

Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

A Regional Dialogue on: "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," was held in Rajshahi on 5 August, 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
2021 is a special year. You all know that this year Bangladesh will celebrate Golden Jubilee. This is the achievement of fifty years. We take pride in expressing citizens' aspirations that is, what are our expectations from our country, nation, state leaders and politicians. We have identified twenty-two basic expectations. We have formulated eight objectives on the basis of these. These objectives have common characteristics. We hope by 2021 Bangladesh will have achieved these characteristics. There is conflict between the expectations and reality and today we will discuss how this conflict can be resolved. A series of expert discourses on the eight objectives for 2021 has started from Dhaka. The objectives are: we believe that by 2021 Bangladesh will become a country on the basis of participatory democracy. Secondly, there will be a transparent, efficient and decentralised government that will be accountable to the people. Thirdly, we shall become a middle-income country after eradicating poverty. Fourthly, we shall become a skilled and innovative nation. This will become a healthy nation. Fifthly, we shall become a regional hub of development living within the global infrastructure. Sixthly, by that time the country will have a sustainable and strong natural environment. But most importantly the country will develop the strong characteristics of equality and social justice. These are some of the goals of our Vision 2021.

We expect that there will be practice of democracy among the political parties. There will be a proper and acceptable electoral system in the country. There will be a transparent and prudent financial management to hold elections. Changes will come to the political culture. A political culture on the basis of mutual respect will emerge. There will be a functional parliament. Women will go to parliament after getting elected through direct vote. The right to information will become a reality. Every citizen will enjoy the rights and rule of law. There will be an independent and corruption-free judiciary. There will be an efficient administration free of any political pressure. There will be an elected president with full executive power. There are proposals for increasing the rights of the president. There will be an ever-vigilant civil society.

I feel we have got some very bright members of the citizens' committee in this dialogue in Rajshahi and I believe today's dialogue is of immense significance.

Mahfuz Anam
We reserve the right to talk about our country. More so before the general elections. If you and I talk about it then why should it be considered a nonpolitical activity and when political parties talk about it why should it be termed as political? Those who do politics on a professional basis they will contest in the election and go to power. But don't I have the right to speak? I am a citizen of this country. I shall definitely talk about how this country will be governed? This is not a nonpolitical activity. CPD, The Daily Star, Prothom Alo and Channel-i are helping in this effort.

I believe that as a voter and as a citizen of this country I should hold my head even higher. No one should take me for granted. I am not anybody's property. I am a proud voter of a free and democratic country. I want to kindle the spark of this pride in your heart by working with you. If we become successful in doing that then our efforts will be successful. We believe that election is the time when we shall act. After the election those who go to power it would be their time to run the affairs of the country and those who go to the opposition and talk about various issues in parliament, then is also the time for us to act.

During election it is you and I who become more relevant. Therefore, it is time for you and I to become more conscious. We can only get the right government through election. That government will be accountable to the people. But many politicians think that after election it is they only who would govern the way they wish to. But no. We have not given you the country on lease. You came with some specific promises, which we believed and we have elected you to power to implement those promises. It is the voters who have elected them to power. Therefore they are accountable to the people. This is called democracy. As we do not demand that accountability by shouting loudly, they think that they are not accountable to us.



I expect to see the voters in a celebration mood; I want to see them having joy and I want to see their head held high.

M. Hafiz Uddin Khan
Since 1991 there is a democratic system in the country and three elections have been held under this system. But we have not achieved democracy in the true sense of the term. We say that their is elected dictatorship in the country. The role of parliament is negligible. Parliament is not being able to play any role in our national life. We can see signs of confrontation surrounding election in the future. This is posing as a threat to our nation. Our expectation is that the coming election will be proper, free, neutral and acceptable to all. To hold such an election what we need is a strong and neutral election commission on which the people have confidence. This is our demand. There is need for reform of many rules and regulations under the electoral law. Otherwise if elections are not held with neutral and acceptable people it may not be fair. They will need to be empowered through electoral law reforms. The election commission will have the power to punish people for not following the electoral regulations. The election commission should have the power to take steps to keep the election free from the influence of black money.

Before going to cast our votes we will have to know about the candidates. You all know that there was a High Court order in this regard in May last year it was eight-point declaration. Now the problem of time has arisen. After receiving the order from High Court election commission says that it is not mandatory. It is a document from High Court and it could be used to find honest people but instead of doing that EC is playing a negative role. They are saying that it is not mandatory. But had it been followed properly, it would have proved to be beneficial for the country. We want every candidate to give a declaration of his/her asset, liabilities, and source of asset, educational background and whether there is any criminal case against them. We shall cast our vote after taking everything into consideration.



Adv. Roushan Ara Poppy
There will be competition in politics but we in the opposition or government party try to escape by blaming others. But what we want is a free and fair election by working together instead of blaming one another. As a conscious citizen we want a free and fair election.

Adv. Hamidul Haq
Though there is a parliamentary system of government, the parliamentarians do not have sufficient knowledge about parliamentary affairs. The citizens also lack awareness about this. Instead of becoming a law making body it has become a business organization. The nation wants an end of this. The members of parliament will only remain engaged in creating law and supervising its implementation. They will not supervise development works. Honest people who belong to the civil society have been kept away from politics. They should take part in politics. Politics has to stand on ideal grounds.

