is now our turn" and the winner-takes-all politics: the idea that we have been deprived of opportunities for so long, so winning the election entitles us to capture everything. Political positions, elected or unelected, within parties or the government, are unfortunately being treated as a licence for profiteering and personal gain. After the former regime fell on August 5, 2024, the space it had occupied through extortion and corruption was taken over by those who emerged as victors. This continued under the interim government and persists today.

This political culture, in which the abuse of power simply changes hands, must end. Political commitment must be demonstrated by enabling institutions to hold those in power to account. People must also be able to reject and report corruption without facing retaliation. Harassing those who expose corruption while protecting the corrupt only allows it to flourish.

Four elements must work in concert—political commitment, the capacity to hold offenders accountable, independent and effective institutions, and people's ability to stand against corruption. If any of these is missing, the system cannot deliver what is promised.

If you could begin making changes now, what would be your first priority, and what results would convince people that accountability is finally possible?

There is no single magic bullet for fighting corruption. My first priority nevertheless would be to create the conditions for the governing authorities to address the two major drivers of unabated corruption: cleansing the ruling party of corruption at all levels and overhauling a bureaucracy that has become deeply entrenched in preserving systemic corruption. The first step to that end would be to require public officials to disclose their annually updated assets for public scrutiny. Equally important is a truly independent, corruption-free, efficient, and accountable ACC. The recommendations are already there on how to make it effective. Its ability to function properly depends on the government allowing it to exercise its mandate without partisan influence or bureaucratic control.

We need to see corruption, especially at higher levels, punished. The commission has hundreds of cases; it cannot, nor does it need to, handle all of them at once. Prioritising high-profile cases and securing exemplary punishments in, say, even 10 cases a year could send a powerful signal to society.

ACC cannot deliver this alone. It needs, among other things, a truly independent judicial system that upholds the highest standards of integrity. Fighting corruption needs a comprehensive strategy combining both prevention and control and involving the whole of the state and society.

Stop attacks on campus journalists and ensure accountability



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FILE ILLUSTRATION: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

Campus journalism is often seen as a stepping stone to the profession; it is also a training ground. But it is far more than an extracurricular activity. Alongside their studies, campus journalists carry a real ethical responsibility. Campus correspondents are often the first to report what is happening around them. They ask difficult questions and give students a platform to speak about issues that might otherwise go unheard. At the same time, these young journalists are well positioned to expose long-standing malpractice. However, this job is far from easy. The occupation can come with threats, intimidation, expulsion, and even violence.

Protecting these journalists, therefore, is essential not only for their safety, but also for accountability, freedom of expression, and the free flow of information on campus. The latest heinous attack on several Rajshahi University correspondents, carried out by members of the ruling party's student wing, Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), goes far beyond threats or intimidation. Although the JCD has expelled its three leaders and The Daily Star has identified seven JCD men and published their photos, the university hall administration filed a case with Motihar Police Station against "unidentified people". This potentially raises a broader concern about a culture in which accountability is weakened when perpetrators remain unidentified. In some cases, universities routinely respond to such incidents by forming probe committees, only for their findings to gather dust for years.

Consider the Dhaka University case, for instance. On April 23, several reporters of the Dhaka University Journalists' Association (DUJA) were assaulted allegedly by a group of JCD leaders and activists inside Shahbagh Police Station while covering a dispute triggered by a derogatory Facebook post targeting the prime minister and his daughter. Five months on, the university administration is yet to publish an investigation report.

Universities are places to question, debate, and challenge ideas, and campus journalism is an extension of them. However, when reporting expands to cover topics like irregularities, discrimination, and misconduct, the reporters often come under fire. Asking difficult questions becomes harder when journalists fear what might happen after publication. I know this fear first-hand. When I was a campus correspondent at Jahangirnagar University five years ago, senior administration officials would often remind me, "You are a student first, then a journalist." The remark is not entirely wrong. Student reporters must balance their academic careers with a demanding and vulnerable job. But the line also works as a warning, and sometimes, the work can jeopardise the reporter's academic life.

I can recall two cases in the past decade in which campus reporters were suspended from their universities. One is Mohammad Iqbal Monwar, a reporter for the Bangla daily Jaijaidin at Comilla University, who was suspended over a report in 2023. The suspension order said Monwar had violated university discipline by allegedly distorting a statement by the then VC AFM Abdul Moyeen, and intentionally circulating misleading information to tarnish the university's image. The other case involved Fatema Tuz Zinia, the university correspondent for The Daily Sun. The Gopalganj Science and Technology University suspended her over social media posts that the authorities claimed had damaged the institution's image.

Such incidents affect far more than the journalists targeted. The immediate victim may drop a story; other journos become reluctant to investigate similar issues, while editors grow more cautious about publishing sensitive reports. Eventually, self-censorship takes root. Therefore, the safety of campus journalists, who is also the student of the university, must be treated as an institutional issue. When a journalist faces intimidation, threats, or violence because of their work, complaints must be taken seriously, investigated transparently and settled through established rules and procedures.

Too often, however, the authorities themselves are part of the problem. In 2019, when I was a leader of the Jahangirnagar University Journalists' Association, two of my colleagues—Shoriful Islam Simanto of Bangladesh Pratidin and Maidul Islam of Prothom Alo—were assaulted when they sought comments from then vice-chancellor Farzana Islam while investigating allegations that Bangladesh Chhatra League leaders had demanded Tk 2 crore from the VC as "Eid salami," claiming it was their "fair share".

However, this does not mean campus journalists should be above criticism. Student journalists, like all journalists, must verify facts, avoid presenting allegations as facts, give people a fair chance to respond, and rely on evidence rather than sensationalism. They should correct their mistakes, and those who feel misrepresented have the right to seek a correction or respond. But intimidation or violence is never an acceptable response.

Student organisations also have an important role in creating this culture where people are welcome to strongly disagree with a report, may challenge information or interpretation. Such disagreement is part of a healthy campus environment. But disagreement should be expressed through argument, evidence and logic—not through threats or violence. Newsrooms, too, have a responsibility to support campus reporters, including with legal and financial assistance when necessary. Many correspondents work with limited support despite the risks involved.

Universities should be places where questions are embraced, evidence is treated with importance, and disagreements are resolved through dialogue. Protecting campus journalism means protecting young people's space to question power. As when a campus journalist is silenced by fear, the entire campus loses an important channel of accountability.