## The citizens' group and the role of civil society



**REHMAN SOBHAN** 

HE recent initiative by Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star and Prothom Alo to assemble a group of citizens to project a vision for the future of Bangladesh has generated both interest and controversy. The controversy has focused on issues relating to the role of civil society in addressing the issue of free and fair elections but particularly about identifying credible candidates. The attempt by Professor Yunus to provide specific suggestions about how to identify appropriate candidates has particularly aroused intense debate. The degree of debate generated by the CPD initiatives is all to the good, even if some of it is far from positive. It suggests that the initiative has generated enough attention for commentators on both sides of the fence to engage themselves in the debate. Had the initiative sunk without any public attention it would indeed have reflected on the irrelevance of the people involved and

Such an ongoing debate should be kept alive. It would however serve a more constructive purpose if the issues could be discussed in less polemical and personalized terms so that the initiative itself could be placed in some perspective and particular proposals evaluated on their merit. This would naturally require a clearer understanding of the current nature and prospective role of civil society in

the issues they have raised.

The citizen's initiative is hardly new. Various groups of citizens have been coming together to focus public attention on the major problem of the day. In recent years the most effective of these was the Citizen's Group assembled in the late 1980s involving Professor Mosharaff Hossain and others which made a trenchant indictment of the Ershad regime and issued a call for united action by the democratic political parties and citizens to challenge the misrule of the regime. During the Shahabuddin Caretaker

We must all remember that our primary identity is that of a citizen of Bangladesh which makes all of us card carrying members of civil society. This rediscovery of our identity as responsible citizens may begin with a collective effort to make the forthcoming elections a credible demonstration of democracy. But we must then further commit ourselves to spend the next five years making the government we elect accountable for their every act of commission and omission.

eminent citizens in 29 Task Forces to identify the problems inherited from the malgoverance of the Ershad years and to present a policy agenda to the newly elected government and parliament on how to cope with this legacy of problems. In 2001 CPD assembled about 160 citizens in 16 Task Forces to present before the political parties contesting the 2001 election to the Jatvo Sangshad, a set of Policy Briefs which addressed the major problems of the day and suggested some policy responses for the newly elected government. In 2003 the same Group of Citizens were reassembled by CPD to prepare a report card on progress made by the incumbent government in responding to the challenges presented to them by the Citizens Group in 2001. Many other citizens groups have surfaced in the post-democratic era addressing specific issues ranging from the environment (BAPA) to ensuring free and fair elections (FEMA, Brotee, Sujon).

It is not clear how far the regime elected to office in 1991 and again in 2001 made effective use of the dedicated efforts of their fellow citizens in volunteering their time and labour to prepare Task Force reports or in cleaning up the environment. The operative issue, however, remains that over a twelve year period a distinguished body of citizens from Bangladesh were willing to pledge their creative skills in the service of the country. Their labours not only constitute a unique body of source material for the infinite possibilities which lie before Bangladesh but the Task Force reports and Policy Briefs, for example, also provide a historical memory of the extraordinary professional capabilities which lie underutilized within Bangladesh. Any democratic government with the creative imagination to reach out to their own people rather than run to their development partners for policy guidance has a veritable treasure trove of talent at their disposal. It is a tragedy for Bangladesh that in most cases these services tend to remain largely involved in the initiatives of civil society rather than in the service of democratically elected

The latest attempt to assemble a citizen's group to provide a Vision for Bangladesh has become particularly topical. A decade and a half of democracy has generated an almost universal concern across the country that some of the most deeply felt concerns of our citizen's have remained without satisfactory address. General problems such as the persistence of mass poverty. unbridled corruption, the tyranny of patronized criminals, the alienation of the administration from the people, the comodification of law enforcement and the recent emergence of terrorism in the name of religion, are compounded by specific failures such as in the power sector. Ordinary citizens feel that their elected representatives do not prioritise their concerns.

The confrontational nature of our

political system has rendered three successive parliaments dysfunctional while those equipped with money and muscle are increasingly transforming democratic politics into an instrument of private gain. As a result, virtually all voters aspire to be represented by honest, committed, candidates who would seek votes on the basis of their public record rather than the size of their bank balance or the strength of their firepower. All citizens would hope to participate in an election where they would be free to cast their vote free of coercion and can be sure that these votes would be correctly tallied so that the candidate who genuinely enjoys the confidence of the electorate represents them in parliament. When parliament is assembled voters would like to see this function throughout its five year life, free of walkouts and boycotts, where the concerns of the people are freely voiced by their elected representatives and seriously addressed by the party in office. The demand for 'clean' candidates is, thus, not a personal demand of Professor Yunus or the Citizen's Group but is a long standing demand of all Bangladeshis and grows stronger with every election where many voters feel inadequately represented.

