

COVER STORY

weak parliamentary traditions, inordinate power in the hands of the executive, ineffectual and weak judicial system, the culture of political 'Godfathers', poor quality of social services and a poorly developed representative local government.

Rahman said that while these institutions are addressing the challenges of governance stemming from different socio-economic crises, their initiatives are not always enough to bring about long term benefits for the people. Rahman believed that had these initiatives come from within, the nature of participation in both designing and implementing these reforms would have been far more effective. He was also critical of certain conditions imposed by these institutions such as the requirement of hiring costly foreign consultants rather than local experts and demanding immunity for 'all their deeds and misdeeds'. Rahman pointed out that these institutions should not force Bangladesh to adopt policies and programmes that may not be conducive to our cultural, social and political realities. "International institutions are welcomed to participate as partners in most of our development efforts. But the key to setting our agenda according to our realities, constitutional obligations and people's aspirations should be always be with us." Rahman further said that most creative efforts of human development have been pioneered by indigenous social entrepreneurs. International institutions should therefore try to recognise and bolster these creative options instead of forcing formulaic solutions.

Activism and Media for 'Good Governance'

Farida Akhter, in her paper, criticised the generally accepted definitions of the good governance agenda. The basic criticism, she said, is that it is based on Western notions of liberal democracy coupled with free market economies as the best option for countries like Bangladesh. This definition, she added, assumes that corporate NGOs with donor support and interference contribute to good governance. But, asked Akhter, do we want a "political and social change or some superficial changes that fit into the globalisation agenda of the present day?" This brand of good governance results in the privatisation and 'NGOisation' of public services. This in turn undermines the responsibilities of the state in its



The wealth of candidates is more important in determining electoral nomination than their ability and willingness to represent the interest of the people.



The poor have no participation in governance.

responsibility to provide basic services to citizens.

Akhter acknowledged the positive role of media in generating activism: "Newspaper reports have led to many protests, campaigns and even movements by political and social activists... There are many instances of the movements by garment workers, women's organisations and environmental organisations who have benefited from media reporting". She talked of the risks taken by journalists while trying to report important socially relevant issues and challenging the different organs of the state.

But then, she questioned, was the media completely free of any influence? She mentioned that one criticism of the media's overzealous bashing of the government's failure has been to shift the state's normal duties of providing basic services to the private sector and to the NGOs. The media, she added, assumes that there is no governance problem in the private sector and the NGOs and that all of government's failed tasks can be taken over by these two sectors. Thus they have no accountability to the people.

One particular failing of the media, Akhter mentioned, is that it does not give any importance to global issues that affect the local scenario. She alluded to the invasion of multinational corporations in the seed sector whereby hybrid seeds and genetically modified seeds have been introduced to Bangladesh's farming that has