

The Vicious Triangle of Corruption, Human Rights Violation and Injustice in Bangladesh: Is there a Way Out?¹

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I. Introduction

Corruption is an insidious crime that prevails in every country in the world. It has destructive effects on states, people, and societies. It is an outcome of deficits of transparency, accountability, integrity, rule of law, and ineffectiveness of the institutions that are expected to hold power to account. The cost of corruption is usually understood and analysed in terms of adverse social, economic, and developmental challenges. It is also considered an outcome of governance deficits, which in turn result in further corruption, creating a vicious cycle. A similar mutually reinforcing relationship also exists between corruption and the weakening of the key institutions of democratic accountability or the national integrity system. The deficit of the rule of law, for its part, protects and promotes corruption, and corruption also leads to further erosion of the rule of law. Corruption erodes public trust in government, leads to the violation of human rights, and breeds injustice. By distorting the political and economic structures and weakening the social fabric, corruption can also be a potential source of mistrust of the government and insecurity in the state. Corruption is also increasingly linked to the violation of human rights, the deprivation of justice, and the spread of the culture of impunity.

This paper is an attempt to contribute to the discourse on a triangular relationship between corruption, violation of human rights, and injustice, drawing upon the experience of Bangladesh during the past fifteen years of authoritarian and kleptocratic rule. The main theme of what follows here is that Kleptocratic state capture to enable and sustain corruption in Bangladesh was responsible for gross violations of human rights and injustice on unprecedented dimensions. The transformation of a

¹ Barrister Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed Memorial Lecture 2025, Asiatic Society, Dhaka, 8 December 2025.

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government elected to power through a well-recognised national election of 2008 into authoritarianism was primarily an outcome of the regime's design for unaccountable abuse of power. Corruption was facilitated, promoted, protected, and granted impunity through politically influenced, dysfunctional, and professionally bankrupt state institutions. State power was captured by kleptocratic syndication, and to strengthen and sustain authoritarian control of the state, various repressive measures were adopted, and systems were created for widespread, multi-dimensional, multi-level, and often ruthless violation of human rights and deprivation of people's access to justice. Judiciary itself was also deeply politicised and used with the same purpose of reinforcing kleptocratic control of the state structure and denial of justice and protection against violation of nearly every category of human rights, including civil and political rights. The paper highlights this vicious triangle of corruption, human rights violations, and injustice in general and Bangladesh in particular as experienced during the period of the kleptocratic regime from 2009 until its fall on August 5, 2024.

II. Corruption – the global menace

Although corruption is a global menace, there is no universally accepted definition of corruption. The UN Convention against Corruption, which was opened for signature on 9 December 2003, came into force on 14 December 2005 and has been ratified to date by 192 States-Party. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has also refrained from specifically defining corruption, presumably because of diverse manifestations of corruption at national and international levels. However, they provide a list of various forms of this crime that include bribery and embezzlement in both the public and private sectors, trading in influence, abuse of functions, illicit enrichment, illicit national and international financial transfers, including money laundering, concealment, and obstruction of justice in various forms.³

The word corruption comes from the Latin verb *corruptus*, which means to break. Corruption is a behaviour or act that goes against ethical and moral standards, traditions, laws, and civic virtues. Transparency International defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain⁴. The UN's Global Programme against Corruption (GPAC) defines corruption as the "abuse of power for private gain". Most often, abuse of power for personal gain occurs in both public and private domains and is usually by

³ <https://www.unodc.org/corruption/en/learn/what-is-corruption.html>

⁴ <https://www.transparency.org/en/what-is-corruption>

a collusion for a win-win game of individuals or groups of individuals from both sectors.

A more elaborate description of corruption is “the abuse of office, whether in Government, administration, or business ... (it) is about the giving and seeking of favours, it is about buying political influence, taking kickbacks, bribing officials. It is about subverting public good for private gain”⁵. Along with the UNODC listing, corruption includes any or a combination of such acts as embezzlement, fraud, nepotism, negligence of duty for private gain, or promoting any vested interests - financial, political, or otherwise, misuse of public or institutional funds, and extortion. Corruption, therefore, is more than bribery. The wide variety of acts that are classified as corruption makes the definition of corruption wide and flexible, which is also partly the reason why corruption is studied under several disciplines – economics, political science and governance, development studies, sociology, anthropology, and psychology.

This paper defines corruption as the abuse of power for private gain. In this sense, power does not have to be in the public sector alone, because a power base can be outside the public sector, as in the case of the business or corporate sector, for which financial power is the key. Similarly, institutions outside the public and private sectors – national or international and non-governmental organisations - are not necessarily free from corruption. The same is true in situations of corrupt activity that takes place by abusing social power or power drawn from knowledge, intellect, and information. Nor does power have to be “entrusted” as in cases where power, usurped by extra-constitutional means such as military or military-backed rule, is abused.

Corrupt activities in the public sector, particularly transactions for public contracting at various levels and project implementation deals, are most often involved in a triangular win-win game between individuals or entities in possession of political, administrative, and business or financial power. This form of corruption is collusive corruption as opposed to coercive corruption, where the public service recipient is a hostage to the abuse of power by the service provider or duty bearer. Such coercive abuse of power takes place even in the case of petty corruption because the service provider holds delivery-level power in whatever sector or stage it may be. The key element in the concept of corruption, therefore, is the abuse of power, and

⁵ Richard North, “Corruption: Stopping the Rot” in *BBC On Air*, August 2003, p.10.

the extent of discretion with which power can be exercised without checks and balances for accountability.⁶

Amartya Sen recognizes the motivational importance of personal gains from corruption and stresses values, norms, and behavioural factors.⁷ The possibility of the exercise of power without accountability is the key driving force. Factors that create such possibilities include inadequate laws, systems, rules, and regulations, as well as ineffective enforcement of the same due to the weakness of the institutions of the national integrity system.⁸ Behavioural factors behind corruption may consist of a combination of incentives drawn from compulsion or need and greed. Poor salaries, benefits, infrastructure, logistics, etc., in the public sector are often viewed as the source of need-based incentives to corruption. When salaries and benefits are, for instance, inconsistent with the cost of living, it is considered a justification for indulging in corruption as a second source of income, though earning additional income outside a regular job in the due process and subject to disclosure may be treated as legitimate. Moreover, 'poor salaries and benefits' in all cases do not motivate corruption, and there may indeed be many duty bearers who serve with honesty and integrity despite predicaments. It should be added in any case that the dividing line between need-driven and greed-based corruption is very thin.⁹ What starts with a need-driven incentive can soon turn into greed-driven corruption with the sky as the limit, especially when there is an absence or insufficient enforcement of legal, ethical, and anti-corruption standards in the public service, leading to systemic corruption. This, in a way, is about a cost-benefit calculation. If the 'benefit' of corruption is higher than the risk or cost it entails, it can be a rational behaviour to take the risk of being involved in corruption. If, however, the risk was higher than the anticipated

⁶ For a review of conceptual approaches, see by Zoe Pearson, "An International Human Rights Approach to Corruption", in Peter Larmour and Nick Wolanin, *Corruption and Anti-Corruption*, Canberra, Asia-Pacific Press, 2001, pp. 30-60.

