

National Election 2007  
Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

*Nagorik Forum*

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*Concluding Statement*

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**Restoring Faith in the democratic process**

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We meet at a very critical moment in the nations history. On the previous occasions where I have presented such reports the moment held much promise. In March 1991, when as a Member of the first Caretaker Government, I presented the report on 29 Task Forces set up by me, to the then President of Bangladesh, Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, the nation was consumed with optimism for the future. In August 2001, when we presented the reports of 15 Task Forces convened by CPD, again by a coincidence, to President Shahabuddin Ahmed but also to Mr. Mannan Bhuiyan and the late SAMS Kibria, this optimism had been somewhat diminished through exposure to a decade of confrontational politics and a dysfunctional parliament. But the mood was still positive, if more subdued. Today, as we stand poised on the edge of a dark void which could devour our democratic institutions, the public mood is one of foreboding.

We have witnessed three elections under three successive caretaker governments in the post-democratic era which have been held in an environment of relative tranquility. The three caretaker governments, during their tenure, commanded universal respect at the time for their non-partisan character, and could discharge their responsibilities in a collegial environment which recognized the democratic nature of their mandate and composition. The Chief Adviser enjoyed universal credibility and chose to take all his decisions through a process of democratic consultation with his colleagues in the Advisory Council. Whilst controversy over the role of the Caretaker government may have been generated in the wake of the elections,

particularly in 2001, during the actual tenure of the three governments, no such challenge to the legitimacy of the Caretaker government prevailed.

Today, for the first time, the conduct of the Caretaker government, has itself become a source of controversy, with the non-partisan character of its Chief Executive, being questioned. Even though Members of the current Advisory Council are playing a commendably constructive role under the most trying circumstances, we are witness to contradictions between the Chief Advisor and his colleagues which were not witnessed in any of the three previous Caretaker governments. The credibility of the present Election Commission, from the outset of its incumbency, has come under challenge to an extent again not seen during the course of the last three elections, and the very scheduling of the elections is now contested.

Some very dramatic changes in the current situation are demanded if the Caretaker government is to establish sufficient authority to preside over a credible election. The conduct of the Chief Advisor needs to be more transparent, the functioning of the Advisory Council more democratic, the integrity of the Election Commission must be restored and, above all, the conduct of the major political parties has to be less confrontational. Otherwise we may end up with confrontation instead of elections or with an election which commands a diminished credibility in the eyes of the electorate as well as the international community. Either of these outcomes would compromise the legitimacy of whichever government holds office in the days ahead which would serve neither the cause of democracy nor restore tranquility to Bangladesh.

In such circumstances, as voters and citizens, we look to our political parties to step back from the brink and make a final effort to restore the credibility and authority of the Caretaker Government by restoring the autonomy of the office of the Chief Advisor. We need to reestablish the credibility of the Election Commission so that a greater sense of urgency can be invested in the task of publishing a credible voter's list. Such a process may usefully reach out to civil society organizations, with links to the grassroots, to augment the resources of the Election Commission, in the task of expediting the preparation of a comprehensive and transparent voter's roll. Once the right to vote and vote only once, has been established we need to ensure that no person is denied this right through direct coercion or threats of force. Here we will need to ensure that the officials who conduct the election, enforce law and order and eventually count the votes, are untainted by partisan commitments. In this task of establishing the integrity of the voting process civil society must also mobilize itself across the nation and go out before, during and after the elections to ensure as well as protect their

right to vote and to reassure those who are particularly endangered from exercising their franchise.

The establishment of an enabling environment for free and fair elections remains an immediate priority. But it is just the first stage of an election process. The demand for clean candidates, associated neither with acts of violence or command over sizeable undeclared wealth, is widespread. The Nagorik Committee and every other civil society group who have sounded out public opinion across the country, can testify to the universal nature of the public demand for the political parties to nominate credible candidates for the forthcoming election. In this task again it is not enough to make demands on the parties to reach out to party workers of longstanding commitment with a record of public service and to prioritise such candidates in preference to those with deep pockets and adequate firepower at their disposal. Voters must demonstrate their preference for clean candidates by actually voting for such candidates when offered such a choice by the political party. It is for citizens as voters to reassure the political leaders that they will not be sacrificing a seat by nominating a clean candidate in preference to one with muscle and money.

If we move to a free and fair election, contested by candidates held in some public esteem who have participated in an electoral process whose outcome is beyond challenge, we will also need to ensure that the democratic mandate of the parliament is restored. Three successive parliaments have failed to discharge their electoral mandate to hold the state accountable or to give voice to the mounting concerns of the voters. The people of Bangladesh seek corruption free and effective governance which assures them uncompromised justice, non-partisan law enforcement, adequate food, remunerative work, access to regular power supply, clean water, decent schools and well functioning health care facilities. It is the responsibility of our parliament to ensure such a process of governance through creative legislation as well as keeping the government constantly accountable and fully transparent.

Bangladesh cannot afford to live through yet another dysfunctional parliament characterized by boycotts, exchange of invectives and indifference to burning public concerns. A fourth such parliament could reflect a terminal sickness in a vital institution of democracy from which it may be difficult to recover. With our administration and law enforcement agencies compromised by corruption and partisan conduct, our judiciary moving into a phase of partisan warfare, virtually all the major organs of governance are approaching meltdown.

The crisis of governance facing Bangladesh is particularly tragic because there are many areas of light which punctuate the darkness. Our hardworking farmers have tripled food production. Two million women from our rural areas, as well as other workers, employed by a class of promising entrepreneurs, have given Bangladesh a globally competitive export capacity. Millions of ordinary people, mostly from the rural areas, are working abroad, to remit over US\$5 billion which has sustained our balance of payments far more effectively than our declining inflows of foreign aid. Near to 20 million, mostly poor women, use access to micro-credit to sustain their families and prevent them from sinking deeper into poverty. Large numbers of unrecognized individuals or groups have worked in a variety of innovative ways to ensure subsistence for their families or resources for the local community. Many young men and women, whether working in the professions or through civil society organizations have demonstrated commitment and professional skills which have enhanced our development capacity.

If faith in the democratic process is to be restored such constituencies of promise deserve to be presented with a vision for the future. Such a vision will serve to aggregate these various enclaves of activity within a national project which inspires hope that Bangladesh can one day come together to synergise its enormous potential. The initiative of the Nagorik Committee was designed to reach out to citizens around the country to capture this sense of expectation for the future. We have attempted to build upon Bangladesh's successes in a variety of areas so as to design a vision which draws upon the potential inherent in us, to transform Bangladesh into a poverty free, democratic and inclusive society.

Our expectation is that our political leaders will share this vision and draw upon many of our ideas in designing their own agenda for transforming Bangladesh. Any such vision originating from civil society can only graduate into an implementable agenda by encouraging the political parties to invest their political authority behind a vision for the future which they can transmit to the people through the democratic process. Sustainable democracy demands political parties who can project a vision of hope to the people of Bangladesh. Such a vision should not be perceived as yet another exercise in campaign rhetoric or it will only perpetuate cynicism from a public who have grown weary of broken election promises. The political leadership must demonstrate their credibility as well as capacity to implement such a vision and the statesmanship to reach out to civil society to join them in the task of transforming such a vision into reality.