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**Polarisation of a Civil Society Space
between Secularists and Islamists
by Design: The Case of Bangladesh**

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Abstract

Bangladesh has been rich in civil society activity since its very birth but the term civil society became a mantra from the 1990s onwards when donors within the international development policy framework saw in it a potential for instilling democratic processes in otherwise volatile political structures. However, the term that has taken root in the country has been derived from a western neo-liberal frame of understanding, which has led donors to favour certain civil society actors at the expense of others, particularly those that are perceived as being 'anti-fundamentalist'. These civil society actors have largely been translated as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The paper broadly argues about the subtle ways a civil society space in Bangladesh has been crowded out through the dominance of 'big' NGOs since the country's independence. Backed by heavy donor support and a local secular-oriented power elite, these NGOs have become a pivotal voice for society at large and have managed to falsely construct an opposition between so-called secularists and Islamists, hence, reducing the prospects of a plural civil society.

Civil society, as a concept, was introduced to Bangladesh notably through the aid industry and this has taken a particular organisational form. In the early 1990s when donors in the international aid system realised the potential non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had in pushing democracy forward, they began targeting most of their funding into these institutions. This not only created a more manageable development process but it also set the foundation for promoting a particular brand of democracy that was compatible with western values of liberalism and capitalism. This has potentially crowded out other forms of democratic systems based on more indigenous values and ideas. This paper illustrates the subtle ways in which this process has taken place. Though NGOs are not elected by the citizenry, they have over the years assumed the role of a parallel state in the country. Yet their political status has often been camouflaged through the language of development. I attempt to shatter this myth by showing how a civil society space in Bangladesh has been overtaken by western-funded NGOs and how they have moved from being 'apolitical development machines' to formidable political agents voicing 'anti-fundamentalist' slogans, alienating a large section of the society.

De-politicisation of a civil society space: politics with a small ‘p’

Historically, Bangladesh has been very rich in civil society activities. The very birth of the nation in 1971 came about as a result of civil society activists drawn mainly from a community of students, intellectuals, and political parties fighting against injustices faced by Bengali people as a direct result of political, economic and cultural domination by the ruling Punjabi elite of West Pakistan throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

However, the concept of civil society and its usage became more salient through the 1990s as the aid industry saw it as a vehicle for democratisation, particularly through the promotion of the NGO community. As the political landscape of the world was changing with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism, a consensus emerged within international fora about the twin virtues of liberal democracy and capitalism¹. In addition, evidence of political liberalisation across the African continent, following on from a democratic revival in the Latin American countries, stimulated by powerful domestic pressures for change seemed to have provided further justification for such a democratic thrust. Hence, the brand of civil society that became dominant among international development actors was very much one that encapsulated a neo-liberal framework of understanding. Theories of civil society in use today have largely been drawn from limited western experiences, and certain critics², including myself, argue that western ideas based on puritan traditions of civil society have basically been juxtaposed onto southern societies, mobilising only a small fraction of western elites into action.

In the early 1970s, NGOs emerged onto the development scene in Bangladesh when there was a great need for relief and rehabilitation for the war-ravaged country³. Their main tasks were to provide medical care and establish relief programmes. At the time donors were also prioritising growth-oriented models that would bring developing countries out of abject poverty. There was little talk of a ‘good governance’ agenda or indeed a ‘civil society empowerment initiative’. The task ahead was economic emancipation for the masses. Domestically, between the period of 1975-1990, NGOs were acting within a political framework of military rule and they had no direct ‘voice’ in civil society. The language of development was spoken much more fervently from within a neo-classical framework of economic liberalism with growth models and structural adjustment programmes being the order of the day. NGOs’ priorities were to provide goods and services. Donor dependence was evident right from the start. Among the

multilateral agencies, the UN was the first to develop financial links with Bangladeshi NGOs. UN agencies, along with other donors, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, funded projects such as health care, family planning, fisheries, water, sanitation and nutrition through most of the 1970s – consequently the number of NGOs working in those areas also increased⁴. NGOs were initially seen as apolitical development machines. Their main role, as far as donors were concerned, was to provide economic resources to the grassroots as governments were failing to achieve this task in a meaningful manner.

