

# Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

A Regional Dialogue on: "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," was held in Pabna on 19 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**  
About three months back, with the initiative of CPD and support of Prothom Alo, The Daily Star and Channel-i, we initiated this dialogue titled "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," keeping the upcoming election in view.

This is not the first time that we are doing such work. In 2001, before the national elections we had formed a taskforce to collect opinions of eminent citizens and on the basis of that we had prepared a set of recommendations for the new government. In 2003, we had done an exercise of evaluation to find out how much of that set of recommendations has been implemented by the government.

The elections of 2007 is approaching, but there is a widespread feeling that nothing much has happened in Bangladesh with regard to its problems. There had been ample analysis of the problems, and we also have idea about some of the solutions. But there are differences of opinion regarding how effectively the problems could be solved. On many issues the political parties have reached a consensus but for some reasons these are not being implemented.

We have tried to present here the developments we have achieved in the democratic system of governance in last 15 years and what prospects for further development are there in the future.

During this period the per capita income has increased, production has increased, national export has increased, literacy rate has increased, child mortality has decreased, discrimination between man and woman has decreased and so on. But everyone has not received the boon of this growth. The benefits of development have not reached those people who have been made destitute by river erosion or to those living in the fringes. The gap between rich and poor and between town and village has increased. The CHT Accord has not been implemented.

After analysing these we have come to the conclusion that the organisations that work for the poor and the common people in this country such as judiciary, Election Commission, Anti Corruption Commission, Tax department etc are very weak. Political leadership plays a vital role in making these organs work properly. That is why we have started an initiative so that honest and competent people may get elected in the next election.

Many people have said that we are doing politics. My answer is, we are not doing that. Right to vote is a serious matter, that's why we want every citizen of Bangladesh to find the right person through an accountable process. Citizens also need access to information so that they may find such persons. Information relating to their educational qualification, profession, source of income, list of property (in his own name or in the name of those who are his dependents), status of bank loan (individually or jointly), whether there is any criminal case against him, whether he is a convict, if he was a public representative before then what was his role, whether he gives tax, whether he is telephone or electricity bill defaulter, how many times he has changed party and so on. These have to be exposed before the people.

If Bangladesh is governed by honest and competent people then we believe that the country will progress further. What sort of development are we talking about? We are trying to include that in the book Vision:2021.

### Discussion Matiur Rahman

The country is going towards another election so we have a lot of work to do. But considering the prevailing situation, we are apprehensive whether we would be able to finish our work. In the last three elections we have observed that the defeated parties do not want to accept their defeat. There is a fear in people's mind whether they would see the same thing again this year. The way the Election Commission is working at the moment, it is compounding the situation even further. People are living in a state of anxiety.

We had dreamt of a democratic, secular and discrimination-free social system. But our starting was not commendable. The country went under military rule under various names. Corruption increased manifold since then. It is fifteen years now that we have returned to the democratic system of governance. But we have not been able to implement the desired structure of democracy as yet. Those who came to power after election chose to govern as per their own wish. They never cared for taking opinion or cooperation from others. They have politicised administration; parliament did not become effective; and corruption became widespread. When they are in opposition they do not join parliament and impose hartal and blockade. For a long time no dialogue is being held between the government and the opposition. This is not favourable for democracy or progress. This way uncertainty is becoming a regular feature in the country. Elections are held but we are not progressing. I feel that such condition cannot continue.

During elections political parties give many pledges, but our progress endeavours are blocked in every step. Despite a good number of achievements, we are lagging behind. Today the country is standing at a crossroads. The question whether we shall be able to move forward looms large before us. Questions loom whether the tradition of democracy will continue; whether we shall be able to hold on to whatever is left of our secular character. In this regard, we expect more responsible response from the political parties. Political parties give many promises in their manifestos before elections, but they forget everything after going to power and become entangled in black money, muscle power and corruption.

Those of us who have taken this initiative of dialogue have no political aim,

goal or desire. We have organised this meeting with our own money. There is no foreign money involved here. Our demand to the politicians is—please listen to what people have to say. Please keep the promises you make.

Some organisations are trying to mislead people about our initiative. Our message is very clear: We shall continue with our programme. Our attempts at creating a people's welfare-oriented state will continue.

### Abdul Matin Mian

It is an important task for us to elect honest and competent people in the next election for the progress of the country. We have noticed how black money and muscle power have dominated in the elections in the last 15 years. What can we expect from those who are going to power through such a system? It is useless to expect anything good from them. Because, they had bought votes to go to power.

