



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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the National Academy of Public Administration,  
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and the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice,  
Princeton University*

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Oral History Program

Series:  
Interview no.:

Civil Service  
G3

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Interviewee: Manzoor Hasan

Interviewer: Andrew Schalkwyk

Date of Interview: 25 February 2009

Location: Institute of Governance Studies, BRAC  
Dhaka  
Bangladesh

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Innovations for Successful Societies, Bobst Center for Peace and Justice  
Princeton University, 83 Prospect Avenue, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544, USA  
[www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties](http://www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties)

SCHALKWYK: Today is 25 February 2009. I am with Manzoor Hasan, the Director of the Institute of Governance Studies (IGS) at the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) University, at their offices in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Before we start the interview, Mr. Hasan, could you—could I ask whether you have given your consent for this interview?

HASAN: Yes, I have.

SCHALKWYK: Excellent, thank you very much. Before we talk about civil service reform and administrative reform in Bangladesh, I wonder if you could just tell me what your current responsibilities are at IGS, and some of the positions that you've held in the past, that have brought you up to this position.

HASAN: *Well as you have said earlier on, I am the Director of the Institute, I was involved with the Institute—I have been involved with the Institute since it's inception which was, what—now three and a half years ago. Officially I was not the first director, I was the International Director, but I was involved from the very first day. We appointed a former Cabinet Secretary as our— as the first director of the Institute, but after he left—that was around 2006, that I—end of 2006, in approximately October of 2006 I took over, and I have been the director ever since.*

*Prior to that, I was the founding Executive Director of Transparency International (TI) Bangladesh when it began its work in 1996. And I was the Director— Executive Director for seven years, and then I left TI Bangladesh and went to Berlin to be the Regional Director for Asia Pacific. I did that for a year before returning to Bangladesh to join BRAC and BRAC University. I'm a lawyer by profession, by training.*

SCHALKWYK: All right. Most of this interview will revolve around the civil service in Bangladesh, some of its challenges and some of the reform efforts that have been attempted. I wonder if you could talk about the issues and challenges currently facing the Civil Service?

HASAN: *The civil service that we have—the structure of the civil service is still very much the structure that was left behind by the colonial power. So we have a very hierarchical structure. I think this is certainly a major challenge for the bureaucracy. Particularly so given the fact that the nature of the business that the civil service is involved in has changed dramatically over the last 50 or 60 years, since the partition of the Indian continent. So I would say that this is a major challenge that we are facing.*

*Secondly, I would say that the fact that the people in this system—the way they are trained, the way they are given instructions to operate, still leaves much to be desired. Because I feel that the training that they receive is not adequate to perform the kind of duties they're supposed to be performing. So it's both—I would highlight both the structural challenge and the software challenge as the major obstacles that people in the civil service are faced with.*

*I don't think that we can describe the civil service in a monolithic manner, saying that everybody in the service is thinking negatively or doesn't have the right mindset. But I suspect that there is a system that forces many of them to behave in the way that they behave. Particularly given our experience with the master's program that we are now doing, where we have mid-career civil servants*

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*undertaking the master's program. We find that a lot of these people started working with a different set of attitudes. But that has changed— that set of attitudes has changed over time.*

SCHALKWYK: What is the master's degree?

HASAN: *The master's degree is known as the master's (MA) program in Governance and Development. It's a full-time, 12 month program where we have a—it's a residential program, and every year we take 25 applicants as our students. And they all come from the civil service, from the public sector. This is because of an arrangement that we have with the government whereby they give us some names—more than 25 names. We are generally talking about a couple of hundred names, and from those, we then select 25.*

SCHALKWYK: And how do you go about selecting the 25 from the hundreds of names that you receive?

