

Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

A Regional Dialogue on: "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," was held in Mymensingh on 29 April, 2006 under the joint sponsorship of CPD, The Daily Star, Prothom Alo and Channel-i. Members of the Citizens' Committee, leaders of various political parties, people belonging to various professions and from all walks of life joined the dialogue. This supplement contains the summary of the discussions. The names and identities of the participants are published below. Due to constraint of space we are not able to publish the comments of all the participants. -- Editor



Debapriya Bhattacharya
As you are aware, Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, Channel 1 and CPD have organized this dialogue. I am now placing before you in brief its background, main objectives and significance.
Prior to the 2001 election CPD formed eighteen task forces, to provide direction to the newly elected government. In order to undertake this task as many as two hundred specialists were brought together as a result of which a comprehensive report was produced. At a later time the report was discussed with the people's representatives and the government, several dialogues at regional levels were also held. During that time Prothom Alo and the Daily Star were also with CPD. Thereafter, we felt that the mere handing over of a report to the politicians and the government was not enough, what we needed to do was to keep the matter under constant review and monitoring. Or else people were likely to forget. We therefore requested all the 18 task forces to get together and evaluate the progress of implementation of the recommendations submitted by us for speeding up the development process in the country. This task was accomplished. The booklet that you have with you has, in brief, the details of what we had done during 2001 and 2003.

As the election 2007 draws close we began to think as to what could be done on behalf of the people and the civil society? We arrived at some conclusions based on our experience of 2001 and 2003. One of the conclusions we arrived at is that the recommendations we made were in effect based on the framework of the Five Year Plan development strategies of the country, that is, what should be the short term, mid term, long term development strategies, but we find no indication as to where Bangladesh will stand in terms of long term development. Formerly, even the mid-term planning was prepared for a period of 15 to 20 years, which is no longer the case now. This practice has been abandoned after the introduction of PRSP. We have found that the country has made good progress through democratic process, particularly in the last 15 years, and yet the rich-poor gap has widened in many fields, resources have been centralised, the gap between the rural and urban development has further widened. There is a marked difference between Gulshan of Dhaka, and Khulna or Mymensingh.

Therefore, it is necessary to think about what will happen to the state of our health, economy, job opportunities, unemployment, poverty eradication etc. Thinking on those lines we brought together a number of intellectuals, experienced and successful individuals from amongst the civil society, in order to formulate a vision document for Bangladesh. This is the result of that process.

Abdul Quayum
Greetings to all. Prothom Alo, along with The Daily Star, CPD and Channel-i, has gathered here today so that we are able to duly focus and present before you the hopes and aspirations of the people and implement the same for Bangladesh in the coming years.

When we were students in the 60s we saw students from Malaysia and other neighboring countries come to study at the Dhaka University, Dhaka Medical College and BUET, and now our labour forces are unable to obtain jobs in Malaysia. We have no dearth of resources and yet we are lagging far behind. On the other hand, we are also ready to sacrifice and make serious commitments and are ready to dream.

I do not think we, who are with the Nagorik Committee, either understand or know of everything. What we need to do is to project the views of the common man of the country. We shall also visit and hold similar dialogues in various other places of the country. I like the others, am here to listen to you and not to lecture.

Delwar Hossain Khan Dulu
Every government has its failures and successes. If we are able to properly analyse the causes behind the failures then only we would be able to help the people. A competent citizen can only talk about an honest and a capable candidate. Men like me who contest elections have been accused of resorting to all kinds of lies, not keeping pre-election promises and working away from the party manifesto, and that our only objective is to win elections. Citizens across the country should be made aware of these issues. It is not possible for a government to carry out all the tasks assigned to it. We therefore believe that there should be some structural changes in administrative management of the state. For example, under the existing system, the functioning of the state is vested in a government formed by a political party having majority in the parliament. The government in turn is ruled and guided by yet another government within, whom we call the bureaucracy, there could be the Election Commission, the DC, the Police Super or even others occupying various seats of administration in different capacities. These people in turn have their individual philosophies of administering, some work based on his or her personal thinking while others work on party lines.

