

Confrontational Politics in Bangladesh Is There a Role for Civil Society?

by Professor Rehman Sobhan

Are there many citizens who are willing to invest time, survive the initial hostility of both parties and will persevere to see such tasks through to their conclusion? The answer may depend on the emergence of a coalition of civil society groups such as the professional bodies, business groups, NGOs and even the smaller political parties, to invest their institutional authority behind such groups.

corruption. It is recognised that in all areas of weak development, responses poor governance, originating in the malfunctioning of the political process, remains as the root cause. The disillusion over the state of democracy in Bangladesh must thus be related to a pervasive concern amongst our people that prospects for a better future are being compromised through the failure of the political system to subordinate parochial concerns in the wider interests of the people of Bangladesh.

Sources of Political Crisis

I may repeat myself when I state that the irony of the situation lies in the fact that our political system should have been the most positive asset available to the people of Bangladesh. We are a relatively homogenous people with a tradition of democratic struggle, having attained our independence not as a gift but through blood and sacrifice. We have an assured system of free and fair elections which has been tested over two widely acclaimed general elections and we have two major political parties with an equal capacity to win an election who remain as counterweights to one-party hegemony over the polity. Why then is our political system in a state of total confrontation with parliament immobilised and incendiary vocabulary dominating the political discourse? Why is the incumbent regime passing draconian laws to enforce law and order? Why is the opposition outside parliament walking the streets demanding the resignation of a government which is still vested with a clear majority in the parliament, long before the expiry of its term of office?

These answers must be sought in two areas. Within the political system the emergence of two strong political parties, rather than promoting a mutual recognition that neither can oust the other from national politics has instead bred a culture of intolerance amongst the two principal parties. Each party questions the legitimacy of its rival to a point where they behave as if they would like to drive out their rival from the political arena. Politics as a result has become more confrontational, hence more violent, abusive and disconnected from popular concerns. Such a system has encouraged the entry into politics of a breed of people motivated exclusively by personal greed and the use of violence to realise their private goals.

That such elements have emerged to debate the noble profession of politics reflects a failure of civil society to play a more positive role in the polity. For all the public statements and attempts by business groups to mediate relations between the parties, in the final analysis civil society has failed to make the principal political parties accountable for their abuse of the democratic process. The political parties feel insufficiently threatened by the pressures from civil society because they reckon that those who speak for civil society lack the stamina to expose them-

selves to a process of applying sustained pressure to ensure a more constructive political process.

The confrontational approach to politics in Bangladesh is now a decade old. The very issues which now find the opposition on the streets kept the Awami League on the streets during the term of office of the BNP. The one difference lay in the fact that Awami League's primary issue over holding of elections under a non-party caretaker government was a widely supported issue which was recognised in the passage of the constitutional amendment by the BNP government institutionalising the caretaker government. Had the BNP not resisted this demand when it was first put before parliament by the Awami League their political fortunes may have been different. Indeed, today the BNP are likely to be the principal beneficiaries of this amendment where they can expect to contest the election under a non-party caretaker government rather than their under Awami League government.

However, the prospect for holding a national election under a caretaker government has done little to solve the problem of by-elections or local election. The same set of apprehensions which gave substance to the demand for a caretaker government for a national election

applies to local government elections. The source of the problem lies in the culture of intolerance and confrontation between the principal parties. Until this intolerance is resolved we may have no choice but to make further legal provision to ensure that all local government elections are also held during the tenure of a caretaker government. This would put a heavy burden on both the caretaker government and Election Commission to hold at least upazila, municipal and national elections within their three-month tenure. This has to be done if we have to preserve the democratic system.

The problem of by-elections during the life of the parliament being manipulated by a ruling party can be resolved by abolishing by-elections. As and when a vacancy occurs in a parliament seat the party which originally won the seat in the general election could be invited to nominate someone of their choice to fill the vacancy. This suggestion may not be fully sensitive to the concepts of representative democracy but appears the best available solution

if political confrontation is to be avoided. It is not clear if the two principal parties will endorse such amendments to our electoral system but civil society should come forward with a concrete set of legal proposals and consult with the parties if they will accept such a proposal which can then be piloted through parliament in the form of bipartisan legislation.

