Politicized Civil Society in Bangladesh: Case Study Analyses

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Abstract

Although civil society in Bangladesh is recognized for its vibrant performance in social development, it is often criticized for its inability to influence good governance and democracy. The aim of this paper is to point out the reasons for this failure of civil society. Through performing case studies upon five civil society organizations (CSOs) representing different sectors and levels of the civil society, the paper concludes that CSOs in Bangladesh are often politicized and co-opted by different political parties. In a typical scenario in other countries, civil society can provide a counterbalance or even monitor the state both at the national and local levels. However, in Bangladesh, often CSOs have compromised their autonomy and politicized themselves to certain political parties or political blocks. In such a vulnerable position, civil society can hardly play its expected role to ensure good governance and strengthen democracy.

Keywords

Civil Society, Democracy, Bangladesh, Political Party, Politicization

Introduction

Bangladesh is often called a 'development show-case' where civil society organizations are found to be successful and active in micro-credit, empowerment and social development initiatives. It is also often cited as a success story for the Neo-Tocquevillean school[1] (Diamond 1999; Fisher 1998; Hulme and Edwards 1997). However, the political system is still struggling with a poor economy and, as a fledgling democracy, is marked by confrontation and violence. The vibrant civil society is often criticized for its weak contributions to democracy (Lewis2004; Quadir 2003; Ahmed 2011). The case of Bangladesh forms a stark contrast to the Neo-Tocquevillean assumption that a strong civil society fosters democracy, holds the state in check, and contributes to development (Howell and Pearce 2001, p. 40). Civil society is considered central to both the promotion and maintenance of democracy (Diamond 1999, p 239). Naturally, the question arises as to why the vibrant civil society in Bangladesh fails to contribute to the institutionalization of democracy there. This paper seeks to discover the reasons behind the weakness of Bangladesh's civil society. It begins with the hypothesis that most civil society organization (CSOs), both modern types such as development-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and conventional types such as professional groups, trade unions, and citizen's groups, are politicized and co-opted by the major political parties. Due to this co-optation, CSOs fail to function autonomously in their interactions with the state, whether in acts of cooperation or of negotiation. With the help of individual case studies of five CSOs representing different sectors of the civil society, this paper argues that civil society in Bangladesh often compromises its ability to monitor the state and politics and become politicized. In most cases they become compelled to come to such situations just to survive, achieve their primary organizational objectives, or earn personal gains for their leaders.

This paper is based on empirical research. The first section gives a theory-based explanation and description of politics, civil society and its politicized nature in Bangladesh, using the most accurate theoretical lenses available. The second section comprises five case studies of CSOs representing different sectors of the civil society. The case study analyses verify the politicized and compromized vigilance of civil society in Bangladesh inferred in the theoretical section.

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[1]De Tocqueville (1873) conceived of civil society as a sphere of mediating organizations between the individuals and the state. Neo-Tocquevillean scholars not only argue for the positive link between civil society and democracy but also advocate for building and strengthening civil society in order to build democracy and ensure good governance in third world countries. While de Tocqueville saw civil society as the site of decentralization for democratic governance, neo-Tocquevilleans view civil society as a supporting structure in the state's democratization. Associational life is thought to provide social infrastructure for liberal democracy; supply the means to limit, resist and curb the excesses of the state and market; present an alternative when they fail; facilitate service delivery at the local level; assist in conflict management; deepen democracy; provide a voice to disadvantaged groups; and promote economic development (Alagappa, 2004, p. 41). According to the neo-Tocquevillean model, efforts to produce democracy through civil society and civic engagement are believed to effect change in three ways: first, changes at the micro-social level will produce macro-political results; second, in a society, disposition and practices shaped in one association will have spill over effects in other circumstances; and third, the same associational structures will operate in similar ways in different socio-historical contexts (Armony, 2004, p. 7). For detail consult (Tasnim 2012, p 156-157).

Civil Society and Politics in Bangladesh: The Search for a Theoretical Lens

From a general sense, civil society is considered as the sustained, organized social activity that occurs in groups that are formed outside the state, the market, and the family (Schwartz & Pharr 2003, p.xiii). Civil society is considered to represent the public voice and to influence the process of achieving and maintaining democracy by acting at the national and grassroots levels. A vigilant civil society in a developing country may contribute to better governance and democracy in different ways: through providing civic education, increasing interest articulation, monitoring the state apparatus and markets, and ensuring better participation and representation of all segments of the society in decision making, aside from the polls (Tasnim 2012, p.161).

Neo-Tocquevillean literature generally considers civil society in idealized terms: autonomous, democratic and rich in social capital and civic engagement, always enhancing democracy (Diamond1999; Putnum 2000; Salamon 2003). In explaining this theory, Diamond (1996, p210) emphasizes the necessity of a vibrant civil society to bring institutional reform and fight against corruption and clientelism in a new democracy. Civil society is also expected to supplement political parties by stimulating political participation, building a better citizenry, and providing leadership training. Ultimately, experience with associational life may enrich other democratic values, such as tolerance, moderation, compromise and respect for opposing views. These ideal theories give the impression that the flow of influence is strictly one-way, from civil society towards political society. However, in real life, civil society is often observed to be influenced by political society and the traditional norms embedded in the social life.

In Bangladesh, for example, it is true that group-based micro credit, community-based education and health awareness systems introduced by NGOs have had direct positive impacts on poverty eradication, literacy and health management (Ullah and Routray 2003; Amin 1997; Dowla 2006; Diamond 1999). NGOs actually created a public resource distribution system outside the nation state (Nobusue 2002, p 34); in this way, civil society in Bangladesh has supplemented the state development policy. However, it is also fact, that civil society influenced by conflicting political parties often has become polarized, corrupt and ineffective in democratic terms (Quadir 2003). Moreover, CSOs, including the development NGOs in Bangladesh, appear to have entered the long patron-client chains running from top government leaders down to the periphery of Bangladesh; similarly, NGOs have often been accused of becoming new patrons for the poor (Lewis 2004;White 1999; Hashemi 1996). Although Bangladesh is ethnically homogenous and casteless, its society is vertically constructed and politically polarized. Here, civil society, instead of forming bonds and bridging social capital among different groups, helps sharpen existing political divisions (Quadir 2003), which have their origins in historical circumstances and have been strategically used and generated by political parties (Tasnim, 2007). Thus, in Bangladesh, civil society has been behaving in the opposite dimension of what is ideally expected from it in relation to democracy. Moreover, civil society is often observed to be compromising its

essential watchdog status due to the strong influence of political forces and its accompanying loss of independence.

For Bangladesh, Neo-Tocquevillean assumptions have thus proven to be partly true but ultimately inadequate. This requires further exploration for alternative lenses or models through which to understand civil society in Bangladesh and, above all, the reasons for its failure to contribute to Bangladeshi democracy.