I believe that the first and foremost thing is to stop this business of use of excessive money by candidates to win elections.

Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya
The real yardstick of honesty is the man and his honesty is proved through the process of election. The fact of the matter is that, based on certain facts and figures we call fact-based empowerment, if the people vote for the individual we shall accept their verdict and that is what democracy teaches

us. We shall have to accept people's verdict. We wish to see the manifesto of a political party as a social contract between the people and the concerned party.

Principal Matiur Rahman
Personally I wish to see an honest man elected. I have so far contested for the chairmanship of the municipality for five times, three times for membership of the parliament and am, thus, fairly experienced in this matter. No matter what amount of money a candidate spends in an election he, or she, may not be elected. It is not easy to influence public opinion, and their decisions, with money.

I do not understand what you mean by 'non-political' since there is none who is non-political. One who is not connected with active politics also votes for a candidate belonging to a particular party and hence he, too, subscribes to the party's political philosophy. No one can remain fully neutral. We have achieved independence after unprecedented sacrifices made by the people and I hope that we will now come forward to make sacrifices in order to build this country.

Advocate Mahmud-Al-Nur Tareq
We gained our independence some 34 years ago and are yet to have a proper judiciary, or an administrative system for running the country. To this day not a single "institution" has been fully functional.

I have seen a nephew of a Malaysian minister studying at the Mymensingh Agricultural University, and now see the progress and development that have taken place in Malaysia since then. We continue to lag far behind, despite the fact that we are about the only country in South East Asia for the independence of which unprecedented sacrifices were made.

Today we are facing criticism from all corners. One of the most important instruments of a state is its judiciary, but we find irregularities exist even there with regard to appointment of judges. These high profiled individuals are above everything, where as the minister himself has said that over 30 percent of our lawmakers are corrupt.

Dr. Mufakkarul Islam
We are currently more concerned about finding a competent candidate rather than merely an honest one. What we have to decide upon is a criterion for a competent candidate, particularly with reference to what kind of qualities the particular individual must have before he becomes a member of the parliament. I believe that a good deal of that responsibility of finding that right candidate should rest with the government. The government should fix a ceiling on the amount of money one is allowed to spend while contesting an election and that expenditure should be borne by the government and no one should be allowed to spend any money beyond what has been fixed. The candidates should not criticise one another. There should be a system in place making this binding on the candidates. On the other hand we find that there still exists a controversy amongst the big parties as to whether we are Bengalis or Bangladeshis. This matter should be settled outside the parliament.

Dr. Marufi Akhter Khan
The civil society should ponder the extent of the role of the minority community in the coming election. Moreover, money should not determine the suitability of a candidate. It is difficult to find an honest person, yet we continue to hope.

Abdul Quddus
The main factor in the process of locating an honest individual is an administration that believes in democracy. Even here we find that the verdict of the people is not duly reflected. What we need to do is to hold a few fair and independent elections and that alone will drive the corrupt elements out of the process. In this regard we should follow the example of our neighbor, India.

Capt. Mujibur Rahman Fakir
Today no one from the younger generation wishes to enter politics. They are not ready face the trials and tribulations that a politician has to undergo. Besides, the civil society and the intellectuals have sidelined the younger generation, yet we have to be with the people and join them in the streets and revive our past achievements. There are only 52 of us in the Parliament and when we arrive at the Parliament we find that the session still falls short of the quorum required for the session to begin. More than half of the senior lawmakers are out of the country. They are out on "business" trips. A point has been raised about fixing a criteria in order to qualify as a competent candidate. I believe that educational qualification is an important factor. As for the loan defaulters, all you have to do is look at the fleet of cars following a VIP going abroad. These are the people who constitute the majority of loan defaulters. We support the call of the 14 party-Alliance for scrapping of all the existing governing bodies of schools and colleges, including reformation of the caretaker system of government. If we want to see a reflection of the people's wishes we have to undertake reformation of the caretaker system of government and the electoral process.

