

Say no to black money

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M. Gholam Salek

We believe in democracy but at the same time we have to be in the seat of power. I believe in the form of democracy that will help me achieve my desired goal. But at the same time we should indulge in such politics and election that are reflective of the people's wishes, and help elect people of their choice. Therefore, let us support that capable candidate

Abdus Sattar

CPD has presented before us as to what should be the face of Bangladesh in the year 2021, but I wish to see that even earlier. The path for that has been shown by the people of Kansat, and our RMG workers, who make about 930 takas a month as wages, whereas the owners have made crores in profits by cheating on taxes. Many of them subsequently appear on the scene as candidates contesting elections. Appropriate measures should be taken against all such individuals. The present government has let black money holders off the hook after collecting a mere 7 percent in taxes. Let us identify the black money holders. A list should be prepared and actions must be taken against them. As soon as you declare Islam as the state religion the rest of the people, belonging to other religious faiths, become second class citizen. We demand scrapping of this provision from our Constitution.

Advocate Abdul Hye Mahbub

In the past when Pakistan was conspiring to destroy our culture, the intellectual community came forward to resist. Many of them gave their lives in 1971 and we gained our independence. Our politicians had assumed that these forces no longer existed. Taking advantage of this, the defeated political elements killed Sheikh Mujibar Rahman and promulgated Martial Law. My question is where was the Nagorik Committee at that time when all military and civil administration was trampling the passage of honest political process based on democratic principles? I am tempted to ask the leaders of the Nagorik Committee as to why they chose to remain silent at that time?

We need to say in clear terms whether or not the policy guidelines, that are often laid out by IMF and World Bank for running the country, are tantamount to interference in our internal affairs and whether they have the right to do so?

Debapriya Bhattacharya

The way the politicians are talking it seems as though we have undertaken the sole responsibility of putting everything in order, but as a matter of fact we have stood behind them, with their explicit consent, keeping full faith in their leadership. All you have to do is to go through the life sketches of each of the members of the committee, then you would come to know as to who contributed what during the various critical stages of the country. We have inducted each one of them into the committee after considerable thought, and taking into consideration their contributions, to the society. On the one hand you say that they have made no contributions on the other you are ready to describe them as the "conscience" of the nation. You cannot say two different things at the same time.

Advocate Hiran Kumar Das

Although a provision exists for boycotting the Parliament but, in my opinion, since Parliament is the only platform where one could talk about issues of people's interests, no elected MP should be allowed to abstain from the Parliament. If an MP feels that he, or she, can no longer repose trust in the Parliament, he, or she, should resign.

M. Hafizuddin Khan

It was quite possible for us to raise our per capita income to a thousand dollar but this has not been so due to lack of good governance. For establishing good governance we need to reform the Election Commission, the passage of electoral process etc. We have come here to listen to your opinions and discuss matters and exchange views with you.

The Election Commission had earlier prepared a voter list spending Tk.

160 crores which it has apparently misplaced. But we have a copy with us. Subsequently the Commission prepared yet another list, spending another Tk. 160 crores which has since been rejected by the people. As one belonging to the accounting profession I would say that the people responsible for this should be punished. Registration of political parties at present is optional but this should be made mandatory. As you all know we have topped the list of corrupt nations consecutively for five times. Although there is an independent anti-corruption commission, it has failed. Despite that we visited the commission on behalf of the Nagorik Committee. We asked the commission to carefully scrutinize the income tax returns submitted by those seeking to contest the election, and ascertain the correctness of the details provided.

Syed Gholam Mahmood

For 30 long years I served as a Commissioner of Barisal City Corporation and as Acting Chairman. Here you have talked about National Election 2007. I do not agree with you and wish to see the holding of local elections prior to that.

Mr. Mukherjee resigned from the party due to the failure of his party; Sonia Gandhi resigned after having been accused of receiving money from a profit making state enterprise. Later she was re-elected. Can we not create such examples?

Advocate Mujibar Rahman Talukder

My proposal is that reform of the electoral process should have the provision of a constituency to be based proportionate to the population in a specific locality.

Dr. A. K. M. Mukhlesur Rahman

If every common man realized that this was his country then this would not have been the condition of our country. Step by step we have lost that sense of belonging and the entire administrative control is now in the hands of the government. Today, the big political parties own us. We have to retrieve our rights. Unless a free and fair election is held we shall not be able to judge the honesty and competency of a candidate.

Enayet Pir Khan

It is indeed a shame for us that, today, politicians are tagged to corruption. Surely it is the politicians who will run the affairs of the state. It is they who will formulate the laws. However, prior to the election in 2007, we should consider what 2006 holds for us. People of the country in 2006 are in a state of shock and worried. The prices of essentials in the market are rising at an alarming rate going beyond the reach of the common man. There is scarcity of electricity, water and gas for domestic consumption. The country is on the verge of collapse. 73 percent profit earning RMG industry is on the way to ruination. This is the background against which we are going to hold the election of 2007. Mr. Aziz, the CEC, along with a few corrupt and partisan commissioners, is leading the country to destruction. In order to come out of this state of affairs our politicians have to play the key role. Bangladesh has a rich political heritage. Politicians have conducted politics with honesty and wisdom. But one of my friends pointed out to me that as many as four Martial Law Governments have pushed our country to ruination. Some one has said that Bangabandhu had forgiven the collaborators, but surely he did not forgive rapists and murderers.

Mujibar Rahman Sarwar

The Election Commission must be made accountable and it should be given adequate independent authority.