Although not entirely opposite to the Neo-Tocquevillean school, the Gramscian model of civil society provides a better method to understand its relevance to the state and political forces. Drawing on but differing from Marx, Antonio Gramsci sees civil society not as a counter to the socio-economic base of the state but as part of the political superstructure (Alagappa 2004). Gramsci's hegemony encompasses both the consensual basis of an existing political system within civil society and the advancement to a level of class consciousness where class is understood not only from an economic point of view but also in terms of a common culture and intellectual and moral awareness (Adamson 1980, p. 170-171). Gramsci's conception of civil society includes all social institutions that are non-production-related, non-governmental, and non-familial, ranging from recreational groups to trade unions and from churches to political parties, meaning that there is both a separation and overlap between civil society and political spheres. He believes that civil society creates the ideological hegemony in the state's favor. His analysis is clearly historically specific, and his main interest is the role of civil society in making capitalism politically viable in cooperation with the state's political apparatus (Khan1998). Gramsci equates the state to the sum of political and civil society where both parts are in touch with hegemony. In a capitalist society, the state itself oscillates between three positions in relation to civil society, simultaneously contrasting with, encompassing and being identical to it (Anderson 1976, p. 12-13). With the state's consent, civil society is the manufacturer of and contributor to the political hegemony that may be considered the state's ideological control mechanism. Political hegemony is hidden within cultural and ideological discourses and the state's disciplinary method. In explaining his war of position, Gramsci has described the possibility of counter-hegemony, where civil society fights not only the coercive methods of the state but also its cultural and ideological codification. Gramsci's idea of civil society may provide a better model to understand civil society in Bangladesh, particularly in its relationship with the state and politics and its role in democracy. As mentioned above, civil society in Bangladesh often mixes with political society. This may be understood better in Gramsci's framework on the state, civil society, political society and hegemony, as well as counter hegemony.

Politicization is a common concept often used in a negative meaning to describe political involvement or exertion to control an institution, organization or an administrative process, which is ideally thought to be neutral and free from political influences. Moreover, government dictates and strong party control upon the organization challenging its autonomy is another feature of politicization. Most often, politicization takes place through ideology, patronage, corruption and clientelism. When a civil society organization takes politically motivated decisions as directed by a party or government and is politically colored by the

political affiliation of its members, withholding original objective and interest on which it was formed, we may term it as a politicized CSO. Partisanship of the members of the organization has a role to play in the politicization process. Partisanship is the party identification of citizens. Such identification leads to predictable relationships with their perceptions, evaluations and actions in the political process.

At present, Bangladesh is a liberal economy; however, democracy has yet to be stabilized. Political society and political parties are the most powerful and influential institutions. The political parties have control over all sections of political, social and even economic life. Civil society is no exception. These institutions use vertical means such as corruption, patronage, nepotism, and violence to strengthen their support and their control on all institutions espousing alternate political ideologies. In the process, civil society has been violated, penetrated, polarized, and controlled by political parties (Tasnim, 2007). Factionalism and patron-client networks have prepared the basis of social organization (Jahan 2005, p. 199). These cultures have developed over centuries in rural society and moved into urban areas with migration of the rural elites and their entrance into national politics (Broomfield 1976, p. 41-60). While the present ruling elites of Bangladesh (belonging to all parties) have a moral commitment to Western political philosophies such as democracy or socialism, in practice, they rely on the patron-client relationship to run the state and political parties (Islam 2001, p. 429). The political leadership of the country, irrespective of ideology and party, belongs to the intermediate class that has links both at the urban and rural levels[2]. Political parties co-opt patrons in various localities, who in turn divert their clients' votes or support to particular political parties. Because clients owe allegiance to the patron and not to the party, these parties compete with each other to increase their support group of patrons (Jahan 2005, p 200). Who are these patrons? In most cases, they are local elites, local council members, and more recently leaders of CSOs and development NGOs. They are clients to the political parties, the brokers between the government and people. In this manner every segment of society, including CSOs, are politicized both at the rural and urban levels. According to Bourdieu (1986, p. 249) in all groups there is a system of delegation where a single agent or a small group becomes the plenipotentiary, accumulating the totality of social capital gained from the collective endeavor. This may be case for a major portion of CSOs in Bangladesh, where the CSO leaders, for their personal interest and political gain, turn themselves into such brokers for the political parties.

In contemporary Bangladesh, very few CSOs may be termed neutral. Party loyalty, communalism and class distinctions tend to split most CSOs. A vast majority of social organizations operating within the private sphere are simply front organizations for various political parties. Instead of representing the collective interest of the people, these CSOs are mainly engaged in the practice and promotion of the ideas and interests of a given brand of

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[2]Historically, Bengal's feudal agrarian society was always hierarchical. The agriculture-based vertical patron-client and kinship network that developed in rural areas was extended to urban areas. The same rural elites who influenced the social and economic life of the peasants later became the urban political leaders and have served as an intermediate political class. During and after the British colonial period, Bangladesh society was penetrated by formal political institutions headed by these politicians, who used their vertical networks to maintain their influence in society (Broomfield, 1976, p. 41-60).

politics (Quadir 2003, p. 432). In the process, it appears that civil society has become politicized and has compromised its vigilance and autonomy, which is negatively affecting the democratization process.

Political Parties and Politicized Civil Society in Bangladesh

In the first 18 years of independence, Bangladesh politics faced government turnovers and military coup d'états with no party competition; for this reason, there was a monopoly of a section of politicians, bureaucrats, military leaders and their parties. Insecure political and economic institutions led the different factions to use patronage and clientelism to build and maintain an organizational base. After the end of the autocratic rule of General Ershad in 1990 and the reintroduction of the parliamentary system of government, a competitive but confrontational party system has been observed in Bangladesh. The two major parties are the left-centric Awami League (AL), which is aligned with other, smaller left-wing parties, and the right-centric Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which is aligned with other Islamic-minded parties (Hossain 2000, p. 520, N. Ahmed 2003, p. 60). Both parties had an equal probability of winning a general election and forming a cabinet with their coalition partners if the election was free and fair. Since 1991, BNP and AL have served as the government twice each alternately (BNP, 1991-1996 and 2001-2006 and AL, 1996-2001, 2008-present) with their coalition or supporting partners. However, in 2014 through a controversial general election, AL continues its regime.

Because both major political parties are centrist, they seem to have converged into catch-all parties[3] (Katz and Mair1995; Kirchheimer 1966) with no radical or identifying ideologies concerning national and/or foreign policy. These parties now attract supporters from all segments of society who show allegiance to their policies. Both parties accept a capitalist economic system and democracy. The ideological differences among them are not based in liberalism or socialism but rather in history and the debate over the inclusion of religion in politics.

Political culture or practice has yet to reach the level where the parties are ready to engage in politics within democratic rules and norms. They calculate politics as a zero-sum game. Therefore, these parties always underestimate each other's political strength and seek to establish monopolistic rule by simply knocking out the other party, believing that the losing party will simply fade away (Hossain 2000, p. 521). At the end of each party's term of office, several factions appear that struggle internally for their share of patronage, power and party tickets to contest the next election.

