

State of our Polity: Views of the Young Generation

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BM Shoaib

Everything around us is being politicized. That has to stop. Then there are two organizations that need to be reformed. First is NBR. According to the common people every NBR staff is corrupt, again which is not true. There are some who are not corrupt. Then comes the judiciary. Whoever commits a crime has to be punished.

And the judges need to be answerable as well. Even if a judge commits a crime, he has to be brought before the law. And everyone has to pay income tax. If these two departments are reformed then there can be a change for the better. We pay tax to the government. If we do not get anything in return from the government then what is the point of paying the tax?

MN Kabir



It is the time for the young generation to come into politics. And I have only one thing to say, that is: think positive, do positive and see positive.

Rubaiyat Hossain

A very western dream has been localized here. And that needs to be addressed if we want to go back to finding out who we really are as Bangladeshis and what are our collective aspirations. When we glorify 1971 and 1952, we also have to understand that the first people who protested against Pakistan were the peasants. In 1948, the first protesters were the peasants, the tribal people who did not want Pakistan. Later, it became a middleclass movement. We fought for our language in 1952, and now we are demolishing the language of the tribal people. So we are doing the same thing to the language of the others, which was done by the Pakistanis to our language.

Lots of people have talked about the role of the media. But we also have to understand that free speech in itself has become a commodity. Lots of people don't even have a platform from where they can speak.

We keep saying that we need to find our own identity and who we are as Bangalis but then within that there is a problematic construction of femininity that by Bangali culture we understand how the Bangali women are. So we need to understand the issues of younger people, how they understand themselves and their identity. If we look at Bangladesh, it seems that women's problems have been resolved but if we look at violence against women, not only the volume is increasing, but the intensity is also increasing. So I think we all need to be aware that women's issue is not something that we need to put in a pocket and deal with it, we need to mainstream that. Look at the garment workers, they are female and they are earning most of our foreign currency. So we need to give them the recognition.

People who love and care for Bangladesh should do politics. But we should have had more people like that in our governments. But power cannot be the incentive for coming to politics, or else we would end up in square one.

Mahfuz Rahman

I think we are overly dramatizing this change in Bangladesh. Suddenly everyone is talking about newness and development and everything becoming clean and that we do not need to bribe anyone. But why is that? That is because suddenly something happened on January 18th that changed the whole thing. What happens when the situation changes back? So I think that a clear message has to be sent to the people that whoever has abused the system they should be given punishment. Once there is the system of accountability then people will have fear that if they do something wrong then they will be punished for it and they will think twice before doing it. Then come the NBR and the police. It shall not take much time to clean up the NBR and the police.

Thirdly, everyone wants election. So what happens after that? It is the same people or their sons who will come into power. Someone who has 100 crores taka might be in jail but his son still has access to that. So, we need to have some sort of a movement with a vision, a specific goal that when this vacuum is created, when there is election, when there is democracy then there are alternative clear choices.

Aftab M Khurshid



We require a clear vision with common goal, which everyone should know. And according to that vision we need a strategic roadmap for the country. If we do not have any roadmap then we can go nowhere. It could be more optimistic and futuristic but we have to set certain goals and then we can go ahead.

We have to make a platform for the young. For leadership we need skilled, knowledgeable, professional, trustworthy people. There was a question regarding morality and ethics. It actually

starts form the family. About the educational system, there is a debate about private and public university but it has to be changed from the school sector. Schooling is important. The mind set is shaped in school. So we need to change our educational system or there should be one common system for every school.

Naomi Hossain

One of the disadvantages of being young is that we haven't lived through history. And it struck me very much that one of the things we were not concerned about in this roundtable is the fact that we are living under some kind of military rule. And one of the things is very clear is that under military rules we have done very badly on development terms, on poverty reduction, and we certainly haven't done well in gender equity.

We also had lots of corruption of which we knew nothing because the media was not allowed to report on it. We haven't done well in terms of economic growth. We also have not done well in competitive party politics because we were not allowed to have competitive party politics under military rule. So we do not know what is about to happen in the election.

On the other hand for last fifteen years we had nasty party politics, but we had lots of improvement in poverty. Substantial poverty reduction took place in Bangladesh particularly in the last five years. We have lots of gains in terms of social development and in terms of women's rights. Though there were problems, but the country has made gains in last fifteen years. I think we need to learn what we have achieved in last fifteen years in order to move forward.

Rubaiyat Hossain

It just struck me that none of us really mentioned issue of religious fundamentalism that we have faced in Bangladesh. I think why the people did not express their opinion regarding the military regime is because we do not expect to be in this regime, we are hoping that there would be a change and we are also hoping that there will be an election. In doing that we should also remember that there is a very strong ground to breed religious fundamentalists and militants

in this country. About 15% of our ADP which comes under millennium development goals has been allocated to education and religious affair. So religious affair has been packed under the millennium development goals. And we do not know what they will do with the big chunk of money they are taking for education and religious affairs.

