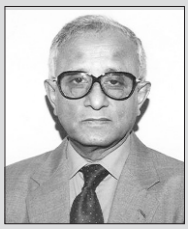


Civil society movement, the Citizens' Group, and the context



M. SYEDUZZAMAN

CONSIDERABLE curiosity, confusion, and speculations have emerged about the formation of a "Citizens' Group" on March 20 on the joint initiative of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the Prothom Alo, and the Daily Star.

Available literature indicates that the term "civil society" was perhaps first used by the great philosopher Hegel in the first half of the nineteenth century. By civil society, Hegel meant a set of institutions designed by the citizens to regulate their economic life and their private affairs. These institutions were meant to operate based on values and reasoning.

The idea was further elaborated by a famous Italian political and social thinker, Antonio Gramsci, in the early part of the twentieth century. Gramsci was the first thinker to make a distinction between civil society and political society. By civil society he meant a group of people who come together on the basis of voluntary and non-coercive affiliation to pursue certain institutions based on universal values. Schools, families, and trade unions, among others, were mentioned by Gramsci as civil society institutions.

If he were alive today, he would have perhaps included NGOs, think tanks, environmental groups, etc as civil society institutions. The political society, as defined by

Our political process has failed to establish a consensus based economic development policy cutting across party lines, a truly bipartisan, or better still, a national policy. That is why the development process while delivering a reasonable growth rate, has been unable to deliver a fair and equitable economic order in our society, has failed to meet the needs of the major section of our people and to unlock their potential based on a participatory process. A common national approach, verging on a unified approach on development policy is absolutely essential.

Gramsci, pursues power and domination of state institutions like the bureaucracy, police, armed forces, and also domination of economic institutions. Political society in a country pursues its objectives based on prevailing laws and the Constitution of the country.

The "Citizens' Group" formed under the joint sponsorship of the CPD, the Daily Star and the Prothom Alo represents a wide spectrum of interests and concerns, not necessarily identical or uniform. Otherwise it will look like another political group or party. The members of the group have come together and agreed to associate themselves voluntarily bringing varieties, and it is, thus, a civil society group.

Politics in any country should be guided by the Constitution and the prevailing laws, but it is important to recognize that a Constitution or laws cannot be cast in stone. These have to evolve on the basis of the evolving needs of the society and evolving values. Otherwise society cannot progress and move forward. The international community today considers adoption of the Universal Human Rights declaration of the United Nations a must for all nations. As we can see, it will not be easy for every country to reach this goal within any given timeframe. Many countries have gone through phases of dictatorship and remain under dictatorship

(military or otherwise) even today. Historically, it has never been easy to establish basic human rights in most societies, even in advanced societies. An important human right, gender equality, is now universally accepted, and has been established in a large number of countries. But it was not guaranteed or accepted even in advanced societies like the United Kingdom, France and the United States, as late as the first two decades of the twentieth century! The reason? Laws of the lands prohibited voting rights of women! So laws had to be changed and this was done mostly by civil society movements, led by the suffragettes.

Our own Constitution has been amended, some would say tempered with, on many occasions, through measures not based on consideration of human rights or values. Debate on these is an ongoing phenomenon in the civil and political societies. Some of the amendments undermined democratic values and principles, others were made by dictates of martial law authorities, some are perceived to have undermined the welfare concept by opting for a market-based economy, and some have definitely undermined the concept of inclusiveness of all religious groups of our society. Needless to say that while some of the amendments have been reversed, others need serious

review, and new ones should definitely be in view in the light of the evolving political, social and economic developments.

Our political process has two very glaring deficiencies: lack of inclusiveness, and lack of a national consensus on our relationship with the rest of the world. The "minority" groups of all religious denominations have not found or been given their due place in our political process. Healthy politics is not possible, I repeat, not possible, without inclusiveness.

The political process and the economic development process are intimately linked in our society. The Citizens' Group would like to emphasize, I believe, without exception, the need for the political process to be based on ethics, honesty and transparency, or in other words, the need for restoring healthy politics. This is the most important precondition for the desired development process and economic growth, and the Citizens' Group will highlight this repeatedly.

