

Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

A Regional Dialogue on: "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," was held in Chittagong on 8th July, 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

Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya

Keeping in view the parliamentary elections-2007, CPD has initiated this programme of regional dialogue among citizens. The Daily Star, the Prothom Alo and Channel-i are its co-sponsors. It is not the first time that CPD has launched such a programme. We formed a task force and framed a set of recommendations based on the opinions of eminent citizens for the next government before the 2001 elections. We rearranged the task force in 2003 to assess how far our recommendations were implemented by the government. Now we are thinking in light of our experience what new things can be done and what precisely are the needs of the country at the moment.

You are aware that there is no mid-term development plan like the five-year plan in the country at present. Instead of such a plan, the government has adopted a three-year strategic poverty alleviation plan. We believe that there should be a mid-term development plan and the target should be brought to the fore on the basis of discussions. We deem 15 years to be an important period for fixing this target. There has been great development in the country under democratic dispensation in the last 15 years, though citizens have not been equally benefited by it. We have decided to set our goals for the next 15 years on the basis of our experience in the last 15 years. There is another reason why we have adopted this plan. 15 years from now, the nation will be 50 years old, which means we will be in a

position to reap the benefits of the hard work of a generation. We have taken the initiative to design a visionary plan to reduce the gap between our prospects and achievements during this period. For this purpose, a citizens' committee has been formed. We believe the politicians will be inspired if we can bring the visionary plan and citizens' aspirations to focus. We have placed the basic points of citizens' aspirations and demands before you. These will be accompanied by a statement. You will discuss here what kind of Bangladesh you want after 15 years. The points raised by you will be treated by the citizens' committee as the ingredients for making a statement out of the aspirations of citizens.

The parliament is the biggest institution that controls the country. Though the parliament is said to be the nucleus of all activities of the state, we can feel that's not the case here. We think those who will go to parliament will be the most respected representatives of the people. We should be in position to be proud of them. The civil society should have a say in the matter of ensuring that the right people are elected to the parliament. Some people tend to believe that it is up to the political parties to decide who they will nominate and we cannot have any say on this issue. What I feel is that we, the voters, have every right to comment on this important matter. Those who can ensure the best utilisation of the Tk 70 thousand crore allocated in the budget should be nominated by the

political parties. We have stated very clearly that we would not field any candidates. Politics will remain the politicians' job. But as citizens we have certain points to make. We want to see the wholesome and respectable trend in politics being strengthened. There is no conspiracy behind our activities, nor is there any foreign intervention. We believe that we will have to build our own future and there is no alternative to democratic governance in Bangladesh.

Matiur Rahman

The initiative that has brought us together is a continuous process. Such discussion meetings were held in 2002 and 2003 also. But on those occasions the discussions were confined to closed roundtable meetings. This time around we feel it would better if the sphere of discussion were extended a bit. That's why we have come to listen to your words. We want to hear from you and cover your statements in both the print and electronic media.

The country is heading towards another parliamentary election, but we have a lot of work to do. We have doubts whether we will be able to do all the works in the situation that has arisen. Foreigners have expressed similar fears alongside the people of the country. We have observed in the last three elections that the losers refuse to accept election results. If a similar situation arises this time also, then we will be apprehensive about our future. On the other hand, the way the Election Commission is working is deepening the suspicion whether it will at all conduct the election fairly. So the concern among people is increasing. The crisis has been aggravated by the fact that the two major parties have failed to sit for a dialogue. Even the foreigners are saying that we have given the political parties the chance to behave like that. We had dreamt of a democratic, non-communal and egalitarian society. But our beginning was not good. Then there were stretches of both covert and overt military rule. It has been 15 years since we returned to democracy, but we have not succeeded in establishing the cherished democratic order.