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[3]Kirchheimer (1966, p. 185) argued that class line parties and integrating mass parties (Duverger, 1978) have gone through a transformation and become more effective in electoral terms. These parties have turned into catch-all parties embracing a nationwide clientele. They began to make broader appeals, trying to gain supportfrom all classes (Katz and Mair 1995, p. 12). Only major parties can become successful catch-all parties. The catch-all party finds its permanent clientele among the interest groups although they also represent citizens beyond group activities (Kirchheimer, 1966, p. 194). In Third World countries, nationalist mass parties often transformed into catch-all parties as they gained victory over colonial powers, were elected to rule, and engaged in state and nation building.

Moreover, the internal organization and decision-making processes of each party are neither democratic nor decentralized. Practically, parties are organized around the center of their symbolic leader, who uses the charisma of his or her predecessor. The chair persons of most parties enjoy widespread powers, including the power to take unilateral action (Ahmed 2003, p.61, Jahan 2015, p. 148).

Instead of a formal and horizontal relationship with these parties, civil society seems to maintain a vertical, informal relationship (Tasnim 2007, p. 24). The local leaders, CSOs, and NGOs are clients to the state and patrons to the citizens and villagers (Islam 2001,p. 213). Such relationships bring CSOs favors for the group, such as project sanctions, financial grants, and jobs, as well as personal favors, including government loans, employment, promotions, business grants and licenses, government contracts, legal aid, and even medical help. In return, the government and political parties receive loyalty and support from different sections of the social strata, financial and logistic support during elections, control over different institutions and even the media, and ensure the necessary organizational base for staging mass protests. Such politicization, as opposed to political penetration, is observed among all types of CSOs, urban and rural-based, traditional and modern.

Traditional organizations such as labor unions, professional associations, university groups, chambers of commerce and even newspapers are identified primarily by their political affiliations. With few exceptions, most of these CSOs belong to one of the major three ideological camps- Secularist, Nationalist and Islamist (Quadir and Tsujinaka 2015, p 11). The ruling party, whether the AL or BNP, has shown through its decisions and actions that it gives special support and rewards to those CSOs that gave positive assistance in helping that party win its election, and acts directly against the CSOs that collaborated with the opposition. Labor union leaders, rather than promoting workers' interests, are motivated to take undue advantage from their position or concentrate on forming links with political parties or higher government functionaries (Zafarullah 2003, p. 295).

Political penetration is also observed in rural society. In their study on the change in the contemporary rural power structure in Bangladesh, Faruque et al. (2007) revealed interesting changes where links with political parties were shown to be the most important factor in rural power sources; previously, it was the possession of landed property, family heritage, and wealth. Another significant change within rural society is the emerging new type of grouping and rivalry, reflecting the polarization and confrontation found in national politics.

Modern development NGOs and their apex organization, the Association for Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB)[4], were considered neutral or apolitical to a point. However, political conflict ultimately led to divisions within this NGO community too (Hossain 2006). While the NGOs at the national level are politically divided, at the local level they have been identified as the new patrons of the poor, both as direct providers of micro-credit and as mediators between the poor and other power structures. Among the intellectual

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[4] ADAB at present is totally dysfunctional, instead the Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB) http://www.ngofederationbd.net/index.php (Accessed 4 November 2016) has earned the position to represent all the institutions.

and professional groups, it is the university professors and lawyers who are at the extreme of political division and factions. Professors join the conflicting political blocs for personal gain and power as well as ideology and thus lose the strength to monitor the university administration or the government. The lawyers' associations in Bangladesh are equally politicized. Our discussion so far gives us an overview of the politicized civil society at the national level.

These matters, however anecdotally true, have yet to be empirically investigated and analyzed. The present study will avoid extreme cases, instead examining typical CSOs belonging to important sectors of civil society and working at the periphery level, to analyze their politicized nature.

Methodology

Among different case study strategies, basically the 'explanation building through multiple case studies' method (Yin 2003, 121-2)[5] has been adopted for this research. To verify the propositions about politicized civil society in Bangladesh, this paper systematically uses in-depth observation, newspaper reports, documents provided by CSOs, information revealed through interviews and group discussions with CSO personnel, members and leaders of four CSOs in the district of Rajshahi, known as the centre of the North Zone of Bangladesh. The Rajshahi district was selected because it best represents Bangladesh civil society at the periphery and meso level in terms of urban-rural distribution, social composition, education, economy, and administrative importance[6]. These case studies were conducted in addition to a survey on CSOs where 504 CSOs from eight categories were interviewed with structured questionnaire[7]. To validate the quantitative survey data[8], it was necessary to conduct in depth

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[5] In a multiple-case study, one goal is to build a general explanation that fits each of the individual cases, even though the cases will vary in their details. The objective is analogous to multiple experiments (Yin 2003, 121).

[6] Because Rajshahi is a divisional town, divisional headquarters of all administrative offices, as well as district branch offices of private companies, banks, educational institutions and NGOs, are found here. Again, because the district is the center for higher education in the northern zone and strata, it provides a space for associational activities. CSOs that are active here, particularly in the urban areas, represent the CSOs active at the meso level of the nation. Again, like almost all of Bangladesh, Rajshahi's economy, in spite of being a divisional district, is mostly agrarian (19.5%), with little significant industry (7%) or business. Agriculture at the national level contributes 20.4% to the GDP. Seventy-six percent of the national population lives in rural areas; similarly, 67% of households in Rajshahi are farm households. The national literacy rate in 2006 (45%), resembles Rajshahi's literacy rate (47.4%). Naturally, rural and community based societies in Rajshahi have a high possibility of representing the peripheral area of Bangladesh(Source: *Statistical Year Book of Bangladesh*, 2004, 2005).

[7] All registered or enlisted CSOs in the district, representing eight categories—cooperative organizations, voluntary social organizations, NGOs, youth groups, labour unions, trade organizations, professional associations, and university-centric organizations—were regarded as the survey population, totaling 3,768 organizations (Tasnim, 2007, p. 11). The sample size was selected through a stratified random sampling process: 1,227 organizations were selected randomly, representing 30% of each category. Ultimately, representatives of 504 CSOs were interviewed, resulting in a return rate of 41%. Each CSO was directly interviewed using a structured questionnaire that included 30 questions along with sub-questions and long lists of answer options. Questions were specifically designed to reveal the policy influences and interests of the target groups and their relationship with the government, political sphere and other important sectors of the society and political system.

case studies. These four CSOs were carefully[9] selected for representing the most common types of CSOs as well as both service providing and advocacy groups active at the local level. *Rajshahi Sugar Mill Labor Union* represents the trade unions, *Pahar Pur Ideal Farmers' Cooperative* represents the cooperatives, *Thengamara Mahila Shobuj Shongho* represents the NGO sector and *Movement to Protect Rajshahi City* represents the local advocacy groups. To represent professional CSOs, a nationally-based movement was selected; a movement for genuine and logical demands by the society's most respected but powerless professionals – *Primary School Teachers of Bangladesh*. Selected supplementary and follow up interviews were conducted in 2012 to confirm the data collected in 2006.

With these five case studies, this paper attempts to reveal the actual relationship between civil society and politics and identify the reasons behind the weak contributions of Bangladesh's civil society to its democracy.