Sara Hossain

It is not true that we could write about corruption then and we cannot write about it now. We have been doing cases for Mr. Mahfuz Anam because he could not write about corruption by these people who are in jail now because he faced defamation cases and arrest warrants. CPD, Mr. Rehman Sobhan, Mr. Saiduzzaman, former finance ministers, former advisers to caretaker government were issued arrest warrants overnight because people could exert influence and could buy judges.

We are all aware that certain leaders and many others who are behind the bars today are not going to stay there. I am very disturbed by the shadow play that is going on now and the reason why we have to work under certain constraints.

But I am more disturbed by the outrageous level of complacency I see around me. I spent the last few weeks wandering up and down the country for some work on Brac's legal aid program. Through that course I have met many poor people all of whom have said that they were delighted at the situation. You will get many poor people who will say they are delighted with cross fire. That does not validate or legitimate what is happening. At the same time what I find really disturbing is meeting lots of members of the liberal intelligence here, who are just not concerned about what is going on about the difficulties of bringing people to account.

The reason why we have an emergency is because we could not solve the problems through democratic politics. All our institutions were occupied. Courts did not function. Are we going to stand in terms of legal technicalities in the name of due process where people have abused, distorted, polluted legal interpretations to get where we got today.

Naomi Hossain

We are hoping that there will be an election. Look around the world, wherever we had a military rule in the last couple of years and anywhere these well meaning militaries have taken over, they didn't give back power very easily.

Iresh Zaker

The reason why these people came into power is because they wanted to come to power. There are people who want the ball and there are people who do not want the ball. And the people who want the ball are essentially attracted to power. Power to do good is still power. So I think you have to want that.

Zahin Hasan

We actually haven't talked about the issue of religious fundamentalism at all. It is linked to education because none of our kids will ever go to a madrasa. That's where poor kids go. Madrasa education is the only truly free education in Bangladesh. They not only get education but also free food and boarding. If you want to compete with madrasas then there has to be state schools for the poor that offer free food and boarding. If you want to provide these services that can compete with madrasas, you have to collect more taxes. Otherwise it will never happen.

Naomi Hossain

I was very hopeful that we were going to go through an election. I think it was possible the elected could have taught these parties a lesson about how not to govern. They have done it before and they can do it again. But now we are in a situation where if we are to have a multi party politics, we will have to start from scrap. These people haven't learned anything. All they have learned is that when you are in power, you are strong and when you are not in power you are in jail. They haven't learned to play the game properly. They won't learn under this government now.

Omar Rahman

We should not make flip assessments of our history. There is lot of evidence of good things happening in Bangladesh in last fifteen years and I am always struck by how all of that is written about extensively outside Bangladesh. The examples are family planning and education. There is a tendency to basically proceed from where nothing works and we need to change it. We need to look at what has worked and what has not. We need to have a more empirical fact based assessment of our history, rather than make a sort of generic pronounce of what has worked or not.

Naeem Mohaimen



There are lots of madrasa conversations going on but with no one from the madrasa at this table. And we also have the thing of solutions being imposed from outside. There is this notion that pumping the madrasa with computer and modern education is all you need to solve this issue. It is not that simple. I think one of the things people don't think about is the manners in which new groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir is particularly targeting places like private universities and English speaking elite and finding among them enthusiastic supporters.

One of the things I have noticed is that those who practice Islamic politics are really smart, they are smarter than the main stream parties, they are adapting all the time and they are ideologically honest and organized. We think that bringing up 71 is not enough to fight them. We really need to start understanding these movements.

Mahrugh Mohiuddin



We want to celebrate optimism as we are looking into the future and we all want to be a part of that positivism and optimism. That is the underline tone of what brought us here together. It is important that we acknowledge the grass-root strength and look at the innovations and be a part of that as well. We happen to be a part of the urban class and we also have this urban prerogative of making decisions for the masses but there is a lot of strength and awareness in the grass-roots level that needs to be brought forward and be connected with dialogues such as this.

That goes back to human rights issues and inclusion of minorities. Minority is not a preferred word as we want them to be included in the society and they are a part of the society. I also wanted to mention the global Bangladeshis or the expatriates. They also have vision, but I don't know how much of that is being heard. Their vision should be integrated into what we are thinking. There is a gap between what is going on in the ground and the vision that is in the urban and also in a global level. There needs to be a connection and I want to be a part of that connection as well.

