

Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

A Regional Dialogue on: "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," was held in Bogra on 26 August, 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

Welcome to the 13th session of its dialogue by Nagorik Committee. Two of the dialogue's key objectives were set in motion through combined efforts of the Daily Star, Prothom Alo, Channel-i and CPD over the past three months keeping in view the forthcoming election in 2007. One is to prepare a vision document for Bangladesh for the coming 15 years; the other is the aspirations of the people. Through the 22-point aspirations of the civil society, as embodied in the paper given to you, we have tried to explain the fundamental thinking behind them. This "aspiration" overseas would have been called "Citizen Charter." In that document the rights of the citizens of the republic are embodied. We have selected two issues as the basis of the hopes and aspirations of the people. First the main thoughts behind our war of liberation of 1971 where the main objectives were to establish a democratic and secular state, and build a society free from all kinds of exploitation. Second we wish to see the realization of the basic rights of the citizens as provided for in the Constitution, most of which remain unfulfilled against the prevailing realities of our socio-economic conditions that has been further complicated by the state of our politics. We want all these to be realized within the coming 15 years. This is our overall objective. Keeping this in view we are working towards preparing Bangladesh's "vision" document 2021 in an expanded way. Of the eight target objectives for preparation of the document seven have already been discussed with a panel of experts. We will be benefited if you could kindly give your suggestions or opinions, if any.

I would like to put forward to you another issue, that of election 2007. We are trying to mobilize public opinion so that political parties give nominations to honest, capable and patriotic citizens. We believe that politics is for the politicians and it should be based on the hopes and aspirations of the citizens of the country, or else it will become meaningless. Keeping in view the election, the politicians should be ready to listen to each of the voters. Through this endeavor we wish to reach to them the hopes and aspirations of the people. At the same time we do realize that there is no assurance of victory in the election, even if an honest and capable individual is nominated. In order for an honest and capable candidate to win election there has to be a congenial atmosphere and proper infrastructure for holding election. The main hindrance to this, as we perceive, is that election in Bangladesh has become a very expensive industry. If we are not able to remove the use of muscle power and black money from election through a legal framework it will not be possible for a regular party worker ever to contest in the parliamentary elections, and be elected. Given the support and the good-will of the political parties it is quite possible to come out of this state of affairs by making required changes in the various provisions of the electoral rules of procedures. The best way would be for an elected party government to undertake this task, based on a political consensus. Should that not be possible, we believe that it is the responsibility of the caretaker government to create the needed congenial environment for holding a proper election, but at the same time it should not be involved in any kind of policy decisions.

However, if reform of a public law is undertaken for the sake of creating a proper environment there will be no reason for any objection. The reason for this is that the existing laws in this regard are weak in many respects, and need to be further strengthened. In the meantime, the election commission could implement the appropriate ones. However, what can the citizens expect from an election commission that is weak and spineless? We invite your opinions on all these issues.

Mahfuz Anam

The main benefit of the legacy that we have observed over the past 15 years is that changes in government have taken place through due process of elections. We have acquired this success through our own efforts; it has not been gifted to us by anyone. The government we elect often makes many promises and commitments, but once it occupies the seat of power it runs the affairs according to its wishes. In view of this experience we believe that the time has come for us to not only exercise our rights of franchise, but also raise our voices on certain related issues like nominating honest and competent candidates. At the same time let this be clearly understood that we are not interested in being involved in any kind of political process, nor are we interested in forming a political party. Through this Nagorik dialogue we wish that the major political parties, while nominating their candidates, reflect the hopes and aspirations of the people of the country. But this will not take place until you have a realization of the matter and raise your voices. Channel I, CPD, Prothom Alo and the Daily Star are engaged in preparing the grounds for our future. We believe that your voices should reach our national leaders. The Nagorik dialogue that is taking place here today should, in fact, have taken place in a democratic environment of the political parties. While leaders of the political parties do get to listen to their party workers through some process or the other, how will the voices of those who do not belong to any political party be heard, and their hopes and aspirations reach the leaders of the parties? The reality is that they neither know, nor do they have any desire to know. But we certainly cannot sit with our hands folded, hence this initiative. As we are talking to you we are presenting them to the people to the best extent possible through publishing of the dialogues as Supplements. It is also being telecast by Channel I, with the hope that the leaders will see and hear. At the same time we are making efforts on our own to let the people know the value of creating an overall awareness, a task the political parties should have undertaken.