We have witnessed in recent times the rise of ultra-communal forces in the country. They are capable of implementing their vicious plans. The government acted against them belatedly. Initially the government denied the allegations and reprimanded the press. But it was found that the ground situation was more dangerous than what the press reports said. Some militant organisations have been banned, but many outfits are still active in different names. They get help, training and money from abroad, besides the internal sources. So the situation in which the election is going to be held is not that favourable. In this regard, we expect a little more sense of responsibility from the political parties. The political parties promise many things in their election manifestoes, but they forget everything after assuming power and become dependent on money, muscle-power and corruption.

Those of us, who have taken this initiative, have no political goal, motive or ambition. Our demand to the political leaders is: please listen to what people are saying and fulfill the promises that you made. Our effort is aimed at making the people's voice heard, holding discussions on the views expressed and ultimately creating public opinion. We want the political parties to be in a position to do good work. People have begun to lose confidence in the political parties. We want the political parties to restore people's confidence in them, and put an end to terrorism, corruption and politicisation of everything on party lines. Please develop a system based on accountability.

Professor Alamgir Sirajuddin
There have been many seminars and discussion meetings in the country in the last decade and a half on practicing democracy. The problems and the ways to resolve them have also been identified in the process. Though the civil society made many appeals and submissions to the political parties in this respect, the parties turned a deaf ear to them. Rather, politics of division and confrontation has assumed menacing proportions--the parties have become family properties. Lack of democracy within the parties is preventing emergence of able leadership and

also introducing the element of autocracy in governance. The "ownership" of the parliament has gone to the businessmen from the hands of the people. I know the capability of the civil society is limited. Honestly, good intentions and patriotism are their capital. They can offer counseling and play a role in creating public opinion and prompt the government to accept their demands. In my opinion, under the prevailing circumstances we need to organise a mass movement like the one of 1990. So you have to decentralise your endeavour and spread it to districts and upazilas. People must be made aware.

Debapriya Bhattacharya

We are being told to reach the grassroots level. We are striving to reach the grassroots. We can reach the conscious and educated people through the Prothom Alo, The Daily Star and Channel-i. But we are not an organisation based on membership. So, it won't be possible for us to approach all the people and make our points clear. That's why we have invited people like you. We have many organisations based on membership and they have been working for a long time. We hope they will do the job.

Khurshid Jamil

Everything has become Dhaka-based in the country. So, I am thanking the organisers for coming out of this trend. I feel that people heaved a sigh of relief after the deployment of the RAB. But why is there no echo of people's sentiments on the part of the civil society? The civil society should of course praise the RAB and the crossfire. Similarly, it must be seen that the people are not confused due to the one-eyed policy of the print media.

Begum Mushtari Shafi

India was divided on the basis of the two-nation theory. We realised later that it was a mistake. The movements that we launched culminated in the independence of Bangladesh following a bloody war of liberation. But because of our mistakes we have witnessed our victories slipping away again and again. The liberation war had secularism as its basis. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and indigenous people sacrificed equally for this country. But we lost secularism from our constitution later on. The state has been imprisoned with the shackles of religion. We citizens are not free from this vice. Hence, secularism must be brought back to the constitution. The use of religion in election must be totally banned. The number of seats for women must be increased in the parliament and direct election has to be introduced for them.

SM Nurul Haq

If we want to keep pace with the fast-moving world, then people having knowledge of economics, education and other subjects should be elected as MPs. The civil society and the professionals are now divided into two groups. We must overcome this problem. The number of times that a candidate can become a member of parliament should be fixed. Good governance is needed for the development of the country. If we can earn 7 billion dollars a year through the services of 18 lakh female workers in the garment sector, then we can make considerable progress by changing the existing social order, electing honest MPs, and choosing the right line of thinking etc.

Advocate Khairul Islam

A fair economic order is a prerequisite for a fair election. Look at the West, they were poor before the industrial revolution, there was unemployment. They amassed wealth by looting the Indian subcontinent and many other countries, setting up factories and boosting production. That is how they developed themselves. So if we cannot raise the per capita income and fail to fulfill people's demands, there will be no fair election. People cannot remain good if they have to starve. They will commit crimes like mugging, dacoity and murder.