MD. Jamat Khan
Because of the failure of the political parties various social organizations are coming up in the country. If we cannot boycott the owners of black money then we have a dark future. There are many patriotic people in the country who do not contest in parliamentary elections, municipal election or in union council election out of fear. People of questionable character usually contest in such elections as a result we do not find good people in politics. That is why we have to search for competent candidates through this dialog we have to know who will protect our country.

Prof. Zillur Rahman
Most of the people of our country are illiterate. It is time-consuming matter to both motivate and educate them. Most of them cast their votes without even thinking or being motivated. I would request everyone to find the way so that we may live in peace and guide the country on the road to prosperity.

Prof. Moloy Bhoumik
In the last election political parties gave nomination to many owners of black money. If the political parties now want to give nomination to honest candidates then there will be two problems. First, they will not find honest candidate in their party therefore they will have to select someone from outside. This will make the people confused regarding who would be an honest candidate. I think that emphasis should be given on politics of principals to remove such confusion. During election law-enforcing forces like army becomes an important factor. This has not been made clear here who will control BDR, Police and Army. Therefore there should be a specific proposal to bring them under the EC. We are placing various proposals through the citizens' dialog but where is it directed? Shall we find solutions through a nonpolitical process? I believe that this problem should be solved through a democratic process. The political system may have degenerated but we have to repair this system.

Adv. Abdul Hadi
We the citizens are the real owners of this country. We may give some people the responsibility to run the affairs for a certain time period. They have to keep their promises. Our responsibility is to elect honest and competent candidates. We have to elect a person who would place the interest of the country above his personal interest or that of his party. If we elect an incompetent person for money or due to influence of the party and then if we expect that he would do something good then we would make a mistake. I feel that more than the dishonest candidate; we should blame ourselves for electing him to power.

Sajjad Hossain Mukul
We usually do politics with the common people of the rural areas. Many speakers have expressed concern whether our words would reach them. How much will they be benefited by this dialogue? It is possible to improve the condition of the entire population of Bangladesh through the local government. The development of all the ministries of the government Bangladesh happens through the union council. Here we are talking about the misdeeds of the politicians and political parties. We are talking about influencing the election. We are talking about black money. But in this country elections are supervised by the government officials. Officials in the EC have been posted on the basis of party affiliation. How can we expect to have a fair election? This is a big question. What would be the role and responsibility of the bureaucrats? How can their accountability be ensured? We can have a fair election only when these issues would be resolved. Only searching for competent candidates will not solve the problem.

Anil Marandi
Bangladesh wears a festive look during the time of elections. This is a good sign for the country. But a particular community remains in fear during this time. The fear may become a permanent feature after the election. They may lose their land. They wonder how the new party in power would behave with them. We the adibashis have passed 30-35 years looking for friends in this country. We have not found anyone who wants good of the adibashis. They stay away from elections. They want a candidate who would do something for them. Entire Bangladesh wants honest candidates. We also want honest

candidate. Our desire is to give nomination to adibashis in such areas. Our appeal to all political parties-we want a separate ministry for the adibashis and there should be reserved seats for them.

Kalpna Roy
We want good environment to cast vote and security after election. We do not want to be victims of mass rape like after the 2001 election. Secondly, we shall not vote for businessmen, bureaucrats and owners of black money. Thirdly, the basic clauses in Article 97 have been amended. Our appeal from the women organisations to the politicians that they should have clear mention of the promise in their manifesto that they would reinstate the changes made in the policy for women's development.

Dr. Mohammad Faek Uzzaman
In a recent parliamentary concluding session a proposal has come for the prime minister and leader of the opposition to submit their asset list. We have not received any specific statement from the government. We feel that the asset list of all the politicians should be given before the election. Many of us here have talked about an honest and efficient election commission. I strongly believe that election commissioners or chief election commissioner should be of strong personality. My proposal is unless the chief election commissioner and the two election commissioners get transferred, the road to a free and fair election in Bangladesh will not be smooth.

Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul
If every citizen, like university teachers and other professionals do not play their due role, if they are not honest in their profession then we shall not progress. We are always talking against others. We never ask what is my position. If we want to free the coming election of black money; if we want a poster-free and banner-free election, then there would be less influence of black money. You must elect honest and competent candidates in the election in 2007. We want to rise like Japan, Singapore and Korea in the next century.

Adv. Eptajul Haque Babu
We talk about rule of law and we talk of good governance but we lawyers are divided. Because of this division we could not play a significant role during the rise of the militant fundamental forces. Similarly we could not take a firm stand on the issue of killing people in the name of 'crossfire' by state agencies. In the past there was no such attempt to create awareness among the politicians. If you look at any sector in Bangladesh today, be that agriculture, education, health or administration, there is corruption and anarchy. The chief election commissioner who is a judge himself is behaving in an unacceptable manner with the nation. The dialogue needs to be disseminated further.



