

Accountable development initiatives-role of the civil society

A citizens' dialogue on, 'National Election 2007: Role of the Civil Society in Accountable Development,' was held in Jessore on May 13th 2006 under the auspices of the CPD, The Daily Star and Prothom Alo. The dialogue was participated by representatives of different professional groups, political leaders and members of Citizens' Group. We publish the proceedings of the dialogue in this supplement

-- Editor

Objectives behind the initiatives undertaken by the Committee of the Civil Society Forum:

1. Legacy of our long and protracted War Of Liberation
2. The spirit, inspiration and unifying force behind our War Of Liberation.
3. Rights and privileges as of citizens as guaranteed by the Constitution; political, economic and social.

Our target

Making citizens aware of their rights in these spheres, and our expectation is that all conscious citizens will take appropriate initiatives and due measures in their respective localities making people aware of their rights, so that a due awareness is set in motion.

Summary of the rights under the Constitution

Ensure democracy in the political process: electing competent, honest people's representatives irrespective of party affiliations and ensure undertaking of development projects that are destined to improve the future of the people at large.

We believe and wish to declare in no uncertain terms

The political parties alone can be the driving force behind all democratic processes and that there is no alternative to it. At the same time what is needed in order to protect the interests of the people are political parties founded and run on the principles of democracy and are transparent and accountable.

The broad description of what constitutes people's interest

Establishing the voting rights of for all citizens, free to vote and the programs and development projects undertaken should be within the framework of the constitution and not based on partisan considerations. In order to achieve that objective what is needed is to ensure good governance, proper enforcement of the rule of law and administrative machinery that is completely independent and non-partisan. A pre-requisite in achieving the above objective is an environment of healthy and honest political activism based on honesty and ethics.

I am certain that you will agree that corruption and good governance cannot run side by side irrespective of whichever party is in power, as we have experienced during the past two decades. Establishing good governance and containing a volatile environment under control with the help of the Police, BDR, Army and RAB etc is not the same thing. Good governance has long-term ramifications.

Despite the fact that there has been an upward trend in the growth of GDP over the past 15 years, it has proved to be inadequate in our efforts towards eradication of poverty. There has been a steady increase in the country's overall resources, a near self-sufficiency in food production has been achieved, increase in exports has taken place, there has also been an increase and extension in health and the education sectors including a considerable increase in remittance from our wage earners from abroad, all these factors have helped the overall upward growth of our economy. Despite all these however, there has been an increase in economic disparity in the society. There has been a decline in the qualitative aspect in the management systems of health and industry. Over 40 percent of the population is still living below poverty line. A large section of mothers are still suffering from malnutrition. Lack of good governance and corruption is preventing us from achieving the expected growth rate in GDP; on the other hand Government is unable even to meet the bare minimum of daily needs of the people whether it is electricity, water, gas or agricultural implements.

If we reflect for a while we shall find that behind whatever has been achieved the major share of the credit goes to the agricultural farmers, the women workers of the garment sector and those of our people working abroad as wage earners.

We therefore wish to see an economic policy that reflects and recognises the contributions made by these people, decrease the prevailing inequalities in the society, increase investments in all sectors like agriculture, education, health and various infrastructures at the village and urban areas. Foreign investments may be welcome only after maximum utilisation of national resources particularly in the case of development of industries and expansion of exports.

The pattern of development we are visualising through our initiatives, the essence of which is embodied in the list of citizens' "hopes and aspirations". Of special significance amongst them is further empowerment of women

We believe that we could achieve a better growth in GDP, once corruption is curbed, good governance is established and proper utilisation of national resources and foreign assistance is ensured.

We believe that in order to succeed in our goals we need to have: a free and fair election and nominating honest and credible candidates. In this regard among others the much debated and controversial issue of preparation of the voter list should be resolved on a top most priority.

We sincerely hope that the leading political parties and their leaders will come forward and find due solution to various emerging issues based on logical digression with a view to preservation of rights as provided under the constitution. These issues are preparation of duly corrected voter list, reform of the Election Commission and the Caretaker Government etc.

Introductory remarks by Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya

Please accept our greetings for joining this 2nd round of discussions. At the beginning I shall attempt to clarify some of the questions and doubts expressed about the objectives of this discussion programme.

Prior to the elections in 20001 Center For Policy Dialogue (CPD) took the initiative of formulating a framework for national development in consultation with a team of 18 Task Force Groups. We had discussed those reports presented by the task force in different cities of the country under joint sponsorship of the Daily Star and Prothom Alo. This created the opportunity of meeting you about 5/6 years ago. In 2003 CPD put together the recommendations of these experts and handed it over to the Government in October 2001.

