

SPOTLIGHT

A PROMISING NEW ERA

THREE EMERGING POLITICIANS TALK ABOUT THEIR HOPES AND DREAMS OF A PROSPEROUS BANGLADESH.

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JUNAID SAKI

During the recent mayoral elections of Dhaka, Junaid Abdur Rahim Saki popularly known as Junaid Saki, a mayoral candidate of Dhaka North City Corporation, became a popular figure among the city dwellers thanks to his fresh political ideals and TV talk-show image. Unlike many of his competitors, he has a long and eventful political background which has given him a deep insight on Bangladesh's political crisis and its solution.

After completing his tenure as the President of Bangladesh Chhatra Federation, a left-wing student political organisation, Saki formed his own political party called Gono Songhoti Andolon in 2002 with the mission to establish 'functional democracy' in Bangladesh.

However, his entrance into Bangladeshi politics was not very smooth. Though his mayoral campaign based on the idea of 'making Dhaka a productive city' attracted public attention, his electoral deposition was forfeited due to, as he tells, 'a totally farcical election'.

Saki comments, "This election has clearly revealed that the first and foremost requirement of democracy, an election by people's vote, is nowhere to be found in Bangladesh."

Saki thinks that this absence of democracy and accountability has paved the way for intense corruption. Saki says, "We lost our democratic right immediately after our liberation when the country was governed under one party and one ruler. Then comes the decades of dictatorial rule; as a result, no democratic or independent institution could be developed. Therefore, even all the elected governments run the country like dictators."

However, Saki is hopeful that a country with functional democracy can still solve these problems. He says, "My goal as a politician is to fight for my people's right to education, employment and a better livelihood while ensuring democracy and Bangladesh's sovereignty."

"In any case, we shall not compromise with our value of secularism. We do not believe in any divine decree rather our core value is democracy which can ensure our country's sovereignty and prosperity," Saki adds.

Saki's political activism began during the mass upheaval against the dictatorial government of Hussain



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Muhammad Ershad. After 1990 he officially joined the communist movement in Bangladesh by joining Bangladesh Chhatra Federation which he led as its President from 1998 to 2000.

On student politics, Saki says, "Student politics creates the opportunity to understand the political culture practically and to work in the root level."

"But the fact is, nowadays, everybody has a negative impression on student politics as it has deviated from its democratic nature. Even, Dhaka University, which is the home ground of Bangladesh's constructive student politics, does not hold its DUCSU election for more than two decades," he adds.

However, Saki is very hopeful about the youth of Bangladesh. He believes that it is the youth who will bring about the positive change in Bangladesh's socio-political culture.



PHOTO: COURTESY

AMATUL KIBRIA KEYA CHOWDHURY

Amatul Kibria Keya Chowdhury, the daughter of Late Commandant Manik Chowdhury, and an Awami League Lawmaker, has been fighting for the betterment of the nation ever since she's had the opportunity to become a member of parliament.

"My father was a freedom fighter, and was later a politician. I learned everything about my country when I was very young. I learned to love and respect Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from him. I lost my father when I was only eight years old, but since then I have wanted nothing more than to be just like him," she says.

Taking in knowledge from the elderly, Keya tries to implement everything she has learned in her work and bring newness to it. She believes, the youth has every potential to be the ideal politicians for Bangladesh. "We are all involved in politics. And we all learn from one another. I followed my father and learned. Those who will come after me will learn from me."

Keya believes that everything about a politician should be visible in everything he or she does. "I don't believe in having a lot of followers following me around. I don't believe in living like a queen. I became a politician to work for the people. So, I try my best to look like it too. I wear simple clothes, mix with simple people," she says. "I believe, to be a successful politician, one has to go to the very root of the country," she says. According to Keya, the grassroots is what makes Bangladesh what it is, and that is what everyone should work on to build a better Bangladesh."

Keya firmly believes that the bravado of politics in our culture is not needed anymore. "I don't need the people to think I am famous and untouchable. I need to be available to my people to be able to solve their problems."



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Leading a simple life, Keya's actions, on the other hand, are not so simple. Apart from being a member of parliament and a lawmaker, she is also the secretary general of Chetona '71 Habiganj which is a much needed platform committed to documenting the history of the liberation war. After Keya's fight, more than six women have been recognised as freedom fighters through a gazette notification by the government. She has also worked to bring empowerment to the women of minority groups. "I believe that if women are kept powerless, then men will automatically become powerless, and then so will the nation," she says. "I dream of a Bangladesh where women can feel free to think big, a Bangladesh where women can dare to dream, and take up challenges confidently and with no hesitation."

"I will keep doing my work for what I believe in. And I believe in the Bangladesh that Bangabandhu has left for us. I urge the youth to step forward, learn from the old, bring in the new and work with us towards the change that we need."



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

ABDULLAH AL KAFEE

The ex-president of Chhatra Union, current president of Jubo Union, and the CPB backed mayoral candidate this year, Al Kafee Ratan, has been a part of politics since his earlier years. Considering himself an emerging politician, Kafee, despite losing the mayoral election, hasn't stopped dreaming of the Bangladesh he has always wanted. "I still fight for my beliefs like I did during the election. My urge to bring betterment to society is what makes me a politician."

According to Kafee, there is an unwanted generation gap between current politicians and the youth. "The youth think differently now. No body wants to be a 'famous' or 'powerful' through the means of politics anymore. The newer generation sees politics for what it is- the means to bring service to the people of the nation- and that is why there is such an urgent need for new and young politicians," says Kafee.

Stating that politics is mostly about money, muscle and manipulation nowadays, Kafee believes that without change in the political culture, Bangladesh just may falter. "My duty as a politician is to know the people's dreams and to try my best to make them come true. My duty is not to roam around with a gang who supposedly respect me, tend to me and treat me like royalty."

The first change is needed in the education system, Kafee thinks. "My main slogan for my campaign was to make Dhaka a liveable and humane city," he says, "and to make that happen, I had promised housing for all, safe water for all, quality education for all, safety for women and a green, clean city." Kafee suggests, to bring thoughts together and ultimately create unity, there should be a single medium of secular education.

"If people are properly educated, they can empower themselves, there will be more employment, which can solve a lot of problems," he says. In this profit driven society, Kafee believes the reason that quality education



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

is not being served in our schools is because education has become one of the biggest businesses in the country. "The youth should primarily work towards employment- and for that, we need proper education."

A banker for 22 years, Kafee also believes that as a market economy, which only addresses profit, change will be difficult to bring about. "The need and greed for money should really be halted while there are a lot of other important issues- like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment- to address."

Lastly, Kafee says that if the youth want to be a part of politics, they have to be dedicated and start from the root. "There is a lot of dynasty politics in our country. It's not bad to follow our parents' footsteps and get into the same profession. But you cannot start where your parent has left off. That will not do you or anyone in the nation any good. If you have to be a part of it, start from the ground up. Or you will never be a successful politician."

These are words to inspire the youth. These are the words to light the spark of change. There are young leaders and politicians in every corner of our country, who have new ideas, new policies and new promises, just waiting to take on the world. At the end of the day, we have to always remember that the youths were who brought freedom to our country, and it is the youth that will forever define Bangladesh.