

Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

A Regional Dialogue on: "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," was held in Rangpur on 15th July, 2006 under the joint sponsorship of CPD, The Daily Star, Prothom Alo and Channel-i. Members of the Citizens' Committee, leaders of various political parties, people belonging to various professions and from all walks of life joined the dialogue. This supplement contains the summary of the discussions. The names and identities of the participants are published below. Due to constraint of space we are not able to publish the comments of all the participants. -- Editor

Debapriya Bhattacharya

I welcome you all to this forum on behalf of CPD, Prothom Alo, Channel-i and the Daily Star. You are probably aware that four months ago we started a dialogue at Dhaka keeping in view the forthcoming election. But it is important to note here that the dialogue in effect began much earlier. CPD, Prothom Alo and the Daily Star embarked upon a similar dialogue nationwide prior to the national election 2001.

At this time there does not exist any mid term or long-term policy infrastructure in Bangladesh. Formerly, there was a five-year plan, which is not being implemented for the last four or five years, instead we have introduced a three year Poverty Reduction Strategy. At this time this is also being questioned. It is not clear as to how people should think about

the country and what should be their expectations in the long-term future. It would be, in fact, much better if we could present a mid-term perspective of the future to the people. We argued a good deal amongst ourselves as what time frame we should take into consideration. Finally we felt that 15 years would be the right period of time since much of Bangladesh's journey into democracy has been for about 15 years and the country has made significant progress in various fields. Progress has been achieved in the areas of education and economy. On one hand development have taken place in education and the health sectors, and on the other in export-oriented industries and agriculture. At the same time, however, its benefits have not been duly shared. The poor have not received their legitimate share, like the people

who are affected by monsoon and those of the north suffering due to river erosion. People of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were also deprived of their due share, including those living in the coastal areas. In other words there is a large group of people and areas that remain underdeveloped, either because progress is hindered or they are being unjustly treated. We then thought as to what would happen to the country if it continues to proceed in this manner for the next 15 years? One may question as to why not 16 years instead of 15? The reason for that is Bangladesh will complete its 50 years of independence in the coming 16 years. We felt, based on the last 15 years of progress, we could visualize now of things to come by the end of the next 15 years. I have said that we have made progress, but if the progress continues to be at this rate then even in coming 15 years it may not be possible for Bangladesh to be among the middle-income group countries of the world. Having analyzed various factors we have come to the conclusion that the main factors that stand in the way of desired level of development are prevailing inefficiency, waste and corruption. The main cause for this is, however, the absence of good governance, which in turn hinders equitable distribution of wealth. We felt, with the election ahead of us we can bring up the issue of good governance now. The institutions that can ensure good governance in Bangladesh are the local governments, the Judiciary, the Election Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission including the administration and the Parliament. The role of the individual becomes important when the institutions are weak. In such cases the concerned individuals often behave according to his or her individual will.

A.K.M. Abdur Rouf Manik
Those who are seeking nominations for the election are industrialists and holders of black money. People who work at grass roots levels have no place. There is no place for the politicians in politics. The politician cum businessmen is busy looking after his business interests. They are of no use to the public. I believe that in order to be a good parliamentarian one has to have a minimum level of education whose doors will be open to the public. I believe such a person is the right candidate.

Mostafa Azad Chowdhury
The country is passing through a critical stage. This is hampering the prospects and the flow of development. The civil society has come forward to play an important role: help the country to come out of this debacle. They, too, have the right to speak on behalf of the people of the country. They are talking against nominating black money holders and terrorists and they are doing this on behalf of the people. This has indeed made the people hopeful. I believe a number of other vital issues should also come into focus such as election of the leader of a political party, accountability of a leader, policy covering membership of the party particularly with regard to nominating of civil servants, party's organizational structure in a particular constituency, its level of strength and its policy on nomination including transparency of its finding. There should be a clear policy covering all such issues. Although the political parties often talk of democracy we

are engaged in politics 'we will carry out our functions'. I believe statements like these are aimed at usurping our democratic rights. The reason for this is that as a doctor I am not standing in the way of a politician in carrying with his functions, likewise as a journalist I am not obstructing the functions of a lawyer, and a teacher is not performing the functions of anyone else, but one who administers the country is with everyone. That is the way it should be. This means that whatever may be our profession talking about the functions of a government and the politics of the country is an integral part of our day to day living. I have that right as a citizen of the country. This is my government and I have every right to say as to how one would be a politician, and how will he conduct the affairs of the country. No one can take that that right away from me. I would say our present initiative is a march towards empowering democracy, and an endeavor to steer the country into the right direction.

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are able to impart education to the people of the country. So long as 90 percent of the people are not educated such trading of votes will continue.

Marhamutunnessa
Children who enter secondary school after completing primary school are ignorant of many things, as a result they drop out from the schools. We see the reflection of this in the public examinations. There are many schools from where not a single student has passed the matriculation examinations. Cases of women oppression in villages are often "bought" by some middlemen or agents. This is possible since the poor oppressed women do not have the financial backing to conduct cases. There also exist innumerable problems like women trafficking, oppression of women workers and unemployment. In order to free ourselves from these problems we want representation of women in the local governments right up to the Parliament including adequate empowerment of elected women representatives.

Sadrul Alam Dulu
We are of the opinion that politics

are able to impart education to the people of the country. So long as 90 percent of the people are not educated such trading of votes will continue.

