

Campaigning for clean candidates



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AT a dialogue on "National election 2007: Civil society initiative for accountable development efforts" organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Prothom Alo and The Daily Star on March 20 in the capital, a 24-member citizens' group headed by the CPD chairman professor Rehman Sobhan was formed with a view to developing a mid-term vision of progress for Bangladesh and launching a campaign for clean, honest and competent candidates for the forthcoming general elections.

The move has, more or less, been welcomed by the conscientious people, prominent politicians and the media. Barrister Moudud Ahmed of BNP and Suranjit Sen Gupta of AL have welcomed the move "conveniently forgetting that

BARE FACTS

The main objective of the campaign is to force the political parties to nominate honest and competent persons as candidates in the general elections. The political parties, whether large or small, can demonstrate their support for the campaign of the citizens' group by 'dumping their unclean candidates in favour of cleaner candidates.'

this move is testimony to their failures as politicians."

Welcoming the move, The Bangladesh Observer in its editorial on March 22 wrote: "It is highly satisfying to see that the ubiquitous civil society has at last taken an initiative to bring its isolated members under an umbrella. It formed on Monday a citizens' group under the title 'Citizens' Group for a Vision for Bangladesh'. The objective of forming such a group is clear from the title."

The Daily Star in its editorial on March 23 wrote: "We welcome the floating of a Citizens' Group with eminent civil society members with a view to developing a mid-term vision of progress for Bangladesh and launching a campaign for clean, honest and competent candidates in the next general election which are intertwined agenda..... The group is to put pressure on major political parties to field good candidates in the first place. Moreover, it will try and raise the consciousness

level of people so that they demand to know all about the candidates and no undesirable elements can sneak through the system."

Prothom Alo in its editorial on March 23 wrote that the issue that figured most in the dialogue on March 20 was that for freeing the country from maladministration; there was the need to nominate honest, competent and self-righteous candidates and create awareness among people for electing such candidates for forming a really accountable government.

Grameen Bank-famed professor Muhammad Yunus, also a member of the citizens' group, presented his formula for nominating honest candidates for the general election. The formula includes, among others, (i) launching immediately a citizens' movement in the name of "honest candidate movement" or "competent candidate movement"; (ii) forming a governing committee and an executive body for conducting day-to-day affairs of the move-

ment; (iii) forming a central nomination committee which will declare in one month a panel of candidates (of the movement) comprising at least one man and one woman for every constituency; (iv) increasing gradually the number of candidates and making their autobiography public; (v) campaigning by the candidates for ensuring the defeat of the corrupt and incompetent candidates of the political parties, rather than campaigning for themselves; (vi) withdrawing their candidature if political parties nominate competent candidates; and (vii) contesting in the election in a constituency where the political parties fail to nominate competent candidates by only one candidate (of the movement) who gets symbol from the Election Commission (EC) and the other three candidates initially nominated (by the movement) will support him/her.

Attaining success will not be an easy task. In other words, the citizens' group will have to work with

certain limitations.

First, we have a divided civil society. The political parties, particularly the major political parties, take the advantage of this division. It is said that one of the main casualties of Bangladeshi politics is the faith that the people had in the intellectuals and the leaders of the civil society. The belligerence of the two major political parties -- the BNP and the AL -- has spilled over to all sections of our society whereby consensus on any issue, however important, is almost impossible.

Second, the names that feature in the citizens' group have intellectual height and social esteem, but they lack political experience and nuisance value of the corrupt politicians.

Third, how will the citizens' movement identify the dishonest and incompetent candidates of the political parties? Even the state machinery does not maintain database on the political parties and the politicians. This is primarily because of the fact that the existing law has not made it mandatory for the political parties to get registered with the EC. Mandatory registration could compel the political parties to submit various information and documents including annual audited reports showing their incomes and expenditure. Even the BNP and the AL have not got registered with the EC to

avoid accountability.

Fourth, the members of the civil society have little or no interaction with the majority voters living in the rural areas. Voters in the rural areas, excepting a few, have little or no access to the print or electronic media. This is the case also with the urban poor and ultra-poor. More importantly, they are not conscious of the value of their votes. Many of them do not bother to sell their votes for petty gains in cash or kind. So, how the civil society in general and the members of the citizens' group in particular will reach them?

