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NATIONAL DEBATE ON CONSENSUS BUILDING IN BANGLADESH: ISSUES AND APPROACHES

1. Introduction

The conflict-consensus dialectic is a fundamental datum in all polities. Consensus on fundamental issues is one of the main features of developed political systems. On the contrary, conflicts do exist in large number in the developing societies. At times some of them turn into violence. In Bangladesh, consensus among political parties is being accorded prime importance by political analysts, intellectuals, professionals, non-political patriotic groups and individuals and the media in order to be able to meet the daunting tasks of nation-building and overcome the occasional national crises, keeping aside group and partisan interests. Some of them are discussing about consensus on all fundamental issues. Others are arguing for consensus on specific ones. The Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, in her first official policy statement said that important decisions would be made on the basis of consensus through consultation with all.¹ The main opposition political party of Begum Khaleda Zia, the *Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)* which is critical of the government's approach to consensus building, suggested that consensus may be forged on issue specific

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1. *The Morning Sun*, 25 June 1996.

areas.² One commonality between the positions of the two is that both seek to underline consensus in the policy making process. But each side seems to want consensus on its own terms. When Begum Zia, the Leader of the Opposition, called for consensus as Prime Minister, she had her own concept of it; the then opposition *Awami League (AL)* of Sheikh Hasina found nothing in common with it.³ Similarly, today when the Prime Minister is calling for consensus, she has her own notion of it, to which the opposition *BNP* seems loath to subscribe. The fact is that neither side believes the other when a call for consensus is made as neither side has the confidence about the other's sincerity in this matter. The bizarre scenario manifests itself in inter-party bickering between the mainstream parties, snapping of continuity in policy making and implementation with the change of governments, and political instability, thereby threatening the entire political system. In fact, all these factors are thwarting an easy transition of democracy to its institutionalized shape in Bangladesh.

Conflict is natural on political issues to a certain extent. But if it turns into something that is marked by emotion, lack of objective assessment, mindless ideological controversy that badly affect consensus-building on issues of fundamental national interests, the nation stands to irretrievably suffer in the process of democratic governance and development. Bangladesh testifies itself as a case study in this regard. The hostile relationship between the mainstream political parties in Bangladesh has been frustrating all efforts at consensus building. A number of conflicting fundamental issues are contaminating the mutual trust between them. For example, the question of national identity (Bengali/Bangladeshi) and the different interpretation of history

2. Quoted in Abdur Rob Khan, "Bangladesh-India Relations: An Introspection on Issues and Prospects", Paper presented at a National Seminar on *Bangladesh Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities*, organised by BISS on 3 October 1996 in Dhaka, p.14.
3. Mahfuz Anam, "Use Parliament for Consensus on Economic Issues", *The Daily Star*, 22 January 1997.

(for instance, the role of different groups in the War of Liberation in 1971) still continue to be issues of polarisation in national politics.

The absence of a shared vision of the two main parties regarding the past and the future continues to aggravate the divisiveness of national politics. In such a situation it is more likely that the conflictual issues will aggravate and proliferate as time goes by and deeper animosities may surface. The visible aggravation of social conflicts thus makes the search for consensus somewhat elusive and does not bode well for either good governance or the future of democratic institutions. In the absence of any effective consensus in parliament as well as in the wider political arena the scope for improving governance and giving a new impetus to the development process appears limited.⁴

The history of national consensus building in Bangladesh is a mix of success and failure. Following the country's independence in 1971, the first 1972 Constitution laid the basis for national consensus on fundamental issues (for example, Democracy, Socialism, Nationalism and Secularism) and democratic governance. Afterwards, weak parties riven with intra-feuds, lack of visionary leadership, military's interventions in the political process and absence of a strong civil society did prevent from continued national consensus building in Bangladesh. During post-1975 period, some amendments to the Constitution exacerbated the conflict on fundamental issues (for example, the debate between Bengali vs Bangladeshi identity). Of course, one has to admit that major breakthrough in consensus building took place in 1990 when a Joint Declaration by the three political alliances was signed. In fact, the Declaration set the future parameters of national consensus on governance in Bangladesh. Following the Declaration, a consensus was reached in 1991 on

4. Rehman Sobhan, *Bangladesh Problems of Governance*, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1993, pp.287-288.

the form of government which restored the Parliamentary form of Government enunciated in the Constitution of 1972. But conflicts on fundamental issues as we have mentioned earlier, still inhibit the normal growth of working relationship between the mainstream parties in Bangladesh.