Selected Case Studies

This section provides brief case studies of five types of CSOs: trade unions, cooperatives, development NGOs, citizen groups and professional groups. All five CSO types are very different from one other in nature, function, size, and membership, and each represents the interests of a different segment of society. Each case study among the first four (trade union, cooperative, development NGO and citizen group) focuses on four main points: an overview of the CSO, membership patterns and election, the relationship between leaders and members, and the nature of its interactions with politics and/or the government. These points were selected with the intent to understand the democratic nature of CSOs, their autonomy, and their positions in relation to local or national politics and democracy. The fifth case study is on a movement of a professional group, primary teachers, at the national level that is responding to some very basic demands that they have yet to fulfill. The movement reached its peak in 2006. This case study is mostly based on content analysis of newspaper reports and articles published on the movement and the issue raised in 2006 and later.

Through these very different case studies, the paper shows that, at whatever level civil society is working and with whatever degree of human and financial resources, political links are always important for an individual group's existence, maintenance and success. In the process, groups often lose their independence and compromise their watchdog roles. What is true for an individual CSO is also true for a nation-wide CSO movement.

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[8] Quantitative analysis of the survey data gathered from the 504 CSOs has been published in another research paper (Tasnim 2012) in 2012. The present paper and the paper published in 2012 (Tasnim, 2012), both are based on author's PhD research titled 'Civil Society in Bangladesh: Vibrant but not Vigilant'.

[9] After going through the answers in the filled in questionnaires, the survey notes submitted by the surveyors and their daily reports during the time of the survey, these four CSOs from different categories were purposively selected for further in-depth study. They were purposively selected as these four CSOs had been considered best, for their size, structure, functions, membership and objectives, among the surveyed CSOs to represent each category.

I. *Rajshahi Sugar Mill Labor Union*[10]

The Rajshahi Sugar Mill Labor and Workers Union has been registered under the Ministry of Labor and Employment since 1967 and represents 1,234 members. Its main objective is protecting the workers' interests and bargaining with the authorities for improved wages, pensions, financial security, and insurance for ill and injured workers, which they achieve through a variety of methods, including striking. The union's major funding sources are membership fees, entrance fees, monthly fees, special fees, subsidy from the authorities and income from union property. The union liaises with the other sugar mill labor unions, which are joined under a federation, and the labor unions of other industrial sectors.

All laborers and workers at the Rajshahi Sugar Mill, with the exception of security guards and office assistants in the confidential section, are eligible to become voting members of the union with the right to run in union elections. The union is run by a 23-member executive committee, 17 of whom are elected directly by the general membership every two years. The committee, following constitutional rules, works to implement union objectives. The executive committee is responsible for the union's financial affairs and recruiting necessary staff to run the union office. Financial decisions are made by a majority vote of the committee; they also have jurisdiction over matters not directly addressed in the union constitution. However, the most important responsibility of the committee is bargaining with the mill authorities.

The elected president of the executive committee is called the collective bargaining leader. He is very powerful and has immense influence over the workers and other mill officers. Upon election, he no longer works in the mill and maintains a well-furnished office superior even to the office of the mill's general manager. The status of the elected leader and committee members is very different from that of a normal worker. Members of the committee bargain on behalf of the rest of the workers for higher wages and other perks. However, the voting system brings a democratic atmosphere in the union, especially during elections, which are conducted by secret ballot. Practically, it has been observed that the labor leader who supports the ruling party or those who are supported by the ruling political leaders usually take over the actual power of the union and sometimes control of the whole mill management. Even if these leaders do not hold an elected post within the union, their influence and power are found everywhere. The *de facto* presence and power of these politically linked elected and non-elected labor leaders often challenges the *de jure* legitimacy of the elected committee. Each department of the mill administration has to move according to the wishes of the labor leaders.

It has been found that this particular trade union is neither totally controlled by the political parties nor is it independent of them. During executive committee elections, slates are formed based on party lines that reflect national politics. However, although one slate

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[10] This case study is based on field visits, interviews with the labor union leader, group discussions with other workers and officers and union documentation (e.g. union constitution, election results) provided by the Rajshahi Sugar Mill Labor Union Office.

may be marked as BNP and another as AL, candidates supporting other political parties (like some communist factions, for example) may also be found on these slates. In most cases, the ruling party slate has significant influence among union members and the administration. However, there is no permanent voters' bank for each slate. The voters' decisions change with changes in national politics and the performance of the union president[11]. Examining the list of elected members and their political affiliations for 2001, 2003 and 2005[12] shows that the election results reflected national politics: in 2001, when AL was in power, 10 of the elected members were from the AL while 6 were from the BNP. Conversely, when the BNP was in power in 2003 and 2005, the distribution was just the opposite, with 9 BNP and 7 AL candidates elected in 2003 and 13 BNP and 4 AL candidates elected in 2005. Central political leaders of the Rajshahi District such as parliament members and local mayors have a direct influence on the recruitment process, determining sugar prices and calling tenders for selling sugar. Naturally an oligarchic tendency, intensified by high profile political links, develops within the executive committee.

The Rajshahi Sugar Mill Labor and Workers Union represents a medium-sized, hardly profitable government industry labor group that is active in a region far from the nation's central production zone. Their financial power is far inferior to that of labor unions working in the political and economic center; however, they are still highly politicized and controlled by political powers. Power and control of those labor leaders blessed by the ruling party (which has alternated every five years since 1990) indicates its lack of autonomy. When government-supported leaders control the administration, their bargaining power for the common workers and labor is lessened. These leaders are often found to be more concerned with their own (close inner circle's) personal benefit and patronage than with the collective interest of the labor community.

II. *Pahar Pur Adarsho Shomobai Krishok Samity (Pahar Pur Ideal Farmers' Cooperative)*[13]

In Bangladesh, there are several varieties of cooperatives with different statuses and financial power at different levels of rural and urban society, although their most common purpose is to provide loans. These cooperatives are generally organized in two tiers, with village cooperatives at the periphery and a central cooperative located in each sub-district. The central cooperative committee is elected by the periphery cooperatives. Such cooperatives are mostly made up of farmers but also by poor laborers, workers, fishers, small businessmen and even the destitutes. Primary cooperatives are formed by 20 to 40 members at the village level; these groups each elect one member to the college of electorate, which ultimately elects the members who are sent to the central committee at the union level[14]. In rural areas, a prime objective of cooperatives is providing small loans (5 to 20 thousand BDT)[15]to farmers, fishermen, and small businessmen. The cooperative examined here is a typical periphery

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[11] Group discussion with mill workers and mill engineer during a field visit on 26th September 2006.

[12] As provided by the office of the labor union.

[13] The case study was developed based on a field visit to Bagmara during September, 2006, information provided by the chairperson in a survey questionnaire, and through personal interviews, participation at the cooperative meetings as well as observation note provided by the surveyor responsible for surveying this particular CSO.

[14] Interview with the BRDB Officer, Poba Sub-district, 9th October, 2006.