HASAN: *We have a three-tier selection process. First we ask them to sit for a simple written test, where we try to assess their fluency in English and then we do a group interview where they have to discuss a particular topic and interact with each other and try to basically make a good case for their own points of view. Finally, the final tier is that of individual interviews in which there is—in which the individual applicants have to face a panel of interviewers and, you know, satisfy them. So it's the aggregate of those three test that would determine whether the person gets a place or not.*

SCHALKWYK: And does everybody—do all the people who are suggested by the government go through all of the—all three stages?

HASAN: *They certainly go through the written stage. After the written test we basically discard quite a large number. Then all of those who remain will be going through the final two tiers. And the final decision is made on the basis of the group interview and the individual interview.*

SCHALKWYK: And so I understand—I presume the course is taught in English?

HASAN: *Yes, it is.*

SCHALKWYK: And it's taught here at IGS?

HASAN: *It's taught at IGS, but our residential program is not based here. We have—we use the campus of BRAC University where the students stay and undertake the different courses of the master's program.*

SCHALKWYK: What sort of things are you looking for in the candidates?

HASAN: *We're basically looking for people who are prepared to take risks by coming to a program like this and foregoing one year of work and also probably the possibility of promotion. You know, they have to—they have to spend that year here. For some people this could even mean foregoing some financial incentives. Secondly, I think we are looking for people who are prepared to think outside the box in terms of the way they want to operate: the kind of relationship that they want to build with their customers, if I could put it this way. Basically, people who want to learn new ideas that they would then be able to go out and implement.*

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*And I think we are also looking for people who are thinking of taking on leadership positions, in terms of reform, governance reform or reform even within their own establishment. So we're basically looking for agents of change, because we feel that if one wants to actually bring about governance change, then one has to work with the public sector. And within the public sector, we need to identify people who would be able to bring about change. So first, I would say it is about identifying the right individuals; second, I would say it is about how you link up those individuals over a period of time. So that there is a network, which would then be able to bring about the kind of—the critical mass that sometimes we talk about, you know within that particular institution. So it's an issue of numbers and at the same time I think it is about building a network over time, which would be able to bring about the kind of change that we are looking for.*

SCHALKWYK: And how did—how does the government go about selecting—what sort of people does the government typically suggest? [phone interruption] Start again?

HASAN: Yes.

SCHALKWYK: How does the government go about choosing the people it suggests and what sort of level are they in the civil service?

HASAN: *The government, what they do is—once we inform the Ministry of Establishment that we are ready to recruit a new batch of students, they issue letters to different ministries, saying that they could nominate people who would be interested in doing this particular program. And then the different ministries and departments do their own—go through their own process of identifying people. Then a list is sent to the Ministry of Establishment and that—those lists are then consolidated and the names are given to us.*

*I suspect the Ministry of Establishment will probably not—they probably don't give us the full list, they have their own vetting and selection process. This may have to do with applicant age, this may have to do with whether the applicants have had this kind of academic exposure in the past. So I suspect that this is something that happens. But what we try to do is—we make it very clear to the Ministry of Establishment that we would like a very wide cross section of people applying. So it should not be just one particular cadre, for example the administrative cadre. It should—the list should contain people from the different sections of the civil service. We also make it very clear to them that there should be gender balance. So there should be a good number of female candidates as part of that list that we receive. So that's how it happens.*

SCHALKWYK: How did you go about developing the curriculum for the training for this—for this master's?

HASAN: *Well, when we were negotiating with the government, we initially had the idea of doing short courses, executive courses. But the government made it very clear that their preference would be to have a master's program rather than short courses. And I think their argument was that it's very difficult to bring about change within one's thinking through short courses. It is much better to have a master's program over a period of 12 months. And I can see their argument in that.*

*And so when we decided with the government that there would be a master's program, we then invited—well initially we visited a number of overseas universities including universities such as the National University of Singapore,*

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*the University of Malaya, Monash University in Australia, Griffith University in Australia, Harvard in the United States, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University, Bath and a few others. So we—so I visited those universities, identified people who would be interested and then we decided on a curriculum workshop where we invited some of the people from these universities. We also invited people from—academicians from local universities including BRAC University and also some senior civil servants.*

*We organized a three-day workshop with all of them participating. And the first draft of the curriculum basically came out of that workshop. We built on that and the curriculum that we have today is the product of that exercise. But over the years—in the last few years, some modifications have been made to that curriculum, but it has generally remained as it was decided at that workshop, which took place in the year 2005, in the month of August.*

SCHALKWYK: And what did that curriculum include?