It is also to be admitted that like the Parliamentary form of Government, consensus among the major political parties prevails on free market economy at the policy level. Besides, independence of the judiciary and autonomy for the Radio and Television are undergoing a process leading towards national consensus. On these two issues, there has been an apparent consensus at the social level too.

A few internal and external developments may, however, be conducive to national consensus building in Bangladesh. Internally, the political process of the country appears to be insulated from military intervention. After the end of the Cold War, the political trend all over the world is one of peace rather than conflict. One of the visible sources of inspiration for peace comes from the Bangladesh Armed Forces participation in the UN Peacekeeping Operations. In addition, the democratic resilience of the common people of Bangladesh manifested in defeating autocracy has diffused military's incentives for intervention. Similarly, the fast-moving economic integration across the world is accruing benefits to the developing countries like Bangladesh, in terms of market and investment opportunities. As a developing nation, Bangladesh cannot afford to be sidelined in this ongoing trend. Donors' repeated pressure for good governance in the developing countries give impetus to politicians to reconcile their mutual acrimony.

However, all these positive sets of factors may not necessarily spur the creation of better political understanding among the political elites. Legacy of personality cult, 'ego' factor, intolerance in political behaviour, ideological controversy quite often gain

salience in their political postures. In such a situation, reason is defeated by emotion, resulting in a maligned political cultural syndrome of 'all out support and all out opposition' on a political issue raised by the government or the Opposition. It is no surprise that political debates on issues merely reach a converging point as political acrimony continues with emotion and irrationality.

An extreme extent of intolerance pervades the political spectrum in Bangladesh. It results in an intense competition between the mainstream parties to defeat each other. Democratic politics may be able to develop only where political activists do not feel that the stakes of competition are too high. The politics of consensus is likely to serve as the optimum recipe in order to face this reality.

Given the enormous socio-economic problems of Bangladesh, and the acute developmental challenges facing the country, it is not possible for the ruling party to run the country without the cooperation of the Opposition. Therefore, without consensus no political government is likely to sustain itself for its mandated tenure. So, national consensus building is the stepping stone to political stability in the country.

The crisis of the lack of consensus on fundamental issues is likely to remain unmanageable due to some factors. First, these issues are perceived by the parties as threats to their political existence. Second, these issues have polarised the society in such a fissiparous manner which need enormous time to solve. Bangladesh cannot afford it while the globalisation of development augurs better economic dividends for Bangladesh.

However, consensus on all issues is neither essential nor feasible. National consensus on all issues leads to weak state. A legitimate and democratic government can not seek consensus all the time on all issues. This is a feature which may lead to loss of dynamism of the government. So, consensus building on certain

specific issues may be find out first. These are issues the differences on which persist only at the surface level. Some governance-related issues fit into this category.

Against this backdrop, the central question of the present paper is: How can national consensus building be achieved in the prevailing political mosaic of Bangladesh? The author argues that workable consensus can and should be made first on the immediately required issues of governance, putting the aforesaid fundamental issues aside for the moment. Eventually politicians are expected to be confident in addressing the fundamental conflicting issues. In this regard, the author suggests national debates on the governance-related issues, aiming at forging national consensus.

The paper has been segmented into four sections. The first section has already introduced the problems, rationale, and a typology of issues. The second section identifies the issues which are of critical importance to governance in Bangladesh. This section also outlines how political parties could share their efforts in solving governance-related issues in Bangladesh. It also focuses the areas where parties could adopt common stance for national debates. The third section discusses different approaches to national debates for national consensus building in Bangladesh. The fourth section gives the conclusion of the paper.

2. Consensus on Governance-Related Issues : An Overview

In this section, an overview has been made on a few governance-related domestic and `intermestic issues⁵ Domestic issues are: maintenance of domestic political order, a corruption free clean government, student politics and local government.

5. Intermestic issues are defined as the issues that are "simultaneously, profoundly and inseparably both domestic and international", See Bay less Manning, "The Congress, the Executive and Intermestic Affairs", *Foreign Affairs*, 55:2 January 1977, p.309.

