

Start dialogue with farmers

HARUN UR RASHID

LET me first commend for the initiative taken by Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Prothom Alo and The Daily Star inviting inputs from individuals from all walks of life about an accountable development process in the context of the forthcoming election in the country.

Development is not simply economic growth. Development aims at improving quality of life of all people in the country. Measures of development can be judged by asking three simple questions:

What has been happening to poverty?

What has been happening to unemployment?

What has been happening to inequality?

There could be robust economic growth in a country but national income may not be equitably distributed. For instance during 1964-74 the GNP registered a rise of 10 percent in Brazil but income of the poorest section declined from 10 to 8 percent per cent. Rise in per

capita income in Brazil did not mean any improvement in the conditions of poor people.

Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen believes that end product of development is freedom rather than bare economic statistics that are currently being used for economic growth. In his book "Development As Freedom" (1999) he provided a new yardstick of measuring development. Development, according to Sen, is removal of "major sources of unfreedom: poverty and tyranny, social deprivation, neglect of public facilities and intolerance or inactivity in repressive states."

The term "accountable development process" would mean policies and programmes of development including the PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers) must represent not only the output of consultations among the government agencies but should also represent views of various segments of society, extending from private think tanks, experts to business leaders, farmers, labour unions, NGOs and a widest possible variety of stakeholders.

Our hardworking farmers have reportedly given 12 bumper crops, through their innovative and adaptive farming mechanism. Our private business entrepreneurs have on average maintained 15 percent export growth per year through their imaginative endeavours. Our social entrepreneurs have focused successfully their activities on poverty reduction and mass literacy in rural areas.

Till today, development policies and programmes have seldom been discussed, debated argued and firmed up in an organized and systematic way in the Parliament or in the forum of political parties or of civil society. Monitoring and evaluating progress in the implementation of development programmes is ordinarily taken by donors but not by our stakeholders.

The role of women in domestic economy and their views on development is still being ignored. Many female activists criticized the male bias in development policies. The reason is believed to be that process in development has tended to consolidate male-based societal

values since women have inadequate access to resources.

Let the civil society begin a consultation process or dialogue with representatives of successful farmers (men and women) of 64 districts as to know what they want and where are the defects in the current development strategy. The development strategy must begin from the bottom and not from the top. Majority of rural people may not be the product of universities but they are product of years of experience and their views are important for development process.

The process of wide consultations countrywide with all segments of society and stakeholders is expected to establish an accountable development process. There lies an important element in an accountable development process.

Socio-economic development is inter-linked with political development and unless there is parallel development in the two strains, "real" development is not likely to take place.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Needed awareness about citizen's bill of rights

DR. IFFATH A. SHARIF

THE enormity and complexity of Bangladesh's economy and society highlight the need for addressing a number of systemic problems, one of which is the electoral process. That elections are held at national and local levels, even though flawed, is a positive feature of our political system. However, the current democratic process does not guarantee pro-poor outcomes. Divisiveness related to party politics is evident in almost all areas of society and the economy, which in turn has weakened a range of institutions (e.g. educational, civil society, business, cultural etc.) that are fundamental to the progression of any country. Reforms to our political process are extremely important, but also extremely diffi-

cult. I applaud therefore the joint CDP/Daily Star/Prothom Alo effort to initiate a process

whereby citizens are encouraged to vote for the candidate and not for the party in the upcoming elections. Such a public initiative helps to create momentum surrounding the advance of political accountability, and I hope that some concrete change will result from this effort.

However I feel that more fundamental to bringing about political accountability is to create a demand for it at a grassroots level, and publicly communicate this demand to our politicians. This would require three basic steps. First, we would have to create mass awareness on a "citizen's bill of rights" which would list the minimum level of public

service every citizen should be entitled to on a daily basis. Such a "bill of rights" would include the following: rights to earning a decent livelihood; rights to meaningful education and proper healthcare; rights to security of self and property; rights to basic infrastructure like clean water, uninterrupted power, reliable gas supply, access to telephones, good roads; rights to freedom of speech; rights to freedom of mobility in a world void of hantals; rights to freedom of association; and rights to a fair system where rules are the same for everybody. This list is only an example and by no means complete.