Our political process has failed to establish a consensus based economic development policy cutting across party lines, a truly bipartisan, or better still, a national policy. That is why the development process while delivering a reasonable growth rate, has been unable to deliver a fair and equitable economic order in our society, has failed to meet the needs of the

major section of our people and to unlock their potential based on a participatory process. A common national approach, verging on a unified approach on development policy is absolutely essential. This should be open to dialogue with all sections of the civil society, business community, professionals, as well as the political parties.

The Citizens' Group will organize activities to make the citizens aware of their constitutional rights - political and economic. The Group will encourage citizens to participate in movements for taking the development process forward for economic growth and reduction of poverty, ensuring human dignity and human rights as enshrined in our Constitution. It will work to make the society conscious about the need for an "Accountable Development Process." With this objective the Citizens' Group will prepare a social and economic agenda, which has been called a "Vision Paper" by the sponsors of the Group. The vision paper is expected to articulate a set of objectives and strategies about our medium term social and economic goals up to 2020. All sections of the society will be engaged in a dialogue process to bring out a consensus on the goals of the vision paper.

This initiative for mobilizing the civil society to work for an "accountable development process" is in the context of the national elections, 2007. The Group will organize activities and dialogues to bring together the views and to establish a consensus on the major development issues facing the nation. This is not a new thing. The CPD took a similar initiative before the elections of 2001 to seek the advice of the civil society on different development issues. Reports and recommendations were prepared on sixteen issues by Task Forces organized by bringing together experts from the

civil society. In 2003 a review was undertaken by expert groups drawn from the civil society to evaluate how many and how much of the recommendations were followed or implemented by the government. The current initiative focusing on preparation of a "Vision Paper" for Bangladesh's economic development up to 2020 envisages a similar process of Task Forces and Dialogues. The process is expected to make significant contribution in identifying and seeking acceptable solutions to many of our national problems. The political parties will be under pressure to reflect many of these in their election manifestoes.

Societies have to be run on the basis of rule of law, and values and ethics should be the basis of all laws in any society. This is why it is important to elect the right people as our legislators who will enact laws and oversee the development process. Prof Yunus, a member of the Group, has elaborated his ideas on electing the right people, and has given detailed guidelines which voters may consider in the context of the coming general elections. The detailed mechanism described by Prof Yunus may or may not be possible in all constituencies. But it captures the basic objective of the Citizens' Group to ensure that all eligible voters are free to cast their votes for the best candidate of their choice, and that their votes have to be counted. Civil society groups all over the country will be encouraged to demand a credible election where all eligible voters can vote and have their votes counted. Such groups will be encouraged to participate actively in "clean candidates campaign" in their respective constituencies.

In the next step, the citizens' movement will charge the politicians, elected members of the Parliament, and the government, with implementation of the economic and social agenda included

in their election manifestoes. The civil society will be encouraged to exercise constant vigilance for ensuring good governance and an accountable development process. The objective will be empowerment of the people to demand an accountable development process based on equity, justice and transparency. The Citizens' Group envisages organizing and providing support to dialogues, dissemination of information on citizens' rights, and on "clean candidate campaign" at different levels within the country.

Examination of the election manifestoes of the political parties in 1991, 1996 and 2001, will show how successive governments have completely ignored their promises for good governance, reduction of corruption, strengthening of the administration, separation of the Judiciary from the Executive, appointment of Ombudsman, setting up of a Human Rights Commission, independence of the public media, setting up of a strong and effective local government system, etc - let alone fulfillment of promises on improvement of the infrastructure, energy and gas sectors, improvement in the quality of primary education and basic health services. Instead of taking meaningful initiatives, on many of the issues the governments have only reacted to external pressure from time to time, to get foreign aid, or worse still, gone through the motion of reacting.

