

Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

A Regional Dialogue on: "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," was held in Barisal on 27 May, 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 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

Deabapriya Bhattacharya

In the preparation of its "vision" document Nagorik Committee will work from three premises. First, people's aspirations: the committee will try to focus on people's perception of Bangladesh that they wish to see in simple words. Second: we will try to discuss the factors that should be added to the political process of socio-economic order to achieve the aspirations of the people. Thus, when a clearer picture emerges, we shall try to put forward before the government a program of implementation as to what

should be accomplished in the first 100 days, then in three months and, finally, in a full year. Subsequently, we shall present the document to the political parties, and the politicians, for inclusion of the points in their respective manifestoes. Each political party shall prepare its own manifesto. We, on our part, hope to prepare a national manifesto based on your recommendations.

As you are aware, we started this program of dialogue through an opening ceremony held at Dhaka on 20 March. A number of Nagorik Committee members of 2006 also spoke on the occasion. One such eminent speaker was Dr. Md. Younus. One of his remarks, and parts of his speech, subsequently, were subjected to criticism. He spoke on behalf of the Nagorik Committee calling upon the people to give their verdict against professional politics. This was purely his personal opinion and not part of a formal speech. We should look for the essence of his remarks only. In the coming election we should encourage participation of honest, capable and courageous candidates. We believe that politicians alone should be engaged in politics, while the civil society should join them in order to establish the rights of the people. A question has come up as to who is the right candidate in terms of honesty and capability? We have emphasised a number of times that those are the candidates in whose favour people will cast their votes. We also have to accept the verdict of the people without any reservation whatsoever. But what we have to ensure is that the people are well informed about the candidates they are going to vote for. In order to select a capable candidate the mere selection of a candidate will not suffice, we also need to reform the electoral system.

You have been given the details of the needed reforms of the electoral and the political process printed in papers of two different colours. We shall appreciate it if you could kindly drop your written comments in the box. The papers you have in your possession are a compilation of the dialogues held so far at Comilla, Jessore and Mymensingh.

Dr. Capt (ret) Sirajul Islam

During our childhood we were told that democracy is: of the people, by the people and for the people but now the definition of democracy has changed, it is confined to leaders only. I am certain you all know why I have used the word "leaders". Since there is hardly any existence of democratic culture in any of the political parties I am doubtful about the extent to which democracy will flourish in this country. Besides, presently there is a competition between political parties to turn their parties into family concerns. I believe that in order to bring about a change in the prevailing state of the country each of the political parties has to proceed relying on its own committed workers.

Advocate Talukder Md. Younus

Every man has his aspirations and needs. However, it looks as though, in our case, there is no end to it. All we want is money and more money. Currently we are passing through a serious shortage in power supply. The other day I saw in a local daily that due to non production of power, after having spent Tk. 16 thousand crores, we ran into a shortfall of 1500 MW. Who will answer for this? Due to total absence of accountability we are not able to change the fate of the nation, although some individuals are able to bring a change in their fortunes. I am in agreement with the Civil Society's standing on the issue of black money.

Corrupt people must be brought to justice. Although an independent Corruption Commission has been set up, over the past year and a half, it has not been able to institute a single case of corruption.

Dr. Mizanur Rahman

It is my earnest request to all parties that they should give the opportunity to an elected government to continue to hold its office for the entire term. Whether they should be re-elected, or not, should be left to the people. It is but natural that those who fail to deliver, and are not able to meet people's aspirations, will not be re-elected.

We have seen that the political parties often nominate people with black money, or ex-bureaucrats. This, in turn, results in huge expenditures during elections that later indirectly affect our budget. It is due to this undue impact on the budget that we frequently confront rising prices in the market place. I am not holding any individual responsible for it, but certainly there is a link between black money and rising costs.

Nurul Alam Farid

The civil society has to stand united against this curse where the elected representatives go back on their promises. Together we must raise the issue with the respective political parties. We wish to see honest people elected who would speak out about the welfare of the people.

