

State of our Polity: Views of the Young Generation

Perspectives need to be reshaped and redefined. And one way of doing that is through hearing the voices of the young. They have a remarkable ability to think the issues through--in a variety of areas. A few instances are presented here in a roundtable on "State of our Polity: Views of the Young Generation" held at the conference room of The Daily Star on 17 March 2007. It was participated by a number of young professionals. The Editor of The Daily Star, Mahfuz Anam, moderated the discussion. The transcript of the discussion is published below.

Mahfuz Anam

I welcome you all to today's roundtable. The topic of this roundtable is "State of our Polity: Views of the Young Generation". We are delighted that you have responded to our invitation. We look forward to a very exciting discussion. We would like to analyse why we are where we are today. We would also like to hear your vision of how to move forward and then finally your personal role in it. You may pinpoint many problems but at the end of the day the question will come forth - who is going to do it?

Do we make personal commitments? Like for example, we shall keep the section of the road in front of our house clean, or we shall not spit on the road and so on? But it hardly happens. We never go beyond uttering the platitudes.

It has been our ambition in The Daily Star ever since our birth to try to hear and give space and voice to the young as much as possible. At this moment, I think two Bangladesh exist simultaneously. One is a degenerative Bangladesh and the other is regenerative Bangladesh. In the degenerative Bangladesh you can talk about politics, bureaucracy, business, profession, education, student politics, journalism and so on, that are in a rotten stage. On the regenerative Bangladesh you have a very bright and courageous group of entrepreneurs who are making their place in the world in spite of the odds. We have good example of the non-governmental sector, particularly led by NGOs like, BRAC, Grameen and many others. You have some examples in journalism also. Then there are young professionals.

So, you have this two Bangladesh -- one with enormous potential, the other with a degenerative trend that might pull us all down. Which Bangladesh will win? The degenerative or the regenerative Bangladesh? We may go down the tube but we may also go up and stun the world with what we can do. It all depends on where we position ourselves. The time for sitting on the sideline is over. We have to commit ourselves to the future of Bangladesh, which I think is absolutely attainable.

One of the assets of this country is the history of our political struggle, like the Language Movement, Liberation War and then the struggle to restore democracy 1990. This catalogue of political heritage is a big asset for Bangladesh. I think, in the hearts and minds of the people, there is an urge for freedom and liberty. This is precisely why dictatorship never lasted long in Bangladesh. We have a social psyche, which refuses to live in an environment of autocracy. Then, where have we failed? Perhaps this fundamental urge to build a democratic prosperous society should have been institutionalized.

Today, while we analyse the past we should also look into what we should concentrate on and what needs to be done in the future. I think the issues are reforming our politics, establishing a genuine rule of law, establishing an accountable and transparent governance process. We need to really look at Bangladesh as a part of the modern globalized world making its own place in it.

I would really like to hear the voice of you all in this roundtable -- not only what's need to be done but also what you as an individual and a group are willing to do.

Zahin Hasan

I think one of the main problems with governance is that people tend to blame politicians and overlook the fact that bureaucrats carry out the day to day functions of the government. No MP or minister can get away with corruption without the complicity and cooperation of bureaucrats. We cannot reduce corruption unless we can reduce the involvement of bureaucrats in corruption. That also will not happen unless salaries of the government officials are significantly increased.

In Bangladesh almost entire tax collection is from customs duty and VAT on import. But if we rely less on VAT and more on sales taxes then we can significantly increase revenue because in Bangladesh most people do not have high taxable income. So personal income taxes will never raise all the revenues you need. There are lots of profitable companies that are evading taxes on profits. We have to think of imposing tax on the basis of their sales. Then we shall collect more taxes. Sales revenues are transparently recorded on every company's statement and can easily be taxed.