I would like to illustrate one thing on which we need a national consensus: the issue of foreign aid and foreign private investment. We should realize that aid is given by bilateral and multilateral donors to the people of Bangladesh, not to the government of the day. It is, therefore, incorrect for political parties to lobby with donors, as has been done on some occasions in the past, to stop giving aid to a

particular regime by mounting protests at home and abroad. The level of public investment as share of GDP is shrinking, and we need foreign assistance to supplement our national savings to raise the level of investment, particularly public investment, for development of infrastructure of all kinds and expansion of the social sectors. The important thing to decide, therefore, is what type of aid we should accept and on what conditionalities. Conditionalities have multiplied over the years because of our growing inability to implement agreed programs and projects and growth of corruption in the public sector. Foreign aid and private investment which help to promote basic facilities and growth, should not be rejected outright because conditionalities are politically "uncomfortable" to a particular regime or government; which in many cases means discomfort in not being able to exercise a free hand in procurement, in allocating public resources, and in reforming institutions which hurt political power. Ironically, successive governments have put "politics in the command" on the plea of "interest of the people" when conditionalities were uncomfortable for them. This is dishonest politics. What is needed is to build up capability within the administration and the bureaucracy, to professionally examine every offer of foreign aid and investment, and to negotiate them with the donors effectively. Only those should be accepted which are in the interest of the nation and of the people, not to be determined on the consideration of comfort or discomfort of political parties running the government. I believe this position will be highlighted in the Vision Paper.

M. Syeduzzaman is a former Finance Minister.

Sushil Samaj fights back!

Make no mistake, if there was ever a Chinese new year called "year to make it happen," this year would be the one for Bangladesh. This election will decide which direction we go in the coming years. So why not do our bit in this? Let's write, let's participate in the discussions and help the organizers come up with the list of candidates who genuinely portray the wishes of the constituency from both the parties. The best of us have spoken and taken a stand, now it is time for the rest of us to engage and make a difference. I promise I will do my part. Will you?

ASIF SALEH

IN the recently held, widely talked about debate organized by BBC, the first question that was thrown at the politicians was a revealing one. New Age Deputy Editor Almer Khan asked if it was due to the failure of the politicians that civil society is taking on more and more responsibilities in the political arena.

The sad reality of Bangladeshi politics today is that the answer to that question won't be debated that much. The recently concluded BBC survey showed that a startling 83% of the population think that the politicians do not represent their views.

Naturally, the void has to be filled, and in response, civil society, otherwise known as the "sushil samaj" in Bangla, has taken the first organized step in a long time to start an organized movement/dialogue to come up with a list of real candidates from the grassroots.

In my opinion, they already pondered on this far too long. But the hardest part of breaking this inertia has become possible finally. In today's Bangladesh, politics has become equivalent to mud, greed, and power. The civil society's involvement, hopefully, will bring it back up a notch to the level where it should be - at the level of talking policies and of talking about the real people.

The role of this current movement is to campaign to force the parties to

make a conscious decision on picking the best candidate for the job rather than picking a candidate by the strength of his muscle and wallet power.

This is a fantastic issue to rally on for the people. But herein lies the biggest challenge for this movement - how to talk to our people in a language they understand and inspire them to get involved in this process. The success of this movement will lie on how the general population responds and gets involved. The civil society leaders need to make them believe that each and every one of us can make a difference in the system.

Over the past 15 years of democracy, more than the politicians' incompetence, what troubled me is the indifference among the countrymen about the state of the nation. There is a proverbial Bangla phrase: "shob jaye" which means anything goes. That's the saying we just became too used to hearing. Nothing moved us to shame, nothing outraged us anymore to the level of taking a stand that enough is enough. The mentality became such that everything was fine as long as you let one live in peace. Sooner or later, the surroundings around us will come and catch us off guard, if not already. At that time we will not have any one to blame if we didn't do our bit to sufficiently take a stand in changing the status quo.

This phenomenon of not getting

engaged in issues that affects one's self is not uncommon for the rest of the world. People just don't hold the politicians accountable for any of their misfortune and vote for the same candidates over and over again.

In the US, the majority don't think the political decisions at the Congress affect their day to day life. But at least real issues are debated there - at least most of the time. Here in Bangladesh, however, we don't have the "luxury" of seeing policy debates in parliament. Although, we see the effect of political inertia hit us every single day in our day to day lives, we have just taken it as a fact of life that this is to be our fate.