⁷ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp-275-8.

⁸ Transparency International developed the National Integrity System approach as a comprehensive means of assessing a country's anti-corruption efficacy sector by sector. When all the pillars in a National Integrity System function effectively, corruption remains in check. The pillars include: Legislature, Executive, Judiciary, Public sector, Law enforcement, Election Commission, Ombudsman, Audit institution, Anti-corruption Commission, Political parties, Media, Civil society and Corporate sector. [https://www.transparency.org/en/national-integrity-system-assessments#:~:text=The%20National%20Integrity%20System%20\(NIS\)%20is%20a,government%2C%20civil%20society%2C%20and%20the%20business%20community](https://www.transparency.org/en/national-integrity-system-assessments#:~:text=The%20National%20Integrity%20System%20(NIS)%20is%20a,government%2C%20civil%20society%2C%20and%20the%20business%20community)

⁹ As M.K. Gandhi said, "The earth has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed", <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/427443-the-world-has-enough-for-everyone-s-need-but-not-enough>

gain, it would act as a deterrent against a corrupt or illegal activity. The other personal factor is the lack of trust among the people about the capacity of the state to control corruption, a sense of disempowerment that leads to accepting corruption as a way of life, which forces, and often motivates, people to be involved in corruption, causes an erosion of values and ethics, and drives into a culture of normalised corruption.

III. Implications of Corruption

Corruption is a major impediment to development and democratic governance. Weakening the institutions of the national integrity system, it prevents the rule of law. Corruption erodes public trust in government and breeds injustice. By distorting the political and economic structures and weakening the social fabric, corruption can also be a potential source of insecurity for the state. Corruption is also increasingly linked to the violation of human rights, justice, and the spread of the culture of impunity to all three: corruption, human rights violations, and injustice.¹⁰

It is well-researched and well-documented that corruption is inversely related to democracy, democratic institutions, and economic development.¹¹ There is strong evidence that corruption increases poverty and impedes the institutional capacity to reduce it. Economic theory and empirical evidence suggest that corruption impedes economic growth and hence accentuates poverty by discouraging or raising the cost of investment and entrepreneurship, curtailing access to public services, lowering the quality of public expenditures, enabling tax evasion, reducing revenue collection, promoting rent-seeking, and distorting the allocation of public expenditures.¹² From the governance and democratic institutionalisation perspective, corruption weakens institutions, leads to low or distorted participation, and to erosion of the trust of citizens in leadership, public office, and institutions.

Implications of corruption are multi-dimensional and pervasive. Amaryta Sen asserts that a “high level of corruption can make public policies ineffective and can also draw investment and economic activities away from productive pursuits towards the towering rewards of underhanded activities”.¹³ As a universal phenomenon, corruption affects all, but the

¹⁰ International Council on Human Rights Policy & Transparency International, *Corruption and Human Rights: Making the Connection*, Versoix, Switzerland, 2009.

¹¹ See for instance, Seymour Martin Lipset and Gabriel Salman Lenz, “Corruption, Culture and Markets”, in L.E. Harrison and S.P Huntington (eds), *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York, Basic Books, 2000).

¹² Eric Chetwynd et al., *Corruption and Poverty: A Review of Recent Literature*, January 2003, www.u4.no/document/literature/corruption-and-poverty

¹³ *Ibid*, p.275.

poorer and marginalized suffer more. As the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said, “this evil phenomenon (corruption) is found in all countries – big and small, rich and poor – but it is in the developing world that its effects are most destructive. Corruption hurts the poor disproportionately – by diverting funds intended for development, undermining a government’s ability to provide basic services, feeding inequality and injustice, and discouraging foreign investment and aid. Corruption is a key element in economic underperformance, and a major obstacle to poverty alleviation and development”.¹⁴ The incumbent Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, ranked corruption at the top of the list of contemporary criminal justice issues.¹⁵

Corruption, by its very nature, is about subverting fairness. It generates disproportionality and inequality. Corruption affects the poor both directly and indirectly. Directly through increasing the cost of key public services targeted to them, lowering the quality of such services, and limiting or even preventing the poor's access to essential services such as education, health, and justice. Indirect implications of corruption on the poor include diverting Government resources away at the expense of social sectors. By limiting growth and development, corruption also reduces the scope and prospect of poverty reduction. In addition, while corruption affects everyone, the poor are more vulnerable, especially because they are easy victims of bribery, extortion, and intimidation.¹⁶

Corruption is protected and perpetuated by biased policy regimes and faulty governance practices that favour the rich and well-connected. A statistically significant positive association exists between corruption and income inequality. The more pervasive corruption is in a society, the higher income inequality is, which in turn leads to further perpetuation of corruption. A similar positive association exists between corruption and poverty – the higher the level of corruption, the higher the level of poverty. Countries that top the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) as least affected by it also rank high in the Social Inclusion Index, while those at the bottom

¹⁴ “Statement on the Adoption of by the General Assembly of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption”, New York, 31 October 2003, http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/speech_2003-10-31_html

¹⁵ Divya Prasad and Lazaria Eeckeloo, *Corruption and Human Rights*, Geneva Academy, 2019, p.8

¹⁶ Among many materials on corruption and poverty linkage, see for example, Sanjeev Gupta, Hamid Davoodi and Rosa Alonso-Terme, “Does Corruption Affect Income Inequality and Poverty?” IMF working paper, 1998; World Bank, “Voices of the Poor Programme”; Transparency International, *Global Corruption Barometer 2003*. Berlin, 2003. Deepa Narajan, Raj Patel et al, “State Institutions in Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?” World Bank, Oxford University Press, 2000.

of CPI are also found to score low in terms of the Social Inclusion Index, which indicates that in such countries the degree of marginalisation and exclusion is higher.¹⁷