Second, we could conduct Gallop-type polls to score each and every candidate who run for a seat in the elections of 2007 on how well she or he had delivered on this "citizen's bill of

rights" in recent years or during the Awami League's rule during 1996-2001 (where applicable), and make these scores publicly available.

Third, in the run up to the elections of 2007, similar Gallop-type polls could be conducted to keep track of how each candidate is doing in terms of the level of voter support. Allowing for such systematic information flow between the public and our politicians will perhaps sow the seeds of a demand-driven political process where the politicians contest elections for the causes of their respective constituencies, and not for their own personal ones.

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Wanted 'fit' candidate for 'fair' election

M. INAMUL HAQUE

BANGLADESH had three Parliamentary Elections under Caretaker Government in 1991, 1996 and 2001. Those elections are now a model to the whole world, and many people in other countries are demanding such type of elections. But my question is, how much fair were those elections? Those elections could not stop the corrupt, land grabbers, loan defaulters and other criminals to take part and dominate the whole process. As a matter of fact, the election activities have become the playground of those elements, because of their black money and muscle power. The good and capable persons who can run the country quite well stay away with their hands crossed for want of such might and money.

The debate started recently by the CPD, Prothom Alo and The Daily Star proposes to launch a movement all over the country in the style of 'Joggya Prarthi Andolon'. A 'Joggya Prarthi' meaning appropriate candidate may also mean 'capable' or 'and fit' or 'and qualified' candidate. To elect a peoples' representative with those qualities altogether, the proposal sounds if

not ideal, definitely very good. But my question is, how shall you judge the person having those qualities? You cannot do it by interviewing, or from CV, or from any sort of application format. Because, it is just impossible to find a person who did not get benefit from the culture of corruption we practiced since the birth of our nation. I want to solve this question by positive use of laws, not sparing anybody on favour.

But my other questions remain on the board. Where does a caretaker government stand when black money dominates the whole electioneering? Who shall guarantee the fairness of the government elected thereby during its long tenure? What will happen to the local government elections, when the caretaker government will be absent? Nowadays, a candidate for the parliamentary seat spends more than crore taka on electioneering. Once a candidate is declared elected, he and his promoters immediately set out to regain the money spent. Some students and labour leaders also contest in the parliamentary elections. Where from do they get money? An honest man in this country shall never dare to contest elections in the prevailing situation. Can we not make the

system approachable to every man and hold fair election in the real sense?

I want to propose the electoral college system for a fair election in this country. The points of my proposal are given below. The entire election procedure shall stand upon a three-step voting system.

1. First, people shall elect 1,00,000 'Jana Protinidhi' in the range 500 to 1000 voters per seat.

2. The Jana Protinidhi candidates shall seek votes on party tickets or independently. As soon as this election is complete it shall be clear which party is going to form the government.

3. In the second step, the Jana Protinidhis shall elect 10,000 Union/Ward Chairmen, 1,000 Thana Chairmen and 200 Members of the Parliament (MP).

4. In the third step, the Thana Chairmen shall elect District Chairmen, and the MPs shall elect the Speaker and the President.

5. All the elections shall be held under the same Caretaker Government, so that the winning party coming to power cannot influence the later elections.

6. The Jana Protinidhis, Members of the Parliament or any political person shall not be allowed to take a seat in the management board of a government institution.

7. Any one must be a Jana Protinidhi in the first step to seek nomination to the higher posts. If a Protinidhi gets elected to a higher post he shall nominate a person for his vacant post.

8. A government servant can be elected as Jana Protinidhi. In that case he will work as independent member at any stage, and shall work on deputation.

9. The tenure of the Jana Protinidhis shall be maximum three years. A Jana Protinidhi shall lose his seat on floor crossing.