During that time we also held meetings at different cities and did seek your opinion. Later, through holding of national convention the recommendations made by the people were forwarded to each of the Ministers in Charge.

Now, prior to the forthcoming national election in 2007, we found that Bangladesh has passed through a democratic form of administration. Bangladesh will be 50, 15 years from today, in 2021. We would like to leave behind a vision for Bangladesh for the coming generation based on your hopes and aspirations. It is therefore imperative that for us organisers we must have a clear vision. In order to formulate this "vision" we have today amongst us 7/8 well-known national level personalities. We are particularly happy that one of these distinguished personalities is Ms. Angela Gomes, winner of the coveted Magsaysay Award. We are grateful to her for joining us. We have already presented before you the outlines of the "vision".

Following this we shall prepare the "vision" document and then the road map for implementation. As we proceed with the preparation of the document and begin handing over of the document to those responsible for its implementation we should also be aware of their honesty, dedication of sticking to principles including professional competence. If they do not have any concept of the Vision and its objectives we shall not be able to achieve our objectives. Therefore it is only but natural that the citizens present here today may like to deliberate on whom we shall entrust the responsibility of implementing the "vision". We sincerely hope that the political parties include this document also as a part and parcel of their national campaign strategy and manifesto.

assets and properties including those of the dependents. The reason for that is, often many maintain their properties under different names as their custodians or nominees. The ruling also stipulated that the concerned candidate must also provide details of bank transactions including whether or not he/ she is a loan defaulter etc. On the other hand if he or she is engaged in any public service organisation or activities a record of that also has to be submitted along with a statement of taxes being paid including a record of changing party affiliations so that people come to know who were in which party and for how long: giving them an idea of the individual's possible future conduct. Recently we visited the National Board of Revenue led by Mr. Sayeeduzzaman where we have said that the

publish discussion proceedings on a variety of issues starting from violation of human rights etc. The allegation therefore does not hold good. However we do take the opportunity of the election time especially for the fact that this is the time when the politicians try to come into close contact with the public and we too also try to tell them about our vision and expectations for the future.

You have already with you a copy of the suggested framework of our vision, please go through it and should you agree please lend your support. On the contrary should you feel that something more should be added, please do let us have your comments in writing. We shall deeply appreciate if you let us know your views as to how you wish to see Bangladesh in the coming 50 years. We plan to hold completely free and open discussions. There is but very little scope for making speeches here; this will be a platform for putting forward specific suggestions. There will be three categories of individuals who will be speaking here; those who are sitting on the dais, those who have been especially invited by us including a few selected persons amongst the audience and some honored guests.

I thank all of you for being present here today. I am hoping that together you will make this discussion program meaningful and worthwhile.

Mahfuz Anam

We are grateful for your response to our call. What we are trying to do is to make this function a truly discussion and dialoguing forum of the people. Our endeavor is aimed at talking in one voice by assimilating the opinions of all. One might ask as to the need for such moves now. To me the answer is simple.

You are aware of the many rise and falls in our efforts to build a Sonar Bangla through the War of Liberation. However we have a democratic process in place for the last 15 years. Today's initiatives is aimed at finding ways and means for strengthening that process further as we go along and fulfill peoples' aspirations and find out ways and means towards emergence of a government that is truly democratic. I see no harm in such an initiative since democracy is a continuous process. In every country where there is functioning democracy it has been established through a gradual process. We have passed the first step and I am proud of the fact that Bangladesh happens to be a democratic country compared to many other countries of the world. At the same time we are also aware of the fact that our existing democracy is faulty in many ways. We have crossed a few hurdles and have the potential of crossing many more. Over the past 15 years we have witnessed that there has been change of governments through proper and fair elections. One important aspect of Bangladesh's democracy is that change of government does take place. In all our elections we have seen the defeat of the government in office. This presents us with the evidence as to how fair are the elections and also bears testimony as to how "free" our electorate is. However it is observed that the newly elected government often has failed to translate into action any of our hopes and aspirations, where the next election is already here. The main cause for it is the limitation and lack of freedom of actions of the elected lawmakers, both at party and state levels.

