

Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

A Regional Dialogue on: "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," was held in Sylhet on 17 June, 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

Debapriya Bhattacharya
In 2001 CPD took an initiative keeping in view the then election, in order to advise the next government on how to run its affairs, on the basis of its discussions with the members of the civil society. A development agenda was formulated through the collective efforts of 18 Task Forces and as many as 200 experts. This concept of a development agenda was a novel one at that time. As you all know, when Justice Shahabuddin was the President of the country, one such document was also prepared with the initiative of Rehman Sobhan during the tenure of the first neutral Caretaker Government, and then the one in 2001 at CPD's initiative. A discussion was also held on the matter in Sylhet. I am happy to see that many who were present at that time are also present here today. As a sequel to the dialogue of 2001 we tried to hold a follow up dialogue in 2003 in order to assess how many of the recommendations were effected and accepted by the Government. We then thought about new ideas that could be presented, based on experience so far gained and keeping in view the forthcoming election in 2007.

In our present endeavour we brought into focus a few other issues. We usually put forward our recommendations keeping in view

the five-year tenure of the government whereas we found that it is not possible for any government to solve, or attend to, all the problems of governance in five years. On the other hand, under the present system, there is no provision for mid-term planning. You all know that the poverty reduction strategy, PRSP, is based on a three-year basis, which also does not have any provision for a mid-term revision for consideration of emerging problems and issues. We therefore decided to prepare a 15-year vision document that covers the period from 2006 through 2021. With this objective in view we formed a committee comprising of eminent thinkers of the country so that a complete picture emerges for a given generation within its lifetime. The vision document will have all the picture of the possible interventions too.

Right at this moment an informal dialogue is in progress about what should be the line of thinking. But we felt that a citizens' dialogue covering their expectations should take place and a paper has already been prepared. The paper, in blue color, has already been distributed amongst you. The paper contains a brief summary of the peoples' aspirations. Should you feel that any of the points need to be either further elaborated, or to be made more precise, you can raise those points here so that we can incorporate your suggestions in the document. We therefore urge you to go through the paper with care.

Abdul Quayyum

Many might wonder how media agencies like Prothom Alo, The Daily Star or Channel I could be connected with a collaborative initiative like this one, with a research organization like CPD? We believe that news dissemination is not our only function; we are here also to see what more can be done for the country through our collective commitment and sincere efforts. This is the reason why we have been with CPD since 2000 and also hope to be in the future, too.

Anyone who can spend more money than I will be elected even if he were dishonest! We must find ways to come out of this situation. Today, the major parties are saying that there is no other way since they have to get two hundred of their candidates elected by selling 100 seats. This practice has led to more black money holders being elected to the parliament. This is an acute and multidimensional problem and in order to come out of this there should be a thorough discussion at this Nagorik Forum, and at the same time there should be greater awareness amongst the voters in this regard. Side by side awareness has to be built amongst political parties that it is possible to win an election by fielding an honest candidate if due moral and ideological support is given by the concerned party.

Advocate A. F. M. Kamal

We have discussed here about development of the country, but I find it rather strange when I see the development that has taken place in and around the Dhamnandi area, with many beautiful high-rise buildings all around. Sylhet is also not lagging behind. But, at the same time, there has been a marked increase of the poor who sleep on the footpaths without a roof over their heads; no one has provided us with the statistics on that. They are being appeased with an allowance of taka 200 each, which I believe is nothing but a cruel joke on the poor. Prior to the election, candidates tell the people that they are here to serve the people and hence they are seeking their support. But soon after being elected they play the role of autocrat and oppressor. When our MPs buy duty free cars do they ever consider the fact that the Chief Minister of West Bengal lives with a monthly salary of Tk. 8 thousand only? He lives in a two-room house. All parties make a commitment to activate the Upazilla system soon after their candidates are elected these very lawmakers block its passage.

Farooq Mahmud Chowdhury

We want that the country be governed based on the rule of law and according to the constitution. But is this really happening? The constitution says that this country is a democratic one whereas we now find that it is known as a modern Muslim state. I am not willing to disclose the name of this particular person but this individual obtained nomination from the party by spending 30 lakh taka.