Of course, years after Bangladesh's independence NGOs' rationale for survival changed. In order to survive they needed to incorporate new goals into their development activities. It was also around this time that the West realised the negative impact of its growth-oriented development models, hence, adding such concepts as growth-with-redistribution and launching poverty alleviation programmes with their mainstream activities. The gradual rise in micro-credit provision through the 1980s not only acted as economic emancipation for the poor but also acted as a vehicle for empowerment, particularly for women. NGOs' vision had changed from providing straight-forward economic benefits to organising the population into self-reliant groups capable of resisting structural inequities. Though it may at first glance seem NGOs were apolitical machines, their background and leading figures prove otherwise. Some even argue that NGOs in Bangladesh were acting as a parallel state without citizens⁵ since they were unelected actors providing a service that should have otherwise been provided by the state, and all this under the rubric of heavy external financing.

Many of the national NGOs that began their life in the 1970s, immediately after independence, had radical agendas based on a political reflection of deep seated structural causes of poverty. Many of the leading figures, representing the power elite in Bangladeshi civil society, had been previously linked to student left-wing groups (often with a Maoist ideology) and many had become disillusioned with the failure of radical political parties after the independence war⁶. So they geared all their energies into emancipating the poor through grassroots level organisations that gradually became large-scale non-governmental organisations with tremendous outreach across cities and villages throughout the country⁷. Given the NGO leaders' leftist political background where some were directly involved in the freedom struggle of Bangladesh, the issue of Islam created some anomaly in their ideological stances. On the one hand most of them

identified themselves as being Muslims but on the other they were struggling to come to terms with what the Pakistan army and the Bengali collaborators, the Razakars and Al Badrs, both outfits of Islamic political organisations, had done to the 'Bangalees' during the war. The NGO sector was also caught up with the nationalist identity question along with the rest of civil society: are we Bengali first, Muslim second or Muslim first and Bengali second⁸.

The two-nation theory has been entrenched in the Bengali Muslim psyche since Bangladesh's independence and broadly speaking civil society actors align themselves to one of the two major political parties in the country. The 'Bangladeshi' nationalists with Islamist tendencies side with the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the 'Bengali' nationalists with more secular overtones side with the Awami League (AL). A key feature of Bangladeshi civil society is its lack of autonomy from political forces and vice versa – a necessary condition for achieving a pluralist civil society. NGOs have not been spared in this dilemma, given the sector's involvement in student left-wing politics, its participation in the freedom war, and its link to foreign agents; it was only a matter of time before one group sided heavily with the more secular-based Bangalee camp. This became overtly apparent when certain prominent NGOs on the civil society scene brought back issues of independence – Pakistan 'collaborators', ghataks⁹ and dalals¹⁰, freedom fighters, Jamaat, Ghulam Azam, etc. – onto the front burner once more between 1996-2001, and sided directly with the Awami League (AL) Party, creating a rift within their umbrella organisation, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB)¹¹. I will elaborate on these issues further in the next section.

Clearly, donor agents and NGOs were wrong to label the latter as 'apolitical development machines'. Even at their inception NGOs were embarking on a form of political revolution, albeit with a small 'r', as their leftist gurus set out to create a 'voice' for the poor masses. This became increasingly apparent as their vision was transformed throughout the 1980s from mere resource providers to political emancipators by questioning the prevailing structural inequities that were plaguing much of the country – these were disproportionate resource endowments, unequal power structures, a deeply entrenched kinship system, gender inequalities as well as growth-oriented strategies prescribed by donors that were proving to be less than adequate for those that were most vulnerable in society. Equipped with leftist ideologies and a western financing system with donors promoting changes from within a neo-liberal framework of development, NGOs were becoming

pioneers in upholding secular principles, which at times have proven unwelcome by local people, sometimes considering them as irreligious, immoral, orientalist, western-centric institutions acting as the neo-colonisers of the twenty-first century. The discussion has so far argued that both internal and external variables have played a crucial role in secularising Bangladesh's development process. But what has been the outcome of such a process?