[15]Bangladeshi Currency named -Taka valued at approximately USD 70-300.

cooperative of 35 members, all of whom are male farmers. The cooperative is active in the Bhobanaigonj union under the Bagmara sub-district in Rajshahi. It was established and registered in 1984. Paharpur Cooperative is supervised by the local officers of the Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB). It is a stable and long-running cooperative with a yearly budget of 150,000 TK, approximately USD 20,205. This is rather a large budget compared to the budgets of other cooperatives in the area.

First, the 35 farmers had to form a common capital stock with their personal savings, at which point they began to receive loans from BRDB with the supervision of the BRDB officers. Members use their loans mainly for agriculture and irrigation purposes. Election rules specify that a 6-member committee for the cooperative shall be elected every year. However, there have been no elections for some time, and the cooperative has been run by the same chairperson for many years; the chairperson is a popular figure and was elected by his fellow members to the Electoral College. He was ultimately elected as the chairperson to the central cooperative active at the Bagmara sub-district, Rajshahi.

The cooperative is involved in social activities unrelated to granting loans, such as planting seedlings and sending members for skill training. Compared to other members of the cooperative, the chairperson, an active supporter of the ruling political party, is relatively better off economically and socially. With the help of BRDB officials and his personal connections to political leaders, the chairperson brought significant sums of money and social projects to the cooperative, something that has been possible chiefly due to his position in the central cooperative and his relationships with outside political figures.

Because the chairperson of the Paharpur Cooperative is directly involved in politics, he also led the cooperative into political participation. The cooperative chairperson and members were involved in different election-related functions, such as supporting and campaigning for a particular candidate and participating in programs to raise political awareness. However, their activities and functions never lead them to participate in policy-making. Rather than forming coalitions with other cooperatives or sending petitions, they prefer to take their problems directly to the leaders of the ruling party, the BRDB office or the sub-district administrative office. The cooperative members have virtually no network or understanding with other local social or economic actors, even with local NGOs. The chairperson admitted that before they were politically connected, the cooperative faced problems such as corruption, a lack of government cooperation and bureaucratic obstructions over loans and registration. These problems were solved when they showed their political support to the ruling party. The chairperson admitted frankly that the political identity of the cooperative and/or its leader does matter in official decisions to sanction loans and provide other government services.

In most cases, cooperatives represent the farmers who contribute the most to the agrarian economy of Bangladesh. However, their associations hardly act as any strong pressure or professional group. Cooperatives are scarcely involved in advocacy activities because their members' main objectives are economic benefit, not networking or civic engagement. According to the Cooperative Rule of 2004, in its initial two years of existence,

no cooperative has the right to make any demand to the government. In addition, farmers' ignorance and the strong political pressure on cooperative leaders have led to weak cooperatives in relation to participation, vigilance, and democracy. Local CSOs, such as cooperatives and local welfare clubs, have the potential to develop collective unity, social and political consciousness among citizens, but they lack the necessary resources and guidance. Civil society researchers and donors have hardly considered them as a force for civil society, but they have been successfully targeted by political parties as a means to penetrate rural society.

III. *Thengamara Mahila Shobuj Shongho (TMSS) [Thengamara (name of a particular area in Northern Bangladesh) Women's Green Group]*[16]

Thengamara Mahila Shobuj Shongho (TMSS) is a well-established development NGO. It was first formed in 1980 by local organizers and later received foreign funding and support. TMSS is neither as large nor as famous as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) or the Grameen Bank, but is one of the top ten NGOs of Bangladesh (Stiles 2002, p. 50). Although it has its origins in the northern region of the country, it is now working nationwide in traditional micro-credit and other social welfare activities, including, health, micro-finance, business promotion, education, and human rights and gender equality. The interest rate for a TMSS loan is 12.5% and 10% for the extremely poor. Among its 47 development partners, 16 are international development agencies or foreign embassies.

At the local level, like other development NGOs, micro-credit and other social services are provided collectively to a small group of beneficiaries. Each basic group is made up of 10-30 women. Weekly meetings are held where micro-credit as well as other social issues, such as sanitation, the environment and women's rights, are discussed. TMSS is centrally governed by an executive committee of 15 members who are elected by the general members of TMSS every three years; the general committee includes the chair of every TMSS basic group that has been active for at least three years, plus one or two local elites from each area in which TMSS is active. Members of the general committee representing all zones, vote for the members of the executive committee. Although the process seems to be reasonably democratic, a closer look at the member list in the 2005 TMSS Annual Report shows that only two genuine beneficiaries working at the periphery have been able to enter the executive committee. Practically, regardless of what the system is, the charisma of the founding director, Professor Hosne Ara Begum, plays an important role in managing and expanding the NGO, which is true of many other large NGOs in Bangladesh. Charisma plays an important role in the health and development of large organizations in Bangladesh, just as it does in Bangladeshi party politics.

As understood from conversations and field visits, TMSS works similarly to other development NGOs, with a hierarchical management system in which field workers are trained in the central or zonal offices and then sent to the fields. At basic group meetings, the

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[16] The case study is based on a visit to the TMSS Rajshahi Zonal office, an interview with the officer in charge on 12th October 2006, the 2005 TMSS Annual Report, and the TMSS website, http://www.tmss-bd.org/index.html (accessed 5 August, 2007). The updates are made from visiting the NGO's website and information collected from the electronic media.

assigned TMSS field worker coordinates the meeting agenda, decides how the meeting will proceed, and collects the members' weekly contributions and loan installments. NGO staff functions do not provide any scope for considering the beneficiaries as equal members of the NGO staff, nor can staff consider themselves equal to members; the relationship is more akin to that of a service provider and receiver. Theoretically, it is expected that through the efforts of the NGO staff over time, the economic empowerment and development awareness of the beneficiaries will allow groups to function autonomously. Practically, there are very few instances of such independence. The same comment may be made for the basic unit groups of other development NGOs.

TMSS maintains all of the necessary formal relationships with the government, participating in monthly coordination meetings with administrative district and sub-district heads and also at the national level with the NGO Bureau. The NGO often exchanges opinions and share problems and advice on rural development with the administration, as well as submitting formal reports. However, this is done in a hierarchical way: field workers convey their opinions to the branch managers, who pass them on to their managers. In this way, opinions are carried to the zonal and central offices and finally into consultation with the relevant government agencies and donors.

TMSS belongs to a group of NGOs known as Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB). From the point of view of national politics and the politicization of NGOs, according to NGO officials interviewed, TMSS tries to remain neutral. They admitted, however, that it has become difficult to work in a politicized and polarized environment. Naturally, large NGOs enter into significant contracts with the government on different social welfare projects. Often such joint ventures by NGOs are considered as political actions by the opposition, and when the opposition comes to power, NGOs who cooperated with the previous administration are blacklisted by the new one. Parties cannot carry all the blame here; NGO leaders have also made politicized decisions, and there are tensions between different NGOs themselves. Moreover, NGOs are neither totally transparent nor free from internal problems. Taking all these together, it may soon become impossible to run a NGO without the shelter of a major political party. Interviews were originally undertaken during the BNP regime. Under the present AL regime, when the TMSS website was revisited, it was found that TMSS is maintaining good relations with the present regime and inviting ministers and top AL leaders to their workshops and other events in 2012. In a recently televised popular Talk Show (Tritiyo Matra, 2016)[17], TMSS leader Hosne Ara Begum, who is considered as a highly successful NGO personality, through her conversation, has reaffirmed the same position of the NGOs and situation of politics, politicization and corruption at the national level.