Increased corruption has a direct relationship with the concentration of state power in the executive and the rising trend toward authoritarianism. State institutions are rendered ineffective through politicisation and other means of professional compromise to serve the interests of the corrupt syndicates and even facilitate, protect, promote high-level corruption, including money laundering, and provide impunity. Analysis of successive years of results of CPI shows countries under authoritarian regimes score much less than those under democracy. The 2024 CPI showed that 24 countries in the category of full democracy scored 73 out of 100, 50 flawed democracies scored 47, 36 hybrid democracies scored 37, and 59 under authoritarian regimes scored 29.¹⁸ Similarly, the more corrupt the regimes are, the more are restrictions on civic space which are key instruments of lack of transparency and accountability and authoritarianism. 26 Countries in the category of open civic space scored 70, 40 having narrowed civic space scored 51, 37 having obstructed civic space scored 38 while 47 under repressed civic space scored 31 and 27 with closed civic space received 29 on average.¹⁹

IV. Corruption, Injustice, and Human Rights Violations

It is no surprise, therefore, that corruption has been globally recognised, especially throughout the UN system, as one of the main challenges to promoting human rights and access to justice. The UN Human Rights Council says, “transparent, responsible, accountable, open and participatory government, responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people, is the foundation, [which] is one of the indispensable conditions for the full realisation of human rights”.²⁰ The UN Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030 similarly packages concrete actions for promoting access to information, combatting bribery and corruption and illicit financial flows, as well as recovery of stolen assets; and effective, transparent and accountable institutions at all levels

¹⁷ <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/corruption-and-inequality-how-populists-mislead-people>; <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/2024-corruption-perceptions-index-authoritarianism-chokes-climate-action-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>

¹⁸ <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Human Rights Council Resolution 31/14 on ‘The role of good governance in the promotion and protection of human rights’, A/HRC/RES/31/14, adopted on 23 March 2016

with fundamental freedoms and access to justice under the banner of Goal 16.²¹

Corruption, especially grand corruption and related illicit financial flows, has a ruinous effect on State institutions and the state's capacity to ensure the political and governance eco-system for the rule of law and justice, which leads to erosion of capacity to uphold, respect, and protect human rights. The triad of corruption, injustice, and human rights violations is manifested by the interconnectedness and mutually reinforcing relationships amongst the three. Corruption thrives when systemic checks and balances for accountability are absent or weak due to ineffectiveness of state institutions, especially those involved in ensuring the rule of law, like the law enforcement agencies and judiciary. Weakness and dysfunctionality of these State institutions provide impunity to the corrupt, which in turn transform laws and institutions into enablers of corruption rather than public interest. Through the weakened and ineffective law enforcement agencies and judicial system, the scope of fair trials suffers, especially when bribery, cronyism, and political interference in the judiciary and judicial process. This, in turn, prevents the scope of equal access to justice. A corrupt and politically influenced justice system fosters impunity to corruption, forces people to take corruption and abuse of power as a way of life, and leads to erosion of public trust in the judiciary, and hence leads to further corruption. It can also lead to erosion of democracy and democratic practices, while unaccountable abuse of power can, in turn, lead to judicial ineffectiveness to an extent that it can become a pillar of the rise of authoritarianism, cronyism, and kleptocracy.

When the justice system is compromised, loses independence, and lends itself to sale for personal benefits, it becomes incapable of discharging its mandate as protector and upholder of human rights. A state system that is incapable of preventing and controlling corruption, its judiciary becomes part of the enablers of systemic violation of human rights. The victims of human rights violations are deprived of redress and justice, while the perpetrators are protected and rewarded. The institutional and governance space for promotion and protection of civil and political rights becomes weakened while deliberate restrictions are imposed through repressive laws and administrative actions on other freedoms like free speech, freedom of the media, freedom of association, right to assembly, and civic space. The non-state capacity to hold the power to account is increasingly compromised and lost. Ineffective institutions, including the judiciary, can also compromise their capacity to protect social, cultural, and economic rights. Corruption is intrinsically discriminatory and causes the denial of

²¹ United Nations, Transforming Our World, The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/Res/70/1, p.30.

such rights as the right to work, food, housing, health, education, social safety, and protection. By diverting public resources and funds away from critical areas of public interest, it benefits the privileged cronies and politically connected syndicates who benefit disproportionately and unaccountably through kleptocratic state capture. As a result, the common people, especially the marginalised sections of society, are not only deprived of the economic, political, social, and cultural rights, but also bear the burden of the cost of corruption.

The inter-connectedness between corruption, injustice, and human rights violations is therefore correlative and mutually reinforcing, which is destabilising for the society, economy, and polity. Corruption not only undermines values and practices of human rights, but by corrupting institutions of accountability, rendering them dysfunctional and converting them from the role of protectors of law and justice into promoters of violation of law and corruption, it further institutionalizes violation of human rights and justice. Corruption demeans basic human values of dignity, integrity, equality, and freedom of everyone in the society, more so the sections of the society who are marginalised and disadvantaged because of gender, social, economic, cultural, religious, ethnic, disability, and other markers of identity. It leads to a shrinkage of the scope of ensuring equality in the context of human rights and justice. As the Advisory Committee of the UN Human Rights Council on the issue of the negative impact of corruption states in its final report, it is difficult to find a human right that could not be violated by corruption.²²

Corruption compromises judicial independence, propriety, impartiality, integrity, the principle of equality before law, and fairness of justice. It distorts justice and prevents access to justice for everyone, particularly the people outside the powerful and dominant forces in the political and governance space. The poor and disadvantaged sections of society are especially vulnerable to corruption, not only because their direct burden is more on them because of the unaffordable illegal payments needed to access services, including justice and legal protection, but also because of the bias of law enforcement in favour of the corrupt who are richer and more influential. Judicial corruption directly undermines the rule of law and justice and distorts the investigation process for high-profile or politically and governmentally sensitive cases, more so when coupled with corruption in the public sector, particularly in those involving administration, law enforcement, and security agencies. Corruption in the judiciary makes it less capable of holding other branches of the state – the legislative and executive to account. Judicial abuse of power and compromise of integrity on a partisan political basis or other transactional

²² UN HRC, A/HRC/28/73, 5 January 2015.

and non-transactional connections suffer from conflict of interest, which leads to unholy collusion between the three organs of the state and can lead to concentration of unaccountable power and erosion of democracy, which in turn leads to authoritarianism and kleptocracy.