Manzurul Huq
I wonder why no one is talking about the role of the political parties in order to ensure healthy growth of politics in the country? Political parties have cheated the people in many ways.
It is the responsibility of the civil society to lay open the facts that the

parties who will provide nominations have themselves deceived the people in many ways and at different times. Each of the political parties is in politics with the sole objective of being in the seat of power. They are not concerned about the competency of a candidate. All they are concerned about is to how to allure voters. Nomination is also based on this particular criterion. In all nominations the dominating factors are money, muscle power and one's standing in the society based on his family background. What we have to do is to work against this legacy.

Advocate Sultana Kamal
Many belonging to our class do not perform our duties and fulfill our obligations. Of the 14 crore the larger section of the population, the toiling masses, with its dedicated service is helping the country to move ahead starting from food production. The GDP that Dr. Debapriya refers to is, in effect, the direct outcome of the labor that these people put in. We have to be respectful to them, but instead we are constantly taking advantage of them and squandering the fruits of their labour. As a state, Bangladesh is not a failure. It is us, who are in charge of administering and distribution of our resources who have failed. I wish to point out one more thing, which is that, it is easy to criticize the politicians but one must not forget that it is they who steer the country forward facing all sorts of criticisms and harassments. I am respectful to these people. Today, we have gathered here to see our roles in the civil society and at the same time seek advice from the politicians on how best we can extend our hands of cooperation to them. Except for a handful of the collaborators, all of us participated in our War of Liberation. We know all those who fought for our liberation and those who opposed it.

I wonder why we don't speak out when our women are sold out in the Middle East, when RAB kills people right in front of our eyes leaving behind the dead body, when people like Bangla Bhai come out in the open, along with the police, with guns hanging from their shoulders? Why the spirit of the Kansat movement remains confined to the limits of Kansat only? Incidents like these had been taking place spread over a period of nearly 35 years. Why are we, the civil society, not standing up in protest against all such oppression and miscarriage of justice? If we want our elected representatives to be honest and committed we, too, have to act the same way. I, therefore, believe that it is incumbent upon us to be honest.

Advocate A. H. M. Khaliqzaman
Over 50 percent of the members of the Parliament are businessmen. It is seen that many retired members belonging to the police service and engineers contest elections by dint of their ill-gotten wealth. If the major political parties refrain from giving nominations to such people then the politicians who are dedicated to the welfare of the country will get an opportunity to be nominated and elected. Today, there has been a realization amongst the civil society that those who are representing us in the parliament are the ones who are ruining this nation and do not represent the extended civil society. These people belong to a special breed who are plundering our national resources. If we are to drive out bad people from the election arena then we need to undertake reforms of the electoral process; this in turn will free elections from the influence of black money and muscle-power.

Dr. Md. Ali Siddiqi
We hope that prior to this election, political parties will nominate honest individuals and that they would be elected through a process of free and fair election. In this context we are not thinking of individuals only. You have often seen that an independent and an honest candidate is not able to contribute much inside the parliament and, hence, we are also thinking about the parties the candidates will be representing. It is not enough for a candidate to be honest and capable, his colleagues must also be likewise. The parties nominating the candidates must also be imbued with the same spirit. The guiding spirit of a party should not be confined only to its manifesto.

Dr. Dabirul Hossain Bhuiyan
There are good and bad businessmen in the society. I am told that 93 percent of the politicians are businessmen. If politicians are businessmen then this is bound to be so. You will find that the number of honest businessmen is very meager. It is the dishonest politicians who nominate dishonest businessmen in exchange for money. This must stop.

Shahadat Hossain Himu
My suggestion is that a reform proposal be tabled here whereby an individual who loses in an election once should not be allowed to contest in future elections. On the other hand, a candidate who wins shall not be allowed to continue in office for more than two terms. This will pave the way for new leadership. Contrarily, the candidate who has failed once may ultimately return elected, but by then he, or she, might have lost all zeal and strength to fulfill his or her obligations.

Samiya Tarannum Anannya
As a member of the present generation I wish to raise a question at this forum. Let us suppose that in a democratic election out of 100 voters 70 cast their votes and 30 refrained from voting. Out of the 70, 40 voted for the successful candidate and the rest voted for the other candidates. In that case, it can very well be said that the winning candidate does not carry the majority of the electorate.