Reclaiming the political: ‘civil society’ doing politics with a big ‘P’

Far from being apolitical machines, NGOs have, since Bangladesh’s independence, been veritable political machines with some NGOs being continuously favoured by their donor constituencies for substantial external funding¹². This not only raises questions regarding the formation of a parallel state without citizens but also raises the more subtle question of ideological crowding out where certain ideas, namely secular-oriented ones, are continuously promoted over other more indigenous forms. This is even more alarming when certain of these ‘big’ NGOs with external financing begin towing party political lines when they are clearly not elected by the citizenry of the country. It also raises the issue of accountability given NGOs are primarily accountable to their donors rather than their beneficiaries¹³. When and how did these NGOs become part of the more narrow political process as opposed to merely providing a voice for the poorer masses?

During the two successive military regimes (1975-1990) in Bangladesh, NGOs were mainly concerned with welfare provision and mobilisation of the poor. It was believed that by applying the dual process of ‘conscientisation’ i.e. raising poor people’s awareness about their plight and ‘empowering’ them, a horizontal class unity would be established which would enable them to ‘break the chains’ of complex vertically aligned patron-client relationships and stand against the rich patrons¹⁴. In other words, it was not so much the state the poor were being mobilised against but wider society in the form of local elites, such as moneylenders, landlords, traders and employers. Throughout the 1980s another NGO phenomenon was taking over – the discovery of microfinance and its economic potential to poor villagers who otherwise were left behind by the commercial banking sector. Not only did it provide a staple form of economic resource in the drive for alleviating poverty but it also acted as a process of ‘emancipating’ poor women by providing them credit and, therefore, greater decision-making power within the household¹⁵. This growth in microfinance activities became a powerful tool for the NGO sector’s own growth and sustainability as western donors poured in huge sums of money. They had realised the returns on such an investment were not only high but also a measurable way of doing development, hence, keeping the process more manageable as well as providing instant accountability to tax payers in their own home constituencies.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the wider civil society in Bangladesh became agitated about the heavy-handedness of the military regime and were seeking democratic rule. Students, intellectuals, professionals, political parties, and eventually even the Jamaat-i-Islami and other Islamic parties took part in the democracy movement to bring down General Ershad's administration. This was an event in which the NGO community played a very ambiguous role given its closeness to the incumbent ruler. As I explained in the previous section, civil society at large in Bangladesh has rarely been autonomous from the state. Although the Islamic parties had eventually joined the 1990 democracy movement, they had not done so at its inception because the movement had initially started as an 'anti-fundamentalist' agenda from the more secular camp of civil society. The resistance mainly came from the students and teachers who were heavily opposed to Ershad's proposal of bringing compulsory Arabic teaching into schools in his 1982 education policy.¹⁶ A mass campaign was initiated by students where many were arrested and faced police atrocities, which led to a backlash from university campuses and student political bodies. The policy in question was reneged but other Islamically-flavoured policies were being introduced, which flared up anger among the secularists in civil society, but as political parties were getting involved the Islamic issues were taking a back burner and the movement was changing its dynamic towards an anti-autocracy movement. Considering that donors placed so much faith on NGOs as being formidable civil society actors in the 90s, where were they during the democracy movement?

Many of the larger local NGOs were strongly linked to the Ershad regime (1982-1990) in different capacity, especially, the Chairman of their umbrella body. He found himself in a rather awkward position among other big NGO leaders. NGOs were facing criticisms from wider civil society at this time. The latter saw the NGOs' lack of support for the pro-democracy movement as an opportunity for settling old grievances. The particular context was the National Health Policy (NHP) proposed by a leading NGO figure who was then advisor on health issues to the Ershad administration. The medical profession felt it to be contrary to their interests.¹⁷ Ershad was seen to be favouring certain sections of the NGO community, as he brought them under his wing, yet at the same time attempting to keep western donors on side given their strong and powerful financial position within the development process. A 'triangular friendship' had been established between an autocratic government, NGOs and donors. Ershad further offered opportunities for many of the large NGOs to partner with government ministries on specific programmes, such as the non-formal education and pharmaceutical production. Gonoshasthya Kendro (GK),