After 2001, donor backing was not sufficient for NGOs to pursue their projects uninterruptedly. Moreover, at the local level, political divisions have created a panic among the small NGOs. In this situation, NGOs must please their patron-donors as well as the ruling and opposition parties and avoid all actions that may go against the interest of either party.

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[17] Also available on YouTube Accessed in 20 October, 2016
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hPqMWsOrN0

Naturally, this limits the NGOs' freedom of action, especially in regard to participation and democracy.

In the meantime the NGOs have entered their new phase of marketization and hybridization where the small NGOs depend more on their micro-credit business and big NGOs have entered the private sector in the name of social business (Lewis 2016, pp26-27). Such finance oriented professionalism has brought the NGOs away from their advocacy and participatory performance. TMSS, like other big NGOs (such as ASA, BRAC etc.) have entered into social businesses including tertiary education[18].

IV. Rajshahi Rakkah Shangram Parishod-RRSP (Movement to Protect Rajshahi City)

Rajshahi Rakkah Shangram Parishod-RRSP (Movement to Protect Rajshahi City) is a local citizens' group organized by the middle class and elites of Rajshahi City with the aim of protecting the interests of the area, particularly Rajshahi City. The movement began in 1997, and the group advocates for the provision of basic services, including medical treatment, water supplies, power supplies, and gas supplies for the people of Rajshahi, as well as for concerns over local environmental degradation and against government decisions to move important offices and building out of Rajshahi. The groups also indicate irregularities, corruption, and administrative failures. They articulate their interests through petitions, press conferences, round tables, seminars, public meetings, rallies, sit-ins, hunger strikes, and all-out strikes[19]. In addition to membership fees, other sources of finance include donations from prominent local businessmen and sponsor organizations such as banks, enterprises and national dailies.

Originally, RRSP was formed by a few merchants in the town, but it has come to attract members from all types of professionals, including teachers, intellectuals, journalists, lawyers and other educated citizens. The membership pattern, executive committee, and advisory committee are governed by a written constitution. The executive committee is elected every two years by the members. Any citizen of Rajshahi may become a member of RRSP, although only 140 citizens are formal members. It also has a 20-member advisory committee comprised of local elites from Rajshahi City. In addition, RRSP is able to ensure the participation of a considerable number of members and prominent citizens in the different events and activities organized by RRSP *(Proceeding of the Round Table Meeting, Rajshahi Rokkah Shongram Parishad*, 2006)

RRSP is a group of like-minded citizens belonging to the same social class, and the relationship between the leaders and members is thus mostly congenial. It has been observed that many members are not active within the organization. The executive committee makes decisions to organize seminars and rallies and stage protests. All petitions sent to the authorities are also decided by this committee. When the RRSP faces any difficulties, it turns to its members' personal networks and the organization's relationship with other professional groups such as bar and teachers' associations, as well as consulting with its advisory

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[18] TMSS runs a good number of private tertiary educational institutes, colleges and university in the fields of medicine, nursing, vocational, IT technology, commerce and so on.
[19] Interview with the convener, Rajshahi Shohor Rokkah Shongram Porishad, Rajshahi, 28th September, 2006.

committee. In 2006, it was the convener and not the chairperson who was the most active in the name of RRSP. The same person has been found to be the most active leader in 2012 and 2016. Although this citizen group is working in the interest of Rajshahi, in 2006 it had found itself in an antagonistic position in relation to the Rajshahi City Corporation, governed by the elected mayor, who was a member of the ruling BNP party. In 2005 and 2006, RRSP had become active in pointing out the irregularities found in the administration and protested against government policies concerning Rajshahi. It further came into direct conflict with the administration by protesting patient maltreatment in private clinics. The convener was even arrested and tortured by law enforcement forces[20], which attracted the attention of the national media. The organization claims that they have relationships with neither political parties nor any political blocs; rather, they say they have come forward for the interest of the citizens of Rajshahi because the political parties have failed to do so. To counteract the popularity of RRSP, the ruling party in 2006, have supported the formation of new citizens' groups; however, those groups lack proper organizational strength and the necessary citizen support. RRSP has an excellent relationship with the press and other non-political groups. The organization has gained recognition and media attention for its efforts to bring natural gas supply to the city.

If we examine the RSPP's advisory committee membership lists, we see the presence of well-reputed citizens of Rajshahi City who represent both the BNP (but not Jamat-i- Islami) bloc and the AL and left wing bloc, although most members belong to the latter *(Proceeding of the Round Table Meeting, Rajshahi Rokkah Shongram Parishad*, 2006). The secretary of RRSP, despite claims of being non-political, was an elected member of the Board of Directorates of the Rajshahi Chamber of Commerce during the AL regime (Annual Report 2002) and had relationships with left wing organizations as a youth. In 2006, he was in a position of confrontation with the BNP and Jamat-led administration. During conversations with other citizens about RRSP, it was discovered that the organization and its actions have been praised by the citizens, but the presence of larger numbers of AL and left bloc members has discouraged BNP-aligned and religious citizens to engage with the group directly. For example, in the seminars organized by RRSP, significant numbers of AL-left bloc university professors participated as presenters. Additionally, the elites and civil society leaders who supported the ruling coalition are already favored by the government and administration and, due to the loyalty they sold for personal benefit, have prevented them (BNP and conservative blocs) from joining any movement that protests government policy. The polarization that has divided society has also barred citizens from organizing systematic, united movements. Unless there is a balance among both the blocs and truly non-political citizens groups are established, there can be no real change. In 2012, under the AL regime, RRSP is still active; however, it now enjoys the blessing of the local parliament member representing the leftwing (Bangladesh Worker's Party) coalition of the AL block (Prothom Alo, Nov 13, 2012). The citizen group enjoys same type of blessing in 2016 as the same party is in power and the member of the parliament for the local area is also the same person.

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[20] As admitted by the Secretary of Rajshahi Rakkha Shongram Parishod, interviewed on 28th September 2006.

V *The Primary School Teachers' Movement of 2006* [21]

In Bangladesh, movements formed by people and groups taking to the streets and agitating to make their demands heard, have always been considered democratic and as an important way of establishing rights and bringing about change. This Gramscian tradition in Bangladesh is older than its birth. The government and administration in Bangladesh have failed to develop into responsive institutions. Among the political and social movements taking place from 1990 to 2006, this section shall focus on a particular professional organization's fight for its interests: the primary school teachers' movement of 2006. The movement's uniqueness lies in its polarized character and the way it was handled by the government.

