

Rethinking Confrontational Politics: A Reform Agenda by the Civil Society

Introduction

In this paper an attempt has been made to bring together some of the burning issues of current confrontational politics and some indigenous solutions. The authors believe that if the people of Bangladesh could accept the innovative idea of ‘caretaker government’ as a homegrown solution to political confrontation, then many such special ‘fix’ could be brought in to resolve some of the current crisis. Such a strategy may also help to develop a democratic governance structure over a period of time. Time is ripe to explore different paradigms to establish political stability and democratic institutions. We call for creativity and openness in thinking among the societal stakeholders in order to overcome some of the present impasse.

Politics of confrontation

Politics in Bangladesh has increasingly become confrontational and unstable. The situation is such that whatever democratic institutions we now have could breakdown. The major political parties have boycotted the Parliament on such pretext that they are not being given fair time to talk and all unable to bring their motions. Today, for all practical purposes Parliament is nonfunctional. The major political parties have also abstained from elections on the pretext that the ruling party would rig the elections.

The problems of Bangladesh largely stem from lack of commitment by the political parties to basic norms of democracy. The civil society is once more faced by a challenge. The civil society seriously needs to explore the possibilities of strengthening the democratic institutions and demand greater social and economic development from the politicians. Attempts are being made by a section of intelligentsia to redefine democracy in the form of number of proposals to overcome the present political impasse. In recent discussion meetings held by many civil society organizations and from opinions expressed by eminent persons several suggestions have come forward to strengthen democracy and consolidate the democratic gains.

Some of the important proposals are as follows:

Elections under caretaker administration:

Holding of national elections under a caretaker government was a widely supported issue and was finally was recognized through the passing of constitutional amendment by BNP government. However, the prospect for holding a national election under caretaker government has done little to solve the problem of by-elections or local elections. The same set of apprehensions, which gave substance to the demand of caretaker government for national election applies to local elections. To avoid electoral malpractices by ruling party and eliminate opposition’s scope to go for agitation politics it is proposed that all elections could be held under the supervision of the caretaker government.

Fixed Term of Office:

To avoid desperation and cause of confrontation we may need to rethink the maximum tenure of an elected government and the five-year term could be reduced to four years. A four-year term will help make the system stable by obliterating the demand for mid-term elections. Even the dates of elections could be preset. This would allow parties to plan their campaign and would also prevent political manipulation of election dates.

Making the Role of Speaker neutral:

One of the contentious issues is the role of the Speaker in the Parliament. He/She is the most important figure in the parliament. The public perception is that the Speakers are not being able to perform their duty impartially or in a manner, which would create confidence among the opposition. In order to address the issue of neutrality the following may be done:

1. The Speaker will resign from party position as s/he is soon as elected to the position.
2. Speaker will discard his her party color and not attend any party gatherings.
3. The speaker must be neutral in all respect of political activities.
4. Because of his neutrality the Speaker will not be opposed and s/he will automatically get re-elected to the next parliament if s/he is willing.
5. S/He should be paid attractive remuneration and benefits including handsome pension after his/her retirement.

Political party reform:

We cannot build proper democracy and institutions of democracy without reform within the political parties. Some of the reforms suggested are:

1. Party must have a list of their subscribing members preferably showing a minimum membership from all the 300 political districts or even from 64 administrative districts. That list must be submitted to the Election Commission and be available as public document.
2. Party must have regular meetings as written in there constitution.
3. Party must have annual general meetings and the proceedings must be submitted to the Election Commission together with their annual audited balance sheet duly approved in the party council.
4. Party requires a periodical, secret ballot vote for party leadership, such votes to be overseen by the independent electoral commission.
5. There must be a minimum of two candidates for every party executive position at the election.
6. Greater genuine public participation at the grass roots level could encourage the development of a bottom-up nomination process within the political parties.

7. Party leadership (President) should not be allowed for more than two terms.
8. Party must prepare accounts of its receipts and expenditures, and those must be available for public scrutiny, and public accounting firms must audit these accounts.
9. Party leader's authority should not be so overwhelming that people with diverse opinion can't remain within the party.
10. Political parties should not have armed political cadre in educational institutions.
11. Parties must have election manifestoes and they should not be utilized as devices to deceive and hoodwink the electorate. Such manifestoes should include a clear commitment to fulfill their promises.

Political parties wishing to participate in elections at any level will have to follow the above.

Effective and Meaningful Parliament

Surely the chief function of Parliament (legislature) is the enactment of laws. The modern legislature is much more than a mere lawmaking organ. Here are some general issues for discussion in order to bring some reforms to ensure effective and meaningful parliament.

1. Parliament is a representation of the society in a democratic state, and therefore the parliament should work with and for the society.
2. People want parliament to be truly citizens' parliament, with which citizens can work without much complexity and responsibly. This has to be done by: (a) opening the committees to civil society groups allowing for more open consultations and discussions; (b) Opening important issues of national significance for public debate through circulation of draft bills among concerned and interested groups /peoples.
3. In all democratic states especially parliamentary democracies, all parties should be involved in the running of the parliament. Both Treasury and the Opposition must together run parliament, whilst the majority party forms the government. A number of measures are needed to be taken such as: a) Distribution of important parliamentary positions among able statesmen from the Treasury and Opposition; b) Invite opposition members to head important committees or at times head government delegations; c) Appoint competent opposition leaders to head government/semi-government organizations.

Reforming the Electoral System- Proportional Representation

The election system prevailing in Bangladesh is that of "first past the post" (highest vote-getter wins). To remedy some of the defects and promote inclusion of various political opinion and encourage dispersed interest groups to be represented in the legislature the proportional representation system may be considered. Even emerging democracies have adopted some form of PR system.

The Independence of the Government Owned News Media:

The news media in democracy plays a very important role. The following should be done immediately:

1. An independent broadcasting authority (example: BBC) is set up to run state TV.
2. An independent broadcasting authority should be set to run Bangladesh Betar (Radio).

Women's Participation in Legislative Process:

The present system of 30 reserved seats is not only contrary to democratic practice by also gives undue advantage to the majority party. The following should be done immediately, that is before the end of the current system. Provisions should be made for direct elections to reserved seats for women, and the present inadequate number of seats to be increased to 64 seats representing 64 districts. In addition, the political parties should nominate at least 25% women candidates to participate in general elections. Adequate training provision for women MPs is also needed.

Civil Society – Proactive Role

Due to the confrontational nature of politics being pursued by the major political parties therefore it has become more violent, abusive, and is becoming more disconnected from popular concerns. Such a system obviously encourages the entry of a new breed of people into politics that are motivated exclusively by personal greed and by use of money muscle and mastans realize their private goals. The civil society, if it is to be heard will have escalated its proactive role from being a mere observer or even a referee. It must seek to design more potent sections to be applied by a large constituency of citizens against political parties. Civil disobedience movements need not to be monopoly property of the political parties especially in the opposition against the government. Creating such vibrant civil society and working for such goals demands much responsibility of the citizens. To exercise that responsibility, or not exercise it, remains the challenge of the day.

By

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