Kleptocracy, the worst form of grand corruption, is a term that comes from the Greek words *Klepto* and *Cracy*, which mean thief and rule, respectively. It is the rule of the thieves, where high-level power is unaccountably abused to enable a network of ruling elites to steal public funds for private gain, capturing policies, undermining laws, and using public institutions. Unaccountable illicit financial transfers or money laundering out of the country flourishes, which harm the source countries for the benefit of host countries that become the demand side of the global economy of corruption, especially money laundering. Kleptocracy enables wealth to stay in the hands of a few. Public money and resources are stolen in a systematic way. The rule of Law is grossly undermined by weaponising institutions, especially the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, and regulatory bodies. Elections are rigged to monopolise state power. Civil society, media, and other professional bodies are controlled or co-opted. Dissent is criminalised, leading to gross human rights violations and injustice.²³

V. The Triad of Corruption, Human Rights Violation, and Injustice in Bangladesh

Bangladesh earned its independence in 1971 in the wake of a massive national independence movement leading to the glorious war of liberation to establish a democratic state ensuring “equality, human dignity and social justice”. The country has since achieved notable performance in terms of several socio-economic indicators, achieving better than comparable countries in the region of South Asia and beyond.²⁴ However, this performance, in addition to the debatable implications in terms of distributive justice, contrasts strikingly with pervasive corruption and poor performance in nearly every governance indicator, indicating that Bangladesh’s performance in growth and socio-economic transformation

²³ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/what-kleptocracy-and-how-does-it-work>; <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/countering-kleptocracy-through-open-government-and-democratic-oversight/>; <https://www.sanctionsscanner.com/knowledge-base/kleptocracy-1067>

²⁴ These include rise of per capita income from \$134 in 1971 to over \$2,820 in 2024-25, which is higher than India and Pakistan; better score in Human Development Index than Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan; higher position than any other country of South Asia in Global Gender Gap Index; success in maternal and child health, Polio eradication, Diarrhoea control; and life expectancy at birth ahead of Bhutan, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan.

could have been much better and more equitable if it could achieve higher standards of governance and effectively controlled corruption. Bangladesh's performance in terms of nearly every index related to governance has been embarrassingly poorer than that of other countries in South Asia²⁵.

While there is no doubt that the cost of corruption is extremely high in Bangladesh, due to complexities in the measure of multi-level, multi-dimensional corruption ranging from petty bribery to grand corruption and money laundering, there are no concrete, credible single estimates of average annual loss to the economy in terms of indicators like the share of GDP. However, it is estimated that Bangladesh's per capita income could be doubled if corruption were moderately controlled, and the annual cost of corruption is at least 2-3 percent of GDP.²⁶ Public sector corruption reached an alarming level during the kleptocratic regime of 2009-2024. 23 to 40 percent of the total value of road and bridge-related construction projects during 2009-24 were lost to collusive corruption involving politicians, contractors, and public officials²⁷. Nearly 40 percent of the estimated allocation for publicly funded projects to procure goods and services in such sectors as roads and bridges, power infrastructure, hospitals, and education facilities was lost to bribery and extortion, of which 50 percent went to politicians and their accomplices, while the other half went to others in the collusion syndicate²⁸. The amount of illicit financial outflows is estimated at US\$ 234 billion, during 2009-2024, at an average annual outflow of about USD 16 billion. This was considered equivalent to 3.4% of Bangladesh's current GDP or more than twice the net

²⁵ In Democracy Index 2024, Bangladesh was ranked 100th out of 167 countries, third lowest in South Asia after only Pakistan and Afghanistan; by Rule of Law Index 2025, it was 125th among 143 countries, 3rd lowest in South Asia after Pakistan and Afghanistan; in terms of Regulatory Quality Index 2023, 157th among 193, second lowest in SA after Afghanistan; Global Governance Index 2024, 132nd among 191, 3rd lowest in South Asia after Pakistan and Afghanistan; Political stability index 2023, 161st among 193, 3rd lowest in the region after Pakistan and Afghanistan; Voice and accountability index 2023, 138th among 192, 3rd lowest in South Asia after Pakistan and Afghanistan; Press Freedom Index 2025: ranked 149th among 180, in the "Red" category in terms of freedom of media and freedom of expression; Transparency (or Corruption Risk) Index 2024: 94th among 143, 2nd lowest in South Asia; and Corruption Perception Index 2024: having scored 23 in 100 ranked 151st in 180, second lowest in the region followed only by Afghanistan.

²⁶ Former Finance Minister, drawing upon a World Bank study is quoted to have recognized that at least 2-3 percent of GDP is annually lost to corruption, *The Daily Star*, 10 July, 2015.

²⁷ <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/articles/press-release/7098>

²⁸ *White Paper on the State of Bangladesh Economy: Dissection of the Development Narrative, 2024*, p. 109

flows of foreign aid and FDI flows over the corresponding period²⁹. Corruption diverted public resources away from basic public service sectors related to rights, equality, and justice, such as law enforcement, justice, passport delivery, road transport, land, education, health, housing, public safety and security, social protection, labour rights, and protection from climate change. Bribery is so widespread in the public service delivery sectors that for over 70 percent of recipients, a “no bribe, no service” experience has been normalised.³⁰ On the other hand, whatever resources were allocated were also consumed by collusive corruption in public procurement, project implementation, and bribery at the delivery stage.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh has experienced one of the fastest growths in its ultra-wealthy population globally since 2012, with a projected 11.4% increase in high net-worth individuals (those with a net worth of \$30 million) between 2018 and 2023. This came along with widening income inequality. In 2025, the top 10% of people controlled 58.5% of the total wealth, while the bottom 50% held only 4.8%.³¹ The Global Inequality Lab reports that 44 percent of Bangladesh’s total national income was held in 2021 by only 10 percent of high-income people, while the bottom 50 percent possessed only 17.1 percent of GDP. Just one percent of the population holds more than 15 percent of the total national income in 2024.³²

Abuse of power and corruption are among the key factors behind such unequal distribution of social and economic opportunities and increasing exclusion of the poor and disadvantaged from the benefits of growth. Corruption discourse mostly focuses on it as a malaise that prevents development, undermines democracy, and accentuates discrimination. But that it also deprives people of nearly every category of human rights, including the right to life, was graphically exposed in Bangladesh, like some other parts of the world,³³ many times during the kleptocratic period.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 330.

³⁰ Successive TIB research have shown at least 70 percent service recipients in public sectors to have been victims of corruption, and more than 77 percent of those who had had to pay bribe reported experience of no “bribe no service” <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/articles/story/7137>. Another recent study has estimated 54% of public funds used for climate change-related project were lost to corruption. (...)