Monwara Begum

I agree with the demand for a direct election to the seats reserved for women in the parliament. We, the women commissioners of the City Corporation, are victims of various kinds of discrimination. I would appeal to the civil society to think about it. The pledges made by



the MPs before election should be fulfilled.

Emdadul Haq Choudhury

The number of times that the MPs will be allowed to seek election should be fixed. They should have the urge to know about different subjects. Chittagong is being discriminated against in terms of development. This problem has to be resolved.

Jamal Nazrul Islam

We are facing today are very complex and global in nature. But the works that are being done should be completed. The implementation of plans is difficult, but efforts must be on.

I have come here as a concerned citizen. Today 10 to 15 million people in the country have no place to stay at night. We have nearly two million street children. Nearly 99% people have a monthly income of less than Tk 5,000. Over one million women and children have been trafficked out of the country in the last 10 years. Can we do the arithmetic unconcerned under such circumstances? We were under colonial rule for 200 years, which is still there in a different way. The nationalisation programme of the first government of Bangladesh was not well thought out. There were many flaws in its economic policy. It has to be admitted that subsequently the faulty policy adversely affected the industries sector. But that doesn't justify a swing in the opposite direction and introduction of an unbridled market economy. Any country needs an economic order incorporating a synthesis of state and individual ownerships based on sound planning and management. The type of economy that a country will have depends on the political leadership and the people. The sovereignty of a nation is hurt when it is dictated by the foreign donors or financial institutions.

The attitude of coordination and accommodation is needed to resolve the problems. But the disrespectful remarks that our politicians openly make about each other confuse people, and hinder resolution of problems.

Mujibur Rahman

There have been arguments in favour of and against the RAB. We might have got some relief due to the deployment of the RAB. Certainly we want peace. So, my contention is that the peace should come through a decent democratic process, not the RAB. We must ensure that.

Rana Dasgupta

When the country was divided in 1947, the size of the religious minority was 29.7% of the total population. It came down to 20.6% in 1971. Today when we are claiming that democracy is being practiced in the country, the minority population accounts for only 10.6%. My question is why 10% of the minority population has disappeared? Has any political party assessed the situation? Is any member of the civil society feeling embarrassed with these statistics? If a survey is carried out in this area, it will be revealed that in the post-liberation period the policy of eviction followed by the state, and the strategy of clinging to power and practicing a

pseudo-democracy for grabbing everything, is responsible for the decline in the minority population.

In the existing political and democratic culture the question of proportionate representation of the minorities at all levels of political, social and economic development activities has been made very insignificant. They get importance only in the politics of vote. The state power repeatedly denied the repression on the minorities before and after the 2001 elections.

We want an assurance that we won't face a similar situation during the 2007 elections. We want a parliament where the participation of people and a proportionate representation of men, women and the minorities will be ensured. The people who have integrity, politically and financially, and those who do not resort to double standards when it comes to the spirit of the liberation war and can rise above individual and party interests are the truly honest people. They should be elected to parliament. And the CPD initiative should not remain confined to this area only.

Ali Ashraf

It is still doubtful whether election will be held under the present Election Commission. The Election Commission is not fully independent, and there is no enforcement of election laws. The number of 'part-time' MPs has increased in the parliament. There is nomination business in the two main parties. The two parties are also not sincere when it comes to voter ID card. The income and expenditures of the political parties must be audited. Alongside that, the state may extend financial assistance to the parties on the basis of the votes that they get in the parliamentary elections. Before signing any contract at the national level, the details of it must be placed before the public.

Commodore AZ Nizam (ret'd)

Democracy has always been weakened in Bangladesh by the armed forces and their highly ambitious leaders. But question has never been raised about this unlawful and unconstitutional conduct; the issue has never been delved into. People are also in the dark about such issues. Despite the return of democracy, the politicians still fear the armed forces. They please the armed forces through high budgetary allocations out of this fear. The strategy of governance consists of four parts: the political strategy, economic strategy, social strategy and defence strategy. We have not yet been able to decide whether our defence strategy should be offensive or defensive. As a small country it is better to have a defensive military strategy. So, we do not need such heavy armament. We have to evolve a national defence policy and run the armed forces within its ambit keeping them above politics.

