

In its issue of 8 February *The Daily Star* reported that Karl F. Inderfurth, US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs had observed in a lecture that Bangladesh is a major example of democracy in South Asia and a beacon of hope for the countries in the Muslim World. This positive external image of the working of democracy in Bangladesh coming from the principal spokesmen on South Asian Affairs in the US government was in stark contrast to the local image of the state of democracy in Bangladesh echoed in the recent public communication to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition from Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud, President of the Bangladesh Economic Association. The observations originating from the local missions of the principal aid donors of Bangladesh led by the World Bank and the high profile remarks of the US Ambassador and the outgoing UK High Commissioner to Bangladesh display a similar degree of concern to those registered by Mahmud over the state of governance and democracy in Bangladesh.

There is more extended evidence at hand to point to these contrasting images of Bangladesh at home or abroad. The gloom and doom associated at home with affairs in Bangladesh is not how we are viewed abroad. In particular areas such as micro-credit, reduced fertility, spread of education for girls, high rates of immunisation, the explosive growth of garment exports, the doubling of foodgrain production, steady growth of 4 to 5 per cent and reasonably sound macro-economic foundation, Bangladesh has generated a positive image for itself in the international community.

Bangladesh's own self image, backed by the perspective of our immediate aid donors projects a more melancholy prospect. The meeting point of these two contrasting perspectives on Bangladesh are to be found in the shared belief that Bangladesh's development prospects are more promising than they used to be because we have registered quite positive achievements. However, there is a strong feeling that these positive achievement could be undone if we do not build a workable political infrastructure to take our positive achievement forward from micro-success stories to macro-changes in the society and economy needed to build a sustainable and inclusive development process.

There are many things wrong with our development process such as persistent poverty, growing inequality even our inability to move beyond the 4-5 per cent steady state growth of the economy to a level of 6-7 per cent which has been promised in the last three Five Year Plans. These limitations to our development manifested in low levels of investment, low revenue collections, poor returns from our public investments in the way of power, ports, telecommunications, schools, health services are seen to originate in both misgovernance and endemic

That such elements have emerged to debase 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-

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 to day (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 Ayatullah 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, Fatemah 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 machinery will be controlled by the conservative elements.

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apples to local government elections. The source of the problem lies in the culture of intolerance and confrontation between the 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 debase 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.

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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 collective 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 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 civil society figures can expect 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 its 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 mediator 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 unsatisfactory without an ongoing process of political dialogue between these two parties.

If however both parties remain committed to the politics of confrontation, then mere exhortations of eminent citizens or even concerned aid 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 *hartsals* 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 oversight 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 at the outset as to its objectivity 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. 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 the ongoing political confrontation. Will either 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? 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?

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 volunteer

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 economies over politics in the world; and professionalisation of business, the world over.

For Bangladesh small business and CEO's, 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.

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 CEO's. To achieve success in the international arena of business requires a manufacturer or an exporter to make a principled commitment to a marketplace.

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 NAPTA, European Union, SAARC, ASEAN, OPEC, AAPSU, MURCOSIL; Removal of visa and travel restrictions; Informa-

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.

Bangladeshi companies and CEO's 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 Bangladeshi 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-

business. It enlightens the ways of working with other cross cultural companies for synergistic (the whole equaling 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. Bangladeshi business and CEO's 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

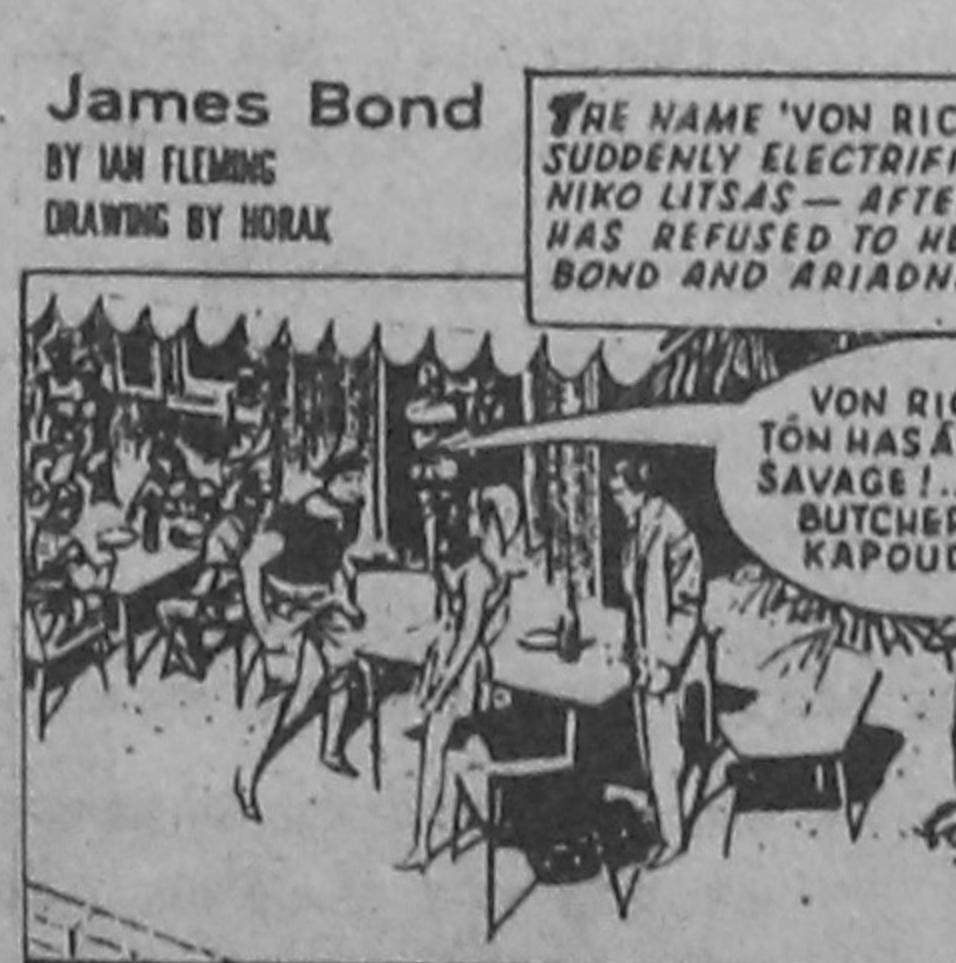
business practices; business jargon; British vs. American vs. Bangladeshi business English; marketing and advertising messages given to American public; communication with American business women; international language and protocol.

CEO's will have to understand and 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.

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by Jim Davis



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