

# Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

A Regional Dialogue on: "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," was held in Tangail on 2 September, 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**  
Many had doubts in their minds about this dialogue when we started some four months ago. Some said that this could be a conspiracy of the third force, while others thought that this could be yet another way to grab power through the back door. Yet there were others who thought there could be some foreign hand in this. There were also those who were thinking as to whether this was a preamble to form a political party. Many such questions and doubts prevailed, but today we wish to say with all confidence that we have no such ambition. There is no foreign hand behind our initiative. We have embarked on this venture in order to strengthen the democratic process and to enrich the politics of the country, based on people's thinking. Those confusions no longer exist. Your presence in large numbers here today, and the continuity of the dialogue held in various remote areas of the country bear testimony to the fact that this is an honest venture.

The objective of this dialogue is to let people have a mental estimation as to what the face of Bangladesh would be in the coming 15 years. It is for that purpose that we wish to present before you a "vision" document for Bangladesh for the year 2021. 2021 will be the Silver Jubilee anniversary of our independence. We have focused our attention on the next 15 years so that an eighteen year old who participated in our liberation is able to see what he is leaving behind for the next generation at the end of his own life. It is our observation that a foundation has been laid for unprecedented development of Bangladesh through the continuance of the democratic process spread over the past 15 years. Through the untiring efforts of the people we have achieved self-sufficiency, our per capita income has increased, there has been an increase in industry along with development in agriculture sector. There has been development in the various social sectors, reduction in maternal deaths, increase in the rate of education including narrowing of the gap in the ratio between men and women. For any developing country this is no mean achievement. We simply cannot ignore this. Credit for this achievement does not belong to any particular party or group, or any government; it belongs to the people. For this you and all of us can be proud of.

But not all have reaped equal benefits from this. It is our observation that the gap between the rich and the poor, between villages and the cities has increased during this period of time. The benefits have not reached those affected by river erosion and Monga. Even after signing the agreement on the Hill tracts we have not been able to provide any succor to the people of the region. On one hand we have made good progress, on the other there has been an increase in the gap in distribution of resources. Therefore, we have to further increase the development resources and ensure equitable distribution, for this we shall have to ensure good governance. We are not saying that it does not exist but that it has to be more people oriented and free from corruption. In order to ensure good governance we believe that political accountability has to be there. If political accountability is ensured, then it will be easier to bring about accountability in other areas, too. We stake our claim with the political parties since it is they who are entrusted with utilizing public funds. A good way of attaining that accountability is to listen to them before the election and to let people's views reach them.

**Mahfuz Anam**  
We are all citizens of Bangladesh and have gathered here with that identity. We want that a proper and credible election be held and competent elected representatives take the country further ahead. The main force behind this election are the citizens of the country. In other words it is you and I. We wish to express our thoughts, satisfaction or suspicions just like those citizens. Many people say that this is the business of the politicians and we are unduly interfering. We do recognize that this is their area but at the same time this also constitutes an important function for the citizens. The politicians are responsible for serving the people and the nation, but at the same time they have gained that authority with the help of the people. Therefore, politicians have to listen to the people. Why talking should be looked upon as interference? Our greatest pride is our citizenship, and our right to hold our heads high as citizens of Bangladesh. It is the politicians who should be the first to listen to whatever discussions take place here. This initiative could be taken by the political parties also, they could have listened to the dialogues of the Nagorik Forum coming out of their party forums; learn about our thoughts, hopes and aspirations. There should be many more dialogues of this nature.

One of the major preconditions for strengthening democracy is to keep the process of people's thinking alive and known. We are hoping that other locally based organizations will also come forward and hold such dialogues on permanent basis. The dialogues have to continue even after the election. The foundations of democracy cannot be strong without the freedom to speak freely. I, therefore, call upon every one to work towards strengthening democracy, holding of a proper election and establishing of all-round accountability.

