

The Daily Star-Students Dialogue on Election '96

More Responsible Politics Hoped for

We have heard a lot about the expectations of the adults from the coming elections. What about the young citizens? What do they expect from election '96? To find out what our young boys and girls are thinking The Daily Star invited students from ten leading schools and colleges of the city for a free and candid dialogue. The meeting was conducted by The Daily Star editor Mahfuz Anam, and assisted by Ekram Kabir and Fakrul Islam Chowdhury. Below we present what they told us.

MAHFUZ ANAM: We thank all of you — the students of colleges, schools and universities for coming to The Daily Star office and joining the discussion. We want you to express your expectations, desires and dreams regarding the coming parliamentary election. We hope all of you will speak from your heart and share your views with our readers. Let's begin with Shahed Masud from Dhaka College. Shahed, what are your expectations from the coming election?

SHAHED MASUD (Dhaka College): Politically, the coming parliamentary election is very important for our country. I hope the ensuing general election will be free and fair and without any violence. I also hope that the results will be accepted by all political parties regardless of who wins or who doesn't. These are my minimum expectations.

In a democracy, people have a wide range of expectations from both the government and the opposition. We are looking forward to the party or parties, who will form the next government, to ensure political stability, improve law and order situation and eradicate poverty. Most of all, we want the elected government to work for the nation's prosperity and not for the narrow party or self-interest.

But we should note that it

is not possible for the government alone to achieve everything without the help of the opposition. If the opposition keeps itself busy only to call and observe hartals, oborodhs and ashoghjogs, no government will be able to materialise any development programmes whatsoever. So, I hope, the government and opposition will co-operate with each other and reach to a national consensus on important national issues.

But first of all, it is the voters who are the most important factor — it is on their choice, the course of events in the next five years that will follow the coming parliamentary election, depends. My expectations from them is that while choosing one candidate over another, they should consider merit, ability, honesty and patriotism of the candidate irrespective of his or her party affiliations.

I also expect that the next elected government and opposition will be tolerant to each other and participate in open discussions on various policy issues through the media. This will enhance our democratic culture.

Women candidates should be directly elected by the people to the women seats. The voter will have two ballot papers, one for the general candidate and one for the reserve-seat candidate. With this method a better selection of candidates can be ensured.

I want to see the next Parliament completing its full term. Let parliamentary democracy flourish to its full extent. Give our country a chance to prosper.

MAHFUZ ANAM: Thank you Shahed, we all share your hopes and concerns. Now to Quasif Ridwan from Udayan Biddyalaya — what are you thinking Quasif?

QUASIF RIDWAN (Udayan Biddyalaya): I have a lot of expectations — I want the com-

ing election to be held in a violence-free and peaceful environment. I hope by a free, fair and neutrally held election, we will achieve a democratic ruling system, and democratic governance will be firmly established in this country. I hope our Police, Ansar, BDR and Army to play a neutral role in the ensuing election. They belong to the Republic, not to any particular political party. I hope political parties, too, will not try to make them controversial and will place them above narrow party interests.

I was born in an independent country — Bangladesh. Our ancestors fought for this country and brought independence sacrificing a sea of blood. But after the War of Liberation just when we were aspiring to establish a democratic, secular and exploitation-free country based on Bengali nationalism, some unfortunate and unasked-for events took place. Following those events, some people tried to erase the cherished values of the Liberation War. I hope, through this election the forces in favour of independence to be the majority party, and they will firmly re-establish the values of the Liberation War. Finally, I hope that the results will be accepted by all political parties whoever wins, and the next oppositions should lend their helping hands to the government and ensure the well-being of our motherland together.

ZAHAIDUR RAHMAN (Govt. Laboratory High School): I hope our Armed forces will be able to maintain their image during the coming election. The Army should place themselves above any controversy. I expect that the incidents of 18-20 May will not be repeated ever in this country.

Between August 15, 1975, and December 6, 1990, our country was more or less ruled by autocratic governments. The anarchy that prevailed during those years in all walks of life made it difficult to build a prosperous country. Compared to those 15 years, the last five years were much better. After a long gap we had a truly democratically elected government. Despite many failures, we now have relatively better freedom of expression and movement, and democratic norms and culture have prevailed during the last five years. This is a chance to continue this progress made in the last five years.

In this context, the Army should keep itself aloof from the political and electoral process — they must maintain strict neutrality. I have another expectation from this election which is about the report of the Court of Inquiry, which we are apprehensive, maybe published before the election to avoid any unforeseen situation. I think the report be published after the election.

ASHEK MAHMUD (Govt. Laboratory High School): I don't have much expectations from the June 12 election because I don't think that an election will not be able to lead us to a prosperous Bangladesh from the gloomy situation we are in now.

