

Voters' right to know

FROM PAGE 25
to who is an honest and a committed candidate. We often come across a situation where an employer that takes 10 lakhs of graft describes his boss who takes 100 lakhs, as corrupt. A trader who sells adulterated oil calls one who sells adulterated sugar as dishonest. Therefore there should also be a clear definition as to who is corrupt and who is not.

The reason for this is that we often come across bank loan defaulters who have accumulated considerable wealth and property from loans taken from banks are often well placed in the society. Are they honest? Are the bureaucrats honest?

Once these definitions are framed up the public then can apply the criteria and be able to select or choose the right candidate.

Chowdhury Shahidul Islam Nayan

CPD's move today is a very noble one, but I have my doubts as to whether or not their endeavor will succeed. They are perhaps trying to achieve their goals during the elections in 2007, but their initiatives may bear fruits in 2012 or by 2017.

From the emerging guidelines here, we are perhaps visualising an election in 2012 that will be free from terrorism, will ensure public safety and security, establish a public administration that is accountable and forward looking and free from partisan influence. Let the rule of law be established on the basis of constitutional provisions through separation of the judiciary from the executive and a workable and an effective independent Judiciary.

Prof Afsar Aliy

From the discussions on the proposal we find that there are inconsistencies in our election systems and other related processes. These inconsistencies should be regulated. If the citizens are able to play that role effectively we should be able to forge ahead.

I believe that the civil society has definitely a role to play but the question is, whether they should be from outside political parties and the related political process? The civil society believes that they are certainly not outside the political arena. They also believe that healthy politics will be able to bring about ultimate desired changes for the country. We also hope that they succeed but it should be remembered that it is the politicians who are responsible for carrying forward and realising our hopes and aspirations. The main objective of the discussions we are having here today should therefore be, the strengthening of the guiding principles of the political process.

I do not think those present necessarily subscribe to the same political philosophy. They all have their different opinions. If our political parties and their leaders are able to implement the policies effectively and reach the common man, then only we can hope to see our aspirations fulfilled.

I beg to differ with Mr. Mahfuz Anam's contention that if proper elections were held much of our problems would be resolved. I believe that the electoral process should be bettered so that the opinions of the people are better reflected.

Angela Gomez

We achieved our independence in 1971. Now let us see how far have we progressed since then? We should make an assessment of the progress made so far and analyse failures as to why and how. That should be the base for our discussions with the entire civil society and the politicians. We should find out as to why adequate progress could not be achieved and proceed from their onwards keeping in mind the reasons and explanations offered by them. And then our objective should be to go ahead from the level of success achieved so far. It is our opinion that each individual has to be a good man. Each individual, whether a politician or belonging to the grass root levels, must strive to build a healthy civil society. We have to find out as to what resources we have and do not have, and what remains unutilised. I wish to express my gratitude to the politicians for moving the country towards the path of progress undergoing considerable undue tortures and oppression. Their manifestoes should be compatible to our society, the development perspectives of the country, and they in turn must be promise bound to carry forward the declared agenda. As you may know I had been living in this area for over 30 years. I had been subjected to unjust litigations, hands of those who supported me were cut off and some of them were even killed. Today I bow my head in extreme gratitude to Sharif sir. I had the privilege of having thousands like him with me for the past 30 years. I am glad to be alive despite all these. Sharif sir has often been insulted for joining with me working in the villages. He has been condemned for doing business with an unmarried Christian woman. Many of my community have been subjected to extreme harassments. Yet over 7 lakh members of the civil society today look up to me for support. This is my achievement and I believe that behind this achievement I have been greatly assisted by the civil society. If we really love our country and wish to see it progress then we should all unite rising above our petty differences and work together.