10. All the Jana Protinidhis in any post other than the President can be called back on no confidence vote once in a year.

11. Spending by the candidates on posters, leaflets, graffiti, shall be banned. The Election Commission shall be responsible for the publicity of the candidates.

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PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

Infrastructure development: Constructing bridge over the Dhaleswari.

Not only initiative but also responsibilities of civil society

MD ANWARUL KABIR

WE welcome the initiative taken by the civil society in connection with the forthcoming election. By supporting them CPD, Prothom Alo and The Daily Star are playing a historical role indeed!

In any democratic country free and fair election is a must to ensuring overall development. Unfortunately, in our country, till now we have failed to devise an effective and efficient electoral procedure. This is true that to ensure free and fair election we have introduced the concept of caretaker government which is unique in the world. Still there are many loopholes around. These, in turn, affect the outcomes of the election. Evidences suggest that most of the representatives we send to the parliament are dishonest, corrupt and less knowledgeable persons with little future vision. So,

our election system must be reengineered for its better performance. In this context, the following flaws of the present election system can be outlined:

1. The present election system keeps away the honest people from contesting. At present, for contesting the parliamentary election most of the candidates spend Taka 50 lac to 1 crore to influence the poor voters. Though election commission, prior to each election, fixes the maximum amount of money to be spent by a candidate but in reality this is only on paper. It may be noted that most of the honest persons are poor in terms of financial ability. Then how can an honest person dare to contest in the election? Again, the honest persons have no link with the musclemen. But in our election musclemen play a vital role for their godfather-candidate in the election.

2. There is no democratic prac-

tice within the internal structure of the major political parties. In most cases central leaders of party in autocratic ways nominate the local party candidates. In many cases, candidates buy the nomination from political parties. Due to lack of democratic practice within the party, honest and efficient people are not being promoted to their deserved positions.

3. The partisan role played by the government machinery are also observed in the election process of our country. In most cases returning officers, polling officers etc. either directly or indirectly work for some particular candidate(s). In many cases law-enforcing agency fails to show its impartial role. Moreover, till now we have no 'independent' election commission. In most cases election commissioners are loyal to some political parties. Then how is it possible on part of election commis-

sion to conduct a free and fair election?

4. Faulty voter list is one of the barriers to free and fair election. At present the apparently partisan election commission is intentionally trying to implement a fabricated voter list allegedly excluding the minority voters in the country. It has been also heard that the latest voter list has included the names of Rohingya refugee groups in hill tracts. Presumably this will have a serious consequence on the outcome of the next election.

No doubt, above problems have solutions. The civil society should come forward to provide the nation with appropriate solutions in this regard. Hopefully, the civil society will direct us to the right path to ensuring free and fair election.

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PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

Exercising adult franchise: Voters' queue at a polling booth.

A revolt in the arena of dirty politics

ABUL KALAM AZAD

THE announcement published in 'The Daily Star' exhilarated me to write something regarding "An accountable development process and the national election 2007". The need to elect "clean candidates" is a very important issue in respect of our country which did not achieve tremendous success despite being free 35 years ago allegedly due to cunning and dishonest law makers who happen to be always busy in improving their lots neglecting the interest and betterment of the common people.

It should be mentioned here that the burning question has been raised in a meeting of civil society sponsored by CPD, Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, though in the meantime some acclaimed columnists have heaved the query touching the point of equity in case of CPD, for, to them, being an NGO, the CPD cannot involve itself in our politics rather it can provide a plan executing which the country would be benefited much socially and

economically. To this point, I would like to mention that wishing amelioration of the country's problem by NGOs should not be objected but the only point they should be remembered is that if they engage in our politics there would be a great possibility of losing their neutrality and then their role of improving the life of the masses would be disturbed.

However, now our suffering nation with the slur of being the most corrupt severely realises the necessity of electing honest candidates in the national election. There is a popular proverb that it is easy to say but difficult to do. There is no as well as must not be any question regarding the fact that the issue raised in the voice of the civil society is the most serious one upon which the future of the country largely depends.

