The Baily Star

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A note from diaspora

PIASH KARIM

HOSE of us who take the idea and practice of transformative politics seriously have good reasons to be encouraged by the recent formation of a citizens' group that emerged out of a joint initiative of The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, and Centre for Policy Dialogue.

The stated intention of the group includes the formulation of a midterm development vision for Bangladesh as well as organisation of a campaign for electing honest and competent candidates in the next general elections. This is a long overdue intervention.

Given what is happening in the country, one cannot help feeling a sense of what Gramsci famously called the "pessimism of the intellect." There is an abundance of reasons for this pessimism. The fragile contour of our politics, the peripheral underdevelopment of our economy, the capriciousness of our law the stagnation of our bureaucracy, the fractured fabric of our culture -- all of these can sufficiently subvert a well-grounded good life that the majority of the citizens of the country aspire to.

keep, again in the memorable language of the great Sardinian, an "optimism of the will" alive. No

significant transformation in the right direction is ever possible without this human capacity for hoping against hope. For many of us, this recent initiative interjects such a moment of optimistic desire into an otherwise difficult collective existence.

The task of building democracy in a world where old certainties are gone and new enclaves of empowerment are still in a flux, citizen intervention is a much needed political responsibility. While the notion of civil society is often casually tossed around by self-serving promoters of narrow status quo interests and crude defenders of

parochial identity politics alike, the concept contains immense emancipatory potential The civil society is the vital conscience of society, situated outside the core terrain of institutionalised state apparatus and market economy. Not quite integrated with the constraints of organised state -market nexus, civil society contains the ensemble of social relations that sustain the dynamism of social life.

Yet, simultaneously, one has to Civil society represents a decentering of the conventional epicenter of political economy. This "outsidehood," to use Edward Said's expression in a different context has its distinct

advantages. The individuals who are engaged in this recent initiative do not seem to have a vested stake in the contested terrain of our interparty rivalry. None of them seem to nurture ambitions for state power

sharing. Their political-economicideological platform seems to have taken shape outside the boundary of hegemonic bi-partisanship. Only for this reason, if not anything else, they deserve our empathetic attention

When our state tragically fails to resolve its crisis of legitimation, when our electoral politics is subservient to muscle and black money. when democratic accountability becomes an ever scarce phenomenon in our core political universe, when autonomous economic development remains an ever elusive goal, citizen intervention of this sort seems to be a much awaited option. It is imperative that viable narratives development and polity are of articulated within this sphere. It is

dent politics. The media and civil

society of our country has worked as

a pressure group and the situation is

May be our beloved country at

present duration has been undergo-

ing its ever worst time. Considering

together prioritizing some issues:

religion and their godfathers should

money by corruption should be

boycotted in the election.

Those who have earned a lot of

past, present, and future of our nation are vocalised within this discursive field.

But it is also important to understand that, its profoundly significant role as a point of departure notwithstanding, the citizen's group is just that -- a point of departure. Even the most enthusiastic defenders of this initiative will probably not argue that electing honest and competent candidates alone will produce an authentic democratic counterhegemony. Even the most energetic architects of the mid-term developmental vision, I am sure, will not like to see it being reduced to a monolithic, infallible dogma.

These tasks will require long, protracted, vet somewhat opentextured, indeterminate processes the total complexity of which we cannot fully anticipate even in our most confident, imaginative moments. But more importantly. I would like to believe, even the initiators of the group recognise the nature of its immediate social constituency, its urbane professionalintellectual embeddedness.

The authenticity of democracy can ultimately be realised only by incorporating the citizenry that is crucial that conversations about the marginalised or excluded by the

tuses into radically pluralistic conversational processes. Democracy is not a transhistorical transcontextual signifier. It is always invariably anchored in specific slices of history, in specific structural

core political-economic appara-

contradictions and antagonisms. The liberating essence of civil society can be most exuberantly released by continuously deepening and expanding democratic spaces, by including and empowering the multitude of subaltern citizenry -- the direct producers, the poor, women, religious-ethnic minorities, marginal nationalities and others

The dialogue that was inaugurated by the citizens' group in the capital city needs to be continuously translated to multiplicity of subjugated social sites. In the end, the historical significance of the citizens' initiative will be validated if it can operate as a vital catalyst for that plurivocally engaged democracy. The fact that there are people in the group who have long histories of involved praxis in those sites is a cause for constructive optimism.

