

Security Sector Reform (SSR): Priorities for Bangladesh

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Source: UNDP

Introduction

Security Sector Reform (SSR) is a comprehensive process aimed at transforming security institutions to enhance their effectiveness, accountability, and alignment with democratic values². Emerging in the 1990s, SSR addresses both state and non-state security providers, including

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² "What Is Security Sector Reform? | ASSN," African Security Sector Network, November 2, 2015, <https://www.africansecuritynetwork.org/assn/what-is-security-sector-reform/>.

military, police, and judicial systems. The primary objective is to create a secure environment that fosters development, good governance, and the rule of law. SSR involves collaboration among various stakeholders—government entities, civil society, and international partners—to ensure that security services meet the needs of citizens while upholding human rights and democratic principles³.

The Need for Security Sector Reform

Security Sector Reform (SSR) significantly impacts democratic governance by enhancing accountability, efficiency, and civilian oversight of the historically opaque security institutions. It promotes the rule of law and human rights, ensuring that security forces operate under democratic principles rather than political manipulation⁴. Historically, mass people have generally viewed the law enforcement and security agencies operating for a ‘security-first’ policy often sacrificing human-first policy approaches such as ensuring human rights and ensuring due judicial process. SSR fosters inclusive governance by addressing the diverse security needs of all citizens and reducing corruption through improved transparency and oversight mechanisms⁵. These reforms reinforce the social contract between the state and its citizens, contributing to political stability, enabling free and fair elections which are essential for any proper democracy.

Enhancing Security

Security Sector Reform (SSR) significantly improves the overall effectiveness of security institutions, ensuring that they are well-equipped and adequately structured to protect citizens and maintain public order. When the security sector is ineffective or poorly managed, it often leads to heightened violence, lawlessness, and instability, which can severely undermine broader

³ Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), “SSR in a NUTSHELL: MANUAL for INTRODUCTORY TRAINING on SECURITY SECTOR REFORM” (DCAF, 2022), https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/NUTSHELL_EN.pdf.

⁴ Mark Knight, “Security Sector Reform, Democracy and the Social Contract: From Implicit to Explicit,” GSDRC, 2009, <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/security-sector-reform-democracy-and-the-social-contract-from-implicit-to-explicit/>.

⁵ Ibid

peacebuilding and development initiatives. By reforming these institutions, SSR helps create a safer environment that is conducive to sustainable progress and the well-being of citizens⁶.

Promoting Accountability

Through the establishment of robust frameworks designed for oversight and accountability, SSR plays a vital role in reducing instances of corruption and abuse of power within security forces. By implementing these mechanisms, SSR fosters a higher degree of public trust in security institutions and strengthens the overall legitimacy of state governance. Public confidence in security forces is an essential component of societal stability, as it reinforces the social contract between citizens and their government⁷.



Source: UNDP

⁶ Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), “SECURITY SECTOR REFORM: Applying the Principles of Good Governance to the Security Sector” (DCAF, 2019), https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/DCAF_BG_02_SecuritySectorReform_Nov2022.pdf.

⁷ Hans Born, Marina Caparini, and Karl Haltiner, “Models of Democratic Control of the Armed Forces: A Multi-Country Study Comparing ‘Good Practices’ of Democratic Control,” in *Proceedings of the Democratic Control of Armed Forces Workshops at the 4th International Security Forum, Geneva* (4th International Security Forum, Geneva: DCAF, 2000).

Supporting Democratic Governance

One of the core objectives of SSR is to align security policies and practices with fundamental democratic principles. This ensures that security providers operate under the clear and effective control of civilian authorities and consistently respect human rights. Such alignment is essential for fostering a stable and inclusive political environment that supports the growth and consolidation of democratic governance. The proper functioning of security institutions under democratic oversight creates the foundation for a resilient state structure⁸.

Conflict Prevention

A reformed and effective security sector has the capacity to mitigate the risk of conflict by addressing underlying grievances and vulnerabilities that might otherwise escalate into violence. SSR processes aim to transform security institutions into proactive instruments of peace by resolving structural weaknesses that could serve as triggers for instability. By doing so, SSR ensures that the security sector contributes positively to peacebuilding efforts and prevents the recurrence of conflicts in fragile settings⁹.