In the final analysis political parties must choose their candiexercise the final decision of who will represent them. Civil society, in any shape or form, cannot expect to usurp such choices within a functioning democracy. In Bangladesh. in particular, the overwhelming strength of our two party system, narrows the choice of candidates and makes it difficult, for even independent candidates, to challenge the hegemony of the dominant parties. The main option for citizens, thus, remains to influence the selection of candidates by the parties who otherwise remain locked into a fight for survival. Thus. if one party chooses a candidate with a big bank balance and/or a person with heavy mastaan power, the other party feels compelled to match this or risk losing the seat by placing a 'clean' candidate. It is here that citizen's groups, whether organized across the country or in particular constituencies, can come together and demand that both

parties choose good candidates. However, if one party responds to this call and another does not voters must demonstrate their willingness to punish the party backing an unsavory candidate by voting for the better candidate. However this choice may only be exercised if voters are left free to cast their vote without fear of violence. Thus the issue of choosing 'clean' candidates is initially linked to the integrity of the election process. An election process where the Election Commission is compromised by partisan behavior, where election officials such as primary school teachers as well as law enforcement officials at the constituency level have been pre-selected for their partisan identity, is likely to render the issue of the quality of the candidate somewhat irrelevant.

Can civil society exercise enough influence on our major parties to choose the right candidates? Much depends on the seriousness, courage and stamina of civil society itself. In practice much of what passes for civil society in the way of NGOs or professional bodies have steered clear of any involvement in the political process. This choice is largely dictated by the peculiar laws governing NGOs which effectively

ment but even advocacy initiatives. It is not surprising that most NGOs have settled for becoming aid contractors who offer various social services such as provision of microcredit, health care and education through drawing upon donor funding. Some NGOs which have attempted to influence the political process have paid a heavy price if they found themselves on the wrong side of the political divide.

Those civil society organizations which have largely engaged themselves in advocacy rather then service delivery tread on very dedicate ground. There is no saying when the government of the day may take offense at a particular initiative and threaten to cancel a particular NGO's registration or withhold their access to external funding. This being Bangladesh, no uniform norms guide official intervention into the activities of NGOs or civil society organizations. Much depends on who you know but particularly if you have the 'correct' political identity. Thus NGOs, even advocacy organizations, with heavy dependence on external funding, remain particularly cautious about venturing into issues of political significance such as elections.

The hazards of intervention by the NGO Bureau are hardly the principal hazard faced by civil society intruding into the political arena. In an age where huge investments are made in the pursuit of electoral office intrusion by well meaning civil society advocates is not likely to be appreciated particularly if efforts are being made by such activists to expose the antecedents of all candidates to their electorate. Whilst full public disclosure of key information on a candidate, such as their material worth and legal record, have by law to be made public, the Election Commission has never enforced this provision. Efforts by civil society to correct this omission could, in the particular case of candidates with much to hide and the means to keep their darker deeds veiled from the voters, invite some undemocratic

Thus civic activism is likely, particularly when it promises to become effective, to be a potential health hazard for the activist and will require courage, strong public support and the willingness to persevere under quite trying circumstances. The strength of civic activism lies in effective action where various activist enterprises can aggregate their efforts and then join hands with local citizens to integrate

local mobilizations. Multiple civic initiatives, speaking with discordant voices and occasionally forked tongues, can confuse and demoralize local activists who are already exposed to risk from dubious candidates resentful of being put under

It is thus essential for all civil

society initiatives seeking free and fair elections, where 'clean' candidates can be encouraged to come forward without undue risk, to coalesce their efforts and generate synergy at the national and local level. If such a coherent effort can be mounted and above all sustained there is very possibility that the political parties can think a lot harder before they rush to nominate guestionable candidates. Here again, however, civil society should keep in mind that in some areas candidates whose sources of wealth or criminal record may not merit close scrutiny may also be quite popular among voters. In an age of fast deteriorating governance such politicians provide protection, in the Godfather tradition, as well as some public services not always underwritten by the public exchequer. Such candidates may not win civil society endorsement but may remain acceptable to their electorate. Civil society must therefore come to terms with the fact that their judgment on candidates may not always be endorsed by the electorate and must thereby respect the logic of