Rehana Kabir Ranu

We must look for honest and competent candidates due to the miserable failure of the political leaders. Our education system has flaws and that's why society is not producing people having a strong personality. The country is divided

into two parts-- the hungry poor people on one side and the powerful and corrupt educated people on the other. Democracy is not gaining ground because of family-based politics. We have to fight against it. Despite their failures, the politicians will have to address the issue. What I can say about crossfire is that there cannot be contradictory laws in the same society. Women must be integrated in the development process. And if the organisers of today's programme could present an account of their sources of income and expenditure, it might have served as an example to the politicians.

Zerina Hossain

The goal of development is to establish social justice. But now the term connotes construction of roads and buildings only. The interests of individuals are attached importance to when infrastructures of the cities are built, public interests are not taken into consideration.

Abdullah Abu Sayeed

We had removed Ershad with the hope of freeing democracy from the clutches of autocracy. But I think, we haven't got real democracy. Previously it was military autocracy, now it is democratic autocracy. A form of democracy has come where there is no role or value of the politicians. But actually they are the ones who should run the affairs of

the country. They need to have power, resources and position. But today the moment a politician enters the parliament he or she becomes a slave. He has to obey whatever the party or party chief decides. He has no role in decision-making. Because of this reason most political leaders are suffering from frustration.

Democracy is the rule of the qualified persons of a nation. But in the name of democracy some form of autocracy is going on here. The constitution also supports this. In Article 70 of the constitution it is said that party membership will cease to exist if a member votes against the party decision. Therefore, what is the point of sending honest members? Unless the system is remodeled there will be no solution.

The country does not have many neutral people. Unless one joins a particular party both the parties look at him with suspicion. Today, all professional people like students, doctors and teachers are divided. Everyone works as per the direction coming from the top of the party. Those who go to power, drive away the opposition from parliament, from the roads and even from their homes. Whereas, opposition is the essence of democracy. Still there are some

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Recommendations of the dialogue (in brief)

Reforms of politics and politicians

- Politicians have to be made accountable
- Practice of democracy in the political parties has to be ensured
- There should be mutual cooperation among the political parties. The two major political parties will have to sit in a dialogue on all nationally important issues.
- Auditing of income and expenditure of all political parties should be made compulsory. For this reason registration of all political parties has to be made mandatory.
- All political parties must make the names of their registered members public.
- Secularism has to be reestablished as the main pillar of our Constitution.
- Because of absence of floor crossing system, members are becoming slaves of the party. Constitution should be amended to keep the provision of voting as per individual decision, except on sensitive issues like 'no-confidence' or 'budget'. The shadow government system of opposition has to be made effective.
- The autocratic attitude in running the government has to go.
- Honest leadership is being pushed back in the parties. They have to be brought to the forefront.
- The love for culture and tradition is fading away among the politicians. This has to be revived.
- For political cleansing, stayagraha movement needs to be organised.