HASAN: *The curriculum basically includes two sections. One has core courses, and the second section has the elective courses. And the whole course has a credit value of 36 points. Out of those 36 points, nine credits are devoted to a dissertation that students will have to write, and the remaining points are basically courses that people take. And if I'm not mistaken, out of the remaining credit points, so 36 minus nine—Twelve are made up of core courses and the remaining points are made up of elective courses.*

*Now with core courses, you will see there are some courses like Economics for Public Leadership, Learning from People and the Leading Issues of Governance in Bangladesh. Under the elective courses we have subject like Ethics, Corruption, Public Policy and a few more.*

SCHALKWYK: All right. And the training—the teaching is done by members of BRAC University?

HASAN: *Not, not entirely. We have faculty from within BRAC University; we have faculty from outside BRAC University; we also have faculty from outside Bangladesh. So there is a wide range of people that we try to get to come and teach. We try to make it international because we feel that it is beneficial for the students to be exposed to faculty with different kinds of teaching skills.*

SCHALKWYK: What sort of things does—do the participants typically choose for their dissertations?

HASAN: *Normally they go for subjects in which they are presently involved or on which they worked prior to coming to the course. For example, most of the time we find that people are writing on issues like local government, revenue collection, and environmental issues, the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the development process: the problems that civil servants confront in their work. These are some of the topics that we find that people go for. It's a— I would say that it is supposed to be an exercise where people document their experience and also something that they want to pursue both in terms of academic work and also by converting that into a practical project.*

SCHALKWYK: So what—have you been able to test the results of your program, the outcomes, on the civil servants you have gone through?

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HASAN: *Well, I mean if you're looking at the change in mindset, I think—I would say that, we're still in the early days. And I feel that—to have that kind of—to bring about that kind of change or to see that kind of outcome, it is far too early to say what has been achieved. And I think that this is also something that is very difficult to document. We have taken, undertaken evaluation at the end of the first year and we—*

SCHALKWYK: Which were—when was the first year?

HASAN: *The first year came—the end of the first year was around September of 2006, and then the evaluation was done. But that evaluation had more to do with how the course was running than the kind of impact that the course was having on the civil servants. And it had more to do with how—with doing the fine-tuning of the course after the end of the first year. We are thinking of doing another evaluation at the end of the third year, which is the current year. And, again, we would like to see whether the curriculum needs to be changed. But I think this time we also would like to see whether it is producing the kind of results that we would like to see, you know, coming out of an exercise of this kind.*

*So I suspect now it would be useful to look at—to see the kind of—the extent of the network of these graduates who are coming out of the master's program. Whether they are benefiting from this network, whether they are actually making good use of the network, and to what extent these people—these graduates have been able to place themselves in strategic postings and positions from where they could help to improve the governance situation in Bangladesh.*

*So I think that we haven't yet finalized the terms of reference; we are in the process of doing that, and then we will undertake the evaluation. In terms of fundamental change in civil service, my feeling is that it is still too early to expect something like that to happen. I also feel that it is important for the student who finishes our program and goes back to the system to see whether they are getting the kind of support that they would require to really to bring about those fundamental changes.*

*So, what kind of cooperation are they getting from their line managers? Have they been given due recognition for the new skills and knowledge they have acquired? These are also issues we probably need to find out about when we do the evaluation of the program that has been running for the last three years. I suppose you know that as I said earlier on, the issue of numbers is very important to bring about a fundamental change. At the moment we have 50 people who have finished this program, we have 25 more who are now currently taking this program. We feel that in order to bring about a fundamental change this number has to increase. With that in mind, we are now discussing with the government whether they would be able to give us some financial assistance in order to increase the number from, say, 25 to 50.*

SCHALKWYK: So where do you get the current funding, and who pays for the courses that the civil servants take?