Advocate Mir Iqbal Hossain

The observations made by you, in point number 11 of the rose colored paper, in connection with black money should be added to it. In order to eliminate the source of black money along with the NBR, and the Anti-corruption Commission, the name of the Judiciary should also be added. We can find our instruments of stopping black money through these establishments. Our tax administration, and those connected with the government, are so corrupt that it is, in fact, they who are helping the growth of black money. We can achieve many things if we can empower the tax administration to strike at corrupt people directly or indirectly, and ourselves be on guard as citizens of the country. I do not wish to make any specific comment on the Anti-corruption Commission, but would like to refer to its clause 26/27 wherein it has been given the right to inquire into the income and expenditures of any citizen. The same authority is vested with the tax administration, too, with the difference that the Anti-corruption Commission has the additional authority of probing into the source of earnings. What we have to see now is whether or not that authority is being exercised by the Commission. If we are not able to catch the owners of black money, close the sources, then not only the election in 2007, but also no other elections in the future, can be fair and proper, resulting in failure of exercising our civil rights. We, therefore, wish to see that whatever rights have been given to the Election Commission are not merely words in print alone, but also are duly exercised, holders of black money are hauled up and the sources identified.

Corruption and development are interrelated. The incidence of dealing with corruption is far and between, therefore, we have to take the first step in dealing with corruption. The Anti-corruption Commission was set up with high hopes. There have been considerable development activities, for



which we extend our thanks to all concerned, but at the same we protest the trading that is taking place in the name of development.

Prof. Hosne Ara Begum

As the custodians of the country we have the right to talk about its welfare. We have to come out of the mind frame that one can talk about hospitals, only if one is a nurse or a doctor, and not otherwise. This mind set is adversely influencing the society.

The British are asking why there is no talk of reforms in our country. The say that they had left the country after ruling the land for over 200 years, and yet the various legal and other systems continue to be the same as they were some 200 years ago. If this is the way it is, it will not be possible for us to reap the benefits of independence. The legal framework has to be different for an independent nation.

I wish to point out that the political parties look down upon the NGOs, whereas the NGOs are a complete people's entity. They have been deprived of government's support and its facilities. While it is difficult to get a peon's job with the Government, at the same time one who is drawing a monthly salary of Tk 7/8 thousand at TMSS is ready to take up the job of a peon with the government. The reason for this is that getting into a government job is like having a golden deer in one's grip. With or without delivering her she will continue to draw the salaries. We are working within the framework of government rules after having established a NGO involving members of the public. Mistakes could be committed by it too, but it, looks as though people, whether belonging to the government or the Opposition, relish talking about the matter. The NGOs are serving a large section of the population and reducing the burden on the shoulders of the government. Who will look after this large segment of the population?

Khondokar Gholam Kader

I have been working in the village for 45 years. According to me, 5 percent of our population is rich, 10 percent belong to the middle class and the rest live in the villages. We have been serving the interests of the 5 and the 10 percent only, and have not been able to attend to the needs of the 85 percent who are poor. I have seen corruption free villages, Thanas and Unions. In 1962 Akhter Hamid Khan established a Thana totally free from corruption. Many villages became self-supporting and were free of corruption. Today, there is corruption everywhere. The government's Revenue Officer no longer visits those Thanas since there is no scope for bribes.

We are susceptible to rumors and rumor-mongering. If someone were to suddenly say that the sea-water had turned sweet you would see that millions were running towards the sea for a drink. Similarly, if there is a rumor that votes should be cast in favor of a particular person then all the people rush would vote for that particular individual. We have to explain the essence of it all to the people, and only then the scenario will change for better.

Fazlur Rahman Piker

The business community has to play its role for developing the country, like China. Look at where China is today as against Bangladesh. While China gained its independence in 1949 we gained our freedom from the British rule in 1947. Today, there is hardly any country in the world where you do not find Chinese merchandise, and it has business links all over the world, so much so that the major portion of consumer goods sold in USA are products made in China. Between the years 1947 and 1971 we made no progress. We had high hopes and aspirations when we liberated this country after long and bloody struggle. We had hoped to build a free, independent and a worthwhile nation. The people of the country are hard working. We have the capacity to effectively contribute in the fields of business, trading and agriculture. Why then are we lagging behind? We have to find as to how did we lose 50 valuable years. A proper analysis will tell us as to how to move forward.

There is a marked difference between our political situation, and in other countries of the world. Foreign investors, particularly from Korea and Japan, are hesitant in investing in the country due to hartals. We have sealed our own fate.

Mahmuda Hakim

As a citizen I have the right to exercise my political rights. In order to materialize the reform proposals there should be a dialogue between the two major parties. Patriotism should be their guiding spirit. Imbued with that spirit, we gained our independence. If the parties hold the dialogue in such a spirit only then the fear of the nation can be averted.

Advocate Al-Mahmud

In a report presented by TIB it was revealed that 111 MPs in the Parliament were smugglers. What can be expected of a parliament that has such a large number of smugglers? We instituted legal cases against a highly corrupt individual, and to day they are being withdrawn. How can corruption be stopped? Whenever a government official is recruited a full account of his assets should be recorded, and the same should be cross-checked from time to time. Not only the government officials but also the politicians and the Ministers should, for the record, submit similar statements. If that is done chances are corruption may be contained to some extent.