Another point I wanted to make is equitable distribution of wealth and information as well. Connecting all these dots will contribute towards reducing the gap of this huge disconnects of information and wealth. We have all touched upon those issues in micro levels. Then there is media responsibility. There is so much media around us right now that sometimes our thoughts get clouded by so much information that we get. We should have the capability and guidance to filter the right information that we get from the media and what surrounds us.

Mesbahuddin Ahmed

The private sectors are better than the government sectors. There are scopes to do many things in the private sector. But then again the private sectors are influenced by the government sectors. For example many of the private banks are owned by political leaders. Reform should take place in both government and private sectors. It is the time to set our goals and visions.

Zahin Hasan

The political parties need to focus on a platform based on social contract that we are going to have in Bangladesh in the

future. In most countries government collects taxes and spends the revenue on services that people want, such as, education and rule of law. If it is a socialist country then they choose to spend on state owned enterprises that employ a lot of people. The problem is that we do not have a functioning social contract. The public perception is that all the revenue will go to sustain corruption so why should I pay taxes. We need to revisit the issue of what the social contract would be between the ruler and the ruled in Bangladesh.

Faem Shahed

The school education system has to be modified. This teacher-centered educational system has to be abolished completely. Learners cannot sit mute in the classroom. They will have to be allowed to see things critically and speak up. This is happening in the neighbouring countries. Regarding the role of the media, our film-makers and playwrights should glorify the lives of our national heroes. Unless you glorify the lives of the heroes who have contributed to the political, social and economic emancipation of the country we cannot teach everything through textbooks.

Zafar Sobhan

One point that I would like to make is that this is a discussion conducted largely by the younger generation, but it hasn't really been about the younger generation. It hasn't really focused on beliefs and ideas, ethics, morals and values in so far as it relates to this generation. I think it is important to talk about things in terms of generation because the lack of representation at all higher levels of professional and political society in Bangladesh is a problem. If you expand the definition of young upto forty to forty-five then that is 75 to 80 percent of the population.

This is the problem of Bangladesh being a very non-representative polity. Obviously it is not nearly as fundamental a problem as the lack of representation among women, the minority and the economically disenfranchised, but it is still part of the same problem. I think we need to address this as we address the other issues.

The larger problem is the problem we have in our culture. Ours is a status-oriented culture where the lines of communication generally flow down, they do not really flow up. It is very difficult for the younger generation to actually break in, to get a voice and to get a seat at the table and to get themselves heard.

Shuman Jahan

I do not think history makes the world. The world is recreated every-



day, change is possible. History, our education, our thinking process are belief system that are sitting in our heads and making us act in certain ways. What we need to do is go through a rethinking process of what we have learnt as slaves. The education that we have received is slave education. It is not a thinking education. We need to re-examine that. It is possible to make our education system efficient. No child needs to study ten hours a day to go through the process of getting a certificate.

What we can do is capture the imagination of the younger generation.

Mahfuz Anam

Do not forget that Pravda and other newspapers used to be full of how glorious the socialist system was. They said how great the leaders are and what good things are happening. All I am saying is that be ware of the dosage of optimism created out of the thin air. When the past government had banned the two-stroke engine and plastic bags to reduce pollution we painted the town red writing about it. So make good things happen and that will be news.

But all this does not mean that good things are not happening in the country. The media can do a lot of things but I think our primary job is to inform people of what they should be aware of tomorrow morning. If there is a traffic jam, I report it. But if all the traffic is flowing properly then I do not write about it.

Shuman Jahan

We need to identify individuals. Ethics are not like theories. They live in people. Through our behavior we create the world. And we cannot tell by looking who is good and who is not. I need to be educated. Who do I go to for this education? Who can I trust? The basis of a society is trust. We do not have that trust. So how do we grow that? I do not have the answers but I am willing to talk about it till we find the answers.

Omar Rahman

There is a lot of commonality in the sentiments that have been expressed by various people. I just want to summarize it to some extent. It seems to me that pretty much of all of the conversation was at some level about personal and public accountability, broadly defined, and how do you get people to have a greater sense of personal ethics so that they do not deviate from their notion of what is ethical or just.

What do you do when people actually deviate from there? The regulatory framework is always trying to catch the person who has deviated from an ethical standard of behavior. So first we have to imbue people with a personal sense of ethics. Lots of people have talked about the educational system as a very important way of imbuing the younger generation. That is important.

People are so caught up in being rewarded. There isn't often a reward for doing the right thing. Other than that you will get your reward in heaven. Religion plays that card. Religion tells you that you will get your reward in heaven if you do the right thing. That is one thing the education system can do. It can talk about why one

should be ethical.

On the other hand it is important for us to recognize what good things are happening in the country, but we do not recognize that. For me the biggest thing is the media. I think it is a fascinating change. This was not the situation before. Now we have a very activist media. We have a media that tells us bad news everyday, but that news needs to be told. Nowhere in the world you can find the whole government accused of corruption and rightfully so and you have the specific example of the degree of corruption and you are horrified by it. But I am also amazed that you have the ability to read it. I have the confidence that Bangladesh to some extent has a freer media than many other countries.