'Intermestic issues' include Transit\Asian Highway and the recent initiative of South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) as a form of sub-regional cooperation. The reason for choosing these issues is that consensus on these domestic issues may create a general environment that is conducive to resolving other national issues and to overall development in Bangladesh. Discussion on the 'intermestic issues', relating to the India factor, may shed some light on India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. The India factor, after all, dominates our discussion because the foreign policy of Bangladesh tends to be Indo-centric.

Domestic Issues

In overviewing on the above-mentioned domestic issues, we shall try to show why politicians keep their differences in words while they actually share preliminary consensus on these issues. We shall delve into the issues in order to find out the minimum starting point for consensus building.

Domestic Political Order

Political elites of Bangladesh clearly recognise the fact that the deterioration in domestic political order is hampering the peaceful and orderly functioning of the state and society. It is menacing the prospects of economic development in the country. A variety of factors contribute to this syndrome, such as poverty, the absence of the rule of law, deteriorating law and order situation, frequent *hartals*, strikes, criminalisation of politics, guns in politics, politicisation of crimes (Yasmin/Shima murders) and law enforcing agencies (for example, Police).⁶

A common tendency characterising the major parties is that the party-in-power uses the law enforcing agencies (for instance, police force) in its favour. Then, the conflict boils down to the level of 'politicisation' of the law enforcing agencies by the government.⁷ As these agencies are run by the government,

6. *The Daily Star*, 16 January 1997.

7. *Ibid.*

naturally they tilt in favour of the government. The outcome is an apple of discord between the party-in-power and the Opposition. It becomes a sore point of discord when the government tries to exercise politics of vengeance on the Opposition by using the law enforcing agency (for example, police). If these agencies continue to be politicised by the ruling party, their credibility to the common people as the guarantor of security will be dwindled. Gradually, they might become non-functional agencies. The more they will get politicised, the greater will be the possibility of conflict between the people and the law enforcing forces. Even their real image as law enforcing agents will not work as a deterrent to the criminals. Another noteworthy thing is that politicians (belonging mainly to opposition political parties) and the common people seem to hold deep-seated disregard for the Home Ministry which needs to be removed for regaining trust in the government. Therefore, the major parties have to reach consensus on this issue. Otherwise this conflict will come as a danger on all incumbent parties in the years ahead. On this issue, we may insist on the consensus of depoliticisation of the law enforcing agencies (for instance, particularly the police force). Depoliticisation will improve their moral strength to contain crimes. It is possible by a Parliamentary Committee on Home Affairs. Law enforcing agencies may be accountable to this committee for any misuse of power. The committee must ensure about the proper information flow from the Headquarters of these agencies regarding any kind of its activities. On the other hand, law enforcing agents must be given logistical support in tackling criminals, they must be aware of human rights through upgrading their educational standard and they must have the access to legal procedure if any injustice is done to their job security (by transfer or any other means).

Clean Government

A clean, corruption-free government can ensure efficient good governance. This is quite known to the power elites of

Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, corruption has a natural breeding ground because of poverty. But the problem severely affects the lives of the common people when a section of politicians, businessmen and civil-military bureaucrats siphon-off state resources through illegal means. Recently, many politicians in Bangladesh have been identified as Bank loan defaulters. Many a time personal aggrandizement and high cost involved in politics induce some politicians to amass wealth through illegal means.

Political corruption continues to be a contentious issue between the ruling and the opposition parties in Bangladesh. Corruption puts the government at variance with the opposition. It is frequently cited by the Opposition that corruption lies in the ruling party. The ruling party, on the other hand, locates corruption in the Opposition. The Anti-Corruption Bureau has been allegedly used to harass the Opposition by the government. Thus 'locating corruption' becomes the issue of contention between the mainstream parties. The threats to personal security and image of politicians as well as erosion of national image of parties keep the conflict going. Beneath this conflict, there is an implied consensus that nobody would punish the corrupts. The government only takes eye-wash steps to deal with this issue. Police arrest corrupt elements and sends them to the court. Indeed, it is hardly seen that any corrupt politician has been convicted in the court. On the part of government, it is the lack of sincerity in punishing corrupts. On the other hand, it is the weakness of the legal system which can not put them into custody as they have money to get bails.

