

DHAKA TUESDAY FEBRUARY 24, 2009

Civil society role

FROM PAGE 18

Process of Creation of Public Awareness

Creation of public opinion/awareness	Media coverage	Civil society initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In favor of honest, clean and competent candidates In favor of reforms of the electoral process and institutions In support of strong local government In support of negative vote Against hooliganism Against religious extremists/war criminals Against corruption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coverage of issue based roundtables/debates/election olympiads etc Coverage of citizens' dialogues Coverage highlighting candidate profiles Coverage of EC dialogues Hosting talk shows 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clean candidate campaign during UP/Paurashava elections Campaign for political reform Campaign for strengthening local government Legal battle for disclosures Legal battle on electoral rolls Clean candidate campaign by Nagorik Committee Citizens Dialogue/Candidate-Voter Face-to-Face Meetings and distribution of candidate profiles during local elections Citizens Dialogue/Candidate-Voter Face-to-Face Meetings/ distribution of candidate profiles during Parliament elections

A watershed event in creating public awareness for change was the fiasco involving the electoral roll. It may be recalled that after the reconstitution of the EC with Justice Aziz as the CEC, the EC prepared a fresh electoral roll with more than nine crore voters. The authenticity of the electoral roll and the manner in which it was prepared generated considerable controversy and the matter was ultimately brought before the High Court for decision. SHUJAN prepared a database of the entire electoral roll and uploaded it on its website, www.shujan.org, and in the process helped demonstrate inaccuracies in the electoral roll. This massive task of posting over nine crore names was reported in Time magazine and this initiative ultimately paved the way for the preparation of a permanent electoral roll with photographs a task acclaimed by all concerned. The drama surrounding the electoral roll caused a media uproar leading to widespread voter outrage.

In March 2006, a partnership of CPD, The Prothom Alo, The Daily Star and Channel-i launched a clean candidate campaign around the country to delineate "the role of civil society in accountable development efforts" and a "Nagorik Committee" was formed with a group of the most distinguished citizens of the country. The Committee held 15 "Citizens Dialogue" in different locations and received widespread

media coverage, creating demands for clean politics. The Daily Star also, in January 2006, held a seminar with the same theme featuring Professor Muhammad Yunus to celebrate its ...th anniversary.

After the second Caretaker Government took over in January 2007, SHUJAN submitted a comprehensive draft to revise The Representation of People Order, 1972 to ensure free and fair elections and focused its attention to creating public opinion for the proposed reforms. These efforts gave new impetus to the movement for change that was already underway. It may be noted that a big breakthrough in public opinion came with the news conference held by Awami League President Sheikh Hasina on behalf of the Fourteen Party Alliance in July 2005 in which she proposed a unified outline for reforming the Caretaker Government, the Election Commission and the electoral process for free and impartial elections issues that were already identified by civil society organizations like SHUJAN. This received a further boost with her declaration in November 2005 of a unified minimum program on behalf of the Grand Alliance.

Strengthening local government is another issue that received media attention and galvanized popular support in recent years. A good number of academics and thoughtful citi-

zens and organizations like The Hunger Project have been for quite sometime advocating reforms to strengthen our local government system. The last Caretaker Government, primarily due to the advocacy of SHUJAN, formed a Committee which recommended major changes in the present system. Nearly two dozen consultation meetings were held by the Committee and several roundtable meetings were also organized by SHUJAN, Governance Coalition, Democracy Watch and others. These events, covered extensively by the media, made strengthening local government a major issue with widespread public support.

Corruption has always been a big issue in our society. But because of the politicalization of crime and criminalization of politics, it has become an all encompassing problem and the most important issue in our recent parliamentary elections. Transparency International-Bangladesh (TIB) played a critical role in bringing this issue to the forefront and gaining widespread media coverage. Corruption Prevention Committee (CPC), SHUJAN and many other groups and individuals also played a significant role in making corruption an election issue.