But perhaps things are changing? For example, the lack of foresight and initiative and political corruption is responsible for our power sector to be in a sorry state. The authorities had to take police protection to save themselves from the wrath of the affected farmers. Perhaps in a sign of things to come, finally at least some of us are realizing that enough is enough. I say let's not wait till our backs hit the wall. Let's start now.

So where do we start? Does this initiative of electing good candidates solve all our problems? Of course not! But in a rudderless ship named Bangladesh, suddenly we have found a group of good people coming together for a cause that can be the first step towards proper and

stable political culture that is of utmost need.

The debate on BBC showed where our political dialogs could be - beyond rhetoric and powered with more substance. Unfortunately in that debate, minister Najmul Huda was no match against the eloquent SOAS-educated Saber Hossain Chowdhury. But the frequent disparaging laughter and claps from the politically aware audience showed that a good section of Bangladesh, the youth, has gained the maturity to cut through the rhetoric and appreciate real substance when they see it.

At the end of the debate, Saber said that if the political parties do not listen to the people, then they will slowly get extinct like the dinosaurs. For me, this realization from a Bangladeshi politician was revelation enough to make me believe that if we can start the movement to elect good candidates who truly listen to the people, not only the parties themselves will benefit, it will change the face of Bangladesh.

Make no mistake, if there was ever a Chinese new year called "year to make it happen," this year would be the one for Bangladesh. This election will decide which direction we go in the coming years. So why not do our bit in this?

Let's write, let's participate in the discussions and help the organizers come up with the list of candidates who genuinely portray the wishes of the constituency from both the parties. The best of us have spoken and taken a stand, now it is time for the rest of us to engage and make a difference. I promise I will do my part. Will you?

Asif Saleh is the executive director of human rights organization Dristhitat.

ACC's anti-graft blitz

Bangladesh has been excluded from the list of countries selected for US assistance to be provided through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) for 2006 due to its endemic corruption. The World Bank has cancelled and demanded refund of Tk 6.8 crore from three projects for corruption. The international development partners of the country on November 17, 2005 came down heavily on the government for its failure in curbing massive corruption, for which the country is known in the world.

ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) at long last has launched its anti-graft blitz "trap case drive" against the bribe-takers. The ACC in the first phase of its drive is urging people through advertisements in the media to lodge complaints against corrupt government officials. The advertisement entitled: "The corrupts are enemies of the country and nation: Help capturing them," contains ACC's telephone numbers and e-mail address enabling public to lodge complaints. The ACC will start its operation after receiving complaints from the public.

The ACC had also a plan to use Rab for launching the "storm operation" in different government offices to nab the bribe takers. But the Director General of Rab did not agree on the deployment of Rab to launch anti-corruption drive. The ACC is now interested in associating BDR in its storm operation as alternative to Rab and has targeted 12 government departments including police, education, lower judiciary, health, land administration, air and land ports for operations.

The present government formed the ACC, claiming it as a landmark step in fulfilling its election pledge of combating corruption. But the ACC and the government had been at odds since the commission came into being one and a half years back. The ACC in its annual report to be submitted to the President may now blame the government for its non-

cooperation in making the commission operational. The anti-graft body has remained inactive so long mainly due to not having its organogram and rules. The government is yet to approve these two all-important items to make the ACC operative.

Bangladesh is now a global brand name for corruption with its ranking as the most corruption afflicted country in the world by Transparency International for the fifth successive year. Corruption in the country has reached new heights, making almost all activities without it impossible. This unabated corruption has negative impact on the country's economy, society and the people as a whole. It is being suggested by the donors repeatedly that two percent of the country's GDP is being eaten up by corruption alone. But formation of the ACC can fulfill a long-standing public demand, only when it is allowed to operate independently and neutrally with sufficient powers to investigate any sort of corruption by any people without interference of any kind.