Keeping these political realities in mind civil society should seek to build alliances over the next months so that they can generate a strong body of public opinion which can in many, if not all, cases influence the selection process in the political parties through educating the voters as to their options. In such an exercise all such interventions across civil society need to brought on a common platform to provide momentum to the movement to ensure a credible election. Attempts to question the credentials of everyone who seeks to contribute to this effort tend to be counterproductive to the primary mission of building a level of public support needed to generate effective pressure on the political leadership

Democracy in Bangladesh has lived a precarious life. Whilst this, in large measure, owes to the peculiar pathologies of our two party system civil society must also share the blame. Democracy can only be sustained when ordinary citizens deem it their responsibility to demand accountability both from



A speaker at the regional dialogue on "National Elections 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development" held in Comilla recently.

representatives. The depth and every five years to elect yet another strength of a proactive civil society is a measure of the health of the democratic process which, in turn, is instrumental in determining the quality of governance. Good governance requires pro-active citizens who can demand greater transparency and accountability from the elected government.

If democracy is to be sustained

the people of Bangladesh need to be persuaded that electoral politics is not just an exercise for private gain but is serviceable instrument which can be used to ensure a better future for themselves and the country. Voters therefore need to be presented with a vision for a better comorrow which holds out a credible promise that their lives really can be transformed. Such a vision must be generated by the citizens themselves to serve as a measure of their expectations from the democratic process. But if such a vision is to be more than just a fantasy it must be owned by the political leadership. Their right to represent the people must be gauged by the credibility of their commitment to build such a future of promise for the people of Bangladesh.

The future of democracy in Bangladesh is not the exclusive responsibility of politicians. The final custodians of democracy remain the citizen voters who elect the politicians to public office. To participate in the democratic process does not mean we have to become practicing politicians. Though it would certainly be a positive step for democracy if more committed and professionally competent people did join political parties and were willing to earn the confidence of the electorate. However, all citizens also need to participate in the democratic process as responsible voters and not just as mere voting fodder

set of unaccountable representatives. Voters, therefore, also need to play an active role as members of civil society if we are to ensure that the democratic process is to take

We must all remember that our primary identity is that of a citizen of Bangladesh which makes all of us card carrying members of civil society. This rediscovery of our identity as responsible citizens may begin with a collective effort to make the forthcoming elections a credible demonstration of democracy. But we must then further commit ourselves to spend the next five years making the government we elect accountable for their every act of commission and omission. If and when civil society is willing to commit itself to such a responsible role during and after the electoral process Bangladesh may look forward to cleaner politics and better gover-

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## Balancing India-Bangladesh trade Accountability of multi-tiered delivery model for electricity carefully Bangladesh prime minister's recent visit to lindia though considered by some analysts b) An accurate (as much as possible) estimate about smug-

as being totally unproductive, Bangladesh government sees it as "perceptible improvement in ties ushering in new phase of friendship." However, no quick development in the growth of trade can be anticipated at this stage.

**ABM S ZAHUR** 

E hear of so many attempts by Bangladesh to bring some balance in bilateral trade with India, one of its largest trade partners. To our total dismay we have not yet seen any appreciable positive result so far as Bangladesh is concerned. Unless certain snags can be removed from both the sides the attempts of Bangladesh will remain as futile exercise. The approach of the politicians from both the countries appears to be defective. Failure of progress in negotiation due to hassles created by the bureaucracies of both the countries may be partly true. The fact is that neither the politicians, nor the bureaucracies nor the traders alone can be successful in narrowing the trade gap between India and Bangladesh. Only a good understanding through a friendly approach with mutual trust and confidence among the bureaucrats, politicians and traders can narrow down the huge trade gap

between these countries. India is a vast country and its industrial development is much more advanced and wider as compared to Bangladesh. In addition, it produces a large number of industrial raw materials. Its dependence on export trade is much less than Bangladesh's which concentrates on export-led growth and as such has to encourage trade related investment. Though India does not depend much on exports it produces much larger number of items than Bangladesh which does not have a very big export surplus. Due to steady high economic growth during the last few years consumer market in India is expanding rapidly. This is a clear advantage for Indian industrialists over the Bangladeshi industrialists. Apart from this, the Indian trade and industrial policies are more stable and balanced than Bangladesh. Ready availability of technical hands in adequate numbers is an added advantage. Only cheap unskilled labour cannot make products competitive. Even Indian effort to market its product is much more aggressive than Bangladesh's. Due to extensive experience Indian traders and industrialists are more organised than their Bangladesh counter-

In any bilateral trade negotiation we must bear in mind that none of the negotiating countries would normally allow import of items from the other country to create any disturbance for their own domestic industrialists or traders. Sometimes due to some special political or economic advantage some items are allowed and domestic producers of such goods are usually compensated by the respective government.