None of the lawmakers should be provided with duty free cars. Administration should be based on following standard democratic practices rather than the bureaucratic way. Ban partisan politics by the students. Let the voter list be fully corrected in all respects, at the same time those responsible for preparing a faulty voter list must be punished. At a time when we are struggling to establish a unified

education policy based on scientific and modern - day education, between four and five crores have already been spent for putting in place an alternate education policy that is confusing and misleading. The people responsible for this should be taken to task. We should also ensure that the Election Commission and the Caretaker Government are neutral. Let the culture of arches and feasts be stopped forthwith.

Habibur Rahman

Local government systems have to be strengthened. Members of the Parliament should be engaged only in formulation of laws. Accounts of all political parties and NGOs have to be made open and transparent. If any candidate gets less than 50 percent votes, a replacement candidate should be nominated and there should be a recasting of votes. The tenure of the office of the Prime Minister should not be more than two terms.

Brig. General Zubair Siddiqui (Retd)

In the previous meetings held by CPD the issue of the academic qualification, the statements of accounts, including statement of earnings and expenditure, and the background life sketch of candidate came up. We expect that these data will be published. Unfortunately, a clear directive from the High Court on this matter is not being adhered to. My earnest request is that the Election Commission should ensure compliance with the directive.

Clause 11 of the citizens' aspirations, deal with the issue of a unified system of education. While formulating and finalising the system we should take into cognisance the multiple forms of education currently in vogue in the country.

Advocate Gholam Rabbani Chowdhury

The suggestion made about creating a provision for "no vote" should be included in the document. If this finds its place in the ballot paper chances are that holders of black money may not participate in the election. I wish to appeal to this committee that every effort be made to imbue 80 percent of our population, who live in the villages, with the importance of electing honest, competent and patriotic candidates. If due awareness is created amongst these people they will be able to make a significant contribution at the time of casting votes. All parties should reject the practice of buying of nominations. We also need to bring about a change in the prevailing outlook of the people towards democracy and democratic practices.

Dr. Shamimur Rahman

As I see it, a capable candidate is he who has risen through a political process, one who would not only be able to acquaint the people with the various aspects of development but also be capable of involving the people in the process. He should be transparent and also be accountable. It is not only a change in the road networking that has to be brought about, but also a change in the mentality of the people in general.

While the political parties in general will play the main role in identifying honest and competent candidates, the election commission could also be involved. No deputed official should be given the responsibility of running the administration of the Election Commission. It must be fully independent. If need be, a separate BCS cadre service should be introduced.

Possibilities for shortening of the duration of the Parliament to four years should be explored and we should see if the 90 days provision of abstaining from attending the parliament could be reduced to 60 days.

Sharmin Morshid

According to our survey the percentage of mistakes in the voter list since 2001 is between 45 and 60. That is, indeed, very high taking into consideration the lists used in various elections since 2001. A faulty voter list is the main reason behind the casting of false votes. It is our observation that the number of booths in a polling station is inadequate; therefore the number of booths should be increased. On the other hand, voters often do not have adequate access to voting related information, hence they are unable to vote based on actual facts about the candidate. Access to information on candidates, therefore, has to be further broadened.

Muhammad Zafar Iqbal

I am a highly optimistic person. In 1971 was also among those young men who braved those dreadful days. Someone once said that India, China and Brazil would be the three countries to prosper and move ahead, and sure enough that is what has happened. Now it is they who are saying that Bangladesh is sure to emerge as an economically stable country. I, too,



believe that we shall march ahead although we may face problems with regard to equitable distribution of our wealth.

I would like to narrate a story here. The other day while traveling by air an MP was sitting next to me. As we got down, I was thinking that there would be a Pajero waiting for him but I saw none. He asked me how I was going to get home. As soon as I said that I would be going in a three-wheeler he said he also planned to do the same. The one or two three-wheelers we tried to hire were asking for exorbitant fare. The MP then asked me to walk with him up to the main street where we might find others asking for the right fare. This incident made me proud of the fact that even here in this country there is at least one member of our parliament who was ready to travel by three-wheelers and was also ready to haggle for the right fare. I wish all our 300 members of the Parliament were the same as my traveling companion.