Fakir Shawkat

I do not agree that the political parties should be registered as proposed by Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya and Mahfuz Anam. You may already be aware as to the complications caused due to the registration of the trade unions in the country, giving rise to yet another platform for bureaucratic red tape. It has also created another avenue for corruption. I am against registration of the political parties aimed at regulating their activities. This proposal should therefore be stricken off. You have also talked about black money, honesty; educational qualifications of a candidate and the same time have requested people to vote for the candidate of their choice. Instead of this, to my mind the most logical thing would be to create a legal entity whereby a corrupt candidate can be identified and legal proceedings can be drawn. I would therefore urge that unless proven otherwise we should not pin point any individual having black money or money earned through illegal means. You shouldn't make any superficial or irresponsible statement that may not be acceptable to the people. This matter of black money therefore should be further examined.

It is also worth mentioning that if during these years those of you, who claim to be the representatives of the civil society, been able to identify the lawmakers who have amassed wealth and money through illegal means during these past five years, this would then have given you an opportunity to point fingers at those particular individuals and those lawmakers in turn would not have appeared before the public.

Although you have indicated that our politics and the elections do have an impact on the international scene but you have not focused on the issue of the principle of our foreign policy? You may have done this knowingly in order not to earn the displeasure of the influential. No country in the world today is outside the international order of things including Bangladesh. Today, there are a few powerful countries of the world that are dictating the political philosophies of the lesser ones, throughout the world.

We are aware that they occupy a sovereign land, kill people and children, occupy their oil resources and yet you say nothing about it. You also represent the civil society of the country and thus should have clear standing on this issue. The nation also expects a guideline framework as to what should be the basis of our foreign policy. You have talked about accountability of the political leaders. In this context you would do well to remember that, we who live in the villages and townships know the political leaders living in our localities more than you know of the political leaders living in your cities and respective localities. A political leader has to look after the interests of a rickshaw puller of his constituency as much as one caught in a legal case. Therefore a mere honest person may not be able to do all that. For a voter the right candidate and the right party is the one who will be able to protect his overall interests. Our political process is dominated by two major parties. If any one wishes to put forward a third party then one has to command a greater public following. They have to go to the people frequently. They must be well acquainted with their problems and the solutions thereof. It is now over 35 years since we gained our independence and we are yet to see any proper, realistic and comprehensive development program. Dhaka was once a district town and then it became a provincial town and now the capital of the country and yet we could not build it into a planned modern city. All our rivers are on the road to destruction and yet we have not been able to take adequate measures to save them. We have systematically ruined many of our agricultural products including fisheries. We have not been able to build a single one of our vital institutions worthy of an independent country.

A very important aspect of Bangladesh politics remains unresolved even to this day: Bangladeshi Nationalism versus Bengali Nationalism. This becomes an important issue during the elections and it divides the people into two different camps. It is important that the entire nation is united under one basic political philosophy and therefore it imperative that we should have a clear standing on the issue.

Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya

I wish to say that all at various platforms. Today at Jessore we are discussing the civil society's hopes and aspirations. We shall then proceed to Barisal, Comilla, Khulna and Sylhet where one of the issues we shall

discuss is the issue of our Foreign policy and national unity. The second question is the issue of black money, which was also raised by Manzurul Isalm Manzu, Office Secretary BANDHUSHABHA, along with Fakir Shawkat who wanted to know if the civil society would identify those having black money and release the list to the media. Our position in this regard is that in order to publish any such list we need to have credible facts and data without which such a list cannot be published on hearsay alone, otherwise it will tantamount to harassing people and we may be unduly entangled in litigations. What we have said is this, that once these facts are placed with the Election Commission and if the Commission once recognises the facts presented, there will then be no need, no real need for publication of a list for good or for worse. Those facts alone would then be sufficient for people at large to arrive at their decisions.

I also wish to point that no one has said that educational qualification is a critical criteria for a candidate. However, if you care to look at the form to be filled in by prospective candidates there is also a specific column pertaining to educational qualifications. It is relevant to remember here that the elected member will also be required to be a member of a lawmaking body at the national level. The last point I wish to raise is that, those of us who have talked about registration of the political parties in no way did mean to make the political parties hostage to bureaucracy. The deliberations made are certainly well thought out which we are happy to acknowledge.