The other principal issue which is dividing the parties lies in the perception of the opposition that the ruling party treats or uses its presence in government to abridge the democratic rights of the opposition. It is argued by the opposition that they are exposed to oppressive treatment by the government through the arrest and harassment of party workers, the disparity of speaking opportunities in the parliament and denial of equal time in the electronic media. Such issues of unfair democratic practice remain the principal reason offered by the opposition to justify their frequent declarations of hartal and boycott of parliament. It is significant that this very concern about unfair treatment was also voiced by the Awami League during the tenure in office of BNP. In an intolerant culture based on a winner-take-all philosophy the chances are that the opposition, at least on such issues, is more sinned against than sinning.

Such civil society initiatives may need to move beyond writing reports and intend their role to initiating dialogues preferably of a less publicised nature where a few key figures from either party can sit with a few civil society figures to explore areas of reconciliation. Such dialogues can set the stage for a meeting of the two party leaders. In this process to do no more than facilitate the process of political dialogue. When major political figures meet they must negotiate with each other and do not need or expect civil society to oversee such a political process.

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What is to be Done: The Role of Civil Society

What is significant is that both parties present totally contrasting political facts to the people. The government claims that they do not arrest opposition party workers but only criminals. Furthermore, they remain willing to share time with the opposition in parliament who in any case tend to abuse their time in parliament through unparliamentary behaviour. The opposition claims that the partisan role of the Speaker in Parliament and the high handed behaviour of the government provokes their misbehaviour. Both facts and their interpretation thus divide the ruling and opposition parties who thereby convince themselves of the rectitude of their position which serves to intensify the political confrontation.

The expectation that the President will play a mediating role does not appear tenable under the constitution whilst the Speaker is seen as too partisan to play such a role. In the absence of institutional alternatives can civil society play a role in resolving such a conflict? Civil Society (CS) is unfortunately too heterogeneous a body to play a coherent role in politics. What we can at best hope for is for enough well-regarded citizens, including those with some representative credentials such as the Presidents of professional and business associations as well as leaders of grassroots organisations, to come together to address spe-

community. This body should constitute itself as a standing body where all such complaints of the opposition can be evaluated and quarterly reports on these and other abuses of human rights can be issued by the group. The principal newspapers should commit themselves to give prominent news coverage to the publication of the report.

If such a group is constituted by people with some public standing and they do their work with both diligence and professional integrity it would be difficult for the government or opposition to ignore their conclusions. If the weight of this evidence can be brought to bear on ensuring more tolerant political behavior such a group could yet play a positive role in mediating the political crisis.

The issue of democratic use of parliamentary time and the electronic media can also be addressed by another civil society group. Such a body could take on the responsibility of monitoring all sessions of the parliament and could prepare reports both on use as well as abuse of parliamentary time. Such reports could be presented to the House as well as the nation to see how far the opposition received fair treatment in parliament as well as to report on the observation of parliamentary etiquette including the use of abusive language and misbehavior on the floor of the house.

This same group could similarly prepare reports on the use of the media both in its coverage of parliament as well as to

explore areas of reconciliation. Such dialogues can set the stage for a meeting of the two party leaders. In this process to do no more than facilitate the process of political dialogue. When major political figures meet they must negotiate with each other and do not need or expect civil society to oversee such a political process.

Assumptions Underlying the Role of Civil Society

It should be made clear from the outset that civil society activism is no substitute for political activism. In the final analysis those in civil society who feel strongly about the state of politics in Bangladesh should join political parties, work with humility and dedication at the grassroots and earn the political credibility to influence party politics. Until enough people of competence and dedication enter politics the role of civil society itself will be limited. In the prevailing circumstances, civil society's ability to volunteer its services to mediate the confrontational relations between the ruling party and the opposition must work within its limitations and depend on two assumptions. The first and most important issue is that both political parties have an interest to seek a compromise. If the government is determined to stamp the opposition into the ground and the opposition is determined to prematurely dethrone the opposition then there is nothing that

any outside party can do to resolve this process. It is only when both parties seek a solution within the framework of parliamentary democracy but remain too suspicious of each other's motives to play the game that civil society can play a role in moderating their confrontation. To seek such a mediatory role by civil society however implies that both the Awami League and BNP have come to recognise that each has a legitimate role to play in national politics and that democratic politics in Bangladesh is unsustainable without an ongoing process of political dialogue between these two parties.