Businessmen, who virtually control the entire business of the country, often lend money to nominees to meet the high costs of elections with the sole objective that, once elected, they will not only realize the money "invested" but also reap other benefits during the five year tenure of the concerned representatives. Our appeal is that both, the Election Commission and the Anti Corruption Commission be empowered to function freely.

Mir Muniruzzaman

We often hear that so and so is a good candidate yet at the same time people say that he, or she, would not be able to win the election. It is up to the political parties to remove this confusion and hesitation from the minds of the people. This is one of the reasons why people with black money are getting elected. In the past we have seen that school-teachers, professors and lawyers had been elected to the Parliament. We no longer see teachers, lawyers and professors coming forward to contest election. Businessmen have replaced them. There should be a reversal of this situation. Both, the ruling party and the opposition, are encouraging black money holders with the result that those actively engaged in field level politics are not getting nominations.

Rabeya Khatun

Here we have talked about capability of a candidate, to which I also wish to add that he, or she, must also be honest, intelligent, just and, above all, a patriot. The voters, too, have to be honest.

We have discussed about the equal role of both men and women in elections. My question is, do we have an equal role for men and women? Out of 101 members of the political parties only five are women.

Second, we have seen that religious minorities barely exist, having no fundamental rights. Hardly a year passes when they are not fleeing the country. The oppression of the minorities is geared up right after the election. This has to be stopped, and the political parties have to undertake that responsibility. While the local governments have been made ineffective, the Union Parishads are no longer functioning; even the Upazila Parishads are closed down, even though there is a clear provision for Upazila Parishad in the constitution. This is simply due to the fact that all powers are concentrated in the hands of MPs.

AKM Shaheen

It is my apprehension that people having money, industrialists having muscle power, and people who have never been in politics may get nominations in the coming election. It is my request that this should not be allowed.

Under the present critical state of power supply, being an officer of the Power Board, I wish to recommend that each of the districts be provided with a small generating unit capable of producing 10 to 20 MW of electricity. This will solve the electricity problem of the respective district. Each of the owners of the unit will independently operate for the respective



districts. This will also make the work of the Power Development Board easier.

Nigar Sultana Honufa

My question is that half of our voters are women and if the number of seats for them is not increased then how can there be a competent candidate contesting election?

In the next session of the parliament the number of seats for women in the Parliament has to be raised to 100.

Advocate Munira Begum

We, who are trying to establish the rights of women, realize that a democratic environment is essential for our efforts to succeed. As a matter of fact, in the absence of any democratic culture, rights of no one can be established. It is, therefore, imperative that the next election be free and fair, and for that the civil society has to work collectively.

Sultana Kamal

We have forgotten to appreciate the efforts of any one. Whenever some one takes an initiative we become suspicious of him, and begin thinking that there must be an evil motive behind it. This is reflective of the fact that we have lost confidence in our own selves. It is my responsibility to see that honest and capable individuals govern the country. A question is often raised as to who would ensure this. The answer to that is we shall all collectively undertake that responsibility.

Prof. Md Hanif

There are many conscious citizens beyond this forum in the rural areas; I believe we should exchange ideas with them too.

While the development of Bangladesh is based on agriculture, its future lies in the growth of industry. I would request Mr. Deabapriya to include industry, too, alongside agriculture. With financial management comes the issue of the labour policy. RMG is our main item of industrial export; hence there should be a clear statement on the labour policy for its work force. Finally there should be a balanced representation in the Parliament based on various categories of profession.

M. Muazzam Hossain

At a time when everything in the country is on the verge of breaking down, river routes are being manipulated and narrowed down, the canals are being reduced to the size of narrow drains, the democratic character of politics is being turned into family politics, I welcome the venture undertaken by the Nagorik Committee. The Parliament, the Election Commission and the political parties are all interconnected with one another. Therefore, reforming of one will yield no results.

Dr. Syed Habibur Rahman

I would request that three issues receive our attention at this forum: health, education and agriculture. If we can develop these three sectors we shall be able to achieve economic emancipation. We all know that our farmers are not receiving subsidies. Even the finance minister has acknowledged that the farmers are not the receiving the due subsidies. If the numerous systems of education, like the madrasa, cadet and the regular school systems continue, we shall never be able to improve the quality of our education. We should have a firm and definite education policy. It is unfortunate that we could not produce an education policy in 35 years.