The fixation of taka 3 lakhs as election expenses for individual candidates by the Election Commission has now become a joke. We all know including the voters and the entire nation that this is but a farce and meaningless. People say that expenditures now run into crores. These are people who are extremely wealthy. We are thus right from the start entering into a culture of election of the rich. It is not possible for an ordinary citizen to contest elections spending such huge sums of money. On the other hand, from the moment one begins preparations for contesting the elections, the person develops a mindset that the money spent has to be realised subsequently. This means that the very electoral process has this built-in weakness. We believe that the citizens themselves have an important role to play here. We believe now is the time. We want a free and fair election and hence there is a need for bringing in changes in the election process. There is an entity called "Electoral Election Tribunal" where any individual can lodge a complaint and the responsibility of this agency to ensure proper redress of the grievance/s. But it takes nearly 5 to 6 years before the tribunal settles the matter. This often allows the accused to walk out freely with the tenure of office being over by then.

We would therefore certainly ask for reformations of the electoral process and the electoral tribunal.

A few days back the Election Commission has termed its office as a post box, the question that arises is, where lies the actual authority?

There has been considerable controversy over the voter list. Besides, we also need to ensure that the role of the Returning Officer is transparent and neutral. In order to overcome all these hurdles we need to empower the people.

We are not saying that one should come and vote every five years but the voter should also have the right to monitor as to how their elected representatives are running the affairs of the country and working towards realisation of people's rights. We should no longer be happy with such limited rights of merely being able to fill in a voter form presented to us and cast our votes. We do not wish to be mere "stupid" voters but one that are well informed, backed by facts and dictated by wisdom. We need to know as to who is seeking our votes and why, what are their background and their identity? Our main objective today is to find out ways and means to set in motion this spirit of enquiry and inquisitiveness amongst the people. In our country there is a tendency of our political parties and the politicians to give credence to the voice of the people when the election approaches, once the election is over they do not have any connection with the voters. We also have with us the questions as to what is the role of the honourable lawmakers, what is their relationship with the voters and how much are they answerable to the voters? We believe that through this platform of citizens we shall carry forward our vision through effective dialoguing and discussions and firmly establish the rights of the voters in comprehensive terms.

S. M. Kamruzzaman Chunnu

I believe the broad outlines of the vision document presented by the Citizens' Committee keeping in view of the election 2007 is indeed praiseworthy.

Aside from the subject under discussion may I inform the audience that I am connected with the local government. Both local and central government authorities since our independence have emphasised the need for providing more powers to the local government apparatus so that they are able to provide better civic amenities to the people of the respective regions and localities. As a matter of fact the local government all along had considerable authority to operate more independently and effectively, but despite assurances, successive governments through various government circulars and directives have systematically curtailed their authority. As of now local governments have to depend on the central government for over 90 percent of their activities. This poses a serious problem for running the local governments.

We hope that this discussion concerning fielding of honest candidates is transmitted to the political parties throughout the country as a strong message from the people at large. It should not be confined to mere discussions, instead, due steps should be taken in order to also actively involve those who are present here today along with you.

R.M. Khairul Umam

I support the initiative. The way the public representatives are competing in running this country a way should be devised to free the country from this crisis.

I believe that there should be a definition provided by the Committee as

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PHOTO: CPD

We shall also talk to Government departments like the National Board of Revenue, Anti corruption Commission, after due consultations with politicians, as to how to keep black money away from being used in the election through utilising the suggested frame works. In order to achieve that aim we have teamed up with two of the most well known Dailies of the country, namely, Prothom Alo and The Daily Star. Today's meeting here is the second one. You would recall that on March 20 we had our inaugural meeting in Dhaka. The booklet published following that meeting is now with you.

At the very outset let me say that this is purely a national level initiative and is neither inspired nor supported by any foreign funds. Whatever we have been able to accomplish is through the assistance of these organisations and our own labour.

The proceedings of our inaugural meeting were published in various dailies and as many as 200 related write-ups. We have preserved all these writings and features containing many valuable opinions of the people for future review. Having due respect to the write-ups I would like to take this opportunity of responding to questions raised. Many of you have raised the questions as to who comprises this civil society? Without going into the technical aspects of it let me say that "civil society consists of those who are outside the Government and are not directly serving the government in any way". These are people who are a part and parcel of the civil society with the spirit of patriotism. We are not a part of the Government and we are not involved in partisan or any other form of politics.

We believe that all who have gathered here from various Zillas and Upazillas are educated people and who care for the country and are not involved in collective partisan politics. This does not mean however that we have no connection with the political parties; on the contrary we do have good relations with political parties, in fact the civil society itself think and work for the political parties. We should bear in mind that ultimately it will be the political parties who will be finally responsible for implementing the "vision".