Mafizul Islam Mantu

Today the committed civil society has begun to think about the welfare of the country. The major political parties are actively engaged in criticizing them and looking at them with suspicion, such as the environment. As a citizen of the country I wish to register my protest against this and express my indignation over the matter. Today, the country's peace, education and prosperity are caught in a dirty whirlpool. We want good governance, and proper democratic control over the activities of the public representatives. I am quite disappointed when I look at the state of our student politics. The student politics that played an important role during the 50s through the 70s and in the independence of the country are today engaged in the politics of tender and terrorism. We have to rid the student politics of this curse. Student politics has to return to the traditions on which Bangladesh was founded. I give my full support to the recommendations made by CPD. I also endorse my support, in no uncertain terms, in favor of the "no" vote.

not be elected for more than two terms. They will vacate the field of politics and then go into retirement.

Advocate M.A. Bashir Tipu

Those who are illiterate and do not understand the essence of democracy we have to show them the right path, but instead we are misguiding them. We are using them. Where is the people's democracy we had been aspiring for? We wish to speak out against dishonest empowerment. Today, we find that particularly in the field of politics what have been established are nepotism, dynastic rule including confining of national politics within the family. The civil society is fighting a massive evil force. We have with us the strength of our minds and souls. We wish to establish a healthy political and an accountable environment. We believe that the entire country is behind us.

Mukul Mosafiz

It is imperative that account of the resources of not only the politicians, but also of the bureaucrats must be accounted for from the liberation of Bangladesh right through to the present day. The reason for this is that once there is change in party status the politicians belonging to the party are sent to jail whereas a Secretary returns to his former position or, at times, he even gains access to a better position. Businessmen have hijacked politics. 58 percent of the MPs are businessmen. Usually it is the businessmen who go to the politicians and not the other way round. The situation is such now that whoever is involved in politics based on ideology is looked upon with pity. In the past if there was an idealist in a village people would often talk about the village with pride but nowadays an idealist is needed, let there be voting through secret ballot and then, let them say as to who are the right candidates for their respective localities. In this way, whether one has money or not, whether there is lobbying not, the one nominated will be the people's representative. At the same time we also need to nominate a person who is non-communal, ready to treat the entire population of the country on an equal footing and who shall be free from all kinds of prejudices. Finally, I would like to say that any one who has no respect for our War of Liberation must not be nominated.

Prof. Mazharul Mannan

Are there no honest and competent politicians in the two political parties: Awami League and BNP's coalition? Yes there are. But unfortunately they are not able to get nominations to contest elections. Why don't we put pressure on this issue? Whether it is for Awami League or BNP, the nominations are given at Dhaka. My suggestion is that the major parties should be asked not to give nominations in this way, instead let the leaders and workers at grass roots hold a conference and then if need be, let there be voting through secret ballot and then, let them say as to who are the right candidates for their respective localities. In this way, whether one has money or not, whether there is lobbying not, the one nominated will be the people's representative. At the same time we also need to nominate a person who is non-communal, ready to treat the entire population of the country on an equal footing and who shall be free from all kinds of prejudices. Finally, I would like to say that any one who has no respect for our War of Liberation must not be nominated.

Laila Rahman Kabir

Our prime success over the past 15 years has been that we have been able to uphold our democratic Constitution. We have succeeded in holding regular elections to the Parliament and retaining the continuity of the government. Credit for this goes to the political parties of the country, particularly the major ones. But we have not succeeded in one particular field, that is, the culture of democratic practices. In accordance with our Constitution, the Parliament, the Government and the Judiciary are the three main institutions of our democratic state. There should be a proper balance between the three. It is the constitutional responsibility of the Opposition to ensure accountability of the government, whereas the Opposition remained absent in the Parliament, as a result the Parliament has become inoperative and obsolete. However, it may be pointed out that in order for the Opposition to effectively carry out their constitutional obligations it is the

uty of the ruling party to provide all kinds of facilities. Unfortunately, no government has been able to fulfill that obligation. Judiciary is the defender of the constitution, upholds the rule of law in the society and prevents misuse of governmental authority. But we have seen that it has been obstructed from carrying out its functions independently as per provisions of the constitution, as a result all powers are concentrated in the hands of the government. There is no way to put a check on this enormous concentration of power. Wherever there is a scope of exercising this power by the government, it has been brought under the influence of the ruling party. An end to this situation is only possible when the voters become aware of their democratic rights and are ready to cast their votes for candidates after careful consideration, and to vote for the right candidate who will be prepared to protect their rights. On the other hand, since, in the process political parties are voted to power, if the voters become conscious then this will, in turn, be bound to bring about a change in the mentality of the political parties.

Moinul Islam

We have to determine the system of selecting the honest and the competent candidate. Is a successful and established businessman, who is earning through honest means, the right candidate? Is a businessman who

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do not find any democratic culture within the parties. I do not recall any party Secretary General or a President being elected to the posts.

It is common knowledge that large parties are giving nominations against donations of large sums of money. From that very day the individuals are given the license to indulge in corruption. We believe anyone seeking nomination has to be with the party for at least five years. Initiatives like this one will succeed provided we

Imrul Kayes

When a political party that was once in the opposition goes to power you clearly notice some changes in the party's political culture. Empowerment based on facts is of vital importance. In this regard the media could play a significant role particularly in the matter of black money that is being discussed extensively. Let the face of those who are turning black money into white be exposed before the public prior to the election. A political leader should

not be taken so that block allocations of the ADP are not used in the election.