Though Pabna is an old district of the country, there has not been much of a development here. No new factories and mills were set up here. The cotton mill has closed down. Our demand is that it should restart. One medical college should be set up here. Some land has been acquired for this purpose but the work has not started yet. A railway station has to be set up at Pabna proper (sadar). That will make entrepreneurs interested to come here. Pabna Edward College, one of the oldest educational institutes in the country, has to be upgraded into a university.

**Debapriya Bhattacharya**  
During elections political parties bring out manifesto and give promises to the people. But we have not seen any written manifesto on the local problems prepared by the candidates. They only talk verbally about them. We may think about a written manifesto on the basis of the seats.

### Mahbub-ul-Alam Mukul

My observation is, political leaders to some extent feel jealous about the civil society leaders. Some recent incidences have made this more obvious. Some days back Mahmudur Rahman, chairman of the Investment Board, filed a suit against CPD for some of its comments, though we have seen in the TV footage that there was no such comment passed. The comments of CPD have been distorted and the suit was filed on that basis. He has the right to file a suit, but I have objection to what he told before TV camera after filing the suit at the court.

I want to ask whether this initiative of yours can be taken to the upazila level. We have got gas in Pabna but we cannot use it in our industries. The entrepreneurs of Pabna are investing in other districts. It is essential to excavate the Ichhamati river. It should be done on a priority basis. Though some attempts have been made before but that brought no result. Therefore the problems persist.

### Baby Islam

There is widespread corruption in the country. It is difficult to find honest people. But there are still honest people in the country. Those who opposed our liberation fly the national flag in their cars. We fear to talk openly. When people like Debapriya Bhattacharya and Rehman Sobhan have to stand in the dock for talking for the nation, how can we expect any security for us?

Nothing moves here without money. Though most bombs of JMB were exploded in Pabna, there were no arrests so far. We talk about various problems and organise seminars but we never go to the grassroots level. During elections, candidates sign on papers that they would not spend more than Tk. five lakh for campaign purpose. Do they keep their words? No. They become liars. So, let us all resist the liars and resist those who create division in the name of religion.

### Purabi Maitra

Many political parties had given promise to ensure equal rights of man and woman but none kept the promise. Bangladesh has signed the conventions on women and human rights but the basic points have not been implemented. As a result, women are neglected and abused. There is the curse of fatwa everywhere. Total development of the nation will not be possible by keeping half the population outside the development process.

### Prof. Muhammad Nurunnabi

In recent times there has been three historic development. First, it is the media. Second, civil society. Third, rise of the militant elements. Among these, the first two are positive developments and the third is negative. Behind many achievements in Bangladesh you will find the role of the civil society. There cannot be any argument on this. In today's discussion, the greater majority of the people and the poor community are not present. They are luckless, silent and illiterate. But they are also patriotic. But here we have some great personalities of the country including some from Pabna. Civil society is an entity that is very much within the society and not outside. But they are at an advantageous position. They can work as a bridge between the political parties and the people. Political parties come into being on the basis of their genuine concern for the people. This is what we have seen in the past. The bottom line is we cannot have salvation without political parties. We have to protect the healthy political culture in this country.

### Captain (Retd) Dr. Ilias Iftekhar Rasul

After the '90s there have been three elections in the country. There were many promises. But the people have always been deceived. That's why they show least interest about elections. They do not have much confidence on the present political system. Today, political leaders have less influence over the people. There is no practice of democracy within the political parties. People are talking about election engineering. But resignation of the CEC

will not solve the problem. There are other officials under him who have been appointed by the 4-party alliance government. To ensure a free and fair election, besides administrative changes you also need change of character. At present, money plays the central role in elections. Despite taking many steps, nothing has proved effective. The candidates contesting elections should have some minimum qualifications. Alongside educational qualification they should also be honest. Now we see that before elections the state coffer is kept wide open. But this is not anybody's personal property. Because of widespread illiteracy, religion becomes a major weapon before elections. And because of this reason, no government had taken any step to educate the people. In Pabna we have witnessed a great show named Prodipto Pabna, undertaken by the government to make the people literate. We have been told that it cost 19 crore taka, but not even 19 people have been made literate. Among the Hindus, 80 percent belong to.....but no one ever thought about their representation.

### Gopal Sanyal

The officials of our Election Commission are good subject for cartoons. They act like puppets. We have noticed that political parties in Bangladesh operate like limited companies. All they want is money and affluence. That is why when the civil society members talk against this, all the political parties point their finger at them. All the top ranking leaders of the political parties are affluent. They used the people as a ball and played games with them. There is no practice of democracy within the political parties. What we see around us is autocracy and nepotism. When a party nominates a corrupt person, can any honest person of that party protest against the decision? Politicians everywhere become the beloved of the people. But in our country people are scared of them. To grab power they are ready to give up morality or principle.