Prof. Nargis Begum

We have in front of us the vision document of 2006 placed by the Nagorik Committee with the sincere hope that that this will meet the target of what Bangladesh should be by the year 2021. The speakers, while presenting the document, had also mentioned that in order to achieve all that we shall have to secure our sovereignty. The document however has left this point out.

There is a news item in today's dailies that India and Myanmar are secretly working for obtaining gas connections for their countries from the bottom of the sea. We have seen time and again that border forces of our neighbor have killed many of our innocent farmers. The very first thing we want is to secure our borders through firm political will and added support of the people.

We often hear about black money, many think that it is the politicians who are destroying this country, but let us not forget that it was the politicians who brought about the independence of the country. Therefore if tangible changes are to be made it has to be through the efforts of the politicians. Let us not forget that behind whatever successes we have achieved so far in the fields of education, family planning including the health sector, driving force behind them was a political force of whichever shade it may have been. We could not have achieved these successes had there been no political commitment behind it. There may have been a few individuals who have faltered, for that it will not be proper to make blanket condemnation of all politicians.

We the people however would like to see that no known ill reputed individuals of the society are involved in the development initiatives in their respective localities.

I would also point out that those who retire from the government services as secretaries and straight way enter into politics, through a process should be required to work as a member of any political party for at least a period of five years and then if he or she receives the nomination of any of the main political parties he or she will be eligible to stand for elections, this will then be fair to all those who have been in politics right from the beginning. A point has been raised at this platform that the reputation of the politicians have become questionable and is at their lowest and that they should make efforts to retrieve it. I, however, do not agree with the contention. A question has come up in the civil society with regard to dictating of terms by the powerful countries and their agencies about running the affairs of the country as per their prescription in almost all spheres of our economy and administration including as to how to hold the elections. I believe if the politicians can unite on this particular issue we can then tell them that we shall not accept any such unsolicited interference in our internal affairs.

Debapriya Bhattacharya

Let me say this that this that this Committee is also of the same opinion.

Advocate Syeda Masuma Begum

I would like point out that the outlines provided by this Committee does not have anything on the Agriculture sector.

Asaduzzaman

The voters listed at present are mostly young students from colleges and universities. As new voters they have a right to know of their rights. In what way this Committee can assist in the voting process.

Suraiya Sharif

It is but natural that half of those who are engaged in any initiative by the civil society should consist of women. But it is often seen that there is a kind of reluctance in this regard, particularly with regard to the increase in women seats in the parliament. I wish to draw the attention of those who will occupy the seat of power to give ample attention to this contentious issue.

Nurjahan Islam

People who are above self-interests and are willing to serve the country only should be nominated for the elections in 2007 and 2011. Often industrialists and ex-bureaucrats are given nominations. I believe by nominating them we cannot hope to achieve any real progress for the country.

Fazlul Haque

Dr. Debapriya has raised the issue of what kind of Bangladesh should be in



his framework outline 50 years hence. He has given a description of his vision and has also raised the relevant issues with great care.

People are the source of all power. They should be provided with due opportunities. The nation is passing through a critical stage of its existence as the election 2007 approaches. We are currently discussing various reforms including the Caretaker Government. Although the political parties have agreed on the issue but there still exists a bottleneck due to the prevalence of intolerance amongst them resulting into ineffective coordination and cooperation. Therefore since CPD represents the civil society, it should also give its due attention to this matter.

Now a days lawmakers view winning election as their ultimate achievement. They do not consider themselves as people's representatives responsible for looking after their individual interests. On the contrary, taking advantage of their position soon engage in the business of money making and fill up their pockets. In this regard there should be a system of accountability side by side legal provisions for due punishment of those found guilty.