Bangladesh has been excluded from the list of countries selected for US assistance to be provided through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) for 2006 due to its endemic corruption. The World Bank has cancelled and demanded refund of Tk 6.8 crore from three projects for corruption. The international development partners of the country on November 17, 2005 came down heavily on the government for its failure in curbing mas-

sive corruption, for which the country is known in the world. The development partners also issued an ultimatum to the government to truly activate the ACC within a few weeks.

Corruption is not just taking bribes; it covers a broad spectrum of misdeeds. Corruption has manifested itself in many bizarre forms and dimensions in our country. The misuse of public power for private gain, for instance, is a major means of corruption which has assumed alarming proportions in Bangladesh. So it is not an easy task to curb corruption and it calls for concordant efforts from the government, opposition and the civil society. Improving governance, strengthening accountability, and ensuring transparency are three major components to eliminate corruption.

Some of our ministers and MPs have been accused of corruption. The Danish Ambassador in Bangladesh brought the charge of corruption against the Shipping Minister. A parliamentary body on March 8 also criticized the Shipping Minister for a "mysterious" increase in price for building an ocean-going ship and misuse of funds for construction of a new container terminal in Chittagong. Two MPs from the ruling BNP also brought charge of corruption against the Communication Minister for his involvement in the CNG import scam for Tk 2 billion. The minister was also blamed for involvement in corruption in allotment of land for setting up CNG station. The ACC should now proceed with these

cases to attain credibility.

It has been learnt that the ACC is going to submit charge sheets on 45 major graft cases within a short time to cast away widespread doubt and frustration in the public minds. The people of this country have very bitter experiences with the now-defunct Bureau of Anti-Corruption (BAC) whose only job was to harass the opponents of the party in power. The ACC must not follow the footprint of the BAC.

We cannot help wondering with the ACC's plan for deployment of Rab or BDR to launch blitz against corruption. Neither the "storm operation" nor the "trap case drive" is considered the right strategy to fight endemic corruption. Getting rid of corruption is a daunting task for Bangladesh as it is deeply rooted in our socio-political structure. The fundamental problem that relates to corruption in Bangladesh is the dominance of the vested interests irrespective of changes in the power matrix. Launching of such drives with much fanfare will only help the top shots to dip for the time-being. The remedy is to start cleanly a drive from the top tiers with the intelligent unit of ACC, who may be a better bet than Rab or BDR.

The people at large are anxious to see a really activated ACC, as they know to what extent corruption has penetrated every section of society, making life miserable. The ACC, which was billed as a mountain, has so far been proved to be a molehill. It should now make desperate attempt for curbing corruption where no corrupt person will be spared for his political affiliation with a view to salvage the country from the position of "most corrupt nation."

ANM Nurul Haque is a banker.

Civilly shutting up the poor

Relating this theoretical framework with what we have before us, is a group of closely knit individuals, both politically and socially, with certain acquired recognitions and achievements, presenting forth to the educated population an agenda for development. Within this agenda, there are certain favourites, top-tens, such as corruption in the bureaucracy and political parties, economic development for the country, and the possible ways forward.

SHAHANA SIDDIQUI

INTERESTINGLY, the Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development is taking place at the same time as I write a rather critical paper for my own school-work on the failure of the visions and missions promised of the NGOs and civil society of Bangladesh. Reading through the articles already posted, I was not surprised that everyone contributing, far more educated and established in our "society" than an insignificant struggling student such as myself, approached the problems and obstacles of the country from blatant vested interests and quite tangential perspectives. Though I cannot prove it

scientifically, but I know that many of the readers will come to a consensus about two particular observations of mine: (a) Bangladeshi intellectuals have a tendency to beat around the bush and (b) they tend to position themselves on very high horses of morality and virtue which then makes me wonder why then does Transparency International keep rating us the most corrupt country in the world?

This article is not an attempt to shame or to degrade anyone in particular, or to provide some magical solution to the complicated and convoluted problems, but rather, this is an article for the people, for frustrated youth such as myself, for those of us who understand but think that we never have a

strong enough voice in anything that happens around us, to us. This article is about voice and who has the right to give whom the platform to speak, to debate, to dialogue, and more importantly, which voice is heard and which ones are deliberately muted. While I write this article, I am much too aware of the fact that most people in my country will not understand for my own shortcoming of writing and thinking in English. I never regret the medium in which I have been formally trained, but neither am I proud of how much the language has penetrated into my thought process. But whoever I can appeal or be heard to, I remain grateful for that opportunity.