HASAN: *Well, when the program started it was underwritten by BRAC, but at the same time, we applied to different donors for funding. The Dutch government came forward pretty quickly with 1.5 million dollars for three years, and we would also require some additional funding from BRAC.*

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*So the work that we have been doing, the master's program that we have been doing for the last three years has been funded by the Dutch government. The bulk of it has come from the Dutch government and, and now we are seeking—We initially did not seek it—did not ask the government of Bangladesh to contribute, mainly because we wanted to operate independently and to actually make our own decisions regarding certain policy issues.*

*So now we feel that after three years, we are in a position where we can afford to take funding or accept funding from the government. We also feel that this is important; government—funding from governmental sources is important in order to develop a sense of ownership for this particular government, for this particular course. You know, if they really want this course to continue. Because if they don't, then I think it shouldn't continue and it shouldn't depend on funding from donors.*

SCHALKWYK: So one of the things I have encountered while I have been here is a great willingness and interest that the government has in providing training opportunities with reforms as the goal, as the outcome—training reformed minded people. But there seems to be a lack of interest in the government for implementing reforms for the center. Why do you think this is the case? Do you think—why is the government not implementing its own reforms but instead focusing on these development programs?

HASAN: *I would say that this is mainly because of the fact that there isn't the kind of political leadership that is required to bring about fundamental reform within the system. You know, whether it's in public service or any other system. So if the political leadership is not ready, then they're not—then, we're not really sure what we want to do. If you don't know what we want to do, then basically you would accept money from any donor to undertake reform programs or training programs. And it really becomes a matter of spending money and taking the gift boxes and satisfying mainly the agenda of the donor community, I suspect, rather than bringing about fundamental changes within the system. So I would say—the reason that I would cite for this is a lack of political leadership, a lack of political vision. You know, in terms of the direction the country should take.*

SCHALKWYK: So considering this, what chances are there for the alumni of your program to have an impact if there isn't some impetus to perform? Do you think having enough reform-minded people in the civil service will have an effect?

HASAN: *Well, the way we look at it is that there's very little that one can do as an academic institution to generate political vision, reform, leadership or political leadership. I mean this is something that will have to come through the political process. But we feel that we are in a strong position to actually train people who will become essential when there is such political vision and political leadership. Because when you have that political vision and political leadership, competent civil servants will be needed. You know, to do this kind of work, to take charge of the kind of reform agenda that they would come up with. So basically what we are saying is that rather than not doing anything actually invest in training people and creating—and therefore creating a pool of people who would be ready to take up the challenge when the political leadership is ready to move forward.*

*And in a way, also, if there is a pool of trained individuals, people who are prepared to take leadership and to be entrepreneurial, then I think the political leadership may also feel encouraged to move forward and take certain steps,*

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*which would take us away from the present path and sort of give us a new sense of direction.*

*You know, it's— sometimes there is this catch-22 situation: what could be achieved through vision if you don't have the people, but then you have— sometimes you have the people but you don't have the vision. I suppose one doesn't know which one is going to come first. But at least we feel that we as an institution should be in a position to produce properly trained civil servants. Particularly so as we are interested in the public sector, but also probably to some extent to train people in the private sector who would be able to take up the challenges in the future.*

SCHALKWYK: So in thinking about that, one of things that I have been a little confused about in Bangladesh is the relationship between politicians and civil servants, especially senior civil servants. Some people have said that politicians relying heavily on civil servants—that ministers rely heavily on their Secretaries because they are more experienced. Other people have said that Secretaries and senior civil servants are moved from ministry to ministry at the whim of politicians and that the senior civil servants are reluctant to stand up to politicians. How—what is that dynamic like and how is that—how does that affect the attempts at reform or the likelihood of reform?