Corruption is all- pervasive in Bangladesh, but at least it needs to be restricted at the level of central power elites. The pressure from World Bank/IMF for good governance put natural strings on the ruling elites to curb corruption. In fact, corruption inhibits the operating of market forces in Bangladesh, prevents planning objectives, includes irrational elements into development

programs, leads to leakages to aid money, creates frustration among honest officials. In short, corruption has made Bangladesh a 'soft-state', rendering it unable to confront development problems realistically. Corrupt elites lose their moral authority to root out corruption from all levels of the society. Corruption even distorts the allocative role of government. The real cost of all corruption eventually has to be borne by the society as a whole. The increasing trend of corruption leads to 'commercialisation of political power'. It has made politics as the avenue to individual's for money-making overnight. As a result, money factor to a largest extent dictates political power within the parties. Selfish motives, however, make individual's spirit of sacrifice for the cause of national interest trivial. Bangladesh is no exception to this scenario. The eventual by-products of corruption are: violence between the winner and the loser in the power game, entries of dishonest persons into politics, and finally continual unhealthy political environment. Hence, we may suggest for a strong Accountability Commission under the Ombudsman that may compel politicians to be accountable for expenses from state resources. Parliament could make the politicians to give details on their expenses. The electoral system may incorporate the right of voters to form Constituency Group of Voters (CGV) which would enable them to ask the respective Members of Parliament to account for their development expenses in the local level development projects. Media can make public opinion against corruption by reporting on individual politician's or governmental corruption. A legal measure may be introduced which will empower the people to sue in the court against any corrupt practice of politicians. In short, the enlargement of the sphere of accountability of politicians practically may restrict the misuse of power to utilise state resources.

Student Politics

Throughout the entire history of Bangladesh since 1947, student politics has been a key precipitating factor in all socio-

political movements. Right at the moment, the nation is concerned about the increasing campus violence in the name of student politics, which has been vitiating the educational environment in the universities and colleges across the country. It is understood that both the ruling and opposition parties realise the problem. Despite that political parties remain silent on this matter and continue occupying the campuses for political purposes by involving a few students in violent means. All the parties do criticise violence in the campus. Yet, conflicts on the campus arise when one party captures the residential halls through violence. Quite often it is the ruling student party that gains control. Naturally, the opposition party strongly protests. In some places, the opposition or some other minor student fronts dominate the campus resorting to violence. Others oppose it. So, violence by the stronger is the point of conflict and invites more violence between the mainstream and other minor parties' student fronts in the campus. The eventual fallout ramifies even to the parent organisations.

The ultimate loser is our nation in terms of valuable time, human lives and property. Several factors contribute to this syndrome, such as political parties' suffer from high stakes in national politics if they lose their control on student politics. As a matter of fact, the parties tend to perceive that the control over the campuses means the domination of national politics as, indeed, students are practically useful for grouping, lobbying for some leaders in the major parties and even mobilising rural voters. Some opportunist student leaders are also opposed to the civilian facet of student politics. These factors, including guns on the campuses provided by some political elements, tend to discourage the politicians to resolve the issue. Thus a balance of terror reigns over the campuses across the country. Inside the campuses, it is the partisan nature of the teachers' politics that makes the control of such state of affairs still more difficult.

For the above reasons, it is neither possible to ban student politics nor impose moratorium on it. Currently, a strong voice is

being raised by the country's President and the intellectuals about de-linking of student fronts from the parent political organisations.⁸ De-linking could help eliminate violence on the campus. But the major parties take a passive view about the issue. Rather, they stand for continued linking as students serve the interests of many regional leaders. De-linking would have destroyed this vicious circle.

There exists an overriding social consensus to eradicate campus violence from the country. It warrants positive response from politicians. The violence may be curbed in the campus in two ways: first, there has to be a consensus at the parent party levels on the removal of armed elements in the parent and student fronts or at least in the student organisations. It may apparently be impossible for the above stated reasons. Second, on the pretext of the failure of containing violence by the teachers in the campuses, a special Judicial Tribunal under a Judge from the Supreme Court may be instituted for campus violence. The members of the Tribunal must be the respected senior non-partisan University Professors. They will handle the violence cases in the light of the university rules and regulations as well as the existing laws of the country. Parliament can work out a legislation on this matter.

Local Government

Since the independence of Bangladesh, we have never had a stable local government. Local government percolates democracy down to the grass-roots. This is an area that remains relegated except for brief and timid one-step forward but two steps backward style in local government.⁹ The frequent changes of the

8. See for details, *The Daily Bhorer Kagoj*, 21 July 1996 & A K Mon-war Uddin Ahmad, "Why should the students listen?", in *The Daily Star*, 21 January 1997, A M A Muhit, "Student Politics: Past and Present", *The Daily Bhorer Kagoj*, 13 December 1996.