Many of you raised the question as to whether or not we are involved in politics, the answer is no. We are not interested in presenting ourselves as an alternative political entity. Bangladesh believes in a political system that is representative and democratic in nature. It is the business of the politicians to run the country.

We are merely trying to strengthen the hands of the politicians. We are not planning to nominate any candidate. We hope that particularly the major political parties will field honest and competent candidates and we shall vote for them.

We do not think we have in any way tried to undermine the politicians and have no reason to do so. As a matter of fact as we look at the politicians we do find that many of them have put in considerable labor and sacrifices as we have gone through the rise and fall of our struggle through democracy; some of them even suffered jail. We are in fact working towards enhancing the image of the politicians and return of people's trust in them.

We are often asked if we were planning to launch a third party by bringing NGOs under our umbrella. We must emphatically say no. I believe this allegation is totally baseless and irrelevant. It is important that we come out of these suspicions, and the sooner the better. Our main objective is to present a framework of vision for future Bangladesh.

A question has also been asked as to who is a competent candidate? In the final analysis we believe that whoever is elected is the right candidate and should be accepted by all. What we are trying to do is provide some parameters for them to judge the competency of the prospective candidates and believe that those should be placed in a logical way.

We are aware that only last year a high court Bench passed a ruling on the Election Commission saying that the submission of nomination papers of each of the candidates must also provide details of his/her educational qualifications, profession, source or sources of income, description of

statement of assets and properties to be submitted is rather inadequate. We however agreed with the Chairman that the standard annual tax returns as submitted by individual citizens might be submitted to the election commission instead. We have also at the same time urged that there should be a legal provision for canceling the membership of an elected candidate should he or she be elected by providing figures in the statement that are false and also for withholding pertinent facts. In other words, we believe that in the final analysis, it is the right of the people to assess and judge the individual candidate.

Many of you have questioned as to why we are deliberating so much on candidacy but not enough on the electoral process? We have already said that even if there were to be a competent candidate and the electoral process is faulty we shall not be able to get the right candidate elected. Conversely it is true that even if there is a proper electoral system and the candidate is a poor one he or she can still be elected.

We have a specific objective in our mind as we insist strengthening the fact sheet. Take for example a wealthy person who buys a nomination spending about 5 crores or plan to win the elections spending a sum of 10 crores would hesitate to stand for elections since he would not like to go into the risky hassle of submitting a detailed statement of his or her total assets. This is how we are trying to bring pressures on aspiring candidates.

The Election Commission has said that the implementation of High Courts directive is not binding upon them. We had hoped that the Commission would readily take advantage of this directive and proceed with its work in order to establish the rights of the people. We observe with regret that far from implementing the directive, the Commission has completely ignored it. We all know that there is a statutory provision that requires each of the candidates, once elected, to submit a detailed account of his or her election expenses within a year after being elected. It is, however, unfortunate that not a single statement of account has been submitted to the Commission to this day by any of the candidates elected in 2001.

We believe that all the political parties of Bangladesh should be registered. It is important here to note that nearly each and every association or an enterprise is required to obtain a license or a registration in order to carry on with whatever activities it is they are engaged in, for instance, a trading house, an industry, a voluntary non-profit organisation or a commercial enterprise, where as, if you are floating a political party you are not required to obtain any such document. This in effect helps the political parties to be non-transparent and unaccountable. People are thus unable to question the party leadership in the case of its failure to abide by its declared manifest. Our political parties have no list of members as such and hence any government official is able to join any party right after the day of his or her retirement from service and finally in no time stands as a candidate. Year after year no general body meetings are convened and there is none to question. There is no transparent financial auditing. Without these reforms we shall not be able to progressively move forward in the coming days. To this extent I have insisted time and again that we need to simultaneously undertake the task of reforming both political parties and the electoral systems. Many have asked us if we would be able to achieve this objective by the year 2007?

I believe it will not be possible, but we have certainly made a beginning. If we are unable to attain our objective by 2007, we hope to achieve it by the year 2012, if not, by 2017. This is a process and we have to carry it forward with the combined efforts of hundreds of other like minded organisations, only then we would succeed. Many have said that we seem to wake up all too suddenly during the election time alone, and election alone appears to be the main target. You have noticed that CPD holds various discussion programmes, particularly on financial systems analysis in order to create a public awareness on accountability including the budget and beyond. The Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, through their papers on a regular basis,

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