Still, my expectations regarding this election can be divided into two parts. One, regarding the election process and two, from the elected government that will follow the election. I hope the coming election will be free and fair. To ensure a fair election we must recover all the illegal arms. But country-wide arms recovery efforts have proved largely ineffectual. The caretaker government must increase its efforts to recover all illegal arms and ensure that the terrorists are arrested before June 12.

My minimum expectation from the next elected government is that it will not make our lives more miserable than what it is already today. I want the next government to be courageous enough to uphold our country's interests in matters of foreign policy. I want to see that we get our due share of Ganges water within the next five years.

I want to see both the next government and the opposition will reach to a national consensus in banning religion as a political tool. If religion-based politics is to be per-



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mitted at all, then the government must ensure that those who practice such politics do not distort religion.

IMTIAZ FARUQUE (St. Joseph School): My first expectation is that all the voters should be able to cast their votes freely and safely. From the elected government I expect that they will practice a democratic culture and will be transparent, accountable, responsible and responsive to the people, not only in black and white or in speeches but also in reality. The government should overcome the red-tapism to ensure a development-friendly culture. Corruption must be prevented. I hope the next Parliament will be able to complete its tenure. I urge the would-be MPs to use the Parliament as the stage for discussion on all national issues. The political parties — both position and opposition — must allow the Parliament to function smoothly.

The Constitution should be

now prevailing in our country will last even after the election is over. I also hope our political parties to be mature enough to accept the poll results. I am optimistic about the ability of the caretaker government to ensure a free, fair and violence-free election.

I hope that the next elected government will work as the true representative of people and will look at the interests of the people above their party interests. I expect the opposition to accept their defeat gracefully. The opposition should co-operate with the government when the latter is doing something good for the country. And if the government fails to serve the nation or if it does something against the interest of the people then the opposition must protest. But the way of protesting should be non-violent and the opposition should never try to achieve their goal by destroying national property. I hope every one will work for our country together and make Bangladesh a truly democratic and developed one.

TASNEEM ZAKARIA (Ex-student, Holy Cross College): I want this election to be held — that's my first expectation. Secondly, I want it to be fair and my third expectation is that I want to see the emergence of statesmen and statesmanship.

I want to see an intellectually capable government, who can and will rule the country with its ideology. I want the leaders to inspire us, guide us, and lead us with their ideology. I want the government who can make the best use of 12 core views and 24 core hands of our 12 core people.

I want an opposition that leads its movements peacefully and without destroying public and private properties. I want a happy and prosperous Bangladesh where government and opposition will allow each other to function smoothly and work together.

SABERA AREFIN (Vikarunnessa Nun School): The next elected government should behave in a democratic way. I do not want my freedom of speech or individual freedom to be curtailed by any government. I hope the democratically held, free and fair election under the non-party caretaker government will ensure a democratic government and opposition who will remain so during the next five years.

I want such a government who will ensure the freedom of the press and will not harass our journalists for publishing the truth. I want a government that can guarantee my safety as a woman. I want my rights, as a woman, to be established by the government. I don't want incidents like Yasmeen murder to re-occur. I hope the next government will be free of corruption. I want a government that will have a strong foreign policy.

MAHBUBA KHANAM (Ex-student, Vikarunnessa Nun College): To put it bluntly, I have no expectations from the coming election. The overall situation of the country has put a question-mark on the face of a free and fair election. We have been expecting many things on many occasions in the past, but how many of them have been realised? I am really frustrated. Still, we are hoping to cast our votes in a

free and fair manner. When the President is in-charge of the Defence Ministry and the partisan stance of the President is widely known, how can one expect a free and fair election? I must say — though I am a Bengalee myself — Bengalees are ignorant. We always expect and hope without substantial reasons.

ADEEB Z. MAHMUD (Notre Dame College): Our political leaders are promising many financial benefits, like pension for the elderly, subsidisation in agriculture and so on. But they are not telling the people from where the money, to finance those projects, is going to come. Surely the money will not fall from the sky.

Politicians have to impose tax on citizens to meet the monetary demands of these projects. They should also inform the voters about the possible additional taxes while making those fancy promises. There should be a provision in the Election Codes of Conduct so that no one can deceive innocent voters by promising the

impossible or by not disclosing all the relevant information about any programme in their election manifesto.

Politics is a game of competition, so I hope our politicians will treat their opponents as their rivals and not as their enemies. I believe there are still a lot of honest, dedicated and eligible politicians in our country and I just hope this time we, the voters, will be able to choose them over the dishonest ones.