³¹ <https://share.google/t9XI0FURfJxcJMoB6>

³² <https://wid.world/country/bangladesh/>

³³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/04/world/europe/turkey-earthquake-corruption.html#:~:text=Guclu%20Bahce%20attracted%20doctors%2C%20teachers,b%20pulled%20from%20the%20wreckage,> https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/images/2020/report/Amphan/Amphan_Study_ES_Eng.pdf,

The Rana Plaza collapse tragedy in Savar near Dhaka is one of the worst possible examples of corruption-induced deaths that took nearly 1200 innocent lives, mostly women.³⁴ The same is true about a series of fire accidents like Tazreen Garments and others that are responsible for loss of lives and property, which were normalised by corruption, collusive abuse of politically connected power, and poor governance.³⁵

Add to this the distinctive features of political culture, especially the increasingly intense collusion of business with politics. Politics is about investment. Money is invested to rise to positions of politics and power in the party or in the government. Politics and elections are a "winner takes all" game in which nothing short of victory is acceptable. Losing the election means everything is lost, whereas winning is viewed as a mandate to make a profit out of the investment. Not all politicians are in the same category, though in fact, a major qualitative transformation has taken place over the years in the political space. In the first Parliament of Bangladesh, the proportion of MPs who had business as their primary occupation was below 18 percent. Rising steadily since then, the ratio had reached 59 and 61 percent respectively in the 10th and 11th Parliaments, while in the aborted 12th Parliament, it crossed 65 percent.³⁶ This does not include indirect and beneficial ownerships. People often enter politics and assume politically important positions, including that of public representatives, not by virtue of political participation, experience, and people's mandate, but by investing money and muscle to gain a politically empowered position as an investment and profit-making.

Politically influential positions, including those of public representatives from the highest to the lowest level, have been converted into a license for abuse of power for personal gain through all possible means. Politics has been largely criminalised, where money and muscle rule. One example of direct criminalisation of politics as a key source of political capital was shockingly brought to focus by the killing in India of a three-times "elected" MP who was accused in 21 cases between 2000 and 2008, according to his own affidavit submitted to the Election Commission as a candidate for the January 7, 2024, election. Three of those cases were

<https://www.transparency.org/en/press/20060806-corruption-in-humanitarian-aid-a-double-disaster>

³⁴ <http://www.thedailystar.net/beta2/news/corruption-the-killer-in-savar-thoughts-for-international-response/>, https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/images/2014/es_ffs_RMG_follow_up_14_en.pdf

³⁵ https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/images/2020/report/Churihatta-Nimitali/Churihatta_&_Nimitali_Study_EX_EN.pdf

³⁶ <https://ti-bangladesh.org/images/2024/report/pw/Parliament-watch-11th-Parliament-Presentation-Bn.pdf>, <https://ti-bangladesh.org/images/2024/report/pw/Parliament-watch-11th-Parliament-Presentation-Bn.pdf>

allegations of murder, while the rest involved smuggling of arms, explosives, drugs, and gold, extortion, tender manipulation, and sheltering extremists. He was even on the "wanted" list of Interpol³⁷. Another example is the former Bangladeshi "lawmaker" who has been serving a seven-year jail sentence in Kuwait for human trafficking, torture, and money laundering³⁸.

Politics has also long been a zero-sum game, and the winner-takes-all practice prevails to establish monopolistic control of the political and governance space and the spoils that come along. Business and profit-making relationships of public representatives with the government are considered a matter of politically legitimised right. Business, investment, recruitment, public contracting, profiteering, land grabbing, embezzlement, extortion, and influence peddling have also normalised intra-party turf-war, including same-side violence and killings.

The continued ineffectiveness of the national parliament, the Jatiya Sangsad, in terms of its proper role in the Westminster-type of Government that the country has restored with high expectations in the wake of a long-drawn struggle against authoritarian rule, is at the core of the deficit in the overall state institutional structure. Soon after restoring the parliamentary form of government, the Parliament faced a huge credibility crisis. Confrontational politics for a winner-takes-all game led to a situation where the boycott of successive sessions became a regular practice. Even when sessions were not formally boycotted, Members of the Parliament (MPs) were hardly serious about attending the sessions. The culture of parliamentary boycott was eventually replaced by the monopolisation of the parliamentary political space through successive rounds of manipulated elections, resulting in a virtual non-existence of the opposition bench in the House. The parliamentary standing committees failed to perform the oversight role. In sum, the Parliament's delivery as the forum for debate on matters of public interest, as a law-making body, and as an institution to ensure Government accountability to the people remained a far cry. On the other hand, democratic practice in the political parties is a rare commodity in terms of the degree of reflection of the views of the rank and file in

³⁷ <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/editorial/news/why-was-mp-anwarul-azim-murdered-3616136>

³⁸ <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/kuwait-former-bangladeshi-mp-guilty-of-human-trafficking-facilitating-migrant-worker-travel-on-fake-contracts/>

decision-making³⁹ as well as the issues of transparency and disclosure of key information, including political and electoral finance⁴⁰.

Not only the parliament, but also other institutions of democracy and the national integrity system, like the judiciary, the election commission, public administration, law enforcement agencies, and the Anti-Corruption Commission, have also been significantly politicised and effectiveness compromised, resulting in greater scope for sustained corruption and a culture of impunity. The state structure has been exposed to kleptocratic capture by those who benefit from corruption at the expense of those who would like to control it.

Examples are replete in Bangladesh that when the state institutions, particularly law enforcement agencies and judiciary, are affected by corruption, instead of accountability of violators of human rights, they become protectors of the perpetrators, while the victims are exposed to further vulnerability, including threats to wellbeing, violation of the right to justice, safety, and security of life. While the historic July Movement was an unprecedented example of Bangladesh's successful youth and student-led people power resulting in the defeat of the kleptocratic regime of 16 years, it witnessed the peak of multi-dimensional violations of human rights including right to life, individual liberty, safety and security, civil and political rights including freedom of speech and assembly, media freedom and right to information perpetrated by the highly corrupt, kleptocratic and abusive regime. The UN Human Rights Office estimated that directly protest-related deaths during the movement were 1400, among whom 12 percent were children. They also reported the number of people injured as 13,529, including 736 with eye injuries.⁴¹

The years since 2009 have witnessed tyrannical abuse of power and kleptocracy through the forcible monopolisation of political and governance space and institutional structure. Apart from civil and political

³⁹ Transparency International Bangladesh, *Local Participation and Expectations in the Nomination Process of National Elections*, February 2011; <https://www.cmi.no/publications/4967-democratic-dynasties>

⁴⁰ Transparency International Bangladesh, "Transparency in Political Finance in Bangladesh", 2009, [http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/research/Crinis_Report_251009_full\[e\]2.pdf](http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/research/Crinis_Report_251009_full[e]2.pdf); https://files.transparencycdn.org/images/2025_WorkingPaper_DigitalDisclosurePoliticalFinance_English.pdf

⁴¹ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Fact-Finding Report Human Rights Violations and Abuses related to the Protests of July and August 2024 in Bangladesh, Geneva, February 2025. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/bangladesh/ohchr-fftb-hr-violations-bd.pdf>

rights, criminalisation of the right to dissent, media freedom, and freedom of opinion, right to life, and liberty were weapons to establish monopolistic control of power and protect its abuse. Repressive laws were enacted, and Constitutional amendments were imposed for the same purpose. The abolition of the constitutional provision for the Caretaker Government system for holding free and fair elections became the justification for depriving the people's right to vote and the right of political parties to participate in three successive (non)elections of 2014, 2018, and 2024.