**Jamilur Rahman Miron**  
In 1971 it was the common man who took part in our war of liberation. We have not heard about too many of the educated or the intellectuals joining the war. Since we gained our independence there has been but little change for better in the fate of the freedom fighters, if anything they have been marginalized. On the other hand those who are running the affairs of the country have paved the way for the opportunists to enjoy maximum benefits. In the process they have desecrated our national spirit. The parties, once in power, forget about the pledges they have made in their manifestos or do not keep their promises willfully. One does not see any clear policy in running of the government. Both parties have involved their respective families in politics. Foreign credit is slowly maiming us, more inflow of credit, more corruption. We are not making any progress towards

attaining self-reliance. Today you can buy nominations from both the major political parties; it is a shame for the nation. Anti-liberation forces are sharing state power. It is needless to say as to what would be the condition of the country ten years hence if things are allowed to continue this way, and the forces of liberation war are not installed in the seat of power. Therefore, let us unite and vote for those candidates who are with the people. In the meantime I request the organizers, if possible, to present a policy frame-work on socio-economy, and a political philosophy for the common man of the country.

**Advocate Arfan Ali Mollah**  
It is often seen that the bad deeds of the government are criticized, whereas no one is appreciative of its good deeds. The organizers of today have praised government's good deeds, for that we thank them. In order to hold a proper and a credible election we have to stop the curse of black and muscle power. Nominations have to be given to true politicians. The existing gap between cities and villages has to be removed.

**Begum Rabeya Anwar**  
It is the people who make MPs and ministers by their votes and hence it is they who have to evaluate their performance. Election has to be free from black money. It is not proper to put the blame on politicians alone. There are divisions amongst the intellectuals also. Women have to come forward for the development of the country. Although the prime minister of the country and the leader of the opposition both are women, I believe this cannot be treated as our achievement since they have not come through a process of strife and struggle, instead they have arrived at their respective positions by dint of the legacy of their respective families.

**Dr. H.R. Khan**  
We have been deprived of many achievable successes due to corruption. The nation may find a way out if we are able to rid the MPs and the secretariat of corruption. Once elected the public representatives are unavailable. I, therefore, propose, that it should be made compulsory for them to be available in their constituencies at least ten days a month. In addition they have to discuss with the people the development projects to be implemented by them.

**Prof. Shamsunnahar Shanty**  
Democracy has to be institutionalized. The Election Commission and the government have to work independently. Only politicians should be given nominations. In the event industrialists and bureaucrats are desirous of contesting election, prior to that, they have to be with some party at least for a period of three years. While the election and publicity expenses campaign should be borne by the government the total election expenses should be limited to taka three lacs only. The expenses incurred by the candidates have to be monitored. Statements of account of the resources of the candidates before and after the election have to be obtained. Owners of black money and loan defaulters have to be barred from contesting election. Women seats have to be filled through direct elections. The Women Development Policy 1993 should not be changed and it has to be made effective.

**Prof. Dr. Mazharul Islam**  
Like in a human body the society has also diseases like, terrorism, corruption etc. Just as you have medicines for curing the disease of the human body there are also remedies for the diseases of the society. We have to find ways and means to diagnose the diseases of the society and take appropriate measures. If there is any loophole in the law it has to be removed. We have to elect such candidates who will refrain from encouraging nepotism, corruption and terrorism. A social movement has to be geared up against such evils.

**Ajoy Mree**  
We indigenous people have little understanding of such issues like black money and corruption. It is our observation that soon as the election approaches we are given many promises which are not kept later. We have also seen that whoever is in the opposition continue to address us as tribal people, but when they are in the seat of power they are unwilling to recognize us as tribal people. What we want to say is that we are not a tribe but a nation. In 2004 a declaration was made about the ECO Park. One of our brothers, Piren Sian, was slain, we are yet to get justice. On the contrary, various types of projects are being undertaken to uproot us. Often many projects are undertaken for our development but we have seen in reality that finally they result in our displacement and uprooting. We, therefore, urge that there should be an arrangement for our permanent settlement. A solution has to be found to resolve all land disputes, and the false cases lodged against the tribal people. Above all we should be given constitutional recognition. A separate ministry, and an independent commission, have to be established for looking after our affairs.

