Building a New Bangladesh: The Power of Civil Society Alliance

-Shibly Sohail

John Dalberg-Acton (1907) famously stated, *"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."* However, power can also serve the common good when exercised collectively—through shared efforts and collaboration; accountably—by being transparent and answerable to the people; creatively—by finding innovative solutions to societal challenges; diversely—by including voices from all segments of society; and respectfully—by honouring the dignity and rights of every individual. These principles highlight the importance of a strong civil society alliance to ensure power serves the greater good rather than narrow interests. One inspiring example of such collective action is the Sydney Alliance.

For the past seven years, I have been an active member of the Muslim community core team within the Sydney Alliance. This diverse coalition unites community organisations, unions, schools, and religious groups to work collaboratively for a just, fair, and sustainable Sydney. The Alliance uses the principles of community organising to build relationships, foster mutual understanding, hold power accountable, and drive meaningful social change.

The Sydney Alliance demonstrates how a united civil society can address systemic challenges and amplify citizens' voices. This approach is especially relevant to Bangladesh, where the dream of a new nation has emerged in the wake of the July Revolution. While the removal of a fascist regime marks a significant milestone, the real challenge lies in nation-building, fostering democracy, and embedding justice. However, the absence of a unified civil society alliance in Bangladesh risks undermining these efforts.

Drawing lessons from the Sydney Alliance's model of collaboration and inclusivity, young leaders in Bangladesh have an opportunity to build a platform for collective action. By empowering diverse groups working together, they can lay the foundation for a just and democratic future.

The idea for the Sydney Alliance was introduced by Amanda Tattersall, an experienced organiser and researcher for social change in Australia. During her research in the United States, she discovered the practice of community organising and recognised its potential. On her return to Australia, Amanda partnered with Unions NSW, which provided seed funding to explore interest in building a coalition. This initiative ultimately gave birth to the Sydney Alliance.

In this article, I will share the story of the Sydney Alliance, briefly discuss how it works, and reflect on its significance. Additionally, I will highlight the core principles of community organising and conclude by discussing why a similar alliance is essential for Bangladesh.

This story is particularly significant for the people of Bangladesh who fought for democracy, especially the younger Gen-Z. Having ousted a fascist regime during the July Revolution, they dreamed of a new Bangladesh. However, while they succeeded in the revolution's first phase, their role in nation-building remains unclear. In discussions with activists from the anti-fascist movement, I received varying suggestions—some propose forming shadow cabinets, while others advocate creating new political parties. Nevertheless, few have considered the potential of community organising or establishing a civil society alliance. This gap highlights the relevance of the Sydney Alliance's story for young leaders seeking direction in building a better Bangladesh.

**The Three Sectors of Society: Understanding the Balance**

Understanding the three fundamental sectors of society and the balance among them is crucial to grasping why a strong civil society alliance is essential. These three sectors—government, the market, and civil society—function like the legs of a three-legged stool. If one leg weakens, the stool tips over, disrupting societal equilibrium. Similarly, when any one sector becomes disproportionately influential, it undermines the stability and fairness of society.

Each sector plays a distinct role in maintaining societal harmony:

- **Government:** Responsible for public administration, law enforcement, infrastructure, and welfare. While its bureaucratic structure enables large-scale governance, it requires accountability to function effectively.

- **Market:** Driven by profit motives, the market provides goods, services, and employment. It thrives on competition, growth, and innovation but can exploit resources and people if left unchecked.
- **Civil Society:** Represented by unions, religious organisations, charities, and community groups, civil society fosters social responsibility, mutual aid, and relational culture. It amplifies citizens' voices, ensuring their concerns are addressed and their rights upheld.
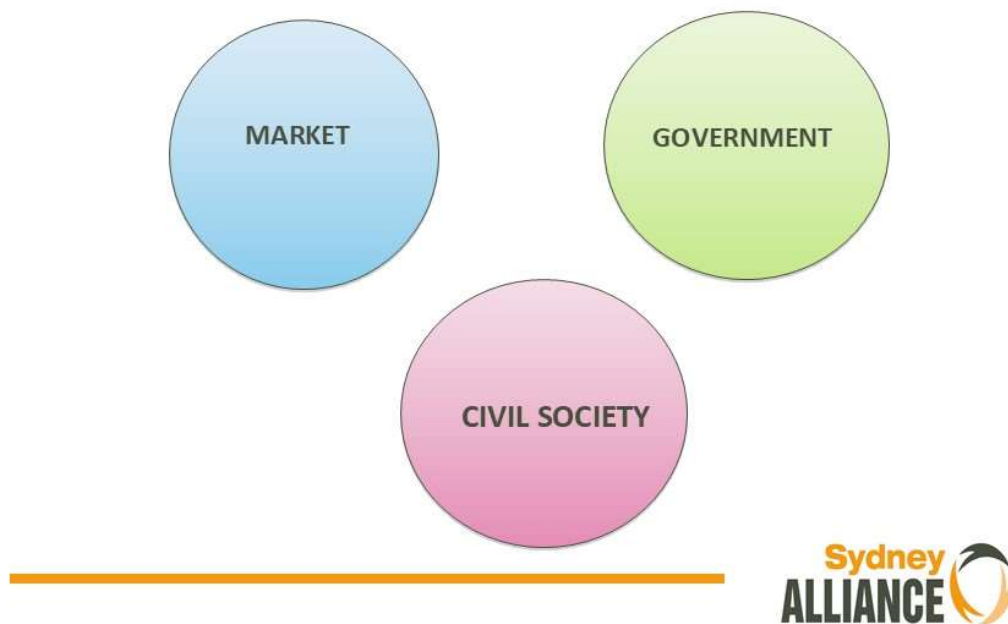
Three sectors in society