9. See Shahed Latif, "Our Fight for Democracy: The Forgotten Issue", *The Daily Star*, 22 December 1994.

local government institutions in the country may be considered a loss for democracy.¹⁰ The basic problem is that these local governments are at best a subject of political competition. They could not function as the centre or a plank of governance. The elective positions are far from attaining the commanding heights of policy decision making. These are occupied by bureaucratic state, which indicates a deep crisis of the state- a crisis of transition from politics of personalised power to politics of policy making and governance.¹¹

The parties in power have always talked about decentralisation of power through local government. Practically, they have decentralised the centralised powers only by changing the names of the local government. As a result, the 'unit' of local government has always been a bone of contention between the ruling and the opposition parties in Bangladesh. For instance, a suspicion is evident in the recent controversy over the amended Local Government Ordinance 1983, by which the opposition criticises that the government has planned to influence the local government through the article 23.¹² It is because of the self-conflicting interests of the ruling elites which favours decentralisation and at the same time preserves the ruling party's interest at the grass root level.

As socio-economic modernisation is taking place, people's urge for participation in the political process is an inevitable upcoming reality. Similarly, the deprived section in the society must be given sufficient space to express their grievances. Adequate space for them may diffuse violent options for ventilating

10. See Hossain Zillur Rahman, "Of Democracy and political graduation", *Weekly Holiday*, 26 August 1994.

11. *Ibid.*

12. As per the amended ordinance (Local Government Ordinance, 1983), if election is not possible to hold on the scheduled date, government will arrange it at the later stage through Gazette Notification. The opposition BNP suspects the move is politically motivated. They have claimed for a fixed time-schedule for holding the election. *The Daily Bhorer Kagoj*, 24 February 1997.

demands at the grass-root level. At the minimum level, some amount of devolution of financial powers to the local elected representatives may strengthen the local governance.

'Intermestic Issues'

The present section analyses some of the 'intermestic issues' that have both domestic and regional implications for Bangladesh. The issues we are discussing here relate to India. Because, India occupies the centre-stage in Bangladesh's foreign policy pursuits by virtue of Bangladesh's geographic location, historical legacies and more importantly, persistence of a number of outstanding bilateral issues vital to its existence.¹³ To be precise, the India factor looms large in Bangladesh's domestic political discourse. Yet the discourse is inevitably tinged with emotions and ideological sensitivities that militate against "any meaningful and coherent articulation of the issue [s]."¹⁴ The ongoing debate on intermestic issues concerning India is only pulling us apart and making policy decisions all the more difficult. The specific issues we are going to deal with are : a) SAGQ and b) Transit\Asian Highway.

Sub-regional Cooperation (South Asian Growth Quadrangle)

The mainstream political parties and intellectuals in Bangladesh are recently engaged in a dispute over the recent initiative of SAGQ involving India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. It is, in fact, a sub-regional type of cooperation which includes cooperation in sectors, such as multi-modal transportation and communication, energy, trade and investment facilitation and

13. For insightful discussions with somewhat different perspectives but reaching more or less same conclusions, see Shaukat Hassan, "India Factor in the Foreign Policy of Bangladesh", pp.44-61, and Iftekharuzzaman, "The India Doctrine: Relevance for Bangladesh" pp.18-43, in M.G. Kabir and Shaukat Hassan (eds.), *Issues and Challenges Facing Bangladesh Foreign Policy*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Society for International Studies, 1989.

14. See Hassan, *ibid.*, p.45.

promotion, tourism, optimal and sustainable utilisation of natural resource endowments. The main opposition and rightist political and intellectual forces strongly criticise this move which will destroy the spirit of SAARC, thereby facilitate Indian economic aggression, geographical hegemony and military designs and threatens the sovereignty of Bangladesh.¹⁵ The recent endorsement of SAGQ at the 9th Male SAARC Summit within the SAARC framework seems to have partly contributed to removing mistrust on SAGQ in relation to SAARC. Although the opposition does not negate the very concept of sub-regional cooperation, it suspects the hegemonic role of India in it. This apprehension is not absolutely baseless. India's unfriendly attitude towards its smaller neighbours like Bangladesh has partly created this apprehension.