Fifth, by nominating its symbolic candidates the citizens' movement will pressurise the political parties to nominate clean and competent candidates for general election. If the political parties fail to nominate such candidates, the citizens' movement will nominate its own candidates in the constituencies concerned. The successful operation of the citizens' movement will require an elaborate organisational structure and a huge fund. How will the fund be arranged? Will the citizens' group appeal to the people for donating money to the fund? There is a risk involved in this. If the people do not respond to the appeal, this may mean that they have no support for the movement.

Last but not the least, it is not

unlikely that those who have lost faith on the major political parties may also not be interested to join the citizens' movement. So, involvement of those frustrated people in the movement will be a challenging task.

Given the will, it may not be difficult to find answers to these questions. In order to carry forward the campaign, the citizens' group should develop a comprehensive programme which, *inter alia*, may address the following areas.

- A united civil society once again commanding respect of the nation can render invaluable service to the campaign for electing honest and competent candidates for general election.

- Committee should be formed at the zila level. The zila committee shall be responsible for implementation of the zila programme within the overall policy of the national committee.

- An awareness building campaign for electing honest and competent candidates for the general election has to be initiated immediately. The media can play a very important role in generating such an awareness raising campaign. All possible steps have to be taken to reach the rural voters.

- Voters should be given the understanding that they can organise campaign for clean

candidates better than any body else as they have the best knowledge of honest and competent candidates in their constituencies.

- The citizens' group will have to pressurise the EC to ensure that the directives of the High Court regarding furnishing certain vital information by the candidates along with their nomination forms are complied with.

To conclude, the main objective of the campaign is to force the political parties to nominate honest and competent persons as candidates in the general elections. The political parties, whether large or small, can demonstrate their support for the campaign of the citizens' group by 'dumping their unclean candidates in favour of cleaner candidates.' This will help free general elections from the influence of black money and muscle power and take parliamentary democracy a deep root in the country.

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Palestine: After Hamas

In any case, the hawks are found to be more likely to make a lasting peace than the doves in any conflicting situation. Sharon and Olmert's Kadima Party on one side and Hamas on other are more likely to make peace, than if both governments were headed by the doves, always on back foot to deflect criticism for being soft on the other side. Both the Israelis and Palestinians are fed up of dying in violence. There is no way to peace in the Middle East any longer; peace is the way.

SAAD S. KHAN

THE Hamas victory in the Palestinian legislative assembly elections must not have come as a surprise since it was the fifth straight win of an Islamist party in the Middle East in almost as many months. The four previous wins were when the Iranians elected Ahmadinejad, the Hizbollah made a good showing in Lebanon, the Islamic Brotherhood routed the ruling NDP in Egypt in the one third or so of the Egyptian parliamentary seats that it was permitted to contest, and the Iraqis returned Sunni and Shia Islamist parties wiping out even traces of secularist politics where Ahmad Chalabi's alliance that could not secure a single seat in 275-member Iraq National Assembly.

Palestinians have a longer democratic tradition than that in many of the countries of the region. Even when the Palestinian government and parliament functioned in exile, and the latter used to have its sessions in Cairo or Tunis, the Israeli press used to express surprise and tacit admiration at the level of openness and the democratic debate in the Palestinian legislature, especially when compared with the Knesset sitting in Tel Aviv. The Palestinian people, with the democratic tradition they have, thus could not be bullied into voting for the ruling Al-Fatah which has trailed behind with 45 seats to 74 for Hamas, in the enlarged 132-seat legislature. And within the Fatah tally, less than half of MP's owe loyalty to

the Marwan Barghouti's Islamist faction, making the defeat of secularists more decisive.

The staple explanations for Hamas victory suggest that it is a vote against America and Israel, than one for Hamas, and that the divisions and factional rivalries in Al Fatah had benefited Hamas. The wave of support towards Islamists parties in the whole region and their victories one after the other may also have influenced the minds of the voters. And just like in many other Middle Eastern autocracies, where Mosque is the only functioning civil society institution that the State cannot ban, political networking and social activism starts from, and mushrooms across, the mosques. Thus targeting secular opposition politicians, persecuting journalists and torturing human rights activists, destroys any meaningful opposition to tyranny except the one channelled through religious forums and religious parties. This has happened in the whole Middle East and in Palestine as well, where Hamas was as much a reaction to Israel's military policies as to Yasser Arafat's intolerance to dissent.