Over the period from 2009 to 2024, which witnessed the transformation of a government that came to power following a nationally and internationally acceptable national election held in 2008 into one of the worst forms of authoritarianism and kleptocracy, was marked by 4,356 instances of gross human rights violations, including 2715 extra-judicial killings, 1,132 deaths in custody, and 689 enforced disappearances.⁴² Such violations can be credibly attributed to multi-level corruption. These were examples, firstly, of abuse of power to suppress free speech, dissent, the media, and political opponents. And secondly, in most cases, the law enforcement, security, or intelligence agencies that became the key pillars of abuse of kleptocratic power were involved either as perpetrators or abettors, beneficiaries, enablers, or, at best, acquiescent for lack of action, deliberately or not.

The chain of secret detention and torture facilities operated by the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) during the fallen kleptocratic regime revealed multi-dimensional human rights violations, including enforced illegal custody to facilitate abductions, tortures, extra-judicial killings, and disappearances. The specific number of Aynaghors, the illegal detention facilities used for such ruthless violations of human rights to protect and promote the interests of the authoritarian and kleptocratic regime, is unknown but estimated to be 700-800 across the country, including Dhaka⁴³. There were hardly any crimes that the law enforcement agencies, especially RAB, were not involved in. In one of the worst such crimes, RAB was the direct perpetrator in the grotesque case of contract killing in which seven people were brutally

⁴² This is according to annual reports for the relevant years by Odhikar, <https://www.omct.org/en/network-members/odhikar>. While the Odhikar estimates are for the period 2009-2024, another leading human rights organisation, Ain o Shalish Kendra reports the total number of such cases of gross violations for the period 2013-2024 to be 2987. <https://www.askbd.org/ask/>

⁴³ <https://www.risingbd.com/english/national/news/110381>

murdered on April 27, 2014, in Narayanganj, to enable the elimination of rivals in politically connected abuse of power⁴⁴.

In addition to specialised detention and torture centres like Aynaghors and Taskforce for Intelligence (TFI)⁴⁵, offices of so-called law-enforcement and security agencies were also used for illegal detention as demonstrated during the July Movement when seven leading movement coordinators were abducted by the Detective Branch of Police, some of whom were undergoing medical treatment in hospital, and detained illegally just because they were exercising their right to dissent against Kleptocracy⁴⁶. Fake narratives were also used as a weapon to criminalize free speech and suppress violations of human rights⁴⁷. Free media and free speech were indiscriminately criminalised, as in the case of the brutal assassination of the journalist couple Sagar and Runi, an example of enduring impunity that had a chilling effect on media freedom⁴⁸. It is widely believed they were targeted because of their investigative reporting on corruption in Bangladesh's energy sector, which they were about to publish⁴⁹.

In a specific example of protecting and providing impunity to grand corruption and money laundering, the politically biased Appellate Division issued a directive to stop investigations against one of the top-level money launderers and kingpins of kleptocracy⁵⁰. It is also no secret that the DGFI played the enabler's role in the forced takeover of a group of banks by the same group of companies that eventually used the dysfunctional banking sector oversight system to plunder and launder billions of dollars out of the country,⁵¹ one of the key factors that brought the country's banking sector

⁴⁴ <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/vkoi5vigsw>; <https://www.bbc.com/bengali/articles/c0v0z2w5x1ro>; <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/86913/dowe-know-the-whole-story-behind-the-narayanganj>

⁴⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/17/bangladesh-secret-interrogation-centre>

⁴⁶ <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/ycs5rf0jku> <https://www.bssnews.net/july-uprising/295833>

⁴⁷ <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/articles/press-release/7048>;
<https://www.newagebd.net/post/country/241525/tib-condemns-govts-use-of-fake-narratives>

⁴⁸ <https://x.com/amnestysasia/status/1762811995475017871>

⁴⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/03/bangladesh-end-crackdown-against-journalists-and-critics>

⁵⁰ <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/appellate-division-scraps-hc-order-investigate-money-laundering-allegations-against-s>

⁵¹ <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/dgfi-helped-force-takeover-leading-banks-bb-governor-tells-ft-978021>;
<https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/banks/news/how-islami-bank-was-taken-over-gunpoint-3691281>

to the brink of collapse. On the other hand, in revenge for trying to uphold judicial neutrality by resisting the highest level political pressure and refraining from issuing the Cangaroo-judgement to scrap the 16th amendment that deprived the authority of the Supreme Judicial Council to remove High Court Judges and handed it over to the Parliament,⁵² a former Chief Justice, known for his strong stance against allowing bail to notorious smugglers and corrupt individuals, was forced to leave the country using the DGFI, one of the most infamous intelligence agencies of the country⁵³.

Competition for establishing partisan political influence over law enforcement and the judicial process has a longer history. To subvert the investigation against perpetrators of the high-profile Grenade attack of 21 August 2004, the Criminal Investigation Department of the police staged the widely known “Joj Mia drama” to secure a confession of criminal responsibility by force upon a poor farmer Joj Mia, who was eventually proven innocent only after regime change in 2007. Joj Mia’s experience became an example of ruthless violation of human rights under partisan political influence by those who are legally mandated to protect these rights⁵⁴. Similarly, the controversy over the non-partisan and neutral Caretaker system of election-time Government for conducting free and fair elections was initiated by a politically biased decision to increase the retirement age of judges from 65 to 67 years, with the crafty design to ensure that the head of the Government of the Caretaker Government to be formed would be a person of choice of the then ruling party that made the amendment. This controversial decision is considered one of the key factors that eventually led to the scrapping of the Caretaker system⁵⁵, which, in turn, is believed to have been the strategy to establish monopolistic control over political and governance and enable kleptocracy. Another example of political influence over the judiciary was the ‘Skype scandal’ of 2012, which revealed the government pressure that led to the resignation of the relevant Justice and undermined the credibility of the International Crimes Tribunal nationally and internationally⁵⁶.