If however, both parties remain committed to the politics of confrontation, then more exhortations of eminent citizens or even concerned donors can do little to resolve our political crisis. Here civil society, if it is to be heard will have to escalate its proactive role from being observer-referees to seek to design more potent sanctions to be applied by a larger constituency of citizens against the political parties. Civil disobedience movements need not limit themselves to actions by the opposition against the government. Citizens can also enforce hartals, gheraos and lead citizens' demonstrations against both the government and opposition to demand that they resolve their conflicts within a democratic discourse rather than through confrontation. Such mobilisations were practised by citizens in Northern Ireland and two of these citizens even won the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts at peacemaking.

Such a proactive role by civil society assumes that some citizens are willing to invest enough time and energy to mediate such confrontations between the parties. To monitor court cases and police behaviour day after day, to monitor every session of parliament and to monitor the far from exciting news coverage of BTV requires patience fortitude and a sound digestive system. This demands that enough strong and dedicated persons are available to invest their time in such a task and that they command high public credibility to ensure the acceptability of their over-the-top reports which are placed before the nation. To find such credible figures is no easy task because such a group has to be accepted as a non-partisan body. Today it is increasingly difficult to find universally acceptable public figures who even if they have a political position are willing to rise above this to perform a mediating role. Obviously the acceptability of such a group will be challenged and will only be able to prove itself through the merit and objectivity of its reports. To find such citizens who will move beyond report writing to expose themselves to the hazards of both organising and leading citizen's demonstrations, involving both time and risks is likely to be even more problematic in Bangladesh today.

Are there many citizens who are willing to invest time, survive the initial hostility of both parties and will persevere to see such tasks through to their conclusion? The answer may depend on the emergence of a coalition of civil society groups such as the professional bodies, business groups, NGOs and even the smaller political parties, to invest their institutional authority behind such groups. There are few people with the stature to lend credibility to such groups who would volun-

teer their time without such a broad based support base.

Can such an initiative work to resolve the prevailing political impasse? Our politicians have, if anything become more intractable in their mutual hostilities and hence more insensitive to citizen's voices so that the threshold of effort demanded of citizens rises by the day. It may be possible that we have reached the point of no return in our confrontational politics? If we have reached this point then dark days lie ahead both for the economy and polity which will not be resolved just by a change of regime. If the opposition stays out of parliament they may feel that they have no option but to seek to oust the regime by force. But is this a feasible goal particularly when the government just has one year to complete its term? The Awami League for all the strength of its movement in 1995 could not reduce the tenure in office of the BNP by a single day. Does the BNP seriously expect to succeed where the Awami League failed even with the more credible political agenda of the caretaker government to back its movement. The people of Bangladesh may thus have to live with more hartals and a half-empty parliament for yet another year. This means that close to half the life of two elected parliament will have been spent in confrontational politics which has compromised the effectiveness of both parliaments. This does not do much for the process of representative government if close to half the population of Bangladesh remains unrepresented in Parliament. If citizens get used to being unrepresented they may then be less enthusiastic to defend any prospective assault on the institutions of representative government.

Furthermore, the atmosphere of hatred and intolerance which permeates our political life, aggravated by a year of confrontation on the streets, will ensure that the prospective election of 2001 will be far more divisive and violent than its two predecessors. In such a climate the task of a caretaker government could become untenable so that it will be difficult to find people willing and acceptable to participate in such a government. The results of such a election may be exposed to immediate rejection by the losing party so that the life of the next parliament could begin in a state of confrontation.

The costs of this ongoing political confrontation not just over the next year but over the next six years remains too appalling to contemplate. Not only will it frustrate all opportunities for consolidating our developmental gains but it could undermine whatever gains we have registered so far.