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Pride and prejudice of Citizens' Group

dates" only.

dates.

ABURAAD ABDUL AZIZ

Y knowledge level about most of the luminaries of the civil society of Bangladesh, who took a very precious initiative recently by forming a "Citizens' Group" is shallow and newspaper-deep. With this ignorance I would dare blissfully comment on this initiative.

I won't touch on "mid-term development vision" as I do not have any clue if the group has, now or in the pipeline, any short-term or longterm vision or so. Therefore let it remain as an intellectual jargon to

I feel more at ease to talk on the simplified and up front "clean candidate" campaign outlined by Dr. Yunus, sounds time appropriate, enticing like an instant coffee to a commoner like me. Then, to have a better vision on the campaign, may I ask one or two simple questions to Dr Yunus in particular and the Citizens' Group in general.

What is the real definition of

"clean candidate"? Is it political wins over a "clean candidate" flexcleanliness or financial cleanliness ing money muscles and using or both. For financial cleanliness strings and strengths beyond visual. there are clear and defined guidelines as law with EC.

ally sucked into existing political

fracas. Two, no political party can

point finger at you for their election

failure due to fielding "clean candi-

You certainly understand that you

Extending your moral and intelforemost task will be to gauge the political honesty, integrity and lectual support to ongoing movebravery of the "Citizens' Group" who ment of opposition (you may do it being aligned or being complemenwill be the ultimate judge to define and sort politically "clean canditary or even being parallel with opposition) for creating a credible dates." Hence may I know your unani-EC and more so a credible caretaker government may resolve the mous view about genesis of issue of election with "clean candi-

Bangladesh. If you have one, please speak out loud in unison and This simple solution may help let it be the stepping stone. This will you avert two perilous reactions. connect the Bangalees with umbili-One, launching NGO style political cal chord of the motherland; with party with infinite financial strength history, with heritage and with (and blessing of alien power base) culture. but zero political expertise eventu-

If "clean candidate" implies

"political cleanliness" then my

If you can, you will instantly find recycled politicians like Moudud as redundant and non-existent. Millions of humble and clean citizens will rally around you to build a Bandladesh that is vet in our dreams

have not vet mapped your action The author writes from Toronto, Canada. plan in the event a "dirty candidate"

Media, civil society and 2007 electionWhat must be done

DELWAR HOSSAIN ARIF

HE conscious citizen of our country appreciates that the media has been playing a vibrating role in strengthening the democratic process. It is also superfluous to reference that one of the basic parameters of democracy is to inform the people and guarantee the participation of people in all spheres of activity. In this allusion, media can play a very effective role by informing the different issues of the state affairs and make them observant of the same. So media is denominated the fourth estate. We have seen a responsible role of most of media in Bangladesh on the militant issue in recent times.

The national election of 2007 will be a turning point in the democratic course of Bangladesh. Identifying the weight of upcoming election, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and two maior dailies of the country the Daily Star and the daily Prothom Alo jointly arranged a dialogue on March 20.

At the end of the dialogue, a 24member citizens' group was formed with a prospect to form a vision of advancement. We surely hope that this drive can play a crucial role. But there are some debatable proposition have come out which already spawn an extensive opprobrium midst the political groups.

> The most contentious fume is the far improved than the previous "competent or clean candidate movement." Because how will it be determined who are competent or clean and who are not. I cogitate this sort of concept will create a litigant the existing circumstances, we position with the political parties. should elect those people who will Here an inquisition may arise. strenuously work to shape Whether any citizenry initiative Bangladesh as a secular, progresshould be an opponent to the political parties or it will work as a pres-

sure group by raising voice to nominate clean and competent candidate in the election.

It is an obvious reality that there are a lot of enigma in the political parties and they do prefer to nominate those who have a chance to win out in the election rather than honouring their competency and

I can defaulters should be barred honesty. Regardless, the media and civil society should work to make a to run in the election

change to such kind of practices. Those who want to make We can cite the instance of the Bangladesh a Taliban country position of the media and civil socishould be resisted. To fulfill these issues and vision of ety against using arms in the stu-

progress of CPD, the Daily Star and Prothom Alo initiative some strategies can consider: The dialogue should organize in

all districts not only in Dhaka or major cities. They can invite one private television channel as a partner.