Grameen¹⁸, and BRAC were particularly responsive to these invitations. GK worked very closely with the Ershad regime to develop an indigenous drug manufacturing capability, the government also established a separate incorporation for the Grameen Bank, placing government officials on its executive board.¹⁹ As NGOs were 'too close for comfort' with the Ershad administration, their political affiliations were ambiguous. But as the pro-democracy movement gathered pace, the NGO community had no choice but to join albeit at the eleventh hour. After all they represented a liberal, pro-freedom, and pro-democratic community.

As noted earlier, the 'civil society empowerment' initiative had gathered pace among donors when a wave of democratisation process was taking place across different parts of the world and at a time when Europe faced the fall of communism from different corners of its continent. Western donors had realised the potential NGOs had in Bangladesh in terms of becoming institutional vehicles for the form of democratisation they were seeking after. Throughout the 1990s they launched their pro-poor democracy and 'good governance' agendas. Immediately after the collapse of the Ershad regime, the Islam issue was not at the forefront of political discussions, rather an attempt was being made to bring the country out of economic and political turmoil. Since 1991, electoral participation at the national and local levels had revealed some features that showed noticeable deficits in the nascent democracy of Bangladesh. Violence at the polling centres, political/administrative manipulation at the time of official counting of votes by the ruling party and the use of black money in buying votes seem to have disempowered the people of Bangladesh, particularly the poor.²⁰ All these factors led to the 'exclusion' of the landless poor, women and the minority ethnic groups from effectively raising their voice in political decision making at both local and national levels.²¹ It is at this juncture that NGOs, backed by donor patronage, emerged within the international development policy network as deliverers of electoral advocacy and voters' education programmes. They also took on board election monitoring and training programmes for elected representatives.

Aside from raising political awareness, the 'advocacy and lobbying' programmes had also been established to increase women's representation in politics, not only at the grassroots but also at the national level. Proshika, a leading NGO in Bangladesh, had effectively institutionalised this process by setting up a research and advocacy institute (the Institute for Development Policy Analysis and Advocacy or IDPAA) under its wing.

More and more NGOs took part in this process. NGOs and CBOs²², such as CAC, UBINIG, BNPS, CPD, Nari Pokkho, Nijera Kori, Mahila Parishad, GSS and Bachte Shekha, have particularly been pressing for women's representation in politics, namely in the form of direct election to reserved seats at both local and national levels²³. NGOs began lobbying directly with policy makers, gaining substantial clout in the political process. All the while with donors overlooking their performances and encouraging them. Having claimed themselves to be the 'authentic voice' of the poor, a few radical and moderate NGOs also managed to mobilise their members and rural poor through their voters' education programmes, not only males but also females. This participation by NGOs in the electoral process raised their voices within civil society throughout the mid-90s. Equipped with economic clout on the one hand through their microfinance activities; and on the other political clout by becoming strong actors of democratic change, NGOs had become formidable voices within civil society.

The drawing of a sharper line between secularists and Islamists by design

As NGOs in Bangladesh became powerful political machines throughout the 1990s, they stepped into the more controversial domain of 'voicing' their dislike of incumbent local power structures by trying to educate the rural masses, including women, particularly with regard to social norms, culture and belief systems²⁴. There is no doubt that women were being increasingly mobilised with the advent of microfinance and electoral reforms but the 'Women's issues' also came to represent a new source of foreign funding during the military administration. Not only the state had capitalised on the 'discovery' of 'women', but most NGOs that initially did not have a gender bias began incorporating 'women's issues' within their programmes to obtain greater funds from donors²⁵. BRAC, for instance, one of the largest NGOs in Bangladesh claims to have enrolled more than a million children in their 34,000 free primary schools throughout the country, with as many as 70 per cent of its students being girls and 96 per cent of its teachers being women. However, it managed to undo some of its positive work by publishing material that was bound to cause some form of backlash from the rural elites, especially the traditional mullahs (religious leaders) and village elders. Other NGOs have also played a role in directly attacking the indigenous status quo, forgetting that a large majority of rural religious leaders and elders also provide solutions to rural people's common problems, and ritual events, and uphold religious and Islamic traditions²⁶. In so doing, NGOs tend to offend rural villagers.²⁷ Any form of change prescribed by outsiders upon a community holding traditional values, which often consists of a rich religious content, must respect its 'inner core'.²⁸