Another important civil society initiative was launched by the Sector Commanders' Forum in 1997 calling for the trial of war criminals. This initiative caught the imagination of many citizens and was quickly echoed by many citizen groups. In fact, thanks to the widespread media support, by election time this issue was on the lips of many voters.

A major initiative by SHUJAN on the eve of elections attracted considerable media attention. SHUJAN volunteers collected the affidavits and tax returns, if applicable, of all 1566 contestants, prepared candidate profiles and distributed them in all 300 constituencies. Leaflets and posters were also distributed urging voters not to vote for candidates with tainted backgrounds. Several news briefings were held to share with the media the candidates' profiles. They were also posted on the website: www.votebd.org, which was widely visited by newsmen and other

interested stakeholders. The website also includes an archive of over 5,000 stories of political criminalisation published in major national dailies in the last few years. The media widely used the information and highlighted the criminal records, educational qualifications, financial background etc. of the candidates. Some enterprising newsmen also prepared investigative reporting using the information compiled by SHUJAN. All these activities and information generated an innumerable number of media stories and reports which helped many voters make informed decisions.

SHUJAN volunteers also arranged "Candidate-Voter Face-to-Face" meetings in 87 constituencies throughout the country, some in partnership with CCC (Committee of Concerned Citizens) formed by TIB and CPC. In these unique events candidates signed a declaration promising, among other things, to stay away from corruption and hooliganism, disclose their assets and liabilities each year, and not to interfere in the affairs of local government etc. The most distinguishing aspect of these events is that all the voters present took a oath that they would vote for "candidates who are honest, competent and committed to public service." That they "would not sell their vote for money" nor would they vote for the "corrupt, hooligan, tool collector, liar, war criminal, abuser of women, drug seller, smuggler, convicted criminal, loan defaulter, bill defaulter, misuser of religion, land grabber, black money owner..." Many voters were deeply moved when they pronounced the words contained in the oath.

SHUJAN volunteers developed two other tools for its awareness campaign. They developed a video entitled "Vote For Whom?" which was played in different areas of the country. They also developed "SHUJAN in Songs" a package of songs to articulate various issues. These songs were used by many SHUJAN units around the country and they were quite effective in creating voter awareness of issues.

The innumerable number of post-editorials and articles published in major newspapers and magazines on various issues in the last few years

made a significant contribution toward creating public opinion for change. As I recall, when we started generating reform ideas in 2002-03, the media published almost nothing on reform and the relevant issues. To remedy this void, I myself became a newspaper columnist and over the years wrote several hundred articles in major dailies articulating almost every reform issue. We also tried to encourage others to write columns and provided materials.

Obviously many voters were impacted and their voting decisions affected by the interventions of the civil society and the coverage of those interventions by the media. But, who are these voters? What are their identities?

Some simple arithmetic can be used to identify the segment of voters most influenced by the civil society interventions. According to knowledgeable observers, nearly a third of all voters are diehard supporters of Awami League, a similar percentage have allegiance to BNP. Other parties, including Jatiyo Party and Jamaat-Islami supporters account for roughly another 15 percent of the voters. Thus, between 20 to 25 percent of voters, many of whom are young, are not loyal to any political party. During the recent parliamentary elections, the issues articulated by the civil society and publicized by the media found expression in this segment of voters, and they gave the Grand Alliance a thumping victory. This support, it must be noted, may disappear if the government fails to deliver.

To conclude, it is clear that the people of Bangladesh were fed up with the governance failures and criminalization of our politics by successive governments and they have been yearning for change. Civil society organizations like SHUJAN defined issues that needed to be addressed for that change. The media gave expression to these issues and those expressions became the voices of the people. Needless to say, the Grand Alliance embraced those issues and the rest is history.

Dr. Badiul Alam Majumdar, Secretary, SHUJAN (Citizens for Good Governance).

Fighting corruption

FROM PAGE 17

contradictory to one's party position except on such instances as voting in the budget session or impeachment motions.