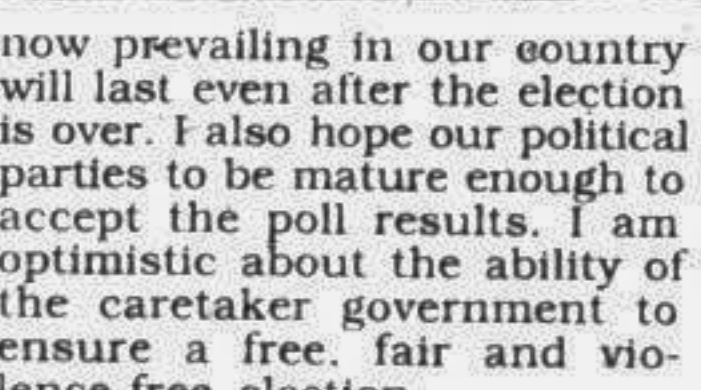
GALEEB HAMID PRATIK (Khulna University): I hope this election will give us a strong and stable government so that Civil or Army bureaucracy will not be able to interfere in political affairs.

I want the government and the opposition to reach to a consensus on major national issues. And I hope we will be able to practice a democratic culture in all spheres of life in Bangladesh. I hope that the next government will pursue a strong foreign policy so that we can have our due share of Ganges water.

MAHFUZ ANAM: One thing I find common in all of you that all of you share a feeling of being let-down in the past by our national leadership. I can see that your base of hopes is not that strong. We understand your feeling of fears and frustrations and you have expressed the reasons behind those feelings. However, you have also expressed your expectations regarding the coming election and hoped that it would be free, fair and without any violence. You expected that after the election, politics of our country would be Parliament-bound. But now, I want

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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Quasif Ridwan (Udayan Biddyalaya)
Ashakur Rahman (Govt Laboratory High School)
Zahidur Mahmud (Govt Laboratory High School)
Imtiaz Faruque (St Joseph's School)
Nuzhat Mahzabin (Holy Cross School)
Tasneem Zakaria (Ex-student, Holy Cross College)
Sabera Arefin (Vikarunnessa Nun School)
Mahbuba Khanam Mukta (Ex-student, Vikarunnessa Nun College)
Adeeb Z Mahmud (Notre Dame College)
Galeeb Hamid Pratik (Khulna University)



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you to reflect on the recent part. What do you think are the reasons behind the failure of the 5th Parliament? First, tell me do you agree that the 5th Parliament was a failure? Do you agree that our experience of democracy during the last five years was an experience of failure? If you do agree, tell us the reasons behind this failure.

TASNEEM ZAKARIA: First cause of the failure is the non-co-operation of our opposition parties with the government. They did not let the government work smoothly. Even when the foreign delegates came to our country to explore investment opportunities, the opposition did not consider national interests and continued with their programmes. On the other hand, our government did not try to understand the psyche of the masses. It created a distance between itself and people. The people of our country did not support, or I should be saying opposed many of the activities of both our government and opposition but they could not make their voices heard because of their fear and insecurity. They remained more or less silent. The responsibility lies on our leadership. They were supposed to make us feel secure and it was their duty to listen to us. But they did not care enough. So we could not reach them and they could not do the same. Ultimately, there was a wide communication gap between the citizens and political leadership. The leadership failed to understand and exploit the potential of our people.

IMTIAZ FARUQUE: I think, those who were elected in the 5th Parliament failed their voters. Many of them lacked adequate political experience. Many businessmen turned themselves into politicians overnight. Politics was only a means to accumulate wealth for some of them. They only worked for themselves and forgot the people. I think if experienced politicians were given more nominations over the businessmen-turned-politicians, the situation would have been different.

I think lack of honesty and commitment on the leadership's part was the most important factor that led to the failure of our great democratic hope.

SABERA AREFIN: I think the absence of respect for each other between the government and the opposition was an important factor. The govern-

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MAHFUZ ANAM: What can we do to change this mentality?

SHAHED MASUD: The leaders of the former ruling party and that of the former opposition parties of our country were unable to show tolerance to each other's views and positions. The consequences of this lack of tolerance were fatal. The country suffered a huge loss in terms of economic, development and social progress during the last two years because of the failure of our leadership. The government was not at all responsive to the demands pressed by the opposition. On the other hand, the opposition's attitude towards the government was also hostile. From the very beginning, they declared a war on the government and said, they would not let the government function smoothly.

QUASIF RIDWAN: I feel, the main reason of the failure was the opposition's decision to quit from the Parliament. At first the opposition boycotted the Parliament for a long period of time and then they resigned.