Failure to respect the 'inner core' of a traditional society has led NGOs and the local power elite to come head to head on several occasions, particularly throughout the 1990s when NGOs' political voices were very strong and effective. NGOs along with other secularists, such as certain journalists, representing the 'liberal-progressive' groups were using the national newspapers to highlight even minor cases of disputes as flagrant violation of human rights. NGOs managed to bring the Islam factor to new national heights and turned it into an 'anti-Bangladesh' and 'pro-Jamaat fundamentalists' attack between the period of 1991 and 1995 while the BNP was in power. By the mid-90s, the secularists formed strong alliances with the NGOs to bring down a civil government. Various NGOs had been taking leading roles in vilifying both the BNP and the Jamaat-i-

Islami throughout this period.²⁹ Their anti-BNP stand was finally exposed during an intense opposition campaign to dislodge Khaleda Zia's government in early 1996, as the then Chairman of ADAB openly sided with the opposition Awami League.³⁰ Unlike the 1990 pro-democracy movement, the NGOs were at the forefront of the 1996 campaign. They were, of course, not alone in forwarding this agenda, the ADAB leadership joined other professionals with the help of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) in establishing the Shommilito Peshajibi Parishad (United Professionals Association), taking part in the agitations against Khaleda Zia's administration (1991-1996) and in the process gained substantial confidence from the Awami League leadership³¹.

Despite the Jamaat Party's withdrawal of support from the BNP government for various reasons by late 1992, the pro-Awami League professionals and NGOs continued their campaign against the BNP as well as other Islamic groups. During this period certain Islamic issues were brought to the forefront nationally by the secularists: (i) the case to try Ghulam Azam, the Jamaat chief, in 1992 (who was then arrested) for his collaboration with the Pakistan government during the 1971 war, (ii) the resistance of the fatwa³² implementation against Taslima Nasreen in 1994 for her alleged blasphemous writings. The first of these non-secularists versus secularists rows continued until 1994, when it was overshadowed by the Taslima Nasreen case, and to some extent it influenced the subsequent political events leading up to the general elections of 1996. The course of the movement to try Ghulam Azam was actually influenced by events beyond the borders of Bangladesh (e.g. the demolition of the Babri Mosque in India on December 6, 1992) and perhaps made it more consequential than any other battle between these two opposing forces within the civil society.³³ Nevertheless, direct involvement of NGO leaders in partisan politics before the 1996 elections had consolidated rather than weakened NGO influence on the Awami League. The ADAB leadership had managed to mobilise a large part of the masses during the 1996 election. It became openly vocal against the Islamists and pursued that tactic throughout the latter parts of the 1990s. As the Awami League came to power between 1996 and 2001, the NGO-government relationship grew very strong. The 'anti-fundamentalist' agenda gathered pace when in 1998 ADAB began sponsoring rallies under the banner of Oikyabaddha Nagorik Andolon (People's United Movement). The movement aimed at promoting progressive social policies and human rights whilst sending 'barbs against the Islamists'³⁴ in an attempt to malign the BNP-Jamaat alliance and thwart all other religious political parties. The Andolon manifesto

went as far as calling for a ban on all religious/ Islamic parties. NGOs in Bangladesh had managed to construct an opposition between the secularists and Islamists within a civil society space.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that theories of civil society in use today in the developing world have indeed been drawn from limited western experiences and ideas based on puritan (this is right i.e. of Christian origins) traditions, and it is these which have been juxtaposed onto southern societies, such as that of Bangladesh, mobilising only a small fraction of western elites into action. Though Bangladesh has been rich in civil society activities well before its independence, the concept itself has taken greater meaning during the early 1990s when the international aid industry saw in it potential in pursuing the western democratic agenda. Non-governmental organisations became donors' obvious choice of institutions through which the 'civil society empowerment' initiative and the 'good governance' agenda would be promoted. They have been political development machines from their inception but it is mainly the nature of their political participation which has changed over the years.