One page of the dailies should be classified with various contents of the next election and it should publish regularly.

It is urgently required to make sive country and as well as protect people cognizant of different issues the sovereignty. In this regard media of next election applying poster, and civil society should work sticker and airing programs in private television channels. The fanatics who are trying to establish militancy in the name of

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MD SADEQUL AMIN KHAN

OR an accountable development process we needs following steps to be the taken 1. A candidate for member of

business organization, because he/she could try to take political organization

free from criminal record and criminal activities, and candidates found to indulge in criminal activities in the past must not be eligible for MP candidate

makes it hard to ensure free and fair election even after taking over by

5. The extreme point of expression as we see today is the corruption at the highest level, including iudiciary and administration, the prices of basic needs such as rice,

come to power to by utilizing police, fish, vegetables sky-rocketing, daily army, EC commission staff, money, utility power, gas price out of reach and hoodlums. Therefore, the and not available, fertilizer is also reform of EC is justified and must be expensive and distribution channel done from time to time when already broken down, inflation at the required with consultation with highest level and foreign currency ruling party and all opposition parprice jumping every day. In such a situation people's sufferings have 4. For an accountable developno limit. If such a situation continues ment process good, wise, educated, for a longer period of time, people honest people must come forward as candidates, otherwise all bad

may even revolt (like in Kansat). Even they might be enraged enough to take arms to kill these corrupt, incompetent, money-sucking ministers, MPs, and their allies. The number one solution for creating danger of this kind if uprising if the good environment and accountable present situation is not improved is development process for brighter verv real. future of Bangladesh. If all honest.

6. Money expending for MP wise and good people keep aloof election has limits, as per Election from politics then the bad people will Commission rule, but actually the fill up the gap as we see now a day. candidates for MP are expending 100 times more than the limit. In Bangladesh, money influence is too much to elect bad candidate. Some kind of corrective mechanism must be made, otherwise rich people with

bad record will be elected

7. To elect clean candidates, people should avoid to support any particular political party, but rather vote for clean candidate if even he/she is independent candidate. A bunch of clean, competent, educated and honest candidate can change the total scenario of Bangladesh like in Malavsia. Thailand, etc.

8. The ruling party and opposition parties should give ticket to young, educated, competent and honest candidates for future leadership of the country. But sorry to say, the present ruling party has include lots of Young Turks who are basically corrupted, incompetent, and whose past record is not good.

9. EC must be a strong, independent body and must be free from government influence, like in India. In any circumstance if any candidate/MP is found guilty, then EC at that moment must suspend him/her

parliament cannot be shareholder in

influence to profit his/her business 2. A candidate for MP must be

3. Money, muscle and administrative influence (in case of ruling party) are mixed together which creates an abnormal situation and

caretaker government, because the previously elected government can prepare in advance the blueprint to

people will drive away good people, as bad money drives away good money from the market. This is the

ties

Who should be a parliamentarian?

not be elected.

ABM FASIHUDDIN

HE selection of "clean" and patriotic candidate for the national parliament is very difficult, but, not impossible task in our country. A clean person in our consideration may be he who is honest with patriotic feelings, devoid of self interest, dedicated to the overall interest of the country. who is not loan defaulter, land grabber, extortionist and well regarded in the society as an honorable man/woman

He/she should be endowed with proper erudition, knowledge and capability to lead the society, and when occasion arises to lead the country as a whole. He/she should have been gifted with guality and capability of delivering speeches in the parliament, in all national and international forums, highlighting national and international interest. Our country, Bangladesh by all

country, embracing politics and religions alike. This is unique in history. The people of four major religions -- Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity are living together with identical rights and aspirations. No clash, nothing, we all are "one " Bangladeshi

Starting from 1991 until 2001 we have undergone three national elections, under a unique system of government that is "caretaker government." The results of the elections were well acclaimed all the world over, except some defeated guarters gualifying the election results with "fine rigging," "aross rigging." etc. But the same

groups said "fair election" when they won However, this is true, that we have never been able to send, in most cases, deserving candidates to the parliament. Whereas there is

criteria, is a moderate democratic for our parliament. Keeping them aside, for obvious reasons, we are nominating candidates like cement traders, fruit dealers, textile millers, contractors, extortionist, musclemen and so on.