We have to facilitate the working of the Anti-corruption Commission. The undue hindrances have to be removed. It is not enough to say that the Commission has to be independent, it should, in reality, be allowed to work independently. Many things have been said about the Judiciary. At a function the other day the chief justice had said that justice is now being bought and sold. Today, judges are being inducted to the highest court of law on partisan consideration. If that is the case, where does our future lie? We should thus, keep our attention focused on these issues also.

Dr. Arshad Sayeed

After a protracted struggle of ten months we had dreamed of a prosperous Bangladesh, where has that dream disappeared? Certainly we all are responsible for this. While we failed to steer the country to the right path, those who were entrusted to govern it simply indulged in corruption. I believe all of us who are present here will vote for the "right" candidate.

Dilara Begum

I have two observations to make. First about the number of women's seats in the parliament, and the other about honoring women. We are rather embarrassed by the conflicts and bickering between the two women leaders. You have to take the initiative to put a stop to this. We have to decide as to what should be our course of action in the future. Begum Sufia Kamal once said that it is the bad people who stay together, whereas good people stay away from each other. You should bring these good people together.

Debapriya Bhattacharya

If you are with me even after the election, I, too, shall stay. As I said before, not all the problems will be solved in 2007. It is a continuous process, and CPD is carrying out its research throughout the year. In fact, it is fulfilling its obligation to the society through its work. We are, in fact, not supposed to do what we are doing today. It is from an extreme sense of obligation that we have undertaken this venture of uniting people. It is because of this that the people are asking as to why did we not do this earlier? We are doing this out of sheer love for the country. If the people are interested, and prevail upon us, then we are ready to work accordingly even after the election is over.

Rahim Chowdhury

Prior to the election, candidates visit the voters; they listen to all that they have to say. They are even ready to walk muddy streets if need be. We put the stamp against the name of the candidates. We do not put the stamp against any party. But soon as he is elected he becomes a "property" of the party. He neither visits the voters, nor can the voters go see him. Prior to the election each of the candidates makes promises, both, on his behalf, and on behalf of the party. These promises have to be given in writing indicating that he would resign if he fails to keep his commitments. This "undertaking" has to be printed in the form of a leaflet with the signature of the concerned candidate.

Since we are not the ones to formulate laws, everything has to begin from the grass root levels.

Zahedur Rahman

We have failed to institutionalize democracy, failed to strengthen it. If we fail to strengthen the process of democracy, the black money holders and the terrorists will be able to consolidate and further strengthen their positions. In order for democracy to flourish, what we need above everything else is a strong Election Commission. The commission has to be totally independent in its operations. If the commission remains under the administrative control of the Office of the Prime Minister then it will not be able to function independently. The Judiciary should also have complete freedom, and it should be separated from the Executive. We shall have to increase the number of good people in the parliament. The press should have absolute freedom.

Mahmuda Islam

On a particular subject only women have spoken. I wish to talk about that subject. We know that the ratio between men and women in this country is half and half. Ten percent of those present here are women. And only they have talked about women's rights. Since women are lagging behind in the society this issue of their rights should indeed be included in the election agenda of the political parties. If we remain silent, these people will never attain equality with others. Establishing equality between men and women in the society is a daunting task. I believe in all you have said. During the election in 1991 we proposed that priority be given to candidates well disposed to women's issues. Opportunities should be there for women to seek nominations in increased numbers.

Many of you have said that without transparency people's hopes and aspirations are trampled. As a consequence of a long and protracted movement a national policy on women was adopted. Many of you might question as to the need for a separate policy for women. As I have said before, special measures have to be taken in order to bring equality between men and women. Unfortunately, the policy that was quite progressive in its content was subsequently changed. So much so that the changes made were not public. Clearly this lacks transparency. I appeal to you to mention and raise the issue of equality between men and women at all places, and create pressure.

Steps should be taken for election of women to the National Assembly

through direct elections. Each political party must include women in its nominations. The questionable policy on women should be scrapped.

Shaymal Bhattacharya

The greatest achievement of the Bengali nation is its war of liberation and independence. But at the same time we have lost our love for the country. Due to lack of patriotism we have been engulfed in corruption. None of us will be able to declare in a loud voice that 'we are beyond corruption'. Today, the entire society from top to the bottom is corrupt.