I have argued that both internal and external political and economic variables have played a role in giving primacy to NGOs within a civil society space since Bangladesh's independence. Given their beginnings in leftist ideologies and a strong link to foreign donors, they have become pioneers in not only upholding principles that were more secular in nature but they began voicing their opinions with regard to religious belief systems. This direct attack on the 'inner core' of a traditional system has at times brought the secularists and Islamists head to head in the country, whilst alienating ordinary sections of the population. NGOs' efforts in the country in terms of development have over the years been tremendous but due to their dependence on external funding, they have also been viewed at times as the neo-colonisers of the twenty-first century. As a result they have not only been accused of creating a parallel state without citizens but their primary accountability being to donors makes them anomalous civil society entities, particularly when they become too closely involved in party politics and construct adverse dichotomies in the society, such as that between secularists and Islamists.

¹ Mark Robinson, "Keynote Papers: Governance, Democracy and Conditionality: NGOs and the New Policy Agenda," in *Governance, Democracy and Conditionality: What Role for NGOs?*, ed. Andrew Clayton (Oxford: INTRAC, 1994), 36.

² See, for instance, A. van Rooy, *Civil Society and the Aid Industry* (London: North-South Institute/Earthscan, 1998); Nelson Kasfir, "The Conventional Notion of Civil Society: A Critique," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (1998): 1; Peter Davis and J. Allister McGregor, "Civil Society, International Donors and Poverty in Bangladesh," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 38, no.1 (2000): 47; Sudipta Kaviraj, "In Search of Civil Society," in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, ed. S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 287-323; Partha Chatterjee, "On Civil Society and Political Society in Post-Colonial Democracies," in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, ed. S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 165-178; Aryn Sajoo, *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers and Co. Ltd., 2002); David Lewis, "Civil Society in Non-Western Contexts: Reflections on the 'Usefulness' of a Concept," *Civil Society Working Papers*, no. 13, (London School of Economics, Centre for Civil Society, 2001); and David Lewis, "On the Difficulty of Studying 'Civil Society': NGOs, State and Democracy in Bangladesh," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38, no. 3 (2004): 299.

³ Tasneem Siddiqui, "Growth and Sustainability of the NGO Sector in Bangladesh," *Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies Journal* 19, no. 3 (1998), 297; and S. Zohir, "NGO Sector in Bangladesh: An Overview," *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 4, 2004, 4109.

⁴ Tasneem Siddiqui, *ibid.*, 304.

⁵ See, for instance, G.D. Wood, "States without Citizens: the Problem of the Franchise State," in *NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?*, ed. D. Hulme and M. Edwards (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997), 79-92.

⁶ P. Davis and J. A. McGregor, "Civil Society, International Donors and Poverty in Bangladesh," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 38, no.1 (2000), 59.

⁷ There are in the region of 20,000 NGOs operating in Bangladesh, and of these over 2,000 receive foreign funds but among them only 15 big NGOs receive 90 per cent of total donor assistance. It is these big NGOs that have the largest outreach in the country and are the major providers of welfare to the poor.

⁸ See, for instance, R. Ahmed, "The Emergence of Bengal Muslims," in *Understanding the Bengali Muslims: Interpretative Essays*, ed. R. Ahmed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-25; and Sarah C. White, "NGOs, Civil Society and the State in Bangladesh," *Development and Change* 30 (1999): 307.

⁹ Bengali for killers.

¹⁰ Bengali for collaborators.