Election Commission and Electoral Reforms

- The election commission (EC) has to be strengthened so that it can work independently maintaining neutrality.
- The present EC has failed to perform its responsibility effectively. They should resign.
- If any candidate is deemed unfit, then there should be the system of casting 'No' vote. If a candidate gets more 'No' votes, then the party has to contest elections placing separate candidate. Income, expenditure, property, educational qualification etc of all the candidates must be made known to all.
- Every voter must have voter ID with photograph. Electronic voting system has to be introduced. This will help stop casting of false vote.
- Election manifesto has to be declared as a social contract. This has to be decentralised, to be prepared on regional need basis.
- Neutral election commission cadre has to be introduced. It has to be determined how many times a candidate will be able to contest.
- One candidate will not be able to contest from more than two seats at a time. If he/she gets elected from both the seats then which seat he/she will vacate and who will (shadow candidate) be elected for that seat has to be clearly mentioned before elections are held. If the candidate wins in both the seats then the shadow candidate will be automatically elected to one of the seats.
- The number of seats for women has to be increased. They will be elected through direct vote.
- Political parties will have to give nomination to women for 10 percent of the seats.
- A person will have to be a member of a party for five years at a stretch before contesting an election.
- The winning parties do not implement the manifesto. How the manifesto will be implemented and how it will be evaluated should be clearly mentioned.
- In order to control election expenses, EC should bear the expenses of the candidates. EC can share the expenses on the basis of number of votes received by a candidate.
- The population of Bangladesh has increased since 1972. Therefore, the number of seats should be increased.
- Those who opposed our Liberation War should be kept out of elections.
- Names of those who have paid 7.5 percent as tax to make black money white names should be made public. If they contest elections, then the people should be made aware not to give them votes.
- List of loan defaulters should be published. They have to be resisted from contesting elections.
- Voting right of the disabled has to be ensured
- Nomination of all persons linked with JMB and other fundamentalist groups has to be prohibited.

Infrastructure

- Every citizen will have an Identification Number. He/she will use that in all official work and while casting vote.
- Politicisation of administration and police has to be stopped. They must work independently.
- The proceedings at national parliament have to be telecast directly.
- The standing committees of parliament have to be made effective. The civil society members may have regular meetings with the standing committees.
- In order to reduce the influence of the armed forces in elections, they have to be directed through creating national defence rules.

Dialogue

- Regional dialogues should also be organised at district, upazila and village levels besides the divisional towns to exchange opinions with the people. They need to be made aware of the fact that ultimate power rests with the people.
- The number of women participants in the dialogues of the civil societies is very less. The number has to be increased. There is no representation from all levels of people in the dialogues.

Recommendations of the dialogue (in brief)

Civil Society and the role of CPD

- The civil society is splitting up. They have to remain neutral and work together.
- The civil society is becoming more elitist in character and inward looking
- The civil society has to be declared free of adulteration. To ensure transparency of all the civil society members the full picture of their income source, property and expenditure has to be presented before the people.
- The civil society has to publish information regarding political leaders or possible candidates.
- The name of the civil society may be changed to 'Sacheton (Conscious) Citizens' Society. This will not give the impression that they belong to some higher class.
- The civil society will have to continue the initiative even after the election. Otherwise it will not have any meaning.
- The civil society does not play any role on other important issues where their involvement is essential.
- The Coastal Development implementation has to be included in Vision Paper.

Initiative to create honest citizens

- For effective voting, we need conscious voters. Awareness has to be increased so that voters do not give their votes in exchange of money or anything else. They have to be told that even if they are offered money they should vote for the right and honest candidate.
- Spread of education may make the people responsible and create awareness. In order to select the right candidate, education has to be made universal.
- The youth will have to be made aware about democracy.

Newspapers and media

- The role of newspapers has to be made more transparent. The mentality to launch personal attack against government or opposition by any newspaper has to be stopped.
- Election must not become a festive occasion for the media. There must not be any media coup during election.

Human rights

- The rights of every individual irrespective of religion or caste have to be established.
- The minority community should be given protection before and after casting votes, and they must be allowed to cast their votes free from any pressure.
- Voters must be allowed to reach the voting centres in a safe and secured manner without facing any kind of pressure.
- The role of RAB is satisfactory and beneficial. The civil society should welcome this. On the other hand, recommendation for condemning its actions as violation of human rights was also made.

Economy and miscellaneous

- For sound democracy we need sound economy. That is why in the very beginning we need economic emancipation of the people.
- Unless there is economic parity and reduction of unemployment it will not be possible to find honest and competent candidate.
- Students should be kept out of the election.
- Facts about all national agreements and contracts must be kept open for all.