HASAN: *I think there are a number of issues here. First I would say that there—I think that we have to look back a bit to understand this. Despite the fact that we have a civil service that is archaic, going back to the British days, the kind of ethos that they had. But nevertheless it was an institution that attracted a lot of bright people, a lot of competent people in the past. Young people were keen to join the civil service because there was an element of prestige, social status and the rest of it. And the civil service was relatively independent, the civil servants could do their job and the politicians sort of respected that independence.*

*Now if we look at the period since 1971—if you look at the literature, you'll find that the institution of civil service has been politicized over the years. Particularly since 1991, it has been politicized and because of this, it has lost its independence, it has lost its stature.*

*And the recruitment, the recruitment of new people has—the quality of the people who have been recruited has dropped. And I think this has brought about a situation where now we find the civil service being controlled or dominated by the politicians, which wasn't the case, say, 20 years ago. So—it also means that the politicians that we have now are very keen on having a civil service with which they can do business. You know, the politicians of 20 years ago probably couldn't have done that because the civil servant wouldn't have allowed that kind of behavior, whereas now it's possible. So—*

SCHALKWYK: Can you just—what do you mean by “doing business”?

HASAN: *By doing business, I mean that the politicians would abrogate their responsibilities of making decisions and leave a lot of the decision making to the civil servants themselves, the senior civil servants. So basically granting them a lot of independence and that way—and also reducing the level of accountability in terms of what they do. And in return the politicians would negotiate deals, business deals with the bureaucracy that would result in high levels of corruption.*

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*So I think, when we talk about corruption, this is the kind of corruption that we would describe as political corruption. This is the nexus, the relationship between the politicians and the bureaucracy that results in grand corruption when it comes, say, to procurement or infrastructure development. We end up with a situation where the bureaucracy makes decision that would give them financial benefits but also give the politicians financial benefits.*

*So it's kind of a win-win situation from a corruption point of view. But at the end of the day their country loses out. At the end of the day the citizens lose out, particularly the poorer section of the community. So it's kind of a collusive relationship that develops over time. And when I am talking about business, I am basically talking about the ransacking that goes on in the so-called commission, that commission that people receive. A lot of stories that we have heard over the last few years vindicate that particular hypothesis.*

SCHALKWYK: And you said this started in 1991. Does the—do you think it's the return to democracy or particularly the parliamentary system that has caused this, are there other factors?

HASAN: *I mean, I would say that there are other factors. I have already referred to the falling of standards within the civil service. I mean this is something that did not start in 1991; it started way back. If you have to pick a date, it would probably be 1971 when the administration had to be revamped and a lot of civil servants left and went back to Pakistan. A lot of civil servants actually left the country, a lot of people left the country. There was an exodus of middle class people from Bangladesh.*

*So this falling of standards where you— it started to happen a long time ago. What we see happening since 1991 is the kind of the politicization of the institution that I referred to. That, together with the other factors, has made the situation what it is now.*

*You know, the politics, the parliamentary form of politics, was supposed to bring about a high degree of accountability. Instead, I think what we have found is that the independence of institutions has been undermined. The accountability factor has been weakened. I think the general public has been receiving poor quality public service from the service delivery institutions like, for example, the judiciary, the police, the land registry offices, the public utility offices, and other institutions that are involved in public service delivery.*

SCHALKWYK: So in the past decade, have there been any major attempts at reform within the administration and the civil service in Bangladesh?