Civil societies, since the time of

Touqueville and Locke (this is not to say "civil societies" never existed before such Western political philosophers, but rather, certain definitions were formulated by them which are now the basis for modern understanding and creations of civil societies) were viewed as the glue between the state and the people. There is an element of ambiguity in this term which allows for civil society to occupy this unique position between the state and the people. The word "civil" in it of itself is a loaded term, implying a clear distinction between those who are "civilised" and those "uncivilised," the mob. In short, civil societies were made up of citizens but not all citizens were a part of the civil society.

These "civilised" groups of people created the space to either contest or support the state, with their own interest in mind and/or the interest of the "people." It is this very point of having the ability to formally associate and discuss the problems of the society, is a place of privilege, as well as to establish oneself to have a prior knowledge of what these "problems" are. This

knowledge is at times direct presentation of voices who actually are affected by problems but most of the time, it is a "re-presentation" of the people. Based on this knowledge, civil societies legitimise their positions, enter into negotiations with the state and more so determine what should be on the agenda for change.

Relating this theoretical framework with what we have before us, is a group of closely knit individuals, both politically and socially, with certain acquired recognitions and achievements, presenting forth to the educated population an agenda for development. Within this agenda, there are certain favourites, top-tens, such as corruption in the bureaucracy and political parties, economic development for the country, and the possible ways forward. Those who have created this forum have already identified certain problems in the country and have set the debate within those parameters. *All this in the name of the poor, in the name of the disenfranchised.* Yet, no common poor person will ever read any of these critically thought out articles, let

alone be aware of them. Then who gives this "civil" society the right to be the champion for the poor, the voice of the suppressed?

This is not to say that we sit back and do nothing. But that is also not the reason for venturing forth without being critical of this self-proclaimed position. Certain elements of feudalism never left the Bangladeshi elites, which have ensured rigid class structures. This class structure is maintained in various different ways ranging from different members of the family having strong holds over different sectors of the economy, including NGOs and media, ensuring children marry within the same social circle, and strategically aligning with one political platform or the other in order to maintain a position of power and privilege. In a "democratic" context, these feudal notions have transformed into "civil society." Even the World Bank joined the bandwagon by doing us a great service by coming up with a euphemistic term for such strategic power relations as "social capital." This civil society embodying such "rich" (yes, both in content and financially!) social capital seem to believe that

they know what is best for the country, acting on behalf of the people, while deliberately refusing to realise that they are part and parcel of the problem.

While I type these words of criticism of not only this civil society initiative, a formal forum, I am constantly keeping in mind of the default position of being "born into" this civil society, this elite class structure as both a reminder to myself and to state clearly to the readers of my position. The idealist in me wants to appeal for the space to question: foundations-breaking questions, norms-defying questions, power-disrupting questions. Questions that must ask who is here and who is not, who were allowed to speak and who were spoken for. On the other hand, the cynic in me tells me that all these words will be carefully considered by a handful, apathetically read by most, but for those a part of the status quo, these will be words of breakfast amusement, easily overlooked and forgotten (the assumption being this article will at all be published!). Life will continue as the same with or without this civil

society for the objective is not to transform anymore, but rather how to "build capacity." All this civil society will accomplish by the end of the day is to gain popularity for those who mainly initiated this forum. Donors will send words of congratulations on such "much needed initiative for democratic dialogue and active civil society participation as a process of accountability." Reports and academic papers will cite this as "best practice" and later on the "impacts" will be condensed into "lessons learnt." But most of all this forum makes great conversation topics at cocktail parties and wedding receptions where while we continue to "dialogue," "negotiate," make or break our political and financial allegiances, and build our "social capital," the poor will remain suppressed, the voiceless will remain silenced.

Where is my position in all this? A "once upon a time" Marxist used to tell me that though he was a part of the ruling class, he will always betray it.

Shahana Siddiqui is a freelance contributor.