### Abul Kashem

There was a time when elections used to be as festive as Eid. We do not see such fervour now. Voters have to be made aware to select honest and competent candidates. A large percentage of voters live in the rural areas. Therefore, to make this initiative successful, it has to be taken to the remote areas.

### Shamima Shireen

People elect a representative with lots of hope. It is our failure that they cannot fulfill those. People's representatives give promises out of their enthusiasm to do some work. But if they are evaluated from party perspective then it is unfortunate. Women are the most deprived and oppressed lot among all. In a country where the prime minister is a woman and the leader of the opposition is also a woman, it is unfortunate that women get such treatment.

There are different types of problems in Pabna. Tidal wave is a major problem. The Ichhamati River also needs to be excavated.

### Dr. Sarwar Jahan

A Development Vision may be prepared on the basis of the opinions of the local people on local problems. On the basis of this vision people would select their candidates. In our country, people meet the candidates every five years. In between no one can meet the candidates. That is why a mid-term evaluation system should be started. Majority of the people in the country are not literate. It is the civil society or middle class that run the affairs of the state. So, it is they who are responsible for the good or bad reputation of the country. The civil society should have a strong bonding. A process has to begin to bring everyone under one umbrella.

### Debapriya Bhattacharya

We have already received three proposals regarding members of parliament. First, they shall work irrespective of party affiliation. Second, decisions have to be taken so that once a week or month they meet the people. Third, if people lose confidence on a public representative then a certain percentage of voters will have the right to apply for holding fresh election for that seat.

### Anwarul Haque

We went to the liberation war with great hopes in our hearts. But we did not get what we had hoped for. We have an election coming up. Even knowing about the candidates, we go to vote for them. How can we make the poor people aware when they sell their vote for a packet of cigarettes or some rice or a dress. They know they will not get anything upfront if they vote for an honest candidate. That is why for overall change of the situation, we need another liberation war. My proposal for the next parliament is, the facility for the MPs to import tax-free cars has to be stopped. Instead of the present election commission, next election should be held under a neutral commission. No candidate will have the permission to hold public meetings individually. Election commission will organise meetings with all the candidates.

### Ronesh Maitra

Bangladesh is a land of endless potential. Singapore is a small country. It has only one city. But they are earning huge amount of money from the seaport and the international airport. But we have two seaports and two international airports. But we cannot utilise them properly. For the sake of development, our railway and highways should be opened for the entire world.

We need more universities. We have forest and sea resources. But to use these resources what is required is a patriotic government. Communal governments cannot be patriotic. Those who bury their principles cannot be called patriotic.

Today, 60 per cent of the MPs are businessmen. Those who have been involved in politics for decades and had gone to jails and sacrificed for the country have been made canvasser of those who are dishonest and owners of black money. Today, students are being supplied with arms. They are given drugs. Women are being pushed inside the four walls of their house. This unhealthy trend in politics must end. The responsibility lies on both the civil society and politicians. All the good people in every political party must fight to end this. Civil society should keep political parties under pressure. As a politician I admit that we have limitations. You have done a great service by organising this programme today. The initiative has to be taken at all levels.

### Aamjad Hossain

Candidates must have educational qualifications. There should be a system so that one who breaks promises does not get nomination in the future. The word accountability is quite strong. The rural people will not understand this. Therefore, I request you to consider the word ..... My question to the organisers: Where are you taking us? What is the meaning of this discussion? I have doubts whether we shall be able to reach the goals by 2021. My request to the present generation: Please work for the country, for the farmers and for the working people.

### Shabnam Monzila Khanom Mita

If women do not become a part of the development activities then there cannot be overall development in the country. As a commissioner we want to have the facilities to work like our male colleagues. We have to give proper recognition to the freedom fighters.

### Aminur Rahman

We the civil society members live in the towns and cities. But are we more conscious than the rural people? Once we had selected AK Khandaker as an

honest candidate. It had created much enthusiasm in the villages but not in the town itself. We the town people talk big but cannot join with the common people of the villages. It is the educated people who are identified as corrupt. That is why education cannot be used as a yardstick to measure competence.

### Mohammad Bhattacharya

The point that is coming back again and again is how to identify competent candidates. In this respect we want to refer to the High Court verdict regarding information on election candidates. According to High Court verdict, every candidate will have to provide certain information while submitting the nomination form. For example, his/her educational qualification, profession, source of income, list of property (own and that of those dependent on him/her), status of bank loan, whether there is any criminal case against him, whether he is a convict, if he was public representative before then what was his role etc. Unfortunately, even after the verdict from the High Court, the election commission is not implementing that. We feel some more points should be added with those. For example, whether he pays taxes, whether he is a telephone and electricity bill defaulter, how many times he has changed political party and so on. When the information will reach the EC, they should be made available to the people on demand. On the basis of the information people will be able to select competent candidates. This is the process of selecting the right candidate.