**Abul Hussain Chowdhury**  
We have made considerable progress over the past 35 years. At the same time we had made many sacrifices. There is serious dearth of magnanimity in the field of our politics. People are, therefore, eager to hear of some alternative. As much as it is true that no one individual is totally neutral, but when there is a reflection of partisanship in his work while discharging his responsibilities we say that one cannot expect fairness and neutrality from him. Those who had served as judges, at some point of their political life, were linked to one political party or the other. But there was no scope of questioning their neutrality once they were inducted to the Bench. Questions are now being raised. I believe we should create an advisory committee prior to holding of the election, and that committee should begin its work right after the election. Irrespective of who wins the election, his accountability then may rest with this committee. On the other hand, we have to ensure that no political decision is able to influence

the decision process of the government servants. An elected representative should have the realization that he not only represents his party but also the people of his constituency. Before a nomination is given, each of the parties should do so after due consultation with the people. While arriving at a decision the elected representatives have to think about the people of their respective constituencies also. Everything has to be decentralized. It will be a mistake to think that a mere 300 people will bring about changes in everything. It is my hope that that an awareness will emerge from today's discussion.

**Bashiruddin Khan**  
If the government fails to keep its commitments then it should place before the public the reasons behind its failures, before the next election. The Judiciary must be separated from the Executive, but this is not being done due to various complications. The political parties should clearly mention about those complications in their manifestos.

**Protibha Mutshuddi**  
The politicians often say that the people are the source of all power, but all of you are well aware as to how true it is in reality. The election is ahead of us. We wish to see that patriotic, educated and efficient people are given nominations by the political parties. Will the political parties bring into their consideration this demand of the common man? It is often they (the political parties), the holders of black money, the wealthy and the terrorists are given nominations. We often see that poor people are never duly evaluated. But we do need capable people. We, therefore, have to put pressures on the political parties so that honest and capable people are given nominations. At the same time public also have to be conscious about this.

**M. Hafizuddin Khan**  
We appeal to the political parties to give nominations to honest and capable people. The question, however, is as to how would they go about selecting the honest and the right candidate? The way to do it is to place before the people facts about the aspirant candidates. Last year a high court directive spelled out nine factors to be considered before a candidate is nominated to contest in the election, these are: His educational qualifications, profession, sources of income, an account of assets and properties (whether in his name or his dependents), status of his bank loans (whether in his name or his dependents), whether or not there is any criminal charges against him, whether or not he has been convicted, what was his role if he was a public representative before, whether or not he is a taxpayer, whether or not he is a defaulter in settling telephone and electricity consumption charges etc. When all these details are presented to the election commission, the people will then select the right candidate based on these facts. It is a matter of regret though that election commission has said that implementing this directive is not mandatory on its part. If the election commission was truly committed to a proper election, it would have jumped at the opportunity and turned this into a law. Our election commission has wide range of powers. Even India does not have such wide range of powers yet they are framing laws, whereas we are not doing so despite having greater authority. The Nagorik Committee has voiced its no confidence in the present election commission. We have to continue to pressurize the commission so that it abides by the High Court's directive, and our slogan should be: It is my vote and I shall cast after careful consideration.

**Debapriya Bhattacharya**  
I would like to add to this that if it is found that a candidate has provided false information about himself, in that case a provision has to be there for cancellation of his membership of the parliament.

**L.A. Khan Jahangir**  
The discussion focused on many things against the politicians but nothing has been said about the bureaucrats. We have to project the true story of our war of liberation. A united stand has to be taken against fundamentalism.

**Minu Anoholi**  
The national policy of women development, 1997, has to be revived. There is hardly any complaint against women about indulging in terrorism or corruption. Women have to bring about a change in their outlook.

**Alamgir Khan**  
Today, many elements of democracy are absent in the country. We have democracy only in name; this is mainly due to absence of democratic culture in our family lives. The civil society happens to be the most privileged class. It is, therefore, doubtful if the movement could be launched from this platform. I propose that that the seats in the parliament be based proportionate to the population.