In the past three national elections we have observed that the dishonest candidates spent even more than 5 crore taka violating the existing rule of expenditure set by the election commission that per-

mits to spend only 5 lakh taka per candidate for electioneering and ironically it is a very common phenomenon in respect of every political party. And after winning in the polls the law makers step forward aiming at compensating their expenses in the election and try to increase their profit like businessmen. The only difference between a businessman and a politician of our country, to me, is that there is a risk of losing something by a businessman while a politician is a profit gainer either sooner or later!

Our politicians very often air in the public meeting that they are practising of politics only for the interest of the general people and that they have nothing to gain and they are always ready to sacrifice even their lives for the land and so on! Despite that we are now one of the poorest and ill-fated nations in the world. What a pity for us!

Again, I come to the focal point. It is needless to mention that without electing 'clean candidate' we cannot expect a 'clean parliament' and a 'clean government' and without

having a 'clean government' it would be like building a castle in the air to have a prosperous and developed country expected by the common people for years and for which the freedom fighters laid down their lives. But where and how we will get 'clean' candidates when most of our politicians are supposed to be dishonest, unclear and corrupted? This is another very important question concerning the fact without solving which the agenda would be futile.

I personally thank the authority concerned for pushing such a burning issue ahead of the national election 2007 and at the same time I feel extremely frustrated realising the fact that in such a critical situation the think tanks shall not be able to present 'clean' candidates instead of those having little patriotic feeling in the core of their hearts. Despite that the attempt would be an excellent introduction and revolt in the arena of "dirty politics" and I conclude voicing with PB Shelly: "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"

Abul Kalam Azad is a teacher.

Let's feel the need to elect clean candidates

SS NASIM A CHOWDHURY

EXISTENCE of strong accountable development process in developing countries deters politicians to seek candidacy from any political party to gain/cling to power for meeting selfish end. For, such person after becoming a parliamentarian forgets his first and foremost duty to serve people's interest -- those who elected him/her -- and invariably seeks venues to get him involved in swindling development fund.

While our country has gone through democratic changes for fifteen years, successive governments have eroded accountable development process. Consequently, huge development fund siphoned away and landed into the hands of people who can comfortably afford to spend to confirm their candidature and buy

muscle power to snatch away victory from their opponents who can ill afford to match the like.

To create sustained and accountable development process developing countries need efficient, well informed, religious, (not fanatic/extremist), patriot, honest, learned, dedicated, democratic in other words "clean" parliamentarians. Unfortunately, though democracy has been uninterrupted in practice for fifteen years, our country has seen alarming decline in the number of "clean" people filling parliament seats.

Today political parties on one hand cannot lure/nominate "clean" candidates to represent them in their constituencies, and on the other hand if albeit found willing to nominate but tend to decline for they (clean candidates) cannot match the money and muscle their opponents can muster. The cumulative effect the country will have to

endure when such prospect becomes reality in every constituency is a nightmare.

Therefore, today the overriding question in people's mind: has their country gained in democratic practices for fifteen years or has lost it through ill gotten money that has been in circulation to destroy our nascent democracy.

Against the above backdrop of dangerous negative thinking, civil society has come into fore to make people aware that there is still time for people to make their contribution to bring goodness into the process by getting involved through closely participating in the political process without directly joining a party. Their involvement will pave the way for the law abiding "clean" members of the public now distancing from politics to come forward for making their due contribution to nation by getting involved in the political process.

Situation cannot be allowed to worsen further when general election is only a few months away.

To give people wake up call to resist corrupt and incompetent persons from entering into next parliament with whatever non-violent means they can, the initiative for floating citizens' group with eminent, honest, experienced, successful personalities like Dr. Yunus with his twelve-point formula and others cannot be better timely. Such group may be formed in other places too.

In past, influx of huge fund happened under the guise of development, now when corruption has sown its seeds it needs to be eradicated. Let's vow to work with whatever capacity we have to bring about the changes that nation longed for.

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