The other point is, there are lots of wasteful expenditures. For example, the biggest government expenditure is on subsidies on diesel and kerosene. The main beneficiaries are those who are buying the subsidized diesel and kerosene and smuggling them across the border. But the farmers and poor households need cheap diesel and kerosene so why not just introduce rationing system? At the moment, the people in business are the biggest consumers of diesel and kerosene in Bangladesh -- each of them is running diesel generator almost 24 hours a day -- but I am sure

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the policy of subsidy was not done keeping the businessmen like us in view.

So, instead of giving subsidy on diesel and kerosene government should introduce rationing system for the poor households and farmers. The fact is, all farmers are paying land tax to the government, so the government knows exactly who has how much agricultural land.

Kaiser Kabir

One of the main barriers in increasing government staff salary is that the number of employees is too big. If you do so the economy will experience inflation. So, before taking steps to increase the salary you have to shrink the size of the government. At the same time lots of government functions can be outsourced. Former government employees can be involved in those activities. It is also possible to merge some ministries. I can't figure out what the ministry of industries does. You have ministry of textile, ministry of industry and so on. The country is run by the private sector so what does this ministry of industries do?

My suggestion is, shrink the size of the government before raising their salary.

Omar Rahman

I think most of us would agree on the point of downsizing the government. But there are other reasons to do so other than for financial sustainability. The functions of a government are to provide things that the market cannot provide. This is the economic rationale for the government. Government intervenes where market cannot.

The private sector will not provide vaccination or education to everyone because there is no profit in providing education to poor people. And caught up in that is the issue of equity. Government needs to take care of vulnerable groups that deserve attention. But at the same time the concept that the government should provide for everyone is not valid also.

Why the government cannot provide for everyone is because it is inefficient.

As for raising salary, I think it makes sense for a reasonable increase in salary. But I think no one believes that one is not corrupt because one is paid enough. You may triple the salary of some people but the opportunities for corruption are also so much greater.

If we talk about corruption then underlying all of that has to be personal accountability. I believe people are not corrupt because they think it is the wrong thing to do. Most people are not corrupt. It is a minority that deviates from moral and ethical principles. The issue of moral accountability has to be central to everything we do. So, I don't think we can reform the system unless we reform ourselves.

Naomi Hossain

There are lots of useless people doing useless things in most government offices. But it is not the case that Bangladesh has a very large number of employees in the government sector. You actually have comparatively a small government. But there are areas where we do not have enough people. We do not have enough government doctors.

We do not have enough people of the right calibre to implement projects. It's not much about size; it's more about quality, better people doing better things, not fewer people.

Shahana Siddiqui

There is no saturation point in corruption. As for downsizing, I am completely against it. The problem is we have too large a support staff. But the number of people who actually govern, the qualified civil servants who can implement policies, is quite small.

Mahfuz Anam

Are you in favour of downsizing the support staff?

Shahana Siddiqui

First, you have to do some kind of evaluation why the support staff are there. The reason for the so-called bloated government, from deputy secretary and above, is severe politicization of the civil service since liberation. All political parties tried to put their cadre in the service with or without having the required qualification.

Mahfuz Rahman

This is a complex issue from the financial point of view. Since 1990 we have been living in the environment of kleptocracy and as a result from 1991 there has been a complete policy paralysis. We should make the government more qualitative. We should make sure that the resources of the government are available.

Today the government is unable to finance the improvement of the resource people to deliver the services to the people of the country.

On the other hand, government officials are going abroad for training but what do they do after returning? The wrong kind



of people have been recruited for the service. Therefore, all politically appointed people in the public service commission need to be removed. The government has to increase its tax collection capability so that it can deliver the services to the people.

Iresh Zaker

In every tier of tax collection there is a moneymaking mechanism. Then the question remains, where is the collected tax money going?

Rubaiyat Hossain

I think there is a big gap between the masses and the handful of elite. The majority has to be brought to leadership role. Maybe we are going to see the end of dynastic rule in this country. I hope the new leadership will establish the people's government. We have to include the common people in policy dialogues. We need to reform our education system as well.