The prospect of transforming a nation of enormous promise into a failed state must thus be projected before our political leaders to enable them to compute the costs of their ongoing political confrontation. Whether of them be statesperson enough to step back to count this cost and to then make an authentic gesture of reconciliation to restore our political process to the path of sanity? And are the citizens of Bangladesh willing to do more than make statements, write in newspapers and participate in seminars in order to compel our leaders to count the costs of leading us towards a failed state? We may all take to heart the haunting message of the poet John Donne: Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

Why is the Parliamentary Election Significant for Iran?

by Harun ur Rashid

Iran is a regional power. Iran's growing military strength and increasing diplomatic interaction are recognised by every one. Even the US admitted its role in the maintenance of the security in the region. Its relations with France, Italy and Britain are growing. Iran's standing will be further strengthened if Iran is governed by moderate leaderships. The Parliamentary election is a key process to achieve this goal.

THE Iranians go to the polls today (Friday) to elect Iran's fifth National Assembly (Majlis) since the Islamic revolution in 1979. Approximately 39 million Iranians are eligible for voting in the election. The election result will have far-reaching ramifications on Iran's future direction and policy.

President Khatami was elected in May 1997. He wanted to create an Islamic civil society within Islamic democracy. His liberal ideas and policies have hit hard on the conservative clerical establishment in Iran. Many of his reforms could not be put into place because of the lack of support from the Parliament. The former Interior Minister Abdullah Noori was forced out of the Parliament because of his support for greater freedom in social, political and cultural areas.

At present the Parliament is dominated by the conservatives who do not see eye to eye with the reformist and moderate President Mohammad Khatami. Iran has a dual system of administration under its constitution. The President has limited powers while the supreme spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is vested with enormous powers of the state. The Parliament controls the appointment of the Ministers of the government. The conserva-

tive elements have used their control of the armed and security forces, the judiciary and many decision-making councils to frustrate the reform-agenda of the President. This has left President Khatami powerless to implement his reforms.

The main faction of the reformists have formed a party, Islamic Iran Participation Front which has nominated five women candidates for the first time for the seats in the Parliament. One of the women candidates, Fatemeh Haqiqat Jou, said: "Khatami's three-year old reform commitments must be supported and this is the only way to ensure the future of our young people and the country. The five women face an uphill battle if they are to achieve their campaign goals."

The municipal elections were held last year. The reformists did very well in the elections and most of the councils were dominated by them. Even in the Tehran City Council, 12 reformists (supporters of President Khatami) won out of 15 seats. The result of the municipal elections demonstrated that most of the people rejected the conservative candidates.

President Khatami's strategy has been to fight his opponents within the constitutional framework. Therefore he held for the first time municipal elections in the country in which the re-

formists largely won. If the reformists gain majority in the Parliament, President Khatami will be able to push through his reforms including the freedom of press and expression.

President Khatami has already a roadmap of making Iran an open Islamic society. If the result of the municipal elections is anything to go by, the reformists have a good chance of winning the majority of seats in the Parliament. In that case President Khatami will be able to lay the foundation of an Islamic democracy in Iran. There is a view that the conservative elements can still slow down the process because a few of the non-elected state machines will be controlled by the conservative elements.

Iran is a regional power. Iran's growing military strength and increasing diplomatic interaction are recognised by every one. Even the US admitted its role in the maintenance of the security in the region. Its relations with France, Italy and Britain are growing. Iran's standing will be further strengthened if Iran is governed by moderate leaderships. The Parliamentary election is a key process to achieve this goal.

The author, a barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

NO region on earth is growing faster or expanding its role in international affairs more quickly than the Asian community of nations. And Bangladesh, with its richness in mineral resources and manpower, has emerged as one of the most important nations of the region. Bangladesh with its developing infrastructure, abundant low cost energy, developing industrial base, rich mineral resources, thriving industrial and agricultural sector, efficient financial sector and several exciting tourist places, has emerged as a new horizon for trade and investment.

Bangladesh is home to 120 million people, a large part of world's population — a huge market in itself. With relations between Bangladesh and other countries in the world becoming closer and more complex, the need for understanding the ways of doing business in international markets has never been greater, for Bangladesh.