Nayan Shikder

We have not brought into our consideration the aspect of student politics, which is usually in the hands of poor quality students who act as lackeys of political parties. Had the student community been well informed and well educated there would have been no need for raising this question of electing honest persons through such forums. Capable leaders have to come from within the political parties and at the same time a considerable awareness

has to be built amongst the civil society. There is no point in blaming the politicians alone.

Srabani Shur

We want such candidates who have no black money, do not indulge in muscle flexing and are secular in spirit. A non-secular individual may also be honest but he may not be a natural lover of humanity as a whole. On the other hand an individual who is secular in spirit will also be generous and democratic in his outlook.

Mostafa Anwar Pasha

Jhikargacha Pourashava is an old institution. In the light of that experience I believe what is first and foremost is building awareness amongst the people. Most of the people are not aware of their rights and what to expect of us. They are also inexperienced in electing their leaders.

Bangladesh has been branded as the most corrupt nation in the world for as many as five times. My question is: is it because of the politicians alone or the blame should also be on the shoulders of the officials of the government?

Prof. Muazem Hassain

I believe in today's context if we are to make any real changes in the society we need to develop our own individual character first of all. As a



teacher I believe this is the main cause behind our being rated as the most corrupt nation of the world. To me it appears that many of us are mere actors.

I am not acting. I have come to see the drama. Many people who are today described as member of the civil society are frequently seen on the TV screens. I wonder about their background. 35 years have passed since we gained our independence and yet we have not achieved our goals. I believe the main reason for this is the poor state of our politics. Many of our members of the civil society present here are well placed. They have gathered here to talk about bringing "changes". I have seen a teacher owning a house valued between two and three crores. A politician owns crores. An ordinary employee has millions.

A. Mannan Mia

Any one who will be heading a political party or wishes to form a political party should be at least a graduate and has to have experience in participating in the elections at the local level at least once.

Shahidul Islam

There is no denying the fact that black money plays an important role in the politics of Bangladesh. However, what I wish to find out if those who are fighting these black money holders are themselves free from that curse. Let me be more specific I wish to know as to whether or not, the Director of Channel 1 is holder of black money? Let him give a declaration in front of this very forum as to how much money between now and then he



has acquired, so that we can proceed with a clear idea about him? I am expecting a detailed statement from Mr. Maitur Rahman too as to how he became the Editor of Prothomo Alo from the very beginning. The aim and aspiration with which I joined the Liberation War, today I see no reflection of that anywhere. Is it because of the play and influence of black money in the society? We should take a hard look to the sources of this black money. Businessmen also control today's politics amongst others. Most of the ministers in the cabinet and MPs are businessmen. In the past those who were involved in politics were lawyers, educationists and they were honest. But gradually the control on politics has been taken over by the rich and the wealthy. Money plays an important role everywhere. If you are contesting elections you will find that people are always thronging in front of your door. They too want money for one reason or the other, someone wants money to meet expenses for his daughter's marriage, and another wants money to meet medical expenses. But I am happy to say that during the last elections a very rich man who was contesting elections spent so much money that entire Jessore was dancing behind him, but fortunately he was not elected. It was estimated that he spent as much as one crore. But he still managed to get 20 thousand votes apparently those of the floating population.

We do have the need for honest people in politics. You have my fullest support for all the issues you have raised here today.

Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya

I convey my thanks to Mr. Shhidul Islam. I do realise that there is extreme anger and frustrations in the minds of the people and hence they are likely to

raise questions of that nature wherever and whenever an opportunity presents itself. I do not think it is the responsibility of this forum to answer the questions raised by you. I run a research organisation; The Daily Star and Prothomo Alo are merely a component of that process from the media. They carry out a function from a social standpoint. It is not a part of their core responsibilities. You have unduly ventilated all your anger and frustrations on us. I am in no way taking it otherwise; on the other hand I too also nurture similar sentiments.