Dr. Kabir Chowdhury

In post-independent Bangladesh we had been witnessing politics of confrontation only, with no visible display of tolerance and understanding. Thanks to The Daily Star, Prothom Alo and Channel I for presenting us with such an initiative. There are two challenges in front of the committee. First, to reach the results of the dialogue to all the political parties and to ensure that they include these recommendations in their respective manifestoes, and second, to bring the leaders of the major political parties to this forum as per popular public demand. I believe this is the biggest challenge for CPD. The question of nominating an honest candidate has also come up time and again but we are yet to have criteria for an honest candidate. To this effect CPD should consider establishing a School of Democratic Training, where there will be set scorecard that will have to be acceptable to all. Before giving nomination to an individual the party has to take note of the score to see whether or not he is honest, his educational qualification, whether or not he has paid taxes and whether or not there are charges of corruption against him.

There has to be an end to present day student politics in our universities or else there will not be a qualitative improvement in our education; besides, there is also a need to bring about changes in politics by teachers. There has to be a democratic culture within the political parties.

Safwan Chowdhury

There is a TV program in India called Dateline India where, alongside others, Ministers also participate, and discussions are held on various issues. CPD should consider taking a similar initiative. In one TIB report it is stated that the main focus on corruption centres round the MPs. Second in line, as per this report, is the National Board of Revenue followed by the law enforcing agencies. Corruption has spread into every tier of the society.

Advocate Abdul Hye Khan

When the carnage on 17 August took place our Minister said that he had information that that such an incident could take place on the 16th. But the civil society did not launch any public protest. A bomb attack was made against the leader of the Opposition where many people died. A bomb attack was also made on the British High Commissioner when I, too, was injured, but no charge sheet has been finalised as yet. To this day the

OC of the concerned Police Station has not approached me for a statement under section 161. The Opposition is demanding the reform of the Caretaker Government and the electoral system. If we are able to establish a functioning and efficient Election commission then there is no need for the Caretaker system. I wish to place a proposal here that in place of the DC and the TNO there should be officials from the Election Commission. Even university teachers who do not belong to either the Blue or the White panel could also fill in the positions. This may prevent tampering of the voting process and casting of false votes. Facts on corrupt candidates and loan defaulters must be placed before the voters.

Dr. Kamal Ahmed Chowdhury

In this discussion everybody has emphasised on the honesty of a candidate. I believe, instead, that we should work on institutionalising the process. Had there been set criteria in place, there would not be the need to put further stress on development of the quality of education. Politicians should do politics while the businessmen should do business. If businessmen are involved in politics the problems will then be the same as in the case of teachers getting involved in politics. If we put emphasis on "institutionalisation" then we need not worry about the Caretaker form of government. We have the Election Commission and the Parliament. We are not abandoning the politicians; instead we are attempting to correct their mistakes.

Ataur Rahman

Who should the lawmakers be accountable to? Soon after being elected they go out of the reach of the people. Most of our people live in the villages. No one talks about our farmers. While they do not have trade unions, as do industrial workers, it must also be remembered that no development goals can be achieved without their involvement. The civil society has to think about these people. If the task of development is entrusted to the lawmakers, then what will be role of the local governments? The lawmakers should be engaged in the business of lawmaking only.

Himadri Shakhkar Roy

The candidates have to be made accountable from grassroots to the highest levels and the same have to be made public. The Election Commission should have a monitoring cell to verify the authenticity of data presented by individual candidates.

Debapriya Bhattacharya

With regard to the second proposal we visited the National Board of Revenue. Each of the candidates, while submitting his tax return, is also required to fill in section B of Form 10 giving an indication of the candidate's lifestyle. We have said that wherever details are provided by the candidates to the Election Commission have to be vetted by the National Board of Revenue. If a difference is detected between the details submitted to the Election Commission and to the NBR, then we have proposed that a provision be made for legal action against the concerned individual, including rescinding of his or her candidature.

Shafi Ahmed Chowdhury

I was elected to the Parliament as an independent candidate in 1986. Since 1991 I have been with BNP. We are saying that the MPs should play the role of lawmakers only.

Today's Bangladesh has changed a lot. Most of the time you have to stay in your constituency, go round your locality continually, be a part of the peoples' every day life and at the same time think how to proceed with development activities. On the other hand, when the Parliament is in session we speak about the problems facing the locality. These days the way the senior politicians are deliberating is even worse than the way the maids and household help in villages do. Therefore one has to explore all sides of one's competency.