Many major events in the 20th century have led to drastic changes in the ways of doing business in the 21st century. Some of the events are: Signing of the GATT/WTO agreement; Patent rights; Intellectual property rights; Formation of Trading blocs like NAFTA, European Union, SAARC, ASEAN, OPEC, AAPSU, MURCOSIL; Removal of visa and travel restrictions; Informa-

Global Strategy for Small Business

Jagat Shah writes from Gujarat, India

Bangladesh is now in the process of globalising its economy and this is an opportune time for organisations to accelerate the successful management of innovations.

Technology-Internet/Satellite communication/Video conferencing etc. Priority of economics over politics in the world; and professionalisation of business, the world over.

For Bangladesh small businesses and CEOs, to cope with these dramatic events, in a world of unpredictable change there is a need to develop a comprehensive philosophy of management focused on innovation and constant improvement. This will require "The new psychology of management" as well as developing a powerful futuristic vision.

Bangladesh small businesses and CEOs will have to learn the skills to cope with this fast changing economic scenario, in the world of business. One of the issues, most relevant in the Bangladesh context is "Succession planning for the family owned businesses". The history of family-owned businesses has not been the most rewarding experience for some, whereas for others it has been quite a welcome opportunity. A family run business in Bangladesh today must address itself to the question of successful transi-

tion and longevity with a minimum of stress and conflict. Various aspects of succession planning to be looked deeper into are: Family and business values; status of the family's current assets and estate; current status in the event of death or disability; the process of choosing a successor; working in the family firm; business maintenance and growth and the monitoring process.

Going international is no longer a matter of something nice one does when one has the chance. It is, today, a matter of strategic importance and even survival for the Bangladeshi small businesses and CEOs. To achieve success in the international arena of business requires a manufacturer or an exporter to make a principled commitment to a marketplace. The process is incremental — one step after another having the option of stopping at any point along the way.

Bangladesh small business and CEOs will have to learn the art of international partnering. Partnering is both a mindset and an activity. It provides many opportunities to see and choose new possibilities for

business. It enlightens the ways of working with other cross cultural companies for synergistic (the whole equalling more than the parts i.e. 1+1=3) solutions. The partnering model (joint ventures and foreign collaboration) enables Bangladeshi businesses of any size to access the benefits generated by pooling the knowledge and experience, crucial to compete in global marketplace.

Success in today's global economy requires an understanding of how business is conducted internationally. Yet the ways of doing business differ across cultures. An unpolished presentation is bad business, and a breach of etiquette can result in loss of business. Since many years one of the important trading partners of Bangladesh has been USA. American English and business practices dominate the world trade. Bangladesh business and CEOs need to familiarize with business language, practices and customs used by their American counterparts. Various aspects which needs detailed understanding, are: American meeting and negotia-

tion practices; business jargon; British vs. American vs. Bangladeshi business English; marketing and advertising messages given to American public; communication with American business women; Internet language and protocol.

CEOs will have to understand & implement the concepts of globalisation drivers; company global strategy levers; building global market participation; designing global products & services; creating global marketing; making strategic alliances & most important building global organisation.

Bangladesh is now in the process of globalising its economy and this is an opportune time for organisations to accelerate the successful management of innovations. The fundamental condition for sustaining innovations by organisations is the nurturing of effective communication linkages between, for example, marketing and production as well as all other parts of the organisation. The critical goal of sustained and commercially successful innovation in the international market has to be achieved. Bangladeshi companies have all of the core competencies to achieve this goal.

The writer is Managing Director Global Network Institute Gujarat.

Garfield®

by Jim Davis

James Bond

BY VAN FLEMING
DRAWING BY HORAK

THE NAME 'VON RICHTER'
SUDDENLY ELECTRIFIES
BOND LITAS — AFTER HE
HEARS THAT THE
BOND AND ARIANE...

COME ON —
TELL ME
EVERYTHING.
HOW DOES HE
GET INTO THIS?

HE WAS SEEN BY AN
EX-RESISTANCE FIGHTER
WHO TOLD OF LOCAL
PARTY CHIEF!

SO HE'S COME BACK TO
GREECE, LIKE ALL THE OTHER
GERMAN SWINE! BACK TO
TO RUIN —
HIS PLEASANT MEMORIES!



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