¹¹ Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh.

¹² See footnote 7.

¹³ See T. Mesbahuddin, "The Intermestic Development Circle and the Usefulness of a Civil Society Concept in Non-Western Contexts: The Case of Bangladesh" (PhD thesis, University of Bath, 2007), chap. 7, for a further assessment on the issues of NGO accountability.

¹⁴ See, for instance, P. Davis and J. A. McGregor, "Civil Society, International Donors and Poverty in Bangladesh," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*; and B. Kramsjø and G.D. Wood, *Breaking the Chains* (London: IT Publications, 1992).

¹⁵ However, many anomalies remain as I discuss in chapter 7 of my PhD thesis (see footnote 13). Even though micro-credit schemes are heavily geared towards women, they have not always proven to benefit them and in some cases have even posed problems in an otherwise deeply entrenched patriarchal community. NGOs are not set aside from this structure but often work from within that structure and can therefore perpetuate disharmony in the community, particularly when it comes to heavy-handed approaches to collecting interest from their beneficiaries. Although they are considered less punitive than local moneylenders, they nevertheless act as a commercial alternative and have even changed their attitudes towards their beneficiaries who have over the years turned from 'beneficiaries' to 'clients'.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2004).

¹⁷ Sarah C. White, "NGOs, Civil Society and the State in Bangladesh," *Development and Change* 30 (1999), 310.

¹⁸ Although no longer formally an NGO, in many respects it still acts as one. Grameen is also the pioneer in microfinance and one of the largest providers to the poor.

¹⁹ K. Stiles, *Civil Society by Design: Donors, NGOs and the Intermestic Development Circle in Bangladesh* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 126.

²⁰ S. Ahmed, NGOs and Electoral Participation in Rural Bangladesh (paper presented at the sixth workshop for the European Network of Bangladesh Studies, May, in Oslo, Norway, 2000).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Civil-Based Organisations.

²³ This, by no means, reflects women's emancipation from the shackles of patriarchy given that the latter is so entrenched in the society. It only reflects a gradual change in the electoral system. It has often been noted that just by reserving seats for women in the electoral system does not give them the necessary wherewithal to make genuine claims for their emancipation. Nevertheless, these are small welcoming changes.

²⁴ Taj I. Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd.), 153.

²⁵ Ibid., 152.

²⁶ M. Mannan, Islam, Gender and Conflict Models: NGOs and the Discursive Process (paper presented at the sixth workshop for the European Network of Bangladesh Studies, May, in Oslo, Norway, 2000).

²⁷ Of course, rural religious leaders are by no means innocent in the suppression of women as they are equally culpable of undermining women in the community by acting within the local patriarchal power structure. For more details, see my PhD thesis, "The Intermestic Development Circle and the Usefulness of a Civil Society Concept in Non-Western Contexts: The Case of

Bangladesh”, particularly chapter 6. For the purpose of this paper, I am merely arguing that NGOs have managed to alienate certain groups in the communities within which they work.

²⁸ See, for instance, D. Goulet, “Development Experts: The One-Eyed Giants”, *World Development* 8 (1980): 481.

²⁹ Taj I. Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh*, 116.

³⁰ See, for instance, S. M. Hashemi, *State, Politics and Civil Society in the Context of Donor Hegemony: Bangladesh* at 25 (paper presented at the International Conference on Bangladesh at 25, December, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1996); K. Stiles, *Civil Society by Design: Donors, NGOs and the Intermestic Development Circle in Bangladesh*; and S. M. Hashemi and M. Hassan, “Building NGO Legitimacy in Bangladesh: the Contested Domain”, in *International Perspectives on Voluntary Action: Reshaping the Third Sector*, ed. D. Lewis (London: Earthscan, 1999), 124-131.

³¹ See S. R. Khan, *The Socio-Legal Status of Bangali Women in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2001), 222.

³² A religious edict.

³³ Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*, 92.

³⁴ K. Stiles, *Civil Society by Design: Donors, NGOs and the Intermestic Development Circle in Bangladesh*, 120.

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