A healthy society requires these sectors to work in balance, each holding the others accountable. However, in Bangladesh, this balance has significantly tilted. The dominance of political interests has stifled democratic processes and undermined accountability, while market forces, often aligned with oligarchic elites, have exploited resources and widened economic inequality. Meanwhile, civil society has been weakened, unable to effectively counterbalance these forces or advocate for the broader public interest.

History shows that this imbalance can lead to societal instability, repression, and inequality, making it essential to strengthen civil society's role in restoring equilibrium.

Historical Shifts: The Rise and Fall of the Three Sectors

The balance among the three sectors—government, the market, and civil society—has shifted significantly throughout history, impacting societal stability and fairness. Understanding these shifts is crucial to recognising the need for an effective civil society alliance, particularly in countries like Bangladesh.

Civil Society as the Strongest Pillar (Early History)

Civil society was the cornerstone of social life in the early stages of societal development. Religious institutions, unions, and community groups played a pivotal role in providing education, healthcare, and welfare. These organisations were deeply rooted in mutual responsibility and relationships, fostering egalitarian ideals and collective welfare. Examples include the *Waqf* system in Muslim societies, which supported self-reliant economic communities independent of government and benefited people of all faiths, and the *Ponchayet* system in rural Bangladesh, which served as community-based social and judicial structures.

However, as populations grew and societal needs became more complex, civil society struggled to address large-scale challenges like poverty and public health. Traditional civil society structures in Bangladesh began to erode under colonial rule, which centralised power and disrupted community-based systems.

The Rise of Government (Mid-20th Century)

Governments gained prominence as they stepped in to fill the gaps left by civil society. They formalised welfare programs, introduced infrastructure development, and addressed large-scale social needs. Tax systems provided the resources for public services like education, healthcare, and pensions. After World War II, governments worldwide institutionalised social welfare, often collaborating with unions and community groups.

Governments offered large-scale, organised solutions to societal challenges. In Bangladesh, following independence in 1971, the government initially sought to rebuild the nation by centralising authority and nationalising private sectors.

Over time, inefficiencies, bureaucratic rigidity, corruption, and unchecked political dominance began to undermine government effectiveness. In Bangladesh, political instability, nepotism, and the concentration of power weakened public institutions and eroded trust in governance.

The Dominance of the Market (Late 20th Century to Present)

With the advent of globalisation and economic liberalisation, the market emerged as the dominant sector. Deregulation and privatisation expanded corporate influence, and public services like education and healthcare became commodified. Consumer culture and branding further entrenched the market's role in everyday life.

This dominance created significant societal imbalances:

- Public services prioritised profit over accessibility.
- Governments and media became heavily reliant on corporate funding, compromising their independence.
- Civil society was marginalised, with unions becoming tools of political parties and religious institutions confined to private worship.