This has caused a serious blow to democracy. The essence of democracy, and its accountability, are quite different. Activities now being carried out in the name of democracy are not democratic at all. From the state level to other establishments are now engaged in corruption. This has necessitated for survival. Now-a-days it is difficult to survive the honest way. This has also happened due to absence of love for the country. It is true of the political parties also. Neither you, nor I, shall be able to contest election since we do not possess 100 crore takas. Today, we have to buy votes and not seek votes. I had not heard of the civil society's activities prior to 1990, however I now find an extensive role being played by the civil society. I hope that this educated community would be able to considerably influence the voters and the voting process. There is a need to change the various clauses and sub-clauses of our constitution due to the mistrust between the political parties. We no longer find the word Secularism in our constitution. A country cannot progress under such an environment.

Abdullah Abu Sayeed

I am happy that the civil society has started a movement. I believe that this is a welcome start for us. Many complained as to why we took such a long time, until the situation went out of control. I say that no one consults a physician when the fever registers 99 degrees. We normally consult a physician when the fever is 106. It is often said that this spate of corruption can never be stopped. I say why not? We shall strike at the wall of this fortress, today, tomorrow and the day after and the day after that, and continue to do so. I believe we can break down the wall. We have lost faith in ourselves. We gained our independence in 1971; that is the image in which we should repose our faith in. It is the weak and the mean that cannot have trust in their own selves. Having subjugated to foreign rule for a long time we have lost faith in ourselves. Being in crisis is nothing new. Human civilization has faced crises, and has over come them, for had it not been so we could not have this closed door meeting today. I, therefore, believe that we, too, shall overcome our crisis.

I was asked in a television program as to why there was so much corruption in Bangladesh? I answered by saying that there is none to catch them. Corruption is thus walking away like a hero. A similar situation prevails, not only in the field of corruption alone, but also in all other areas. Despite the fact that we gained our independence in 1971, we have not

CONTINUED ON PAGE 13

RECOMMENDATIONS (IN BRIEF)

1. Democratic culture within the political parties has to be ensured.
2. The major parties must have dialogues on all important issues
3. The parties should arrange Nagorik dialogues.
4. Constitution should be amended in order to facilitate floor crossing.
5. Religion based politics should be banned.
6. Nominations should be given after due process of election at local levels.
7. Political parties have to announce their budgets, and provisions should be there for payment of salaries to the workers.

Election Commission and reforms of the electoral system

8. The Election Commission should be further empowered so that it is able to perform its functions independently.
9. There should be provision for "no" vote in case none of the candidates is considered suitable. If the majority of votes cast falls in the category "no", then the concerned party has to nominate a replacement candidate.
10. Sources of earnings of all government officials connected with the election have to be submitted.
11. Ministers and MPs have to declare their sources of income.
12. A foolproof voter list has to be prepared for holding of fair election.
13. Voter ID cards with individual photographs should be prepared.
14. Arrangements should be made for electronic system of voting.
15. A candidate should not be allowed to contest from more than two constituencies.
16. MPs should be involved only with formulating of laws.
17. The number of seats reserved for women should be increased, and they should be elected through direct elections.
18. There could be a benchmark on required academic qualification for candidates seeking nomination to become an MP.
19. Those who have turned black money into white after payment of seven and half percent taxes, including the loan defaulters, should be barred from contesting election.
20. The political parties should be encouraged to nominate women.
21. The Election Commission should bear the election expenses of the candidates.
22. All the candidates contesting from the same constituency must conduct their election campaign from a single stage.
23. A candidate has to be a permanent resident of the locality, and he has to reside in his constituency even after the election is over.
24. Candidates have to give in writing their standings before the election results are out.
25. Candidature of war criminals and Razakars should be declared null and void.
26. Election should be based on corresponding ratio of the population.
27. The election manifesto should be declared an obligatory social contract.
28. The tenure of Caretaker Government should be extended to six months.
29. The election manifesto should clearly indicate development programs/plan.

Institutional framework

30. Judiciary should be made independent and free from Administrative control through due reforms.
31. Tax administration should be made effective.
32. The common people are also involved in corruption, hence awareness against it has to be built amongst them also.
33. Complete freedom should be given to the newspapers, and the right of access to facts.
34. Instead of allowing tax-free vehicles for the MPs, they should be provided with vehicles by the Government for as long as they hold their offices.
35. Provision should be there for drawing criminal proceedings directly against government officials and staff through due amendment of the CPD.
36. Ban political discussions inside places of religious worship.
37. Restore the 1972 constitution.

The civil society and the role of CPD

38. The initiative taken by the civil society would be meaningless unless it continues even after the election is over
39. The subject of access to education for all should be added to the "vision" document.
40. In order to reach the grass root levels Nagorik committee should establish its branches in each of the unions.
41. The discussions should begin after observing one minute silence as a mark of respect to the Shaheed freedom fighters.
42. There should be an extensive discussion on the cultural issues in the development framework of our vision.
43. Assistance could be provided to the Anti corruption Commission through appropriate Nagorik committees.