The primary school teachers' association is considered to be a highly organized and well-networked group in Bangladesh. Such associations are found in every sub-district, district and division, all the way to the national level. They also have geographically based ranked leadership within the various primary school categories, including government schools, non-government schools, community schools, and madrasas. Elections are held regularly among these organizations, and each group is factionalized along party lines. Since independence, the school teachers' community has engaged in movements of varying scales on different issues, though most often for pay raises. Bangladeshi school teachers are poorly paid, with little or no allowances for housing or medical treatment. However, because school teachers' groups are active and networked from the national to the local levels and because teachers are the traditional opinion leaders in rural areas, they have attracted the attention of local elites and national political parties. The 2006 protests focused on demanding better salaries and facilities and the nationalization of non-government primary schools.

After the reintroduction of democracy in 1990, the school teachers first approached the government (at that time, the BNP) with their demands in 1994. The opposition leader, the chairperson of the AL, promised association leaders that the AL would fulfill their demands if elected to power. Once the AL was elected in 1996, however, no initiative was taken to solve the teachers' problems; consequently, teachers began agitating for change in 2000 as the AL's tenure was drawing to a close. The authorities entered into negotiations with the teachers, which ultimately ended in the authorities' favor. Thus, the teachers began protesting again, staging large demonstrations and hunger strikes (*Ittefaque*, 6 June 2001). The opposition leader, then the chairperson of the BNP, promised to fulfill teachers' demands if the BNP was successful in the 2001 election[22], and in September 2001, the BNP formed the government. In 2006, the final year of the BNP-Jamat government, the teachers' groups were

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[21] A search of the *Ittefaque*, *Daily Star* and *Jugantor* newspapers from May to August 2006 finds 69 reports and editorials on the primary school teachers' movement. 29 of these reports were removed from the sample due to their duplicate reporting, leaving a sample size of 41 reports. This newspaper analysis is based on hardcopy newspaper reports were collected from Public Library, National Press Institute and National Library & Archives, Dhaka, in 2007. The updated section is based on newspaper reports available online.

[22] Again in 2006, at the critical stage of the primary teachers' movement, the opposition, AL and its left-wing allies, showed support to the leaders and promised to realize all their demand if elected.

still engaged in negotiations with the government for providing higher salaries and other facilities, but they found that the draft national budget (the last budget before the election) had not allocated the necessary funds for meeting their demands, leaving the teachers once again as little more than tools used by a party to win the next election (*Jugantor* 18 June 2006). This time, however, the teachers were prepared for an all-out movement. Organized by 41 apex teachers' associations, about 800,000 teachers were involved, directly or indirectly, in the 2006 movement. They arranged enormous demonstrations at the capital and sit-ins in front of the secretariat, hunger strikes at important squares of the city and lastly, went on a full-fledged strike, keeping 25,000 schools closed throughout the country for 30 days and depriving 15 million children of their school time. They also attempted to block the roads and waterways in every district, which is a tactic common to violent labor unions, students, and anomic groups. The teachers' key demands, which by this time encompassed primary, secondary and madrasa teachers, were 1) the nationalization of non-government primary teachers' jobs; 2) matched government salaries for teachers in non-government secondary schools and colleges; 3) the elimination of wage discrimination in favor of government primary school teachers; 4) the nationalization of community primary schools; and 4) the incorporation of *ebtedayee* (a type of small private madrasa) teachers into the national pay scale (*Daily Star* 5 July, 2006). Different groups within the teachers' coalition also harbored specific demands.

The teachers' coalition included groups linked to both the BNP and AL, and daily news briefings on the protests indicate that each of the different associations harbored factions that leaned towards the ruling party or the opposition. Although these factions were all fighting for the same cause, they announced programs separately and carried out events in different public squares in the capital. For example, when the community school teachers declared a hunger strike to the death, the pro-BNP faction observed it in Muktangon (Open Square), while the pro-Awami League faction started their strike in the central Shaheed Minar (Monument Square) (*Daily Star*, 20 June, 2007).

These all-out protests were the result of teachers' long neglect by the party government, both the BNP and AL. The teachers' demands gained strength when they were supported by the opposition party, which made electoral promises that it never kept. During the 2006 movement, the opposition AL and its aligned left bloc backed the teachers, giving more force to the movement. For its part, the BNP-Jamat government allowed the violent movement to continue unchecked for months, hampering national education throughout the country because 2006 was the final year of its five-year term. The government could not meet all the teachers' demands, the costs of which ran to approximately 1 billion 500 million BDT, a sum that the state exchequer was not ready to provide. The government instead took the policy of delaying through dialogue with the protesting groups. The Education Minister took the approach of meeting with different factions separately and agreeing to demands conditionally. Naturally, BNP-linked factions accepted the government's halfhearted response to negotiations, while others did not. Some sections of the teacher's group went back to school empty-handed after their long strike; others lost the strength to remain in the streets. The unity of the movement was broken. A handful of non-government primary school

teachers' groups linked to the AL remained in the streets until September, but the movement had lost its force. Media attention refocused on more violent protests by other anomic groups on different issues and the street politics that the opposition had just begun when the 8th Parliament had only a few remaining days.

Update: From January 2009, the newly elected AL formed the government, however, this new AL regime failed to fulfill their election manifesto to regularize the jobs of the non-government primary school teachers. Naturally, again the primary school teachers of 24000 schools had to call for a strike, and came down to the streets with long processions, which were met with brutal police obstruction leading to injuries. Finally, dialogue took place on 23 September 2012 between the Ministry of Education and school teachers with no tangible result (*The Daily Star*, 16 January, 16 May, 17 May, 18 May, 5 October, 2012,). However, on 10 January 2013 the announcement came from the Prime Minister's side, on the government's decision to nationalize 26,193 private primary schools within 2013 (*Daily Star*, 10 January, 2013).

It should be mentioned that at this stage, in 2013, it had become an interest for the government to nationalize the primary schools for the sake of reaching the UN Millennium Development Goal on education and it was the final year of the National Parliament and the government had to begin its preparation for the general election that was to be held less than a year later. This update only ensures that there is no improvement to the situation in civil society and its political relations[23].

Case Study Summary

The case study findings may be summarized by the following observations related to politics and democracy found among the CSOs at the periphery of Bangladesh, despite their widely varying composition, functions, budgets and membership.

1. Whether the CSO is a traditional labor union, a modern development NGO or even a small cooperative, it requires informal political connections to survive and manage its organization. Further, political blessings, especially from the government party, are essential for the CSOs to proceed with their interests and expand their functions and projects.

2. In all cases, there are specific, well-structured and seemingly democratic systems to elect executive committees and ensure member participation. However, in reality, these written systems are only *de jure* formalities. Practically, in most cases, internal democracy and equality among all members are poorly maintained. For example, in the case of the labor union, the leaders supporting the government party actually enjoy

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[23] From 2013, the process of nationalizing the private primary schools is going on face by face. However, there are allegations on process of selecting and inspecting these schools for approval that is, deciding which primary schools shall be brought under government regulations and be declared public schools. Moreover, the salary of government primary school teachers has also increased. However, the teachers and head masters still rank very low (third class gazetted officer) in the national pay scale system for which they have again begun different types of symbolic movements (*The Daily Star* 5 October, 2015 http://www.thedailystar.net/country/primary-teachers-suspend-movement-152227 accessed on 4 March, 2017.)

most of the union's power. Elections are not held regularly among the cooperative members or the citizen groups. Even for a development NGO, the driving force is the charisma of the founding leader. Such charisma is more important than elections at different levels.