The government is determined to move with the grouping by arguing that : "The complementarities that -- have in the countries in this region will usher in a new era of development".¹⁶ The pro-grouping intellectuals cite this move as the 'gateway to economic growth'.¹⁷ In fact, conflicts arise due to perceived asymmetric nature of the grouping. The seamy side of this opposition is that SAGQ is being opposed only from the 'confrontationist' political stand by the main opposition at home targeting India apparently without a hard assessment of the potentials for economic growth that could be accrued from the SAGQ. The government side, argues that SAGQ does not destroy the spirit of SAARC, rather it is complementary to SAARC.¹⁸ As the world is moving fast into economic integration, Bangladesh as a poor country can not be laggard in this race. It could immensely be benefitted by harnessing natural resources (particularly, water) from this region.

15. *Dhaka Courier*, 11 April 1997.

16. *The New Nation*, 7 January 1997.

17. Shahed Latif, " South Asian Growth Quadrangle and Mislplaced Nationalism", in *The Daily Star*, 24 April, 1997.

18. *The Bangladesh Observer*, 14 January 1997.

Geographical contiguity and availability of natural endowments in the four respective countries provide a much closer forum for economic cooperation within SAARC countries. The slow progress of SAARC makes the ground for a little quick-moving forum which could save time and avoid political conflicts. Thus it is imperative for Bangladesh to join SAGQ. Yet, the security and economic dimensions of SAGQ must be debated. Because, in Bangladesh, most of the people do not know about the nitty-gritty of SAGQ. SAGQ may start working on the basis of management of water resources in the region. Afterwards, it could be expanded to other areas.

Transit/ Asian Highway

Like sub-regional grouping, the government's move¹⁹ on granting transit to India and Asian Highway has led to an intense controversy between the ruling and the opposition parties. In Bangladesh, those who favour granting transit facilities to India are arguing in terms of global economic trends and geo-economic perspective. According to them, it is a geo-political compulsion for both the countries to share transit in the spirit of geo-economics rather than traditional geo-strategic perceptions of security.²⁰

On the other hand, the opposition raises alarming signal. They state that the move to provide transit facility to India for using rail, road and navigational routes of Bangladesh would endanger the national interests of the country and pose a threat to its independence and sovereignty.²¹ The main opposition view is that what India is asking for is not transit but corridors. They favour transit

19. *The Daily Bhorer Kagoj*, 21 March 1997.

20. Quoted in Sabbir Ahmed, " Transit Issue: Nature and Direction of Debate", *Quarterly Bangladesh Foreign Policy Survey*, Volume 2 Number 3 , July-September 1996, pp.6-8.

21. *Bulletin, Jamaat-e- Islami Bangladesh*, (Dhaka) Volume 7 No.2 Ramadhan 1417, January-February 1997, p.7.

facilities according to the provision of SAARC which stipulates the multilateral transit facilities in South Asia.²²

Both the government and opposition do not underestimate the necessity of Asian Highway. The controversy appears over the departure of traditional route of Asian Highway which connects Myanmar through Teknaf of Bangladesh. According to the Opposition, the changing of routes (which was actually changed during their time) via north-eastern India to Myanmar is a plot to grant corridor facilities to India to connect its northeastern parts.²³

The pro-transit side rules out any security threats by saying that if air and water ways do not threat sovereignty, then it is not possible through road ways.²⁴ Therefore, security aspects of transit remains as the main contention between the mainstream parties. By taking advantage of globalisation of trade and investment, minimisation of transport costs in export and import, market advantage and a strong bargaining chip, Bangladesh could maximise its benefits by granting transit to India. The Asian Highway will expand these benefits beyond South Asia. Inertia will not give tangible benefits to Bangladesh. Bangladesh may grant transit to India for a selective commodities on experimental basis through Chittagong port. Before taking any practical move, debates may continue mainly on the security aspects of transit and later economic cost-benefits of transit are expected to work out.

In view of the above discussion, we may sum up that a consensus could be reached on the aforesaid domestic and intermestic issues. Because, continuity of conflicts on these issues does not strengthen the partisan interests at the cost of national interest. Conflicts on domestic issues, in fact, lie in narrow partisan and self-conflicting interests of political elites. All these

22. *The Daily Star*, 13 October 1996.

23. Ferdaus A. Quraishi, "Bangladesh's nodal primacy", *Weekly Holiday*, 31 January 1997, Sadeq Khan, "Road to misinformation", *ibid*, 17 January 1997.