You have accused some people directly by wanting to know the source of their incomes. I cannot answer on behalf of others. I have said earlier that it will be highly irresponsible of us to accuse someone of dishonesty or corruption based on hearsay. The allegation has to be based on hard facts. Each individual has a place where he or she is accountable. For example I am answerable to my board of directors. Similarly, systems are in place for even those present here. On top of all these set systems there is the Board of National of Revenue. We cannot answer for each and every one. It is for this reason we have the necessary framework provided by the state. However, be rest assured that the day I decide to stand election I shall be the first one to ask for the sources of incomes of both Mahfuz Anam and Sheikh Siraj. I

am, however, of the firm opinion that whoever is seeking to be the leader of the society must be above reproach. Only then he or she shall have the right to establish the ideals for the society. Let me say with all humility that had we not had the moral courage we would not have appeared before you today.

Sayeduzzaman

I am happy to be in Jessore today. I have many old memories linking Jessore. My first posting was here in Jessore as early as 1956 when I joined the Pakistan civil service. I was appointed as assistant magistrate and collector after receiving two years of training within the country and abroad. At that time Mr. Ruhul Quddus was the district magistrate. During those days we were instructed to maintain a cordial relationship with the local elites. It was due to this I had the opportunity of knowing many personality of the locality, one of them was Khan Bahadur Lutfur Rahman who was once MSD in India, and many others like Nawsher Ali, Bazlur Ala, Abdul Huq, and Ahmed Ali Sardar. Today I recall all of them. I was able to build a cordial relationship with all of them and they grew fond of me.

I feel I should also mention one other incident. I was here on the 3rd of October in 1958 and Martial Law was declared four days after, on October 7. Many of you may recall that following the declaration of Martial law the Parliament was disbanded including many of the local government systems built by local initiatives. At that time Jessore District Board Chairman Mr. Roushan Ali was removed from service. I was appointed as Administrator in his place. My tenure of service was coming to an end; I took the responsibility with utmost seriousness. It is then I realized that given the governmental authority and adequate backup of resources and manpower one can be quite effective.

You have said that the local governments have to be strengthened. The Nagorik Committee is in full agreement with you. We have also discussed at length both our thoughts and your views regarding the forthcoming election in 2007.

At the very outset I would like to remind you of the three objectives behind our initiative: these are our political, economic and social rights as embodied in the Constitution.

Our objective is to make all citizens aware of their rights. At the same time we would hope that all conscious citizens would actively work towards building that awareness in their respective localities. The very first right as embodied in the Constitution is the establishment of a political system based on principles of democracy. Second, ensuring election of public representatives who are honest and men of principle irrespective of their party affiliations. Third, ensuring a development programme that is transparent and accountable, aimed at uplifting the economic welfare of the people.

We wish to reiterate that the political parties alone can be the only driving force behind a democracy. There is no alternative to it, alongside this we have to ensure that that political parties too have to be transparent and accountable committed to protecting the rights of the people. We have already heard about this in details from the previous speaker. By people's rights we mean establishing their voting rights, freedom to vote and eradication of poverty through appropriate development programmes. The gamut of all such activities has to be based on provisions of the constitution. In order to achieve this goal we have to have an administration that is nonpartisan, ensure establishment of rule of law and good governance.

I am certain that you will agree with us that good governance and corruption cannot exist side by side. It has not worked at least during the past fifteen years irrespective of whichever political party was in power. We have observed some success being achieved through the police, BDR and RAB, but this does not qualify for good governance. Good governance has long-term impact.

Ladies and gentlemen, There has been a rise in the growth of Bangladesh's GDP, side by side there has been an increase in our resources. We have achieved near self-sufficiency in food. There has also been an upward growth in exports including an increase in inward remittances from wage earners abroad. Everyone has made contributions towards these positive developments. But what is most noticeable is that, side by side there has been an increase in economic disparities in the society. If we take a closer look we shall see that whatever we achieved so far is due to the contributions made by our farmers, the women workers of the RMG and the our wage earners abroad. In the future we wish to see an economic