The factors leading to Hamas victory are much deep rooted than what meets the eye. The fact Palestine was on the brink of becoming a failed state within weeks of the Israeli pullout from Gaza was as glaring as a mid-day sun. The Palestinian state apparatus is all but collapsed in Gaza, guns and violence rules the streets, and many people who had jubilated on Israeli withdrawal last year, now nostalgically remember the order

on the streets that was at least there. Like all national elections elsewhere in the world, the Palestinian one was to be won or lost on domestic issues -- relations with Israel, including the much trumpeted peace roadmap, which was strictly speaking a foreign policy issue for the electorate, concerned only 15 percent of them. Hamas won because Fatah failed to deliver -- not peace with Israel -- but water, sanitation, education, and law and order.

Hamas capitalized on its own "martyrs" like Sheikh Yassin and Aziz Rantissi to sell itself among the people as a party that can give sacrifices in blood for them. It was a stark contrast with the proverbially corrupt image of ruling Fatah Ministers and civil servants, routinely caricatured for their alleged fondness of the Beirut nightclubs. It was the same level of sympathy wave that Fatah had enjoyed when it lost its leaders such as Khalil el Wazir in the late 1980's. Hamas also fell victim of the folly of democracy where you think you are losing, so you make wild promises to discredit the ruling party and strengthen your share as opposition, and end up being victorious, hostage to own rhetoric and promises, and not knowing what to do. This is the dilemma that will haunt Hamas as long as it rules.

Be that as it may, Hamas has been elected by the people and the world community has to accept and respect the choice of the people whether anyone likes it or not. It is worth pointing out that the impact of the Hamas victory must not be overstated. Most of the Palestinian institu-

tions are controlled by secular forces. The highest decision making body, the 669-member Palestinian National Council, of which the 132 legislators are also members, is dominated by non-Islamists. And so are the civil service, the army and security forces dominated by Al Fatah. Most important of all, the Presidency is with a very moderate, pragmatic and seasoned politician Mahmood Abbas. And it is his office that controls the security forces and the media. And last, but not the least, who controls the purse controls everything, and Palestinian government does not control its own purse. Of its \$1.9 billion annual budget, it is dependant on the European aid for \$360 million and another \$700 million are collected on its behalf by Israeli customs. Without the cash inflow, the government cannot even defray the salaries of its employees for a single month. All this would have a taming influence on the Hamas, even if the incumbency factor alone were not enough.

In any case, the hawks are found to be more likely to make a lasting peace than the doves in any conflicting situation. Sharon and Olmert's Kadima Party on one side and Hamas on other are more likely to make peace, than if both governments were headed by the doves, always on back foot to deflect criticism for being soft on the other side. Both the Israelis and Palestinians are fed up of dying in violence. There is no way to peace in the Middle East any longer; peace is the way. No bigger proof, in concrete, of this could be than the Separation Wall Israel is building. Moral and legal criticism notwithstanding, the wall is the biggest testimony that Israel does not want to sacrifice any more men or money to retain the Palestinian majority areas. Palestinians and Israelis would do well to stop decrying each other's election results. It is a

necessity, rather than mere expediency, to recognize and respect the voters' mandates and to get down to talk with each other's elected governments. There is no short cut to the resolution of the impediments to the peace roadmap.

Western media may continue speculation to its heart's content on whether Sunnis or Shiites might have blown up the revered shrine of Imam Hassan Askari, venerated by both the sects; in Iraq and elsewhere a mere suggestion that Israeli intelligence service Mossad might not have done it shall remain a joke. On such like perceptions that translate itself into the region-wide electoral victories for the Islamists, the US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, is reported to have remarked that the Islamic extremists have outcommunicated the United States in reaching and influencing the people of the region. Well, Al Qaeda and all the organizations put together cannot match a fraction of the resources that the US has. One would be tempted to believe that it was the United States that acted as the PR and advertising agency for the terrorists. Commending tyrant like Hosni Mubarak, condoning his repressive rule and dummy electoral exercises, refusing to accept genuine election results in Palestine, and torturing people in Guantanamo Bay, where the hunger strike has entered the thirteenth week now, US could not have better conveyed the Al-Qaeda message among the masses.

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Preparing for bird flu in Bangladesh

As the Bangladeshi public knows very little about this vitally important document, I will attempt to summarize it and to recommend some urgent actions necessary to its implementation. The goal of the Plan is clear: "to minimize the risk of human pandemic influenza." The Plan aims to stop the spread of the bird flu virus (by culling or vaccinating poultry in infected areas) before it has a chance to mutate into a new human flu virus.

KAZI ZAHIN HASAN

SINCE 2003, bird flu has killed 105 people around the world. Bird flu is caused by the H5N1 avian influenza virus, which primarily infects poultry and wild birds. It does not easily infect humans, though humans can be infected through contact with sick birds (and particularly through contact with their droppings/faeces).