If you are able to effectively work with the local chairmen there is a possibility of bringing down corruption. The proposals put forward are all worthwhile and significant. If we are able to follow these, the country is sure to march ahead. The country has made good progress. Today you can find that a rickshaw puller has a tin roof over his head, whereas earlier it was a roof made of straw. However, the greatest need of all is education. We need to put further stress on development of the quality of education.

Advocate Bedananda Bhattacharya

During the 70s and the 80s we were told that corruption does not affect the economy at macro level. Corruption has not reached such proportions all too suddenly. This is the result of criminalisation, commercialisation and colonisation of politics over a long period of time. This has, in turn, resulted in the polarisation of the two major political parties. Today, people have rejected politics. Parliament has become a club for the millionaires. MPs are engaged in the illegal business of licensing. In order to come out of this crisis we shall have to come out from the clutches of these two political parties. Bandits are at the helm of the state machinery. It will be a mistake to think that they would not try their utmost to cling to power and bring their own people into the Parliament.

Abdus Samad Nazrul

There are four categories of people from which we have to make our choice as to who would represent us. One, those who are ready to stand by you at all times. Two, businessmen who will not use money to influence people. Three, those who are out to make a name for themselves. Four, those who are looking for the opportunity of building a five-story house and coming out from their dilapidated houses.

Today our country has been branded as the most corrupt in the world, a state for which only 10 to 20 percent of the population is responsible, whereas the burden of this guilt has to borne by the rest 80 percent.

Abul Hossain

35 years of independence have passed and we have seen many changes taking place, but there have been no substantial changes in people's food, clothing and shelter. We wish to see a Bangladesh that will ensure food, clothing and shelter for all. I have doubts about the election to be held in 2007. We, from the 14 Party Alliance, have said that we will not be participating under the prevailing circumstances. Those in the government were not ready to sit with us for a dialogue. Since they are not prepared to do so, I see very little possibility of election taking place. It is indeed sad that after having struggled for long for establishing people's right to food,

clothing and shelter I had to listen to all kinds of accusations and insulting remarks for the last two hours. I strongly believe a reversal of the situation is possible only by dedicated politicians.

Syed Abdul Hannan

For the development and progress of any country we need to have educated people, politicians and businessmen. But 95 percent of the people belonging to these categories have turned out to be dacoits. They are engaged in the ugly contest of joining one of the two major political parties since that is where all the money is. There was a time when there were 22 families who were millionaires, whereas in Bangladesh we now have four thousand families. Who are these people? 60 percent of these people are politicians. As a matter of fact a survey should be undertaken of the resources of the ministers prior to their coming into office, and after. If the resources far exceed those prior to the taking of office the excess resources should be confiscated, and those involved should be penalized. Only then we shall be able to save the country.

Lokman Ahmed

I am also in doubt as to whether or not the election will be held. Today we are reeling under the burden of utter unrest and restlessness, deteriorating state of law and order and unprecedented spiraling of prices. In order to come out of this debilitating state of affairs there is no alternative to establishing a transparent and accountable government and a nation that is non-communal. Our emancipation lies in our establishing a non-communal state imbued with the spirit of our liberation and Bengali culture, and creating a government that is capable of providing the people with their basic needs. Today the entire country stands united on the question of the Caretaker Government. Likewise we need to be united on those questions too.

Prof. Anisuzzaman

Doubts have been expressed earlier also about the Nagorik Committee. Some people are of the opinion that we are against politics, but what we are doing is passing through a process of de-politicisation. The reason for this is that Dr. Muhammad Yunus put forward few personal views. I say "personal" because a formal session of the Nagorik Committee was yet to be held till then. He said that, if need be, candidates will be nominated on behalf of the civil society. This gave rise to the idea that we were planning to work as a parallel political entity. Later we have tried to explain through our collective discussions that election and politics are the domains of the politicians. As conscious citizens of the country we, too, have some responsibilities like putting forward our view- points to the politicians and bringing pressure on them about certain issues.

Towards that goal we have prepared the vision document and have indicated the development strategies that should receive priority. It is in this connection that we stressed the need for electing honest and competent candidates. Our concept of politics in this country is based on the Parliamentary System. We have thought of a society that would be secular, free from poverty and one that will be free from any kind of discrimination. We have thought of a society where everybody will receive food, clothing, shelter,

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