Facilitating Development

Security Sector Reform directly contributes to fostering economic stability and growth by creating a secure and predictable environment where investment and social development initiatives can thrive. Without adequate security, development projects are often rendered ineffective, unsustainable, or even abandoned altogether. SSR addresses these challenges by ensuring that the security sector provides the stability necessary for economic progress and the implementation of long-term development plans¹⁰.

⁸ U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Department of Defense, and U.S. Department of State, "Security Sector Reform," *USAID*, February 2009, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/State-USAID-Defense%20Policy%20Statement%20on%20Security%20Sector%20Reform.pdf>.

⁹ Alexander Burian, "Security Sector Reform and Conflict Prevention," *World Bank Blogs* (blog), 2018, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/security-sector-reform-and-conflict-prevention>.

¹⁰ *ibid*

Inclusivity

SSR emphasizes the importance of inclusive participation in decision-making processes related to security, particularly by involving marginalized groups that have historically been excluded. This inclusivity ensures that the diverse needs and concerns of different communities are adequately addressed, ultimately fostering greater social cohesion. By promoting representation and equity, SSR strengthens the social fabric, helping to build a more harmonious and integrated society¹¹.

Stakeholders of Security Sector Reform

The core components of Security Sector Reform (SSR) encompass a range of actors and activities aimed at enhancing security governance. Key components include:

Professional Security Providers

Professional security providers form the foundation of the security sector, encompassing a range of institutions such as the armed forces, police, intelligence agencies, and border control units. As a result, enhancing the professionalism of these providers is crucial. This involves comprehensive training programs that emphasize human rights, community engagement, and accountability. By improving operational effectiveness and fostering public trust, professional security providers can better serve their communities and uphold democratic values¹².

Management and Oversight Bodies

Management and oversight bodies are essential for ensuring that security providers operate within a framework of accountability and governance. This category includes ministries of defense and internal affairs, legislative committees, and civil society organizations. Effective oversight mechanisms are vital for preventing abuses of power and corruption. SSR initiatives often focus on strengthening these bodies by enhancing their capacity to conduct independent audits, engage in policy-making processes, and facilitate public dialogue on security issues¹³.

¹¹ Mugiho Takeshita, "Security Sector Reform and Gender," OSCE (Geneva: DCAF, 2008), <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/9/75281.pdf>.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

Justice and Rule of Law Actors

Justice and rule of law actors play a critical role in upholding legal standards and protecting citizens' rights within the SSR framework. This includes judicial institutions, correctional facilities, human rights commissions, and legal aid organizations. Reforming these institutions involves improving access to justice, enhancing the efficiency of judicial processes, and ensuring that security forces respect legal norms during operations. By reinforcing the rule of law, SSR contributes to a more secure environment where citizens feel protected and confident in their rights¹⁴.

Non-Statutory Security Forces

Non-statutory security forces encompass private security companies, community-based groups, and other non-state actors involved in local security dynamics. These entities often fill gaps in traditional security provision but can also pose challenges if not regulated properly. SSR recognizes the importance of integrating non-statutory forces into the broader security framework to ensure accountability and coordination. This may involve establishing legal frameworks that govern their operations, setting standards for conduct, and fostering collaboration between state and non-state actors to enhance overall community safety.

Holistic Approach

The holistic approach of SSR emphasizes the interdependence of various security actors and the need for coordinated efforts across all levels of governance. This perspective acknowledges that effective security provision requires collaboration among state institutions, non-state actors, civil society, and local communities. A holistic SSR strategy involves assessing how different components of the security sector interact with one another and addressing any gaps or overlaps in responsibilities. By fostering cooperation among diverse stakeholders—including government entities, civil society organizations, and local communities—SSR can create a more integrated and responsive security environment that meets the needs of all citizens while upholding democratic principles.

¹⁴ Ibid

Existing Implementations of Security Sector Reforms

Iraq

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been actively involved in Iraq's SSR efforts since 2015. The program aims to establish a comprehensive security sector reform architecture, focusing on democratic oversight and civil society engagement. Key successes include the establishment of the Security and Defence Committee (SDC) by the Iraqi Parliament, which has contributed to accountability within the security sector. However, challenges remain, such as limited regional access for UNDP advisors and weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms¹⁵. The budget for this initiative was approximately USD 4.8 million over two years, emphasizing the need for sustained financial commitment to SSR efforts.