An extreme form of intolerance and suppression of dissent and freedom of expression of any type was manifested throughout the period of the authoritarian regime, as exemplified by numerous fabricated cases under

⁵² <https://epaper.prothomalo.com/Home/ShareArticle?OrgId=a1245545z&cid=1&imageview=0&epedate=18/09/2014&sedId=1>

⁵³ <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/star-interview-hasina-used-dgfi-force-me-leave-the-country-3684736>

⁵⁴ <https://www.thedailystar.net/august-21-carnage/news/joj-mia-drama-the-real-deal-1644658>

⁵⁵ <https://www.voabangla.com/a/7395418.html>

⁵⁶ <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-260836>

draconian use of the infamous laws like the Digital Security Act (DSA), ICT Act, and Special Powers Act. In one such case, Khadijatul Kubra, a 17-year-old student, was arrested under the DSA and suffered imprisonment for over a year, most of the time without a specific charge. The only stated allegation against her was a comment made by one of the speakers in a webinar that she moderated⁵⁷. Not only the DSA, but its predecessor, the ICT Act, also provided the ‘legitimacy’ to indiscriminate violation of the right to free speech⁵⁸. The Foreign Donations Voluntary Regulations Act of 2016 is largely responsible for unprecedented restrictions on civic space, especially for targeted harassment of rights-based NGOs and creating an atmosphere of intimidation against free speech⁵⁹. The Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply (Special Provisions) Act, 2010, granted indemnity to systematic violation of the due process in large-scale energy sector public procurement in the name of expedited approval of rental power projects. The law was widely criticized for preventing transparency, promoting corruption, and above all violating people’s right to raise a voice for transparency and against collusive abuse of power and barring judicial redress⁶⁰.

Similarly, the ruthless killing of Abrar Fahad, a student at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), which shocked Bangladesh, as he was targeted by some leaders of the student wing of the ruling party for his critical views against the regime, was posted on social

⁵⁷ <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/jnu-student-khadijatul-walks-out-jail-after-over-14-months-3474146>

⁵⁸ The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act 2006, purported to be a digital governance law to regulate electronic transactions, cybercrime and related matters, amended in 2013, and eventually replaced by the Digital Security Act 2018, is considered to be the most draconian of all in terms of its provisions and application, often deliberate to control freedom of speech.

⁵⁹ The Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2016 provided the NGO Affairs Bureau, public administration and security agencies the basis on which to promote various forms of abuse of power in the name of regulation of NGO operation with foreign donations in Bangladesh at both national and local levels included bribery, extortion and targeted harassment at the behest of the ruling authority. Article 14 of the Act in particular created an intimidating atmosphere by providing inter alia, that any NGO or individual shall be deemed to have committed a criminal offence if any remark or comment is made that can be considered inimical and defamatory to the Constitution and Constitutional institutions.

⁶⁰ Section 9 of the Act, repealed only after the fall of the regime, provided that no question can be raised before any court regarding the validity of any action, or any action deemed to have been taken regarding investment or procurement in the sector for which sweeping powers were vested in the Energy Ministry under the control of the head of the government.

media⁶¹. Only because of exercising the right to freedom of expression through posting satirical cartoons critical of the government's management of the COVID-19 crisis, through Facebook post writer and cartoonist Mushtaq Ahmed and Ahmed Kabir Kishore were jailed under DSA in May 2020, tortured by RAB under custody, and denied bail six times. Mushtaq Ahmed died on 25 February 2021⁶². Among many instances of ruthless violation of human rights by the RAB was the case of Limon Hossain, a 16-year-old college student who was shot point-blank in a farmland near his home in a typically fake and fabricated narrative of crossfire with criminals. His leg had to be amputated to save his life, following which he was unable to return home under threat of further persecution by the perpetrators. Two years after the shooting, he was charged in a further fabricated case of alleged possession of an illegal weapon. Although eventually the fabricated charges against him were dropped, he never got justice for the violation of several items of his fundamental rights, including the right to life, nor was the perpetrator brought to account⁶³. Instead, the then National Human Rights Commission, in another example of a state institution being politically captured, called upon the victim to withdraw his case against RAB and reach a compromise with RAB⁶⁴.

The DSA was particularly used for the suppression of political dissent and media freedom. At least 4,520 individuals were charged under 1,436 cases between October 2018 and September 2023. Of them, 495 were politicians, 451 were journalists sued under this Act, while the remaining were of various other professions. Though there were victims of other categories of alleged wrongdoing like hurting religious sentiments, sexual harassment, bullying, and violation of privacy, the overwhelming majority were for alleged defamation due to the exercise of freedom of expression. 255 media professionals were particularly targeted for their journalistic reports⁶⁵.

The Fact-Finding Report of the UN Human Rights Office graphically documents⁶⁶ how law enforcement agencies, especially the Police, Rapid

⁶¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49986893>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/10/bangladesh-ruling-party-activists-kill-student-after-facebook-post>

⁶² https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/3800/2021/en/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁶³ https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/20/bangladesh-no-justice-wounded-child?utm_source=chatgpt.com; https://www.bbc.com/bengali/news/2013/07/130701_pg_bangladesh_rab_limon

⁶⁴ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/laws-rights/29498/limon-won%E2%80%99t-withdraw-case-against-rab>

⁶⁵ <https://cgs-bd.com/article/24476/The-Ordeal--Five-years-of-the-Digital-Security-Act-2018-2023>

⁶⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ohchr-fact-finding-report-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-related>

Action Battalion (RAB), and BGB, with the active support and involvement of the security agencies like DGFI, DB, NSI, NTMC operating during the Kleptocratic Government, were involved in extrajudicial killings and multi-dimensional violations of other rights and freedoms. Various ruthless means were used, including lethal weapons, indiscriminately against participants of the July uprising against discrimination and systematic violation of the range of fundamental rights, including civil and political rights.