3. In all cases, there seem to be differences between the position, power and status of the CSO leader versus the general membership. The leader always enjoys greater status in relation to political links, financial resources and social position.

4. Violence and protests are more common among conventional CSOs like labor unions and citizen's groups. Conversely, the presence of government pressure, 'red tapeism', and political control are found among all types of CSOs, particularly among those organizations that are engaged in state monitoring, address large budget projects or control a large number of general voters such as citizens' groups, labor unions or large development NGOs.

5. Political interventions, often lead the professional groups to factionalism. The faction leaders often compromise their group interest to the interest of the political bloc they affiliate with. Only when the government interests and CSOs' interest have some common proponents, civil society advocacy and movements may reach a positive outcome. Otherwise, civil society in most cases is controlled and used by the political blocks.

After the field work in 2006, a decade has passed. In the meantime there have been changes in nature and function of the NGOs and some other civil society organizations as well as their relationship with the government. The conclusion of the paper restates and re-establishes the arguments of the present research about the politicized civil society on the basis of the case studies analyzed and with the updated information available from the press and recent references.

Conclusion

The Neo-Tocquevillean school presumes that the more associations there are in a country the greater the possibility that democratic institutions will improve. Diamond (1996) is optimistic that civil society movement and actions may make it through the undemocratic environment and contribute to better democratic atmosphere in multiple ways like fighting against corruption, nurturing democratic values, bringing an end to clientelism, bringing unity among social cleavages and so on. The Bangladesh case has proved such expectations from a civil society to be unrealistic and normative. In contrast to the Neo-Tocquevillean model, the situation in Bangladesh better resembles the Gramscian model. Civil society is found to be enmeshed with the political structure. CSOs have been found to be actually engaged, intentionally or unintentionally, in executing the ideological hegemony of the state, the government and mostly the political parties. CSOs have often failed to remain neutral and are often controlled by a political party or bloc. Compromising their independence and vigilance, they are working instead as agents to ensure the political agenda of the party with whom they indirectly identify. Regardless, they may be termed as organizations working to ensure

political hegemony. However, because civil society is partitioned along competing party lines and the government generally ignores peaceful protests and formal petitions, CSOs sometimes engage in protest, including strikes that may be compared to anti-state hegemony. Articulations of interests through violence and strikes do not imply a strong civil society. Rather, it implies a lack of proper harmony between the state and civil society and the presence of deprivation and extremism. The reason behind the emptiness of civil society is because it is politicized. In the last decade there had been a good number of violent protests from the garment's workers[24] for wage rise, protection and other issues. For a long time, trade unions were banned in the garments sector to avoid violence and disruption to the largest dominating industry of the nation. Again, the highly politicized and factious transport owners and workers' groups in Bangladesh often call on strike and use the means of vandalism to press their demands that may or may not be rational. However, it is the economy and the citizens who have to pay most, due to such strikes and violence[25].

Through the case studies, the politicization of the CSOs, the influence of the ruling party, the divisions within civil society and the societies' alignments along party lines have been shown to be factual. It was revealed that for CSOs, whether rural or urban, large or small, survival requires political connections. Without political blessing, it is not possible for CSOs to move forward. Systems for internal democracy are often fractured along national party lines. Any advocacy that may go against the regime is generally met with strong resistance from the state. In the last five years, a good number of incidents took place at the national level that have attracted international attention, and depict an intolerant regime towards the vigilant section of the civil society. We may mention the conflict between Nobel Laureate Professor Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank, and the government[26], arrest of the secretary of the human rights organization *Odhikar*[27], passing a more strict Foreign Donation Regulation Bill 2016, in reaction to a report by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) criticizing the performance of the Parliament in 2015 (Amnesty International Public Statement, 2016). However, this same foreign funded NGO TIB was successful in influencing the government to pass the 2009 Right to Information Act (Lewis 2016, p 124).

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[24] Garment's Industry and Ready Made Garments export is vital to Bangladesh's economy and development, This sector contributes 81.2 % to the national export (BGMEA website, 2017). But often this industry is hit by accidents like fires and building collapses and the production is set back by violent protests from the laborers for their due wages. In most cases, the owners and guilty persons remain above the law due to their strong political connections with the higher ups.

[25] This reference provides only a recent example of such violence, 'Countrywide Transport Strike Underway', *Dhaka Tribune*, 28 February 2017, accessed 6 March 2017 at
http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/02/28/countrywide-transport-strike-underway/.

[26] Professor Yunus was removed from his post as the managing director of the Grameen Bank, after allegations of irregularities in its operation. Professor Yunus, an outspoken critic of corruption, had angered the senior politicians in 2007 by briefly floating a political party. The government had been very aggressive, in their campaign against him which had not been well-received internationally (BBC News 2011;Burke 2011).

[27] A leading human rights activist and secretary to the human rights organization named *Odhikar*, Adilur Rahman Khan, had been arrested on charges of falsehood about violence by state security forces in 2013. His organization is always critical about state administered human rights violation. Again, Khan is a lawyer and former deputy attorney general. He served in this prestigious post during the rule of opposition party -BNP. Naturally, he had always been under the keen scrutiny of the party in power (Hammadi 2013).

This means, that, in recent years, few large and advocacy NGOs have tried to come out from the political influence and emerge as watchdogs to the government performances. Conversely, the authorities are not prepared yet to tolerate or welcome such civil society activism. However, with the advancement of the electronic media in the last ten years, and with the help of a relatively free press, apparently an environment of free movement of information had been observed within the society. This is expected to lead to a liberal government committed to transparency, accountability and responsiveness. In contrast to the situation, editors are being blasted and facing court cases for sedition[28] that only weakens the civil society.

Nevertheless, at the local level, organizational strength and the ability to form collective opinions of the CSOs have attracted local elites and political parties towards them. The leaders of the central cooperative are often targeted by political leaders because of the large amounts of loan money they manage and distribute and the influence they enjoy with their members. Patterns of membership and participation within non-political citizens groups also reflect the political divide in the society.

So it may be understood that politicization and control is evident both at the periphery and at the core of civil society. Instead of monitoring the state apparatus, they are contributing to the misdeeds of the government and political parties. Since 2006, there have been hardly any changes to the political trend and divisions among the professional groups and intellectuals. Rather, new factions came to compete among the divisions found in the CSOs. If they continue to bend under political pressure and remain divided among themselves along party lines, CSOs can hardly gain the necessary independence and strong character to emerge as vigilant forces. Lacking such vigilant power, a civil society, no matter how vibrant, cannot contribute to the institutionalization of democracy.

Acknowledgment

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[28] In March, 2016, seventy nine legal claims of defamation (62) and sedition (17) were filed against Mahfuz Anam, the editor of Bangladesh's most popular English-language newspaper by supporters of the party in power for making an unusual public confession. For details consult (Sattar 2016).

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