Mishu Rahman

On the question of downsizing the government, I would like to say that if the government is an organisation then it should have a system of evaluation of the employees. The young people want to do so many things; they want to change the world. But someone has to give them a vision otherwise they would get lost. I have conducted many programmes for the young generation, seminars and workshops etc but I have seen that the young people cannot think beyond five years. They would like to have a car or a house and settle down, a very limited-term vision. They can hardly think big.

But with the changes going on now maybe the thought process is also changing; maybe we can now think big. We can be social leaders, social entrepreneurs and so on. What about the young generation outside Dhaka? Can we encourage them in some way in sharing their ideas? These young people need to come together and have a platform to harness the energy and enthusiasm. But first of all we need to have a vision.

Mahfuz Anam

Do you have a vision? Would you like to share it with us?

Mishu Rahman

My vision is to see more professionalism in the younger people. It is very important whether I can follow the rules and set examples.

Sara Hossain

The change that has happened in society is going to be a meaningful change. For me the foremost question right now is accountability and justice. And perhaps the biggest challenge I can see is how we deal with that question - what roles we play as individuals to bring accountability to our society and nation.

I don't think we can throw out politics. We are talking about a certain kind of politics, a certain model of politics. All the positive things in our national life such as the Language Movement, Liberation War or the movement for democracy in 1990 have come through politics. It came through the political struggles and aspirations of hundreds of thousands of political activists as well as human rights activists, professionals, journalists and so on. So we have to think how we can regenerate politics and not throw away politics.

When we came back in 1990 we saw real hope. We did not see 1971 but we have seen 1990 - a moment of change, to cut across party line - to form an open society, one that gave opportunities to

people. But we were devastated to see how the old model was replicated. And young people fell into that pattern. In the past five years we have seen the worst excesses. I also want to see professional institutes free of partisan politics.

Faheem Shahed

Don't you think that value education has never been implemented in our country? The root of all problems is the education system. Value education system is that system which will teach the young people about the values, modesty, decency, and high moral standard. It will also create the concept of nation state. In Bangladesh there is no concept of a nation state. European countries fought for years to implement democracy and nation state.



Now that the caretaker government is in power, I am a good teacher; he is a good magistrate and so on. Is that patriotism? This feeling that we are an independent nation and we shall do what is the right thing to do is absent in most of us.

Look at the school education system. Parents and students have accepted the fact that students will have to go to the coaching centres. In the universities students find out which teachers (s) give better grades and they choose the subjects they teach.

In the public education system we did not create any role models. Public university teachers are busy campaigning to become deans or pro-VC even vice chancellor. This lack of role models has created disaster for the new generation.

Shuman Jahan

I think Bangladesh can be a shining star in the world. I think we have to redefine what is meant by the word 'civilized'. The word civilised is defined in terms of technology. But we have to define it in terms of ethics. So, education system has to be reformed. Right now education system is about certificates. Most of the knowledge is theoretical so create a practical school. It is not through monologue we learn. It is through dialogue we learn.

Naeem Mohaimen

More research should be done to find out what is the representation of ethnic and religious minorities in jobs and education.

Sharin Shajahan Naomi

I think we expect too much from the government and we talk much about our rights. We do not talk about our duties. We are talking about tax enhancing capability of the government but have we asked ourselves whether we are paying our taxes properly? If we perform our duties we need not go and ask for our rights.



Sara Hossain

We did not see justice for those responsible for genocide committed in 1971. And as far as the international community was concerned at that time, there was much more concern about violation of prisoners of war rights than for how to bring to account those responsible for the genocide. I would like to ask how as a group and we as individuals can infuse the central issue of corruption in the national discourse.

Kaiser Kabir

Those who are leading the young generation have to formulate a vision that takes into account the fact that their future is going to be in Asia, which is going to be vastly different from the place they grew up in. The present leadership does not have that vision and certainly do not have the policies of how to harness Bangladesh's future to the future of Asia. Give the young leadership. Show them the way.

Iresh Zaker

I think more people need to go into politics, especially our generation.