Colombia

Colombia's SSR has focused on addressing issues stemming from decades of internal conflict. The Colombian government has implemented reforms aimed at professionalizing its military and police forces while enhancing civilian oversight. The establishment of the National Commission on Security Guarantees is a significant step towards ensuring that security forces respect human rights and operate within a legal framework. Reports indicate that these reforms have contributed to a decrease in violence and an increase in public trust in security institutions¹⁶.

South Africa

Following the end of apartheid, South Africa undertook extensive SSR to transform its security forces into institutions that respect human rights and operate democratically. The establishment of the South African Police Service (SAPS) aimed to create a police force that is accountable to the community it serves. This included community policing initiatives that fostered better

¹⁵ UNDP Iraq, "Evaluation of the Security Sector Reform Programme" (UNDP, 2018), <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/documents/download/13650>.

¹⁶ International Crisis Group, "Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia," *International Crisis Group*, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/95-trapped-conflict-reforming-military-strategy-save-lives>.

relationships between law enforcement and citizens. Despite significant progress, challenges such as corruption within the police force remain prevalent, highlighting the ongoing need for reform¹⁷.

The Prevailing State of Security Sector in Bangladesh

The prevailing state of the security sector in Bangladesh is characterized by a complex array of challenges, including political instability, emerging security threats, and the need for comprehensive reforms. Here are the key aspects of the current situation:

Political Influence and Governance Issues

The security sector in Bangladesh has been significantly affected by political dynamics. The politicization of security institutions, particularly the police and military, has raised concerns about their effectiveness and impartiality. Experts argue that the current political environment has led to the misuse of these forces for political ends, undermining public trust and accountability¹⁸.

Emerging Security Threats

Bangladesh faces a range of non-traditional security threats, including terrorism, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. The country has experienced waves of Islamic militancy over the past two decades, with significant incidents like the 2016 Holey Artisan attack highlighting vulnerabilities in national security. Additionally, the rise of new drug-related issues, particularly with substances like ‘yaba’ and crystal meth, poses serious challenges to law enforcement¹⁹.

Rohingya Refugee Crisis

The ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis represents a significant humanitarian and security challenge for Bangladesh. Hosting over 1.1 million refugees has strained resources and created tensions in border areas, leading to potential security risks associated with insurgent groups operating along

¹⁷ Albrecht Schnabel and Hans Born, *Security Sector Reform*, ed. Alan Bryden and Heiner Hänggi (The Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2011).

¹⁸ Kazi Kamrul Hassan, “NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL for BANGLADESH: DEBATES and ISSUES,” *NDC Journal* 7, no. 1 (2008), <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php/ndcj/article/view/51>.

¹⁹ Towkir Hossain, “Bangladesh’s Non-Traditional Security Complex,” *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/bangladeshs-non-traditional-security-complex/>.

the Myanmar border²⁰. The interim government is urged to formulate policies addressing this issue while ensuring national sovereignty and stability.

Need for Comprehensive Security Sector Reform

There is a strong consensus among experts that comprehensive security sector reform is essential to address these challenges effectively. This includes restructuring military and police forces, enhancing governance and accountability mechanisms, and fostering community engagement in security matters²¹. The establishment of a National Security Council (NSC) has been proposed as a potential solution to improve coordination among various security agencies.

Public Perception of Security Providers

Public perception surveys indicate that while many citizens feel safer than in previous years, significant concerns remain regarding the police and criminal justice system. There is a demand for greater police presence and community-oriented policing strategies to build trust between law enforcement and communities²². The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) is generally viewed positively for its role in crime reduction but faces scrutiny over human rights issues.

Cybersecurity Challenges

With increasing digitalization, cybersecurity has emerged as a critical concern for Bangladesh's financial sector and beyond. Reports indicate that banks are facing numerous cyber threats, highlighting vulnerabilities in infrastructure that need urgent attention from security agencies²³.

Civil Unrest and Instability

Frequent civil unrest related to political issues has disrupted normalcy in many parts of the country. Protests over civil service job reservations have escalated into violent confrontations, exacerbating

²⁰ Prothom Alo English Desk, "New Security Agenda for the Interim Government," Prothomalo (Prothom Alo English, August 30, 2024), <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/m5zcbhpdyy>.

²¹ *ibid*

²² Saferworld, "Security Provision in Bangladesh: A Public Perceptions Survey," Saferworld-global.org, 2015, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/440-security-provision-in-bangladesh>.