In Bangladesh, the rise of authoritarianism from 2009 onward facilitated the emergence of oligarchic elites who wield disproportionate influence over policy and governance. Corporate interests, often intertwined with political power, have further marginalised civil society, limiting its capacity to advocate for accountability and equitable resource distribution.
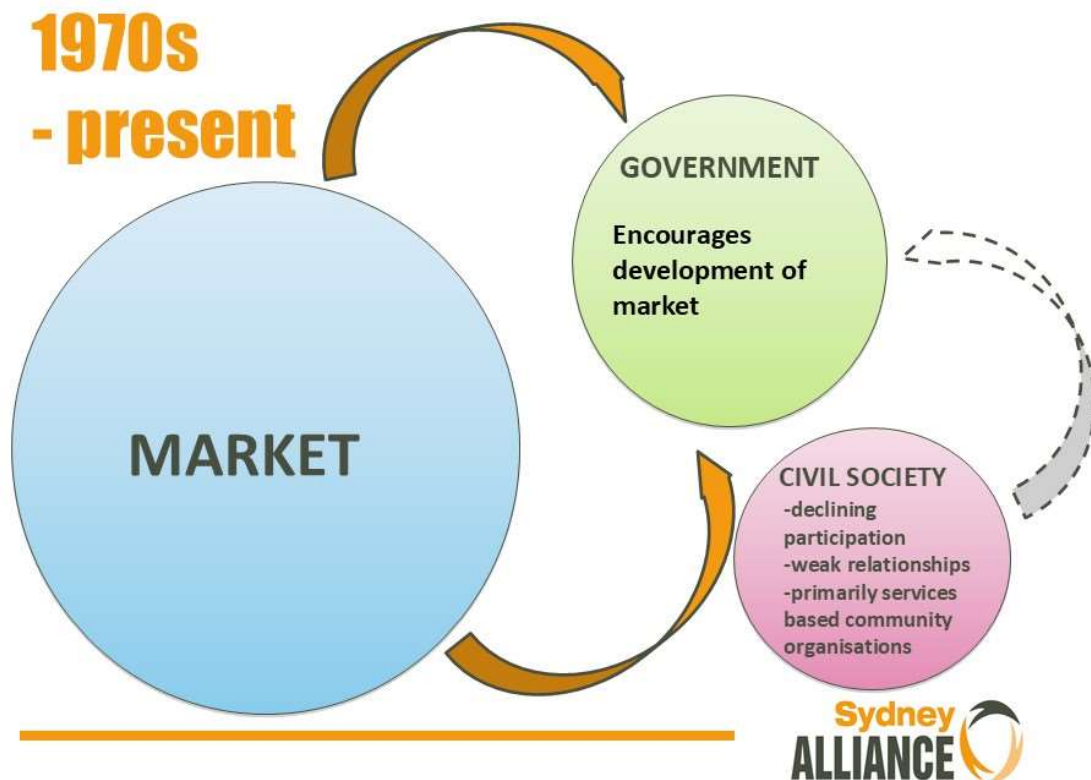
Current imbalance in three sectors of society

The historical shifts in power among the three sectors reveal the consequences of imbalance. In Bangladesh, the weakening of civil society has allowed unchecked government power and corporate dominance, exacerbating inequality and diminishing public trust. Restoring this balance requires revitalising civil society as a counterweight to government and market forces, ensuring accountability and promoting the common good.

Strengthening Civil Society Through Community Organising

Community organising is a transformative practice designed to empower individuals and communities to act collectively for the common good. It focuses on building the capacity of community leaders, fostering strong relationships across diverse organisations, and creating sustainable, community-based power structures. Rooted in historical, theological, and philosophical traditions, community organising engages

core concepts such as leadership, power, and relationships to effect meaningful change.

Principles of Community Organising

The modern practice of community organising, pioneered by Saul Alinsky in the 1930s, focuses on practical methods for empowering communities. In the last two decades, this practice, founded in the United States, has spread to Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the world's largest and oldest community organising network, outlines several core principles:

- **Relational Meetings:** One-on-one meetings are the cornerstone of community organising. These allow leaders and organisers to exchange stories, build trust, and identify shared interests.
- **Focus on Power:** Community organising emphasises "power with" rather than "power over," advocating collective action to address systemic challenges while holding power accountable.
- **Institutional Strength:** Strong local institutions, such as unions, religious organisations, and charities, act as the anchors of democracy, providing sustainable networks for long-term impact.
- **Leadership Development:** Identifying and cultivating leaders is central to creating a movement capable of mobilising others and effecting change.
- **The Organising Cycle:** The iterative process of listening, research, action, and evaluation ensures flexibility and adaptability in addressing community needs.

Community Organising cycle

Community Organising cycle

- **Education and Training:** Regular workshops and training sessions equip leaders and members with the skills and knowledge necessary for sustained action.

The Sydney Alliance applies these IAF principles, adapting them to Sydney's unique social and cultural context, allowing it to build a cohesive and inclusive platform for collective action.