HASAN: *If you look at the reports that have been published by the various public service reform commissions, you'll find a lot of very appropriate and relevant recommendations. But when you look at the implementation record of those recommendations, it's actually very, very poor indeed. If you look—take the last commission report. I think probably not more than six recommendations have been implemented, and even those are some minor recommendations. So the track record is actually very poor indeed in terms of reform. A lot of commissions have been set up and a lot of reports have been published, but very little has been done in terms of action.*

SCHALKWYK: So from what I—from my understanding of the reports and what I've seen, the reports seem to be quite good, with good analysis and sensible

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recommendations. But there seems to be very little willingness to implement them. Why is—why do you think the government has been willing to appoint commissions that are going to produce these reports if they have no intention of implementing them? And am I correct that there is no intention of implementing it— that it's a lack of intent rather than a lack of ability to implement the reports.

HASAN: *I think it's mainly lack of intention, I think there is also an element of lack of ability, which is also there. But my feeling is that this exercise of appointing commissions and getting reports done is a bit of a window dressing, which would satisfy both the domestic demand for change and also the donor demand for change.*

*It's a convenient way of diverting attention. Let's set up a commission, let's get a report, let's have a debate on the report and then a few years down the road no one will think about it and it will die a natural death.*

*I think that has been the strategy, really. Then again, I think that you know a lot of these reports are also done in such a way that it doesn't really generate a lot of ownership within the stakeholder. They remain as academic exercises and not really—I don't think it can really be described as a practical exercise in terms of identifying doable reform measures, which are thought-through with a— with enough resources allocated for these reform measures. So basically it remains an academic exercise; it's not a practical exercise and on top of that, as we discussed earlier on, the political will is not there. So it becomes a kind of exercise that is carried out by a handful of people and then the report finally gathers dust on some government shelf.*

SCHALKWYK: What sort of ways do you think could be used to produce the political support for—to force the government's hand?

HASAN: *I think over the last ten to 15 years, particularly over the last 10 years, I think one of the interesting developments that we have seen in Bangladesh is the role of the civil society and the media. If you take the example governance, certainly you know governance—not only in Bangladesh but also in other countries, it has become a very important topic.*

*But in Bangladesh you'll find that a lot of local organizations, media, both electronic and print, have actually taken up this issue very, very seriously. This has resulted in tremendous public awareness in terms of some governance issues, particularly the level of corruption that we have in Bangladesh. And because of this enhanced awareness on the part of the public, I feel that this has generated a kind of demand and also quite a bit of pressure which has forced politicians to at least talk about these issues.*

*And in some cases we also see some changes being undertaken, right? I must say the pace of change is still pretty slow, but nevertheless I think over the last few years we have seen, we have seen the—seen a lot of change. Particularly over the last two years when we had the caretaker government of Fakhruddin Ahmed and many people would say that, the government of the caretaker government was a kind of, in a way, civil society government. A lot of civil society government members were involved both running the government and also in providing policy input from the outside.*

*And as we know, a whole range of new laws were put together, approximately 130 new statutes altogether. And if you look at these statutes you'll find that a lot*

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*of them have to do with the subject of governance. You know, how institutions can be strengthened and how they can be made independent and more accountable. And there are a few examples that I can cite: the anti-corruption commission, the public service commission, the separation of the law of the judiciary from the executive, and many more. So yes, changes have taken place, but the change has happened due to tremendous public pressure on politicians. Whether this change will be sustained over the coming years is something that is yet to be seen.*

SCHALKWYK: Do you have anything else to add before we finish?

HASAN: *I think that probably what I would like to add, from my own personal point of view—I have been involved with the issue of governance since 1996 and I certainly feel that Bangladesh has moved forward in terms of governance.*

*And I think what is holding us back at this point is not a lack of new ideas, but I think it's the lack of far-sighted political leadership that is holding us back. And if we can actually address this issue—and this is a political issue, I mean, this is something that cannot be generated in the laboratory. If this particular issue can be addressed—and I'm optimistic that Bangladesh will be able to address this—then I think we have a very bright future.*

SCHALKWYK: Thank you very much for your time.

HASAN: *Thank you.*