24. *Dainik Janakantha*, 28 August, 3 September 1996.

emanate from the security of political interests of the political elites which is perceived to be threatened by competition for power. Personal benefits of political elites are also at stake due to this factor. All these are indicative of weakness and low stage of development in the political parties of Bangladesh.

Conflict over Indo-centric issues lies mainly in rhetoric. It is the anti-Indian rhetoric that gives benefits to the politics of main Opposition in Bangladesh. In this propaganda, it is India who stands as the arch enemy of Bangladesh and this has always been detrimental to our national interest. As a result, 'politics of confrontation' is practiced at home posing threats to sustainable India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. On the contrary, the propaganda contains partial truth. The anti-Indian feeling is hard to avoid in Bangladesh politics because of India's bullying towards Bangladesh. For instance, it is recently evident in India's breach of promise about the implementation of the recently concluded Water Treaty. Given this reality, the struggle for harmonious relationship may not come to an end considering the future of the country. We have entered the post-Cold War period where the whole world is taking benefits from the 'politics of cooperation'. That may be applied to the Bangladesh- India relations. It is a fact that India is, by all standard, a powerful neighbour. In such a situation, political and economic strategy demand that we learn how to live in peace and harmony with her. We must do that without compromising our national sovereignty. Similarly, we must be ready to extrapolate the benefits from India if opportunities come up on both sides.

3. National Consensus Building : Multiple Approaches

The present section emphasizes on different approaches to national consensus building in Bangladesh. In this context, we have splitted our approaches into two basic categories, such as a)

national debate which aims at putting the politicians in a continuous learning process and b) national contracts that will keep the substantial outcome of the debates preserved for the future. In both ways, politicians may reach consensus through trials and errors. Here we shall discuss the role of Parliament, Shadow Cabinet, Think Tanks, Media, NGOs, Institute for Parliament Studies, Inter-party Meeting, Face to face Talks between national political leaders and Public Opinion Polls (POPs).

Parliament: Parliament is the key institution for debates on national issues under a Parliamentary form of government. Politicians may hold a scheduled debate on a specific issue, and thereby reach a consensus. The debates must be problem-solving in nature. Endless debates with rhetoric do not help in getting constructive feedback. The debates must be backed up with sufficient homework and correct information. The speaker must be empowered to take action against any misquoting of information in the Parliament by the Members of Parliament (MP). Parliamentary Committees may also provide a close forum for debates on non-partisan lines. Committee potentials for debates on any policy matter may be strengthened through networking with NGOs, Think Tanks and various professional groups in the society. The speaker may be empowered to set the parameter of objective debates in Parliament.

Shadow Cabinet: In Parliamentary democracy, the Opposition is supposed to act as 'shadow cabinet'. But this practice is absent in the case of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, a legal provision may be introduced so as to make the opposition compelled to contribute to Parliamentary debates through structured process. In fact, the Opposition can come up with alternative concrete suggestions on a particular governmental policy correcting its demerits. The government may be concretely benefitted to reach consensus on a particular issue through appropriate suggestions by the shadow cabinet.

Media: Print and electronic media in Bangladesh have an important role in the national consensus building. Newspapers can form strong critical public opinion on particular issues. Media can increase accountability of the politicians by ruthless attacks on their wrong acts. By its 'watchdog' role, media could sharply analyse the merits of an issue in terms of national interest, and could put the common ground acceptable to both the mainstream parties. Specific page could be allotted in weeklies for national debates on important issues. In Bangladesh, TV/Radio has more access to the common people. Non-partisan issues could be discussed through the electronic media. Parliamentary Committee debates may be telecasted except on those issues which are to be kept confidential.

Think Tanks: 'Think tanks' in Bangladesh have enormous potentials of intellectual capacity, non-partisan attitude and can act independent of government. Like a third-party mediation, they may propose the politicians to put aside the national fundamental fissiparous issues for the time being. Then quantify emotions and myopic elements of the issues with a view to making separate neutral issues. After examining the strong and weak points of the issues of conflicting parties, they could make a minimum common agenda for both the parties. Think tanks could increase the participants of dialogues involving senior and mid-level politicians, student leaders, NGO leaders, academics and bureaucrats. The ultimate output of dialogues could be evaluated at regular intervals.