Relevance to Bangladesh

While the Sydney Alliance exemplifies the power of community organising, its applicability to Bangladesh requires careful adaptation to the nation's cultural and political context. Bangladesh's unique challenges, including political polarisation, economic inequality, and a weakened civil society, necessitate tailoring these principles:

- **Relational Meetings in a Fragmented Society:** In Bangladesh, where social and political divisions run deep, relational meetings could help bridge gaps between

- **Empowering Local Institutions:** Bangladesh's community-based traditions, such as village councils and religious institutions, can be revitalised and integrated into a broader organising framework to anchor collective efforts.
- **Leadership from Within Communities:** Identifying grassroots leaders who resonate with local populations, particularly among youth and marginalised groups, could catalyse widespread participation and engagement.
- **Focus on Accountability:** Adapting the "power with" principle to challenge entrenched power structures while fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders is vital for addressing systemic corruption and inequality.
- **Education and Awareness Campaigns:** Training programs can be designed to incorporate local issues and contexts, focusing on civic education, the importance of collective action, and strategies to hold power accountable.

By building on these principles and adapting them to Bangladesh's socio-political environment, a civil society alliance could unite diverse groups, address shared challenges, and foster a culture of accountability and justice.

The Need for a Civil Society Alliance in Bangladesh

Although there are numerous civil society organisations in Bangladesh, they lack coordination and a unified platform like the Sydney Alliance. Organisations such as *Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik* (SUJAN), *Ain o Salish Kendra* (ASK), *Transparency International Bangladesh* (TIB), and others primarily function as NGOs. These groups focus on specific issues such as human rights, poverty alleviation, and anti-corruption initiatives. Additionally, various religious institutions, unions, independent NGOs, and advocacy groups actively work within their respective domains. However, a broad-based civil society alliance akin to the Sydney Alliance, which connects religious institutions, labour unions, and community organisations to comprehensively represent diverse segments of society, remains conspicuously absent.

One of the most pressing concerns is the misconception that the so-called *"Shushil Shomaj"* represents civil society. In reality, they are exclusive and disconnected from the broad religious and cultural fabric of Bangladesh. Their ideologies often contradict the core values of the majority. Many of these groups are aligned with the recently ousted fascist regime and have been accused of prioritising the interests of

neighbouring countries over national welfare. Over the past 15 years, they have actively collaborated with authoritarian regimes, legitimising illegal actions, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, corruption, and repression. Rather than serving the public, they primarily advance the interests of oligarchs and business elites.

Civil society must remain independent and free from the influence of political parties and corporate entities. These so-called groups do not represent genuine civil society. Veteran

editor Abul Asad, in his article *"Shushilra Kotota Shushil",* revealed that members of these organisations have often acted against the country's interests and its people. Similarly, the Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), a prominent entity within this circle, has faced allegations of anti-national activities from the former Chairman of the Board of Investment, Mahmudur Rahman; the matter was later brought to court.

In contrast, in Australia, a Christian-majority nation, the Sydney Alliance's most influential members include religious organisations like the Uniting Church and the Catholic Church. Conversely, in Bangladesh, religious institutions and leaders are excluded from the so-called *"Shushil Shomaj,"* which has a reputation for being anti-religious and, more specifically, Islamophobic.

The current interim government in Bangladesh has formed a *"Jatio Nagorik Committee"* (National Citizens' Committee). However, a civil society platform established through government initiatives or business support cannot genuinely represent public interests or hold governments and businesses accountable. Many fear this initiative might devolve into a *"King's Party"* that prioritises vested interests over public welfare. A genuinely representative civil society alliance must be independent and free from the influence of governments, political parties, and markets. It should advocate for the people, unite diverse voices, and ensure accountability across all sectors.

While different organisations may have distinct interests and agendas, uniting under a common platform does not require abandoning their individuality. Instead, it involves working together towards shared goals while continuing to pursue individual

objectives. In the post-fascist context of Bangladesh, some critical shared objectives include:

1. **Dismantling existing fascist networks** at all levels and rebuilding new democratic structures.
2. **Ensuring justice and punishment** for fascist perpetrators and their enablers.
3. **Reorganising democratic institutions** and initiating transparent and inclusive democratic processes.
4. **Protecting the country's sovereignty** by resisting aggression from neighbouring nations.

Achieving consensus on these collective goals can empower civil society to collaborate effectively. Strengthening civil society in this way can establish a balance of power alongside the government and businesses, fostering greater social harmony and accountability.

Conclusion

The July Revolution demonstrated the transformative power of unity in overthrowing a fascist regime, but sustaining democratic gains and achieving lasting justice requires more than political victory. It demands a strong civil society alliance that can unite diverse voices, hold power accountable, and rebuild democratic institutions. The principles of community organising offer a roadmap for this transformation in Bangladesh.

Young leaders and activists have the opportunity to foster trust among diverse groups, empower local leaders, revitalise community institutions, and create a shared vision for the future. By drawing lessons from the Sydney Alliance and tailoring them to Bangladesh's unique challenges, they can build a platform for collective action. Such an alliance would not only safeguard the nation's sovereignty but also establish a sustainable foundation for generations to come.