Administrative reforms

As far as administrative reforms are concerned, much would depend on the extent to which anti-corruption agenda can be mainstreamed in the public service. The Finance Minister's announcement to set up a permanent pay commission is a step in the right direction, but only partial. Reform of salaries and benefits of employees in the public sector so as to make these consistent with the rising cost of living and sufficiently competitive to attract the best candidates is indispensable.

But equally, if not more important are specific measures to free public service from the partisan political influence. If appointments, promotions, rewards and punishments are determined on the basis of anything other than merit, efficiency, performance and other professional qualities the possibility of integrity in public service will remain a far cry. The Public Service Conduct Rules must be drastically reformed to introduce a comprehensive code of ethics and integrity that would institutionalise positive and negative incentives against cor-

ruption.

I have already argued elsewhere that the scope of work of the proposed permanent pay commission should be expanded to give it the mandate of a Public Service Integrity Commission. It should on the one hand have a comprehensive set of jurisdictions including salaries and benefits such as a built-in system of cost of living adjustment, housing and rationing, and on the other hand a set of strictly enforceable codes of conduct to prevent erosion of integrity in public service and to promote zero tolerance against corruption and other forms of abuse of power.

Private sector

Among the key actors of corruption there is almost invariably a third and crucial actor in addition to politicians and public officials, namely the private sector which acts as the supply side of the win-win game. As a State Party to the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), Bangladesh is under obligation to criminalizing not only private to state sector corruption but also corruption within the private sector. To what extent such commitments will be fulfilled and whether effective motivations can be in place to promote integrity and anti-corruption practices in

the private and non-government sector is anybody's guess.

Right to information

No anti-corruption campaign can succeed and be sustainable without freedom of information, the mother of all freedoms. Right to information is among commitments of Bangladesh under the UNCAC, as are those for strengthening the institutional capacity and policy framework to combat corruption. The Government must move ahead fast in fulfilling its electoral commitment to ensure right to information (RTI) by adopting the RTI Ordinance as an Act with due amendments, especially with the inclusion of provision for whistleblower protection and expanding the jurisdiction down to the lowest tier of local government, e.g., the Union Parishad. Appointment of sector-wise Ombudsmen as per Article 77 of the Constitution can make a difference in ensuring accountability, especially in the key sectors of public service delivery.

At the crossroads

As the new Government settles down and takes full charge, it remains to be seen as to what extent it will develop the capacity and political acumen to deliver the expectations raised. Bangladesh, therefore, stands at the

crossroads in terms of potentials of corruption control. Empowered by the extraordinary popular mandate, it is a historic opportunity to create solid foundations to control corruption. On the other hand, failure to properly handle this mandate may lead to deep frustrations and outcomes that can be highly counter-productive for the future of anti-corruption movement in the country.

The people of Bangladesh have once again given the message that they love to exercise their democratic right. They have also demonstrated their capacity to turn heroes into zeroes if they fail to meet public expectations, which most observers would expect the new Government to remember throughout its tenure.

Post-script: A global exception

Bangladesh has made history once again. No other country in the world has achieved what we have - the extraordinary feat of simultaneously having women as the Head of the Government and the Leader of the Opposition for four successive democratically elected governments has been reinforced by the fact that four key ministries - Home, Foreign, Agriculture and Labour - are headed by women, not to speak of the several others held by the Prime Minister.

These are not necessarily indicative of women empowerment per se in the ground level, though no one can deny that openings in that direction have been reinforced.

But this unprecedented accession of women to the highest echelons of power has added new impetus to the prospect of controlling corruption. Numerous international behavioural studies have found women to be more trust-worthy and public-spirited than men. Results of such research suggest that women should be particularly effective in promoting honest government. There are also evidences in cross-country research that women are less likely to be involved in bribery. It has also been empirically found that the greater the representation of women in parliament and top leadership and policy-making position, the lower the level of corruption. Bangladesh has therefore created for itself new opportunities to contribute to the thesis that anti-corruption movement stands a better chance of success in situations where women are more empowered.

.....
Iftekharuzzaman is Executive Director, Transparency International Bangladesh.