We are aware of the fact that some of our commodities are competitive in Indian market. Because free import of these items by India may disturb the Indian producers, the Indian government goes for creating tariff, non-tariff and para tariff barriers. Even though Bangladesh is a least developed country of Saarc region, Indian government imposes antidumping duties. On the other hand India realises that Bangladesh is a major market for Indian consumer goods because of geographical proximity and cultural affinity. As far as Bangladesh is concerned. because of her policy of export-led growth she may have to try hard (even at the cost of suffering at the initial stage) to divert her trade to other neighbouring countries as early as possible as no substantial growth of its export to India is

envisaged in near future. With the natural desire to become a major power in Asia and a competitor of China India cannot

think of developing hostile relation with her closest neighbour Bangladesh. But there is no magic wand to bring balance in trade between India and Bangladesh overnight. Only sincere effort with good understanding supported by planned approach can bring balance in not too distant a future.

People in Bangladesh want good relationship with India. Trade is more effective for developing closer relationship. To attain this both the countries must appreciate clearly each other's points of view, difficulties and benefits. In doing this India must assist Bangladesh in developing closer trade relations with Nepal and Bhutan. It may be pointed out in this regard that as land-locked least developed countries both Bhutan and Nepal deserve special sympathy from India and Bangladesh.

Without waiting any further for Indian goodwill, Bangladesh and Nepal may consider developing air cargo services between them and also similarly Bangladesh and Bhutan. Joint ventures shared by entrepreneurs from India, Nepal, Bhutan (if available) may be set up in Bangladesh. For very cogent reasons

Bangladesh hesitates to allow transit facility to India through its territory. India is trying hard to get the transit facility. India-Myanmar gas deal is facing uncertainty because of Bangladesh's hesitation to allow setting up of India-Myanmar gas pipeline through Bangladesh territory. Thus the issue of transit facility remains a snag for the growth of India-Bangladesh trade.

As it appears Bangladesh may have to opt for difficult and time consuming strategies. However, in that the following steps may be

a) A thorough study of Indian import, export and industrial policies. Indian state trade policies and practices may also be studied

gling at the India-Bangladesh border may be made: A list of smugglers' associates can also be made: A list of smugglers' associ-

ates can also be made by the ministry of home affairs. c) If possible Bangladesh may consider creating tariff, non-tariff or para tariff barriers for Indian goods. She should be particularly careful

about cheaper low quality Indian d) Bangladesh may concentrate on developing closer trade links with its neighbours like Thailand Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam etc

e) Bangladesh may try hard for diversification of its export trade as quickly as possible

Bangladesh prime minister's recent visit to India though considered by some analysts as being totally unproductive, Bangladesh government sees it as "perceptible improvement in ties ushering in new phase of friendship." However, no quick development in the growth of trade can be anticipated at this stage. In fact, India has created new impediments to export of some of our commodities to India and it has been reported that India and Myanmar are going to conclude the deal for supply of gas from Mvanmar to India bypassing Bangladesh. We may not worry too much about these developments. At this stage we need patience and to continue to press our demands on India. What is actually needed is maximum people to people contacts, and maximum possible economic cooperation. Balance or near balance of trade between the two countries may not be possible within a short time. But it can be achieved in stages. May be within a

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One of the major setbacks of using shared delivery model in high risk industries is ensuring safety standards, which can easily be managed by regulating the certification and audit processes currently used in high risk industries like, marine, airlines, etc. Apart from monopoly power, government is also facing tremendous pressure from the labour unions, which is mainly dictated by labour leaders. These leaders are successfully creating enough unsecured employment panic to generate resistance. Government can overcome those resistances by advertising the employment growth observed in industries due to private sector boost, which was impossible by any government alone within such short period of time.