### Mohammad Kobad Ali

Had the initiative like this meeting been taken long ago then that would have made our task easier. If the political parties of the country decide to nominate competent candidates then things might improve.

Also, there should be provision for casting 'No' vote in elections.

### Prof. Jannatul Ferdous

There are many people in civil society but the big question is whether all of them are honest or not. Most of the people who are engaged in different types of corrupt activities are educated. The public representatives have to be kept under observation. People will have to ask them questions and they will have to give answers. The work has to be done by both media and civil society. We have to think seriously about uprooting militancy. The number of reserved seats for women in parliament has to be increased to 64 one for each district. They have to be elected through direct election.

### Amirul Islam Ranga

Many of the works of the last caretaker government appeared to be controversial to many people of the country. That's why we are worried this time. The Election Commission is controversial and the possible chief adviser of the CG is also controversial. The question remains whether with so much of controversy the coming elections will be free and fair. Before looking for a good candidate we have to find out which one is a good party. In the 36 years of the history of Bangladesh, most of the period was ruled by the army. Politicians did not get much opportunity to run the country. There have been three parliamentary elections since 1990. But there are doubts whether those were done properly. That's why what we need to do before looking for honest candidates is establish a proper electoral system. We must not elect the Rajakers.

### Golam Faruq Prince

Talks have to be held with the central leaders of the political parties on the question of selecting honest and competent candidates. Otherwise we shall not reach a solution. It is better if MPs do not get involved in local development activities. Local government will do this job. For this, local government system has to be strengthened. MPs will create and implement laws. As we are leaders at grassroots levels we cannot talk about many party related problems.

My question is, what is the source of the finance and strength of the organizers of today's programme?

### RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE DIALOGUE (IN BRIEF)

- Political parties will have to prepare election manifesto based on local level problems. If an MP does not keep election promises, he/she will not be given nomination again.
- A bigger Nagorik Committee has to be formed by uniting the civil society at district level. Citizens' dialogue has to be taken at union and upazila level instead of keeping it confined within district level.
- Religion based politics and fatwa have to be banned.
- Women have to be involved in the mainstream of development. Provision has to be made for women to contest through direct vote.
- Practice of democracy within the political parties has to be increased. In every political party leaders at all level have to be selected on the basis of voting at grassroots level so that honest and competent persons come out as political leaders.
- The present chief election commissioner should resign. A new CEC accepted to all has to be given appointment.
- For election to parliament a candidate should be at least a graduate.
- Mass awareness has to be increased and it has to be ensured that villagers do not vote for candidates as per dictates of the local headmen.
- Media has to publish neutral and authentic news and views. Newspapers should not be hostage to the advertisers.
- Rehabilitation and free health care service of the freedom fighters has to be ensured.
- Development of the humanitarian qualities of the youth and healthy student politics should be included in the Vision 2021.
- In the development activities at local level, all political parties should work together.
- MPs should not be allowed to purchase duty-free cars. This has to be reflected in the election manifesto.
- Candidates will submit election publicity funds with the Election Commission and all candidates will give speeches in meetings organised by the EC.
- In order to nominate honest and competent candidates Nagorik committee should hold discussion with the main two political parties.
- The civil society has to interact with the farmers and common people. In every voting area Nagorik Committee has to form Nagorik sub-committee to create awareness among the people.
- Only those candidates should be given nomination who keeps in touch with the people of the area; who do not have house or property in Dhaka; who are involved in politics; who work for the interest of the farmers and workers; and who have no connection with militancy.
- It has to be made clear as to who the MPs will remain accountable to.
- There should be provision for casting 'No' vote in elections. If the number of 'No' votes turns out to be more than each party will have to nominate new candidates.
- Registration system of political parties should be mandatory.
- It has to be ascertained as to who will punish a candidate for violating electoral laws.
- Poor people have to be involved with the local government.
- After announcement of candidates, Nagorik Committee should organise a debate with the candidates of major two political parties.
- Cases filed with EC must be solved without further delay.
- All the poverty alleviation.....
- Transparent ballot box has to be used in voting centres.
- Judiciary has to be separated from administration.
- After announcement of the candidates election has to be completed within seven days so that candidates cannot spend money outside the fixed amount.
- Local level problems:
  - Edward University College has to be made a full-fledged university
  - A medical college has to be established in Pabna.
  - A rail station has to be established in Pabna.
  - Excavation of Ichhamati River has to be done.
  - Gas has to be supplied soon to the industries and factories.