In comparison to malaria and diarrhoeal diseases (which together kill over 3 million people every year), bird flu has killed very few people. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) has warned that the H5N1 virus may mutate into a new human flu virus (against which humans have no immunity). The emergence of such a virus would cause a flu pandemic, and kill millions of people around the world. So bird flu needs to be taken seriously.

On 23 March, the Daily Star reported that the UN Resident Coordinator, Louis-Georges Arsenault, has urged the Government of Bangladesh to approve and implement the National Avian Influenza and Human Pandemic Influenza Preparedness & Response Plan (hereafter referred to as "the Plan") which has been prepared with WHO and FAO assistance.

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The goal of the Plan is clear: "to minimize the risk of human pandemic influenza." The Plan aims to stop the spread of the bird flu virus (by culling or vaccinating poultry in infected areas) before it has a chance to mutate into a new human flu virus.

The Plan primarily involves the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Three "periods" of danger to the public are anticipated, each with a different government response.

1. Pre-Pandemic Period: Bird flu primarily infects birds; it will first be seen on poultry farms, backyard poultry, and wild birds before there are any human cases. The Pre-Pandemic period is the period during which bird flu is diagnosed in poultry or wild birds but not in humans. During this period, people own backyard poultry or work with live poultry will be at risk.

During the Pre-Pandemic Period, the Plan focuses on supporting the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock in stopping the spread of the H5N1 virus among the poultry population. The Directorate of Livestock Services (DLS) will collect samples from farms with high mortality and will have them tested. If testing confirms bird flu in poultry, the DLS will attempt to "stamp out" the outbreak by culling all poultry (including healthy birds) within a wide radius of the infected farm. "Appropriate compensation" will be paid to farmers whose poultry are culled. If outbreaks in poultry continue even after successive attempts at stamping out, the Government will authorize vaccination of poultry to limit the spread of the H5N1 flu virus. During this period the Plan also supports the institutions of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in the diagnosis of human cases of bird flu.

2. Pandemic Alert Period: Some humans will eventually become infected through contact with sick poultry. However, the number of human cases will be very few, as the virus cannot easily spread from one human to another. The Pandemic Alert Period starts when the first human infections have been diagnosed. During this period, people who

own backyard poultry or work with live poultry will still be the ones at risk.

During the Pandemic Alert Period, the Plan focuses on supporting the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in diagnosis and treatment of influenza type H5N1 among humans. Specific measures include improving diagnostic facilities, stockpiling antiviral drugs to treat human patients, and stocking "personal protective equipment" so that health care personnel attending patients can be protected from infection.

3. Pandemic Period: In the worst-case scenario, the H5N1 bird flu virus could mutate into a new human flu virus. That would be the beginning of a pandemic. Large numbers of human cases would be diagnosed as the virus would spread between humans (not only from infected poultry to humans). Once the pandemic begins, everyone will be at risk, but most particularly health care personnel and family members of infected people.

During this period, the Plan focuses on minimizing the effect of the pandemic. In fact, there will be little to do other than ensuring the availability of personal protective equipment for health-care workers and ensuring the availability of antiviral drugs for treatment.

It is important to understand that the Pandemic Period is not yet inevitable. The primary goal of the Plan is to stop the spread of the H5N1 virus (by stamping out or by vaccinating) before a pandemic starts.

In order for the Plan to be implemented, the following measures need to be taken immediately.

a. Communication with Poultry Farmers: The Plan assumes that poultry farmers will report mortality to government veterinarians (the DLS). The DLS will test samples from sick birds and cull all poultry in areas infected by the H5N1 virus.

Farmers will only report possible flu outbreaks to the DLS if they are promised compensation for birds which are culled. The Plan acknowledges that "an appropriate compensation package" should be paid to farmers. However, until the details of that package are decided by the DLS and communicated to poultry farmers, it will be impossible to implement the Plan.

Farmers must be informed about the Plan and must be promised fair compensation in return for their cooperation. Otherwise the Plan will fail. This communication effort should start immediately.

b. Increase budget for compensation of farmers: The budget for compensation of farmers in the Plan is only US\$300,000 (three lakh dollars) each year. The experience of other countries which have undertaken stamping-out programs illustrates that a more reasonable budget for compensation would be US\$ 1 million each year.

Conclusion: The Plan is generally well-thought out. However, to stop bird flu, farmers must be reassured that they can expect compensation in exchange for cooperating with the Plan. More funds also need to be allocated for compensating farmers whose flocks are culled.

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