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In this context, when democracy did have another chance in our country our leadership as well as our citizens failed to live up to the expectations. It was very natural. But I don't think the 5th Parliament was a complete failure. Because at least one way or another it was the first parliament in the history of Bangladesh that could complete its tenure. There is another point to note, the experience we gathered from the successes and failures of this parliament was worth the experimentation. At least we have reached to a national consensus on how to conduct free and fair elections, and agreed on a model — the caretaker government model. This in no mere achievement.

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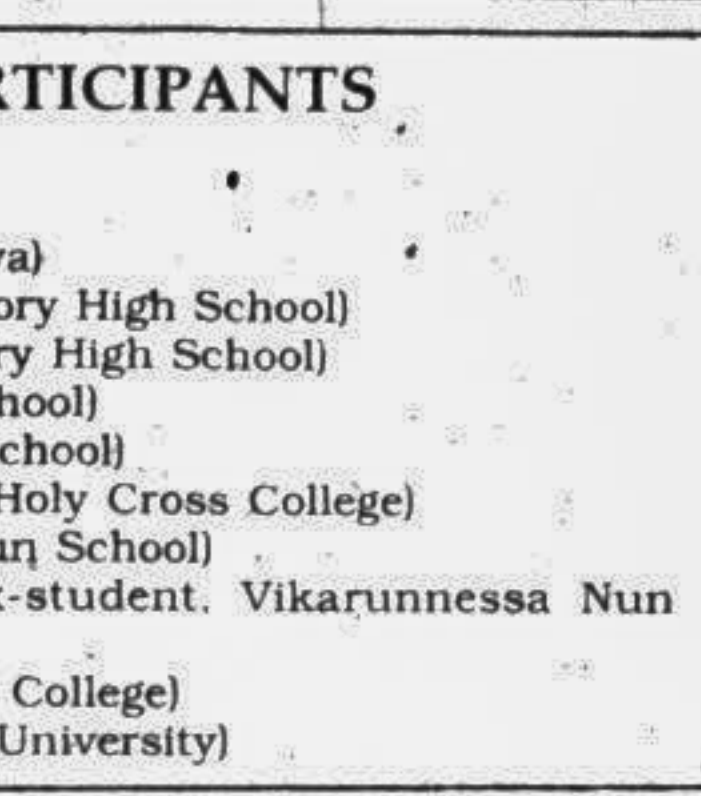
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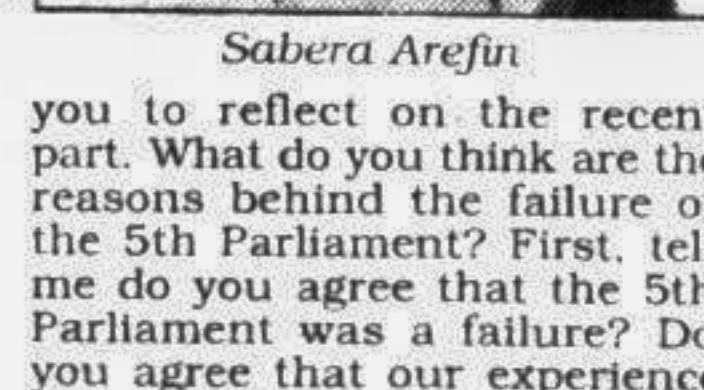
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MAHBUBA KHANAM: I think the absence of democratic attitudes and values is the main reason. We must change our attitudes first. We must have a democratic mind. We have to practice democratic values in our everyday life. Otherwise no amount of efforts can mend the damages done to our country. Until and unless we can change our mindset and adopt a democratic mentality, democracy is destined to fail in this country.

MAHFUZ ANAM: What can we do to change this mentality?

SHAHED MASUD: The leaders of the former ruling party and that of the former opposition parties of our country were unable to show tolerance to each other's views and positions. The consequences of this lack of tolerance were fatal. The country suffered a huge loss in terms of economic, development and social progress during the last two years because of the failure of our leadership. The government was not at all responsive to the demands pressed by the opposition. On the other hand, the opposition's attitude towards the government was also hostile. From the very beginning, they declared a war on the government and said, they would not let the government function smoothly.

QUASIF RIDWAN: I feel, the main reason of the failure was the opposition's decision to quit from the Parliament. At first the opposition boycotted the Parliament for a long period of time and then they resigned.

The decision of boycotting the Parliament and quitting from it left no option for the opposition but to confront the government in the streets. I think should the opposition stayed in the House, the situation would have been better. When some one says something in the parliament as an MP, it carries some degree of importance, but when he/she has already quit from the parliament and was saying the same thing, it lost that importance. There lies the difference between a normal person and a member of parliament. The opposition leadership failed to understand this simple truth. How can a parliamentary democracy work without the opposition?

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