This I say, in most cases, not all, with due regards to our honourable and learned parliamentarians who are well experienced in parliamentary norms, professors, lawyers, politicians etc. But their number is thin. Only because, they cannot compete in elections with mone-

tary and muscles powers, resulting in nations deprivation of their contribution for its cherished development.

Such deserving people are, at times, frustrated and join hands with people and parties not in any

way akin to their ideals and philos ophies. After all they are human, they have got their desire to serve the country, to build up themselves no dearth of befitting candidates as they cherish.

serving candidates winning the parliamentary elections by their monetary strength an agitating ment. power, contributes little to their people and the country as a whole. They serve their party interest in the parliament, engage them in loggerheads with their opposition. Outside they go in finding out business opportunities, national and international level by any means -- right or wrong. Needless to mention, best advantages go to the ruling parliamentarians, to the deprivation of parliamentarians in

opposition. When the alternative left to them only street and agitation, at the cost of national interest. This is what is the common scenario in the realm of our politics.

Now to free the country from such unwholesome and calamitous situations our conscious people, patriots, even political parties should ponder over the

With some exceptions, undematter and give their best attentions to the selection of deserving candidates for the national parlia-

> Members should be nominated by the parties should be honest patriotic, endowed with proper education thoughts and philosophies. At least for a considerable period some reasonable monetary backing either self or party shall be there. If the major parties uphold national interest first, then I think we shall be able to send deserving candidates to our national parliament

As for our voters, they should cast their votes in favour of best available candidates irrespective of party affiliations. Only then we can expect our national parliament to be the conglomeration of qualified people who would contribute to our national development

Some modest proposals

CM KOYES SAMI

N previous elections, we have seen that government servants participate in the national elections soon after retirement. With the election in their mind they unduly exercise power to favour their respective constituency and allocate funds for the development of that constituency. This is a misuse of government funds for personal benefits.

I think that there should be a bar of at least three years on their participation in the national elections after retirement from government service. This same principle should also apply in case of a government employee who resigns from service or who is dismissed/terminated from aovernment service.

Sitting members of parliament need to declare their assets at the time of their assuming the office and also when they relinquish office. Any unexplained increase in the assets and accrual of assets beyond

render them liable for disqualification from being a member of parliament. It is also common knowledge that MPs leave behind huge amounts of outstanding telephone/utility bills. There should also be a provision to restrict such persons from participating in elections unless they settle these amounts. A poor country like ours cannot

afford the luxury of having a large parliament of 330 members. There should be a parliament of maximum 100 members comprising of 1 or 2 members from each 64 districts depending on the population in the respective district (and another 20 female members can be elected on the basis of direct election by women)

Functions of a member of parliament should be restricted to lawmaking only and should not have any role in the administrative decision-making and development activities. For an MP to be able to contribute to law-making process

known means of earning should there should be a minimum level of education to qualify him to participate in the elections.

The facilities allowed to the MPs at the cost of taxpaver money should also be curtailed to a reasonable level. Unnecessary concessions at the cot of a national exchequer like import of duty free case should not be allowed.

While submitting this. I take the privilege of sharing another view with you. People were happy to see the formation of an independent anti-corruption commission, but we were disappointed to see poor performance of the commission. ACC should make them functional and look into the activities of the members of the government at high levels. If ACC finds irregularities committed at that level should bring them to task.

Some thoughts on the recently formed Citizens' Group

ASFA HUSSAIN

T is heartening to see some members from the highest socio-economic class in society of our country to take initiative to bring about changes in the election of public office mainly in the national parliament. This group was formed on March 20, 2006 in the capital, a 24-member citizen's group headed by the CPD chairman Professor Rehman Sobhan with a vision to launch a campaign for honest and competent candidates for the coming general elections was put forth to the citizens. The motives are indeed noble and though belatedly hold out hopes for millions of poor masses of this country that they may one day find their lots have changed to that with effective administration both in public and private sectors. This change has to come about in the transparency of the management of schemes in both the sectors as well

good. One would naturally ask if such recommendations given by such societies have actually worked and incorporated in the previous parliaments. If we go by the history

of our country and for that matter many other countries of the world all such efforts helped the segment of the upper and elite class taking over power Unfortunately, the elite politician faction created through this process is unscrupulous, corrupt, and insensitive to the causes of the poor as the corrupt administrators of this country at this time or as was in the past. Regrettably this division of the

sion manipulation and contracts offered by the civil society sounds It is about time the civil society probe deeper and set priorities right. Why are only a few chosen their members? How can they determine that a honest person is the best solution to improve and make the parliament workable?