²³ Saudia Afrin, "Cybersecurity Challenges in Bangladesh's Financial Sector," The Daily Star (The Daily Star, November 22, 2023), <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/digital-transformation-bangladeshs-financial-industry-2023/news/cybersecurity-challenges-bangladeshs-financial-sector-3475851>.

tensions between political factions²⁴. This instability poses ongoing risks to public safety and complicates efforts to implement effective security measures.

The New Security Agenda of Bangladesh's Interim Government

Security Sector Reform is a relatively new form of institutional reformation which has seen comparatively less implementation in countries around the world. Even though Bangladesh addressed the importance of SSR, Bangladeshi officials often dragged their feet when it came to implementing them. However, with the ouster of the former prime minister Sheikh Hasina, the new government of Bangladesh has decided to reform the security sector in order to reflect the revolutionary values of the monsoon revolution. The main objectives of the new security agenda for Bangladesh's interim government, as discussed by government officials in recent roundtables and expert analyses, focus on addressing critical security challenges while facilitating a smooth transition to democracy²⁵.

Comprehensive Security Sector Reform

The interim government aims to implement extensive reforms across the military, police, and intelligence services. This includes addressing issues of politicization within these institutions to enhance their accountability and effectiveness in maintaining national security.

Addressing Emerging Security Threats

There is a strong emphasis on recognizing and responding to new security challenges such as cyber threats, climate change impacts, and violent extremism. Experts advocate for the establishment of a national security strategy that incorporates these contemporary threats into Bangladesh's security framework.

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ The Daily Star, "The Interim Government's Reform Agenda Is Promising," The Daily Star, September 13, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/editorial/news/the-interim-governments-reform-agenda-promising-3701391>.

Strengthening National Security Coordination

The agenda calls for the creation of a full-time National Security Advisor position and a national security coordination secretariat empowered with subject matter experts. This structure aims to improve inter-agency cooperation and enhance the overall strategic response to security issues.

Engagement with Non-State Actors

The interim government is urged to develop policies for engaging with non-state actors, particularly concerning border security and regional stability, especially in light of the ongoing Rohingya crisis and relations with Myanmar.

Revitalizing Military Education and Training

There is a need to revamp military education and training programs to ensure that personnel are adequately prepared for modern security challenges. This includes aligning training with democratic principles and human rights standards.

Promoting Democratic Oversight

The agenda emphasizes the importance of revitalizing parliamentary oversight over defense and security operations. Establishing robust mechanisms for oversight is seen as essential to prevent past abuses and ensure that security forces operate transparently²⁶.

Public Engagement and Trust Building

Enhancing public trust in security institutions is critical. The government aims to engage communities in discussions about their security needs and concerns, fostering a more collaborative relationship between citizens and security providers²⁷.

²⁶ CAF Dowlah, "Bangladesh at a Crossroads: Can the Interim Government Steer the Nation Forward?," The Financial Express (The Financial Express, December 3, 2024), <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/bangladesh-at-a-crossroads-can-the-interim-government-steer-the-nation-forward>.

²⁷ *ibid*

Restoring Law and Order

Immediate actions are prioritized to restore law and order amidst ongoing political unrest. This includes engaging stakeholders across various sectors to address grievances and build a more stable environment conducive to reform²⁸.

Conclusion

The discussion highlights that reforming the security sector is not merely about enhancing operational efficiency but also about promoting the rule of law, reducing corruption, and strengthening public trust. By addressing critical challenges such as political influence, emerging security threats, and the inclusion of marginalized groups, SSR creates a foundation for sustainable development and societal stability. Bangladesh's security landscape underscores the urgency of implementing comprehensive reforms to tackle issues like the politicization of institutions, cyber threats, and the refugee crisis. The introduction of robust mechanisms, such as a National Security Council and enhanced public engagement strategies, could pave the way for a more resilient and responsive security framework. Ultimately, SSR offers a pathway toward not just a secure state but also a thriving democratic society, where citizens feel protected, rights are upheld, and governance reflects accountability and transparency. For Bangladesh, embracing these reforms can significantly contribute to building a secure environment conducive to development and lasting peace.

²⁸ Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi, "Is Bangladesh's Interim Government State Building by Stealth?," *The Diplomat*.com (The Diplomat, October 14, 2024), <https://thedi diplomat.com/2024/10/is-bangladeshs-interim-government-state-building-by-stealth/>.