Md. Ebaedul Huq Chan

Whoever goes to power considers that the secretariat belongs to him, and his party, and all trophies and lofty titles are his. But as soon as he joins the ranks of the opposition, he says that the people are the source of all power.

We have to discuss the issue of electing honest candidates. We should discuss what should be the qualities of an honest candidate. We have to reject the culture of religious extremism now in vogue in the country. We need to eradicate poverty. Every one has to be recognised for whatever little contribution he, or she, can make towards the development of the country.

S. M. Iqbal

I believe that many of us are thinking along those lines. There is no reason for despair despite the fact that we have to cross many hurdles before we can achieve our goals. Once we start the process people will ultimately rise to the occasion.

Syed Dulal

I wish to add to the Nagorik Committee's suggestions on the Election Commission that on the last day of the election campaign a joint meeting should be conducted, under the auspices of the Election Commission, where candidates of all parties will make a declaration of their overall personal conduct and honesty, and the way they will be accountable to the people once elected. Also to make a clear statement as to how they would work for the people of their respective constituencies.

There is no budgetary allocation for development in the fields of culture and drama. Even where the issue of our aspirations has been discussed there is not a single word about the development of drama.

Advocate Manabendra Batbyal

As a student of law I believe that in order to ensure accountability we have to establish the rule of law first. I am sure all of you have seen a news item in the TV wherein it has been shown that a bunch of people in Sylhet were going in a procession, with arms in their hands in broad day light, while the police and RAB merely stood by as spectators. On the other hand if I oppose this inaction of the law enforcers I shall be a victim of crossfire. If this is the situation then it will be difficult for us to come out of the prevailing state of affairs. It is indeed unfortunate that a number of military dictatorships have ruined our entire social order. It is they who are responsible for the present state of our country. Every time a candidate contests an election, and gets elected under a party manifesto, but (once elected) does not abide by the party manifesto. The time has come to ask each of these elected representatives as to what extent they have fulfilled the commitments made to the people, based upon which the people had voted in their favour? As educated citizens we should be able to ask this question, or else our frustrations will continue. When we find that our lawmakers are called Mr. ten percent, a lobbyist or brokers of Khas lands, we are ashamed of ourselves as citizens.

Deabapriya Bhattacharya

Currently we are in the midst of discussing the manifestoes of the political parties. Once we complete these Nagorik dialogues we shall put forward the party manifestoes. This will be the main subject of work for CPD during the months of August and September.

Nikhil Sen

We all have to be imbued with the spirit that we all have some specific duties to perform. It is not enough to put the entire blame on the politicians. The politicians are no angels, they are human beings just like us. Here amongst us, we have intellectuals, and various categories of professionals, teachers, students, and journalists including lawyers. Let us ask ourselves as to whether or not we have fulfilled our obligations to the nation?

It is written here that religious minorities and various ethnic groups have equal rights. If you talk of equal rights then we have to bring changes to our Constitution. You will possibly argue by saying that Muslims are a majority in the country, my question then would be as to how a country, with a large distribution of population consisting of Buddhist, Christians, Jews, could be based on one single religion? Only the other day a small country like Nepal has turned into a secular one. Why are we distorting facts by saying that secularism means absence of religion. For all practical purposes religion is the heart of our souls. Why should a country, 90 percent of whose population are Muslims, require a constitutional seal of approval as a state religion? After what the minorities had been undergoing for the last 45 years who can talk of equality. If these inequalities are to be removed we have to bring about major changes in the society.

Md. Ahsan Habib Kamal

CPD, during its initiative on Election 2007, had once indicated that had it initiated the dialogue earlier there could be a possibility of discussing about holding an interim election. I believe it should not nurture such an idea. Admittedly, such a move could have reduced further looting of resources but at the same time it would have hindered the pace of development. Democracy is "Of the people, for the people and by the people". It has now become "Of the pocket, for the pocket, by the pocket". This is the condition of our country today. I would request the sponsors to turn their attention to the politicians of the past, and the present, who have amassed unprecedented wealth. At present we have 345 persons belonging to that category. A list should also be made of people of the past. Once you have compiled such a list, it should be made public. This will result in making the election transparent.