We constantly hear of honesty. My question is what do you mean by honesty? Is it honesty in money matters or the overall character or the individual's mentality? On the other hand what is meant when you talk of competency or qualification, do you mean educational qualification or something else?

Farhana Ferdousi Newaz
Like every individual has an election symbol there should a provision of a "no vote" in the ballot paper so that we can put a tick mark on the specified space against a particular candidate who we do not wish to see elected.

Abdul Matin Sarker
Sponsors of the forum have said that the country is moving forward and succeeding. I wish to ask them in what way? During the past government the country was once identified as the most corrupt nation of the world whereas, during the four years of this government, Bangladesh has again topped the list of corrupt countries of the world. Is this the way we are progressing?

There are twelve constituencies in Mymensingh. We are twelve elected representatives working here belonging to different political parties. It is quite possible to make a survey of individual properties and their assets and find out who is corrupt and who is not. The deliberations made here should reach the politicians. Then only this forum will achieve success and will be result oriented.

Prof. Rokeya Begum
If we are able to talk freely as in this forum, we shall achieve success. If we all abide by obligations and commitment to our individual professions, whatever they may be, the country will progress. Alongside, there is one important factor we should take note of, which is, the need for a congenial environment in order to meet one's professional obligations.

Engineer Md. Shamsul Huq
I wish to say that I agree with the comments made by the honorable member of the parliament, Mr. Delwar Hossain, as to how one can have an honest administration if there are no honest citizens in the country? Second, he has also said that it would be unfair for a pourashaha chairman to be sacked. I am also in agreement with him. If an engineer is a chairman, then he or she should be removed from the position only with the consent of the people.

Fakhrul Islam
I liked very much the framework presented by Dr. Muhammad Yunus. The proposal put forward by him had two distinct components. First, the Nagorik Committee was to prepare a list of honest people from amongst the conscious members of the civil society. Second, take measures so that they can be nominated. Now it appears that the Committee has shifted

from that position. I wish to ask why? Are they afraid? Frankly, it is indeed a difficult task to nominate an honest candidate since it is linked to economics and power.

Sujit Barman
There has been much talk about honesty of candidates at this forum but I wish to point out that this is also dependent on the political philosophy of the party nominating the candidate. No one here has commented on that aspect. If, today, a candidate is otherwise honest but opposes our independence should we call him an honest person? A person who has little regard for our Constitution, and does not believe in protecting human rights, can be anything but a competent candidate.

Imdadul Huq Milon
There have been many arguments and counter arguments on the speech made by Dr. Muhammad Yunus but the fact remains that you have succeeded in bringing about pressure on the political parties for nominating honest candidates. This is certainly a good beginning. If a candidate is nominated about 6 months to a year ahead of the election, the scope for squandering money becomes less and less. This in turn narrows down the scope for indulging in corrupt practices. If the process of nomination is set in motion well ahead of time, there will be less chances of money coming into play.

Advocate Nurul Islam Chunnun
As per Article 70 of the Constitution no MP can speak against his, or her party in the Parliament. If he or she does make a move then there is every possibility that the MP's membership may be scrapped. I think there should be a call from this platform informing the public about the need for an amendment to this Act.

Let me now say few words on the caretaker system of government. In the year '96, when the 3-Party Alliance Government came to power, it was unilaterally passed into Act by that government. There was hardly any scope for the opposition parties to express their points of view. We now find that this system has led to politicisation of the Judiciary. It has thus led to politicisation of administration at every step of recruitment, from appointment of a temporary judge down to the Chief Justice.

As for corruption, nearly all leaders of all the political parties are involved in corruption.

Ameer Ahmad Chowdhury Ratan
Following the downfall of the autocratic regime in 1991 we embarked on a movement for electing honest people through creating public awareness. As a part of that venture we have visited each of the district towns and cities.

We had positive response everywhere. You have more opportunities and access to reach the doors of the political leaders compared to us. You have to go to them and influence them to nominate honest people. Only then you will succeed in your endeavor.