There are other factors to be taken into consideration. The entire electoral process has to change.

The office of the election commission is always in question, choice of candidates for this office has to come from all parties and only neutral persons with integrity be appointed to serve us best at the time of election and after. The society cannot act alone but need the people have historically behaved participation from the districts, of exactly in the same fashion whether thick layered civil servant, profesprominent, professional and citizens representation and many others to brain storm and devise a workable system for the forth coming general elections. They need to interact with the election commission and make sure it works inde-

This is the time to do something, pages after pages propagated in vernacular news paper which has more circulation in the rural locations in Bangladesh and the elec-

pendently

tronic media can create this awareness to form pressure groups as 80% of the voters are in the villages. Somehow people like ourselves hardly mention their contribution in actual economy.

We have to think of our farmers and factory workers who have made Bangladesh "shining" for the wealthy entrepreneurs, we cannot miss out on our laborious migrant brothers on whose dollars the Central Bank reserves breathe. We have to motivate ourselves to respect them and assist to improve their conditions. Poverty alleviation is the sincere concerted endeavor of all parties and citizens. In the last one decade private sector has assisted in poverty alleviation in their support in certain sectors

It upsets me when we discuss of improving their lot and NGOs are the only fore runners doing so. The private and public sector are gradually contributing to eradicate poverty by creating opportunities in private enterprises. We have come out of Mr Henry Kissinger's "basket case" and very soon I hope we can come out of this if only the electoral process is reformed by having good people who are accountable to the citizens. Transparency in this will bring about all changes in the

prescriptions. If elections are free, fair with honest people, and the election commission autonomous, the citizens vigilant, Bangladesh can take advantage of globalization and face challenges competently.

Each party has aspiring candidates who are already lobbying for them selves in the own constituencies or have expressed their willingness to contest the National Election to their party stalwarts. The

parties can start collecting data of these persons, right from their family history to the present standing, most notably their acceptance to the common men and women. This archival finding and acceptance can well eliminate many confusion as regards a "honest candidate" within the parties. The parties have to act responsibly this

All attempts should be made to make public awareness of the deprivation of the wealth created by the sweats of the work force. Privileged section of the mass should be aware, it is about time they learn how to share. Recently an eminent and incumbent economist of the civil society suggested that the deprived majority own major

shares in mills and factories. I do understand how frustrated he feels that the poor are becoming poorer and the wealthy not prepared to sense the cynicism based on rampant graft and mismanagement

in governance but of course sharing equity through bonuses, profits and medical benefits with the workers in all private enterprises, factories and in the agriculture can help create equity amongst the work force and better their condition.

The widening gap between the rural poor and the urban rich is a dangerous signal to undo the democratic practices that could lead to ambitions in other form of governance. There is a common belief that governments function best when they are accountable and honest people elected to govern and there is trust between the citizens and the politicians. If this trust is violated much is at stake.

It is a great thought to influence nomination process and get honest. educated and well meaning people elected who cherish the desire of public service for the sake of doing good to common men as opposed to advancing self interest. But under the present structure of the society

and the thoughts that crossed the minds of some well meaning people can we really achieve anything meaningful that will add to the good of the common men? More importantly we can start creating this awareness how to be humane and share social responsibility of our

citizens seriously. In of my article, published in New Age of March 2, I mentioned "power sharing" within the political parties and citizens. Public awareness of this concept and developing a mechanism for achieving this goal is worth considering.

I am very pleased to note that in The Daily Star of April 1 is mention of what I said in my article of equal representation of party members in dialogue on electoral reform. It will be to the best interest of BNP to listen to its citizens and rid itself of corrupt practices and for the opposition to take the lessons never to commit the same as that of the ruling party

do good for themselves, their families and friends to share the acquired wealth through commis-

sional or wealthy entrepreneurs in as much as they are all selfish. totally controlled by their ambition to

The debate and prescriptions