Mohsinul Islam Habul

Even after 35 years, our poor have become poorer. Whoever occupied the seat of power had amassed wealth through unfair means. In line with the previous speaker I wish to say that those who were in charge of administering the country have systematically plundered the wealth of the country. The looted resources should be returned to the national treasury. I am a teacher of economics and as far as I know most countries are under free market system, but I am of the opinion that this is not good for our economy.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

1. Prof. Syed Aminul Huq (President), Distinguished Educationist
2. Dr. Capt. (Retd) Sirajul Islam, Social worker and former Assistant Prof. Burial Medical College.
3. Advocate Talukder Md. Younus. President, Barisal Zilla Ainjibi Samity.
4. Dr. Mizanur Rahman, Member Secretary, Braisal Nagorik Samaj.
5. Nurul Alam Frid, Joint Convener, Barisal Muktiyodha Sangsad, Barisal District Command.
6. Mir Muniruzzaman, President, Barisal Reporter's Unity.
7. Ismail Hossain, Convener, Shachetan Nagorik Committee.
8. Mintu Basu, General Secretary, Barisal Nagorik Committee.
9. Rabeya Khatun, Vice President, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Barisal Branch.
10. Anwar Zahid, Executive Director, ICDA and President NGO Development Network.
11. A. K. M. Shaheen, former Executive Engineer, Power Development Board.
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20. Ishaq Ali Mizan, Executive Director, YES Bangladesh
21. Rahima Sultana Kajal, Social worker.
22. Advocate Nazrul Islam Rajon, General Secretary, District BNP
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24. Prof. Md Hanif, former Principal, B.M. College, Barisal.
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26. Dr. Syed Habibur Rahman, President, Zilla Manbadhikar Jote.
27. Md Ebaedul Huq Chan, President, Barisal Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
28. S. M. Iqbal, President, Barisal Press Club.
29. Syed Dulal, President Member, Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation.
30. Advocate Manabendra Batbyal, former President, Zilla Ainjibi Samity.
31. Nikhil Sen, distinguished educationist.
32. Md. Ahsan Habib Kamal, former Mayor, Barisal City Corporation.
33. Mohsinul Islam Habul, Organizing Secretary, Central Committee of Jatiyo Party and President Zilla Jatiyo Party.
34. Kaniz Fatema, part-time intern, JONIPOP.
35. Abul Hoassian Zahir, President, ADAB.
36. Nasim-Ul-Alam, Bureau Chief, The Daily Inquilab.
37. Akkas Hossain, organizer, Freedom Fighter and General Secretary, Barisal Shahitya Parishad.
38. Sheikh Abdul Quader, Presidium Member, Bangabandhu Ainjibi Samity.
39. Begum Faizunnahar, Lecturer, Barisal Islamia College.
40. Md. Manirul Islam, student, B. M. College.
41. Alhajj. Abdur Razzaq, President, Barisal Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
42. Nur Jahan Begum, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.
43. Jiban Krishna Dey, President Khelaghar, Barisal Branch
44. Shamsuddin Kamal, organizer
45. Bir Pratik Mohiuddin Manik, President, Bangladesh Human Rights Forum
46. Advocate Shahida Talukder, BLAST, Barisal
47. Advocate Md. Tofazzal Huq C howdhury, Freedom Fighter
48. Bazlur Rashid Howlader, President Association of Field Level District Health Workers
49. Chittaranjan Baroi, Vice President City Bank Ltd
50. M. Gholam Salek, President Bus Owners' Association and President Metropolitan City BNP
51. Abdus Sattar, member, Central Committee, Bangladesh Workers' Party.
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63. Shamim Azad, Reporter, Finanical Express.
64. Raffiqul Alam, Reach to Un-reached (RUN).
65. Mintu Kumar Kar, President, Shornali Shilpa Sangstha.
66. Kazi Enayet Hossain, Executive Director, SKOP.
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