**Prof. Mirza Md. Abdul Momen**  
Prerequisite for economic development is good governance. Four factors are important for good governance: patriotism, commitment to the people, transparency and continuity in the development process. Our politicians lack wisdom and hence, every year reform proposals get caught in uncalled for controversies. Politicians do not have respect for each other. In order to sustain democracy we have to be patient and tolerant. The rot in politics began since retired army personnel and bureaucrats entered into politics. There is no democratic culture in the political parties. There is no regular change of leadership. How can honest and capable people contest elections under such circumstances? They neither have money nor muscle power and hence the political parties do not give them nominations. When the bad people get united, the good people should also unite. It is the only way for the good people to come out of this vicious cycle of corruption.

**Maniruzzaman Bulbul**  
I believe before we go for reform of the political process we should redeem our souls. Unless we are able to change our mentality we shall not be able to achieve any tangible success. Opposing for the sake of mere opposition has become a part and parcel of our political culture. The opposition has demanded the removal of the election commissioners, the question is; will that solve all our problems? I believe that mere changing of individuals will not solve anything. If the people are not willing to vote nothing can be done. With the election ahead of us the caretaker government has to play the role of an umpire, and has to be bold. While the politicians join politics in order to serve people but at the same time it is true that not all of them happen to be equal to the task. It is, thus, not proper to criticize all of them. Those who are present here today love the country and the people. Those who have come under criticism are not here. Political wisdom cannot be measured based on academic qualifications. It is also not true that the politicians are responsible for the present state of the country. Many ask the civil society as to why they have so many divisions amongst them despite the fact that they are not willing to be in the seat of power? They should also unite. If we ask people not to nominate bad people, tell the public not to vote, then the political parties will be compelled to give nomination to honest people, if not for anything else but to win elections.

**Dr. Mahbub Sadiq**  
With much hope and dreams we participated in the war of liberation, thinking that there will be a free country where people would have sufficient food and clothing, but it has not materialized even after such a long time. I have seen that 75 percent of those who took part in the Liberation War were illiterate and lived under marginal conditions. They took part in the war because of their love for the country and not with the hope of any material gains. This is the reason as to why we are looking for honest and capable people. We are badly in need of such people. Conscious citizens are pained by the present state of the country. The political condition of the country has become unbearable. Whatever is happening is nothing but autocracy in the name of democracy. This, in turn, has made the best sons of the soil averse to politics. On the other hand, the rich have become richer by joining politics. These people are so distant from honesty that it is not possible for any one to resist them. Politicians have become helpless against this evil cycle of money and muscle power. People have become hostage at the hands of a few syndicated businessmen. We also must inculcate in ourselves a kind of love of the country like that of the freedom fighters only, then we may be able to build a country, one that is the dream of the freedom fighters. It may

not take place through the election in 2007, or the one after that, but may be achieved by the one after that.

**Md. Zafar Iqbal**  
I am optimistic about the initiative taken by the civil society although many have expressed doubts about its success. There is no country in the world that has not benefited from a right action. As an example we could cite the movement against diversified system of education. There we have worked with the assistance of the teachers. We requested the TV channels and the newspapers to propagate our point of view. We wrote about the matter and distributed pamphlets. Ultimately, when the people of the country came to know we did not have to proceed further. The government backed out, and we did not have to indulge in hartals or any other form of destructive activity. The main point is that the people have to be informed. I do not believe our country to be riddled with corruption. Only a few are engaged in corruption and the entire population is carrying the burden of it. I once, while distributing copies to the students of my department, told them that they should point out to me if I had mistakenly given any one of them low marks. At the same time I also jokingly said if excess marks have been given that should also be pointed out. After the end of a class a girl came to me and said that I had given her excess marks. She did not disclose it in front of the entire class. I am often confronted with this kind of incident. I had gone to the Bogra Zilla School, to attend its 150th anniversary, where I had studied for some time. There I saw that martyred freedom fighters being remembered, many of whom were my classmates and had sacrificed their lives for a beautiful homeland. They gave us an independent motherland. They could not see the land of their dreams and aspirations. It is now our responsibility to fulfill their dreams. We would thus urge the present generation to engage themselves in turning the country into a beautiful one and fulfill the dreams of our freedom fighters. Those martyrs have gifted us with a free land, and now it is our duty to build it.