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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

1. Prof. Jatin Sarkar, (Chairperson), writer and cultural personality.
2. Delwar Hossain Khan Dulu, MP, Mymensingh Sadar.
3. Prof. Matiur Rahman, President, District Awami League, Mymensingh.
4. Advocate Mahmud-al-Nur Tareq, Chairman, Mymensingh Municipality.
5. Dr. Mufakkarul Islam, Principal, Community based Medical College, Mymensingh.
6. Dr. Marufi Akhter Khan, Professor, Shaheed Nazrul Islam College, Mymensingh.
7. Abdul Quddus, Principal Officer, Bangladesh Krishi Bank, Mymensingh.
8. Captain Doctor Mujibur Rahman Fakir, MP, Gouripur.
9. Monzurul Huq, General Secretary, District BNP, Mymensingh.
10. Advocate Sultana Kamal, Executive Director, Ain O Shalish Kendra.
11. Advocate A. H. M. Kamruzzaman, Convener, SHUJON, Mymensingh.
12. Dr. Md. Ali Siddiqui, General Secretary, BMA, Mymensingh.
13. Dr. Dabirul Hossain Bhuiyan, President, Mymensingh Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
14. Shahadat Hossain Himu, President, FEMA, Mymensingh Branch.
15. Samiya Tarannum Anannya, student, Mumenunnessa College, Mymensingh.
16. Farhana Ferdousi Newaz, Supervisor, JANIPOP.
17. Abdul Matin Sarkar, MP, Trishal and General Secretary, District Awami League.
18. Rokeya Begum, Professor, Teacher's Training College, Mymensingh.
19. Md. Shamsul Huq, Engineer, Bangladesh Power Development Board.
20. Fakhrul Islam, Presidium Member, Jatiyo Party.
21. Sujit Barman, Secretary, Workers Party, Mymensingh.
22. Imdadul Huq Milon, General Secretary, CPB, Mymensingh.
23. Advocate Nauru Islam Chunnun, Joint Secretary, JSD, Mymensingh.
24. Amir Ahmed Chowdhury Ratan, Convener Shammilito Shanskritic Jote, Mymensingh.
25. Md. Jainal Abedin Khan, Prof. Mymensingh Agriculture University.
26. Kazi Rana, Convener, BNP, Mymensingh Town Committee.
27. Md. Mukarram Hossain, retired Prof. Teachers Training College, Mymensingh.
28. Advocate Shibir Ahmed Liton, Joint Secretary General, Gonotantrik Ainjibi Forum.
29. Syed Manzur Elahi, former Advisor to the Caretaker Government and Chairman, Apex Group.
30. Shaikh Siraj, Director, Transmission, Channel-i.
31. Agdocate Anisur Rahman Khan, District Nagorik Unnayan and Sangarcam Parishad.
32. Prof. Md. Shamsul Islam, Shachetan Nagorik Committee, Mymensingh.
33. Abidur Reza, Professor, Mymensingh Agriculture College.
34. Dr. Shah Monwar Hossain, former Deputy Director, Directorate of Health.
35. Rajat Chowdhury Joy, cultural activist.
36. Reza Ali, Member, Advisory Committee, Bangladesh Awami League.
37. Principal Md. Jalal Hossain.
38. Ariful Islam, student, Department of Economics, A. M. College.
39. Prof. Mujibur Rahman (Retd.).
40. Monira Begum Onu, teacher, Mukul Niketan High School.
41. Priyotosh Biswas Babul, teacher, Dhahirpar High School, Mymensingh.
42. Md. Gholam Mostafa, field worker, RDRS, City Project, Mymensingh.
43. Luffar Rahman Khan, former Prof. teacher's Training College, Mymensingh.
44. Pijush Kanti Sarkar, lawyer, Judge's Court, Mymensingh.
45. Abdul Motaleb Lal, lawyer, Judge's Court, Mymensingh.
46. Anwar Abedin Tuhiin, General Secretary Zilla Krishak League.
47. Hassanul Alam, student, A. M. College, Mymensingh.
48. Abdul Quayum, Joint Editor, Prothom Alo.

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