The evolution of RAB as an indispensable institution to support the exercise of executive authority without accountability is just a case in point that abuse of power is independent of political differences. Established as an “elite force” in 2004 to conduct an ironically coined “clean heart operation” with the stated objective of curbing terrorism, and then praised for doing so “courageously”, the Battalion that grew from an initial strength of 5,500 members to over 15,000 by the time it received the dubious distinction of receiving targeted US Sanctions in 2021 for serious human rights violations including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings⁶⁷. It was no surprise therefore that having successfully managed to survive national and international calls for reform and even specific demands for being disbanded by the both the opposition political parties of the day, RAB became the pillar of the power structure that not only enabled the rise of authoritarianism but also the trusted force for the kleptocracy to suppress any form of dissent throughout the whole period of 15 years and during the July uprising. That the indispensability of such a pillar as a power base prevails in post-August 5 Bangladesh and is likely to be sustained is clear enough in the way the UN Human Rights Office Report’s specific recommendation to disband RAB remains ignored clearly by choice, despite otherwise unqualified praise and support that the report received from the Government and all other stakeholders, including the power-aspirant political parties. Control of dissent by force and indiscriminate violation of human rights through the use of law enforcement and security agencies and surveillance systems has become so deeply ingrained in the political and governance culture of Bangladesh that it is unlikely that the much-hyped state reform agenda will bring any substantive transformations in these agencies, in the repressive systems they have developed, capacities acquired, and methods applied that have been institutionalized.

⁶⁷ Ali Riaz, “US Sanctions on Bangladesh’s RAB: What Happened? What Next?”, Atlantic Council, December 16, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/us-sanctions-on-bangladeshs-rab-what-happened-whats-next/>

VI. Is there a way out – The Whole of the State and Society

What can be observed from the above is that the triad of corruption, human rights violations, and injustice in Bangladesh was trapped in a vicious, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing cycle. Corruption subverted the mechanisms of justice, leading to human rights violations, while the erosion of justice and rights, in turn, enabled corruption to thrive. The impact of this corrosive triangle under kleptocratic control was manifested in subverting the rule of law; undermined fair trials; produced distorted, biased and politically motivated judgements leading to deprivation of civil and political rights; granted both facilitation and impunity to the various forms and levels of abuse of power, especially of the high-level corrupt plunderers and money launderers connected with kleptocratic power; prevented people's access to justice and in particular denied protection of the victims of violation of human rights from further revengeful injustice.

Corruption, criminalized politics, and dysfunctional institutions not only led to kleptocratic state capture but grossly undermined the capacity of the state to ensure pro-people socio-economic development, rule of law, justice, and accountability. It facilitated further systemic abuse of rights and justice using the state institutions and agencies to sustain, where violence, exploitations, discrimination, bribery, fraud, extortion, nepotism, influence peddling, illegal occupation and plundering of public resources, grand corruption, and illicit financial transfers became normalised by both state and private sector abusers of power. There was hardly any remedy for victims. Media and press freedom, freedom of information, civic participation, right to dissent, and assembly were criminalised.

The triad of corruption, human rights violation, and injustice is an outcome of the political and governance eco-system that has evolved over the years since independence, particularly since the fall of the Ershad regime, and reached the deepest level of institutionalisation during 2009-2024. However, getting out of this triangle is not yet impossible. Much of it will depend on the extent to which the pillars and determinants of the political and governance eco-system are ready for transformation towards state reform and a new politico-governance construct. Four mutually reinforcing drivers of an effective national integrity system built on the premise of “the whole of the state and society” are indispensable. First is the political will for accountable governance at all levels, including reforming the self from within, not only on paper but in practice, without fear or favour. Second, the corrupt and other abusers of power must be brought to justice, ensuring equality before the law irrespective of the identity and status of the individual. Third, the institutions of the national integrity system, including security and surveillance agencies, must be transparent, efficient, accountable, and effective, both individually and collectively. Fourth, a

conducive environment must be created for people at large, particularly the media and civil society, to raise and strengthen the demand for accountability and mobilise people, especially the new generation, against corruption, human rights violations, and injustice. This whole-of-state and society approach is graphically presented below,⁶⁸ in which the effectiveness of the national Integrity system depends on the collective and mutually reinforcing strength of the whole set of state and non-state institutions grounded on the politico-institutional, socio-political, and socio-economic foundations. Getting out of the vicious triangle and achieving the aspirations of the rule of law, sustainable development, and quality of life is possible when the whole national integrity system holds together strongly enough to prevent and control corruption and kleptocracy.



The humiliating defeat of what was widely considered an invincibly authoritarian and Kleptocratic regime represents a thumping reaffirmation of people's power and the whole-of-society approach. It has opened unprecedented gateways to ecosystem transformation. The youth and civic uprising have shattered the foundations and structures of kleptocracy. The people's movement, spontaneously participated in by the whole of society except the regime and its cronies, protested not only the use of force by the law enforcement and intelligence agencies but also against long years of misrule symbolised by abysmal governance failures and the worst form of kleptocracy. It represented a powerful outburst of public sentiment against the use of political, public, governmental, and business and other positions of power as a license for corruption and self-enrichment at the expense of

⁶⁸ Borrowed from: [https://www.transparency.org/en/national-integrity-system-assessments#:~:text=The%20National%20Integrity%20System%20\(NIS\)%20is%20a,government%2C%20civil%20society%2C%20and%20the%20business%20community](https://www.transparency.org/en/national-integrity-system-assessments#:~:text=The%20National%20Integrity%20System%20(NIS)%20is%20a,government%2C%20civil%20society%2C%20and%20the%20business%20community)

most of the people who were victims of gross human rights violations and injustices.

The victory of the movement marked the fall of the authoritarian regime, but whether it will lead to the demise of kleptocracy and a sufficiently robust and sustainable democratic transition remains to be seen. It will depend on whether and to what extent the July Charter, containing the aspirations for state reform for accountable governance, will be truly realised. It will depend on the extent to which reform proposals of all eleven reform commissions that have remained outside the purview of the July Charter will be implemented. It will also depend on structural and systemic reforms in some other left-out critical sectors of public interest, like education, the private sector, agriculture, environment, and climate change, etc., which will be part of the transformation agenda. It will depend furthermore on the extent to which the recommendations of the Fact-Finding mission of the UN Human Rights Office will be implemented, especially with respect to the law enforcement, security forces, intelligence, and surveillance agencies and systems. It will also depend quite significantly on the capacity of reform leaders and power aspirants to map forces of resistance to change as much from outside as from within and adopt an actionable, time-bound strategy. It will depend on whether and to what extent Bangladesh politics can develop the capacity to transparently and accountably manage its dependence on money, muscle, and religion. Finally, much will depend on whether the most determining forces in the whole of the state and society, especially political parties and bureaucracy, the prime movers of the executive authority, can overcome the clearly visible “it’s our turn” syndrome