We are passing through a difficult time. The society stands divided. We must turn it into a unified one. Will the CPD undertake the task? It is the responsibility of the political parties to nominate competent candidates. A competent candidate is he who wins the election.

Since it is the people who will elect honest candidates, it is important that we also create awareness amongst them so that they are able to elect the

right candidate. The main task ahead of us is development and for that we need to have a national consensus. A question has come up about ex-civil servants joining politics. We believe that if he, or she, first joins a political party at thana or district level, and later contests election, then it would be more acceptable.

I believe we have achieved considerable development. But what we want is a balanced development. It is an impossible task to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of everyone. If people unite on the question of their overall interests then it may be possible to achieve that goal. Today we, the politicians, have come under severe criticism simply because we have deviated from the path of our stated goal. It is the politicians who are responsible for upholding our independence, sovereignty, people's welfare and the Parliament etc. Therefore, if we are able to bring all the politicians on a single platform for a meaningful dialogue, it may be possible to solve many of the problems accumulated to date. It is my belief that the current initiative for electing a competent candidate will have a positive impact on the common man.

Debapriya Bhattacharya

You have said that we had held discussions in Comilla, Jessore and Mymensingh and that we should now hold a dialogue with the politicians and the parliamentary committees. My point is that we can have a dialogue only when you tell the politicians likewise.

Sajjad Sharif

I would hope that the issues that will ultimately emerge from the various Nagorik dialogues will work as a milestone for us so that in time to come we can look back and find directions for the future.

Prof. Syed Aminul Huq

I believe, from the discussions held, a direction has emerged and for that reason I believe that this dialogue has been a success. But it is true that each one of us must have the opportunity of carrying out his, or her, individual responsibilities.

Although laws exist against money laundering then how is it possible to turn black money into white? I believe we should come to a point of understanding on this issue. We have suggested that a list should be prepared of all black money holders. In this regard I wish to draw your attention to the ruling given by the High Court, in 2005, about the kinds of details that have to be provided by a candidate. If the details, as specified in the law, are provided properly then everything will come to light. The EC has to ensure that this law is implemented in full. Besides, the EC has to be neutral and considerably powerful.

Most of our development interventions are city based whereas majority of our people live in the villages, hence, if we are to have an all round development we need to involve all those poor people of the villages. We have achieved many things in this country, but we have failed to achieve two important things: First no government has ever undertaken any special initiative to build citizens of character, second, we have failed to create leaders, and leadership, capable of salvaging us from this debilitating state of affairs and creating opportunities for us to live in a healthy environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE DIALOGUE (ABRIDGED)

Political reforms

- In order to drive people with black money out of election arena and elect honest and capable candidates, alongside reforming of the Election Commission we need to bring about reforms in politics.
- Each of the political parties has to rely more on its honest and dedicated workers than its muscle power.
- The opportunity created in the last budget for turning black money into white has to be rescinded since it will encourage the use of black money.
- There should be a compulsory provision for retired Secretaries and Army Generals to enter politics at local levels, and work there for at minimum of five years.
- The political parties have to shun the path of conflict between themselves and refrain from enforcing hartals. They have to resolve their problems through dialogue and discussion. The legacy Opposition is making through boycotting of the Parliament is decreasing the possibilities of removing the differences of opinion in the future.
- We are still reeling under a 1500 MW shortage of power supply despite the fact that, to date, as much as 1600 crores of taka have been spent out of the budgetary provision of 2006. There should be a provision for transparency of operations of the government on all such issues.
- Educational qualification is a vital factor for the MPs since they are engaged in formulating, analysing, revising and implementing laws for the country.
- There has to be a regular office at all levels of the union of the concerned MP so that he can make himself aware of people's concerns and their problems.
- Success of the election is dependent upon two factors, first to influence the political parties to nominate honest and capable candidates, second to create an extensive awareness to that effect amongst the public. The grass root level workers have to bring about pressure at the central leaders of the political parties to sit on the table and discuss. In other words we, the citizens, have to be honest and take due initiative in order to ensure accountable development and proper holding of election.
- 90 percent of our people live in villages, and the regional dialogues also have to be extended to villages and not confined to divisional towns only.

Election Commission and reforming of the electoral process

- In order for the Election Commission to carry out all the Constitutional obligations vested with it, it needs to be strengthened. In this regard the honesty of purpose, and neutrality of those engaged in the task of running the operations of the Commission, is of vital importance.
- The national Board of revenue could be entrusted with the task of reviewing the taxes paid by the candidates, and the history of their possible involvement in corruption.
- Preparation of the voter list should be a continuous process. Preparing a new list each time prior to the election is time consuming and results in wastage of government funds. People responsible for wasting over 160 crore takas in data collection of voters should be identified.
- For the holding of a proper election voter ID cards should be issued. This will reduce the chances of casting false votes.
- Arrangements have to be made for election campaigns to be conducted by the state, where all the candidates will address the people from a single platform. This will, in turn, put a stop to the use of black money and muscle power.
- If the people do not find a competent candidate to vote for, they should have the opportunity of casting a "no" vote. If more than 50 percent "no" votes are registered against a candidate, there should be a provision for holding a re-election, and at the same time people should have the right to bring a vote of no confidence against the particular candidate.
- The cancellation of the present voter list has created doubts about the competence and the working of the Election Commission. It will, thus, be only appropriate for the Chief election Commissioner to resign voluntarily in the interest of free and fair election.
- Women are under-represented in the Administrative systems of the country. The women's seats at the Parliament should be raised to 100.
- In order to ensure proper and fair election an observation team needs to be constituted consisting of members from the civil society.