**EKRAMULLAH CHOWDHURY** 

HE recent electricity crisis has stalled the country's growth and is holding back the economic activities required to improve poverty level. Since the country came out of dictatorship, every democratic government has been trying hard to improve business environment by encouraging private sector investment in many areas. It is quite recognisable that, obstacles to businesses are being gradually reduced and the private sector is growing. Massive improvements made in the delivery of different products and services by the private sector have reached a competitive environment. Developments made so far are the direct outcome of reduction in monopoly or duopoly power of public sectors in delivering services to the public. The results are fairly visible, like when it was utterly difficult to provide sufficient banking and financing support to the business, improvement in private banking system has helped to fill in the gaps. Support to businesses through media coverage is now possible due to growing number of visual media. Delivery of improved telecommunication support is now reasonably possible due to improvement made so far in voice technology by the mobile telecommunication companies. A regular supply of skilled & educated workforces is now possible through private universities; and 'session jot', we observed in eighties and nineties will be history soon. All this improvement not only expedited the

development, it also reduced cor-

ruption. Time has come to focus on

the most crucial and complicated one, which is improving the reliability of electricity supply. Insufficient market competition, lack of delivery commitment and lack of harmonisation of standards are some of the reasons for unreliable supply condition, which is discouraging the foreign investment desperately required to maintain a sustainable

Over the years, government has successfully moved the electricity delivery into a multi tiered delivery environment, which is generation, transmission and distribution. BPDB, IPP and RPC are positioned in generation layer, PGCB at transmission layer and BPDB, DESA REB are at distribution layer. DESCO and PBSs are positioned at a subsidiary layer of DESA and REB. Efficiency gain in customer service and billing occurred by DESA, DESCO, REB and PBSs. But public sector monopoly or duopoly (if we consider DESCO is competing with DESA) situation and an uncommitted delivery environment have stalled the economic activities. The probable answer to this monopoly/duopoly environment is, the introduction of more private competitors at distribution layer. This introduction is possible through strong electricity policy, harmonisa tion of technical standards and efficient management of delivery environment through internal and external Service Level Agreements (SLA) at inter-dependable tiers currently practiced in developed world. This inter-dependable shared delivery model and its accountability process will eventudelivery paradigm

Interestingly, all the private sector

growth we have observed so far did not require a sharing of public infrastructure with the existing public sector on that particular service industry in delivering similar services. Current DESA and DESCO delivery model is nonfunctioning, due to uncommitted service level guarantee. To come out of this stagnant electricity crisis, probably one of the efficient ways forward is to split and distribute the existing electricity distribution network to more private sectors. These organisations will lease the existing infrastructure, purchase the electricity at a wholesale price from the generation layer (BPDB or IPP) and manage the distribution at access and service layer through effective competitive environment. Supply reliability to the public and businesses has to be managed through highly accountable SLAs. Effective management of SLAs is possible through ombudsman and higher financial penalties. Authorities can sort out the responsibilities of periodic infrastructure upgrade policy, which can either remain with the existing authorities maintaining it by collecting levies from the lessee, or it can be the responsibility of the lessee with a commitment to periodic improvement schedule to regulatory authorities. But most importantly, to ensure the production and supply of electricity, SLA between the generation, transmission and distribution layer has to be in place and that is the only ally move businesses in way to make every layer account-Bangladesh to an efficient service

able in this multi-tiered delivery

environment. In order to ensure their delivery commitment, competitors at distribution layer should be allowed to source their supply from any sources they want, like from BPDB, IPPs or RPC whoever. Currently government is struggling to encourage investment in IPF businesses, but higher accountability will generate enough demand. which will lead to a profitable IPP investment. These new IPPs will introduce alternate power sources like coal, gas, air, solar or oil powered generators (already happening). Distribution layer should also be allowed to purchase electricity from neighbouring countries to fulfil

their commitments. One of the major setbacks of using this shared delivery model in high risk industries is ensuring safety standards, which can easily be managed by regulating the certification and audit processes currently used in other high risk

industries like, marine, airlines, etc. Apart from monopoly power, government is also facing tremendous pressure from the labour unions, which is mainly dictated by labour leaders. These leaders are successfully creating enough unsecured employment panic to generate resistance. Government can overcome those resistances by advertising the employment growth observed in industries due to private sector boost, which was impossible by any government alone within such short period of time.

No doubt, the time has come to re-evaluate the electricity supply environment and reengineer the whole delivery process. Surely government and relevant authorities are working on it, but they need to make urgent improvement in this environment to support the economic growth.

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