**Shamsur Rahman Khan Shahjahan**  
Had this initiative been taken earlier chances were we would get better results. If the deliberations could be spread to Upazilla levels in the remote areas, it would give some direction to the people living there. The unique event of our national life is our war of liberation. We need to keep that alive at all times, or else we shall not be able to properly evaluate its value and essence. At one time Bangabandhu gave the call to the people to rise and unite under the banner of six points. On March 7 he gave the clarion call, "Rise Bengalis, rise, the struggle this time is the struggle for our freedom". People began to unite. Pak occupation forces swooped on the people and the people also began to resist. When Bangabandhu was arrested, Major Ziaur Rahman read out the declaration of our war of independence, and prior to that it was Shah Hannan. This is the fact of history. At the same time it is also true that when Ziaur Rahman was on his way to the vessel Swat to unload arms, it was the BDR that involved him in our war of liberation. Today, history is being distorted. The name of Bangabandhu has been struck off from our textbooks, and his photographs have been taken down from the walls.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 13

### RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE DIALOGUE (IN BRIEF)

- Political parties have to disclose their sources of funding.
- Sources of earnings of political and student leaders have to be disclosed.
- The MPs have to be made accountable. Statement of their accounts and resources must be scrutinized before and after the election.
- Staying at least ten days a month in their localities by public representatives has to be compulsory. In addition, all development work to be undertaken by them has to be done after due discussions with the people.
- It has to be ensured that no government servants are influenced by political decisions.
- There should be a provision that no one heads a political party for more than two terms.
- Affiliated bodies of the political parties have to be banned.
- No professional bodies should have direct links with the political parties.
- Instead of holding processions and gatherings in educational institutions movements could be initiated through holding of debates and seminars.
- Introduce the system of selecting nominations after due voting at grass root levels.
- Clause 70 of the constitution has to be scrapped.
- The saying that there is no last word in politics has to be shunned as it encourages indiscipline.
- An advisory committee has to be established, consisting of members from all parties, and the committee will begin its work right after the election, so that whoever wins the election will remain accountable to that committee.
- A ceiling on election expenditures should be fixed at the maximum limit of taka three lacs and the same has to be expended through the election commission.

### Election Commission and electoral reforms

- Black money holders and loan defaulters should be banned from contesting elections.
- If the industrialists and bureaucrats wish to contest elections they have to be affiliated with a political party at least for a period of three years in order to be eligible to contest.
- Election expenditure has to be limited to taka three lacs, and the government should conduct the campaign from a common platform.
- Expenditures incurred by candidates have to be monitored.
- Election to the women seats in the Parliament has to be through direct elections. The Women Development Policy 1999 should be made effective without any changes.
- In order to assess the suitability of a candidate, adequate information has to be obtained.
- A candidate will have to contest from the constituency where he is registered as a voter.
- In order to contest election one has to have the minimum qualification of a graduate.
- Opponents of our war of independence should be barred from contesting election.
- Instead of symbols the ballot paper should carry the photographs of the incumbent candidates.
- In line with the High Court's directive it should be compulsory for the candidates to print detailed information about themselves in the posters.
- Allocation of seats during election has to be based on area-wise ratio of population.
- Arrangements should be made for hanging of posters of Assistant Returning Officers having their individual photographs and other relevant details.
- Assistant Returning Officers have to hold meetings at union levels with all candidates.

### Institutional framework and Miscellaneous

- The existing disparity between cities and villages are to be removed.
- Problems of the indigenous people have to be resolved. All false cases against them should be withdrawn, there has to be a separate commission and a ministry to look after their affairs. Above all they are to be given constitutional recognition.
- Proper application of the rule of law has to be ensured in all spheres of our lives at national levels.
- Emphasis has to be given on correct writing, reading and use of Bangla.
- If a government fails to fulfill its commitments then it should provide a detailed explanation of its failures prior to holding of the next election.
- Judiciary has to be separated from the Executive. There has to be a clear indication of this in the manifestos of the political parties.
- The constitution, as it stands now, is serving the interests of corrupt people and, hence, it should be changed except for the basis on which the 1972 constitution was framed.
- Threats and intimidation against journalists should cease.
- The local government systems have to be strengthened, and all development works should be carried out under their supervision.
- In the case of the Hindus, marriages have to be registered and provision has to be there for daughters to have access to father's property.