Ohidur Rahman
Accountable development initiative is a timely step of the civil society. These are true reflections of the expectations of the people. But it would take time to implement them. On that count, political parties will have to take the responsibility of giving shape to people's expectations. Searching for honest candidate is not a new thing. Since the movement is bifurcated it has no impact. The total war is against corruption, politicisation and fundamentalism. We know that the civil society has a national forum. But is that well-organised and serious? There is need for it to spread to district and upazila level. Since you have started you will have to finish. You have

rightly said that political parties will have to become competent to shoulder democratic governance.

Mostafijur Rahman Shoudagor
No loan defaulter can participate in a national election. This is a law. But we have seen many loan defaulters holding top posts in an organisation of the businessmen. We want to see a law passed so that no loan defaulter can hold the top post in such organisations.

Abul Kalam Azad
We are discussing ways to create awareness among the civil society so that we may elect an accountable government in the future. This is a political decision. In many countries including those in Europe there is a system of election system on ration basis. There is also the present system that is in vogue. Those of us, who are a part of the civil society, should get involved in politics and bring about reforms. If that is not possible then strengthen the hands of those political organisations that are against the open market economy and that are fighting to set up democratic values. Implement the ideals of our Liberation War.

Adv. Tajul Islam Mohammad Faruk
There are many honest candidates in the political parties. Politics has become quite complex today. Who has made it complex, where have they come from? Have the politicians done it or have people coming from certain quarters done it? We have to consider that and take decision accordingly.

It appears that during elections the biggest obstacle is black money. But I do not want to believe that. Definitely black money is a major obstacle but not the biggest one. Those who are guardians of election are doing the major damage to election. They are influencing election.

Today we are talking of transparent ballot box. European Union is offering this box. But we are not ready to accept it. Because if the box is transparent then many of our deeds will be exposed. What do we see during elections? Many of us here have said that those with illegal arms will have to be controlled first. I have seen people have been beaten up only four days before the election so that they may not cast their vote according to their own choice. This is a common case in many places. In many areas of Nowgaon we have seen this. There is a difference between '86 and '91. I want to speak openly. I have seen that in '86 officers did not play the same role in every area. About '91 I would request Mr. Hafizuddin to say if there was any instruction from the government.

Bureaucracy is sitting on our head and it is stronger than black money. There should be immediate change in this system. My opinion is there should be student organisations. But no student organisation should be associated with any political party. They will come forward only at the most critical stage of the nation. Today I want to appeal to all political parties including my own party; we should not have any student organisation as our party organisation. They should do politics independently for the welfare of the nation.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 13

Recommendations from the dialogue (in brief)

- Election Commission**
- The chief election commissioner and the two election commissioners should resign.
 - A new election commissioner with integrity should be appointed, and Election Commission (EC) has to be made neutral.
 - Returning officers in EC should be appointed from different ministries.
- Election and Candidature**
- If a voter does not like any candidate then there should be provision in the ballot paper to cast 'No' vote.
 - A candidate will be able to contest from two seats only.
 - Election to be held in phases instead of on a single day.
 - While seeking nomination a candidate will have to give correct information.
 - A candidate will have to give the list of assets of his/her relations while giving personal list of the same.
 - Women should be elected directly to reserved seats.
 - Adibashis should be elected directly to the reserved seats.
 - During elections armed forces should be under the election commission.
 - The objectives of Vision 2021 should be included in the election manifesto of the political parties.
 - War criminals will not be able to contest elections.
 - The election publicity cost of the candidates has to be borne by the state.
 - Extremist elements have to be resisted to ensure free and fair election.
- Parliament and Parliamentarians**
- An MP has to give attention to the development of his/her constituency no matter which party he/she belongs to.
 - If an MP loses confidence of the people in his area then another MP may be elected through recall system. This would ensure accountability of an MP.
 - The duration of boycotting parliament has to be reduced to 40-50 days from the present 90 days.
 - MPs should only legislate.
 - An MP will not lose membership of parliament for taking a stand against his own party.
 - To ensure accountability, parliamentary committees have to be made effective.
 - Seats should be distributed in parliament on the basis of votes received.
 - The number of seats for seven crore people during our liberation period was 300. Now, as population has increased therefore number of seats has to increase accordingly.
- Voter and Voter list**
- Voter list in famine-hit areas has to be made on special consideration. Because in such areas people keep moving from one place to another in search of work.
 - Care has to be taken while preparing voter list in adibashi areas.
- Government, Ministries and Ministers**
- National government has to be formed on the basis of seats won.
 - Senior citizen ministry should be established.
 - Separate ministry for adibashis has to be established.
 - Ministers have to be selected on the basis of their profession.
 - There should be regional quota for appointing ministers.
- Political party**
- Registration of political parties has to be made mandatory.
- Anticorruption Commission**
- ACC has to be given full independence
- Civil Society and Citizens' Expectations**
- People at village level have to be informed of the activities of the civil society
 - Civil society has to continue with such works even after elections
 - If possible, civil society has to monitor/observe elections
 - Consumers Right has to be included in the 22 citizens' expectations
 - In health goals 'sickness right' has to be included.