Shahana Siddiqui

I get to hear a lot from the younger generation. The group of youth that I am talking about is the most disenfranchised both socially and economically and therefore politically. And one of the reasons we never get to hear what they have to say is because they are too busy growing up. They face too much reality.

The other thing is we have taken a very western concept of what is the level of achievement. We have localized a global concept. The reason why we could lose our young generation to that is because we do not have a sense of nationalism. The young generation does not understand why they are Bangladeshis to begin with. Why would 71 matter, why would 52 movement matter, why would these things matter. I think there is this whole detachment issue here with the educated class of children.

Mishu Rahman

I think there should be some kinds of a platform where you can provide opportunity to the younger generation to start businesses or some kind of development initiatives that would help them earn money and support their own livelihoods. Such opportunity for the younger generation to start a development potential should be in other cities also and not just limited to Dhaka. We can take examples from the US. They are trying to make Ohio a young city again. No young person wants to live there. So the government has taken all the initiative to provide the facilities that the younger people need. Maybe something that the younger people like about Dhaka can be replicated outside so that those cities are interesting for them and it will also be very cost effective for them to have business there.

Rubaiyat Hossain

I have seen students at Brac University wear t-shirts that has two options -- Islam and capitalism and there is a take on Islam. So the problem is definitely far beyond education. It is an empire they are trying to fight and they recruit people. In this case they are targeting the young people as their recruits. When I asked one of my students she said that it is not what I think it is. She even wanted to take me to one of the meetings. I am yet to visit but I believe that we have to be aware of that.

Sara Hossain

We need a movement towards the democratic process. This cannot be an indefinite situation in which we are. But at the same time I think let us march forward and let us see how soon we can return to that free world. I think now we have to see how we ensure that accountability process. We have to accept for a moment there is a change that recognizes some kind of a restriction so that we can make the change. We will have to be a part of that real change happening, the real accountability. If we do not ensure that accountability happening through proper process, first of all it will be undone through the law if nothing else.

Mahfuz Rahman

I think a very important point was made there because as we see this change happening and we are all euphoric about this change, I think it is important to see it with proper eyes. We see that some of the politicians are in jail so everything is fine, but lots of his henchmen are still outside. Why are they outside? Were they not corrupt? When Mandela formed Truth and Reconciliation Commission, people were critical about it, but information came out. Now if information is not coming out fully, then the change is selective and that is to be worried.

Mahfuz Anam

I think this discussion in a way represents the challenges that are ahead of us. On one hand, positive things have happened, and on the other hand there are things that are worrisome. I totally share the concerns about losing our civil liberty. These are concerns we should keep in mind. As I have written many times in the Daily Star, democracy of last fifteen years was our best face to the world. There is no better system than democracy, with all its flaws. But we also have to recognize what has happened in the last fifteen years. In last fifteen years we have realized that the way we ran the country, we can do better.

Let us not give the impression that when we criticize what has happened in last fifteen years, we want to do away with it. We do not want to throw away the baby with the bathwater.

I do agree that lots of good things have happened in last fifteen years. Our regret is that we could have done better. We have done five good things, but the geniuses of this country can do fifteen good things. The fact that we did not do the other ten good things at the same time is the loss that we are mourning. We are celebrating the five good things that we have done. So when we criticize the politicians, we do not criticize them to do away with politics. We are regretting the comparative advantage that we had and did not use.

I think in the last fifteen years we have found out that the democracy that we have practiced needs to be improved. Governance, parliament all of these need to be improved. When we criticize the parliament, it is not to do away with the parliament. When I am criticizing an MP, I am not criticizing the institution, but the role that the MP has played. Let us not have any doubt about where we stand, we stand for democracy, we stand for what we have achieved, but the regret is that we could have done better.

So how can we do better in the future? That's where you and your generation come in. Are you willing to be a part of that future or are you going to be on the sideline and be mere observer? The old concept of politics is that if you want to be in politics, you will have to be in a political party. I do not think so. I think we are conscious citizens and in democratic dispensation we have every right to demand a better government and we have the right to say our piece of how the country should be run. And this does not mean that you have to sign up with a political party.

I think that the young people have many ideas and it is the time to articulate them, before the election. Then our dream government will come as a part of that election process. What do we want that should happen and what do we want that should not happen? What will be the role of an MP in the parliament? What will be the role of the government, the opposition?

One thing that did not come up today is employment. There is a large number of youth in Bangladesh. How can we employ them? The unemployment problem is pushing people into drugs and crime. This needs to be addressed.

Thank you all for your participation.