NGOs: In Bangladesh, NGOs are supplementing the role of government in the process of governance at the grassroots level. NGOs could arrange a dialogue between the politicians on an issue. At the local level, they could provide the forum for MPs for dialogues on the critical aspects of locally initiated developmental works. NGOs could help the politicians reach consensus on local issues like local violence for the interest of localised development.

Institute for Parliament Studies: An Institute for Parliament Studies is useful for debates on national issues. The forum is likely to provide the parliamentarians expert knowledge on technical issues like World Trade Organization (WTO) and other Parliamentary Affairs. The forum may introduce a course on 'constructive parliamentary debates' for the MPs. The issues like Water, SAGQ could be debated with sufficient homework between the treasury and opposition MPs which may help reach consensus.

Inter-party Meeting : Inter-party meeting between the ruling and opposition parties may work as an avenue for national dialogue outside the Parliament. An inter-party meeting, which ended on 14 January by adopting 4 points agreement between the ruling and the opposition parties, had returned the main opposition to the Parliament who boycotted it last year on 10 point demands submitted to the Speaker. The agreement reached consensus on the 'neutral and objective' coverage of Parliament proceeding through TV/Radio. Another significant point was that Chief Whips of the ruling party and the opposition will keep in constant contact with each other regarding the functioning of the *Jatiya Sangsad* and they will also appraise the Speaker of the development in this regard.²⁵ The agreement was brokered by the Speaker. This kind of frequent inter-party meetings may help consensus building. In this context, we may suggest informal meetings with the speaker after each Parliamentary session. The meetings may focus on the evaluation of debates in Parliament. Differences on any issue could be informally addressed in these meetings.

Face to face Talks: Face to face talks between the central leaders is expected to dispel misgivings from their minds. On many issues, national leaders may talk at private as well as public levels. The talks could be informal as well as formal. Talks with

25. *The Daily Star*, 15 January 1997.

open mind could solve many grievances even at the private level decision.

Public Opinion Polls (POPs): POPs could effectively contribute to national debates on issues. The actual level of peoples' perception on a particular issue through POPs may be channelised into political debates. Thus it could remove the confusion on a particular issue. Thereby, debates could take objective shape. In Bangladesh, think tanks could conduct POPs on issues. Then its results might be exposed to the public and to the political parties so that they could objectively think about it.

National Contract: National contract for consensus building in Bangladesh is not unique as we have pointed out earlier. With a view to ousting autocratic regime and finding out the possible route for democratization the major parties held frequent dialogues which prompted them to sign a historical contract. Afterwards, it was not followed through due to erosion of commitment to the contract by a major (later the ruling party) party. The contract still carries the democratic overtone. It contained the independence of the judiciary which is in the offing. Finally, one contract does not close the need for newer contracts. The scope for contracts could be expanded following the subsequent needs.

(i) Contract on a Code of Conduct

Here we may suggest for a code of behaviour for the politicians. The fundamental parameter of this code must be based on three points. These are: politicians must commit that the people of Bangladesh will emerge victorious from all their struggle and works and not one political party. They must believe that there are good people in all communities and all political parties and not only in one political party. Politicians must also commit that views of smaller parties should get due importance in decision making.²⁶

26. South African President, Nelson Mandela stated the experience of South African Reconciliation at the State Banquet in Dhaka. *The Daily Star*, 28 March 1997.

The Speaker can mediate this contract. It must be made public so that people could judge the commitment of political parties.

(ii) Issue-based Contract

National contract could be argued as an eventual outcome of dialogue. Here, we may cite the recent experience of Sri Lanka where the ruling and the opposition parties signed an agreement on the Tamil issue. As per the Agreement, the ruling and opposition parties agreed to consult one another on this issue. They also agreed that the opposition would not undermine government negotiations with rebels. Under the accord, any agreement made with Tamil rebels would be binding even after a change of government.²⁷ This kind of issue-based contract may be worked out after the debates on a particular issue in Bangladesh.

Seen from the above discussion, we find different complementary approaches to consensus building. The central tone of these approaches provide learning net for political elites on how to reach consensus through debates on national issues. It is also suggested that only debates in various dimensions- dialogues, critical writings in the newspapers, face to face talks and POPs- may not endure the prospects of its outcomes. Therefore, the importance of national contracts has been underlined. The nature of approaches also suggest that debates may take place both at the private and public levels. Of course, certain things may remain outside of debates for the sake of successful public level debates.

4. Conclusion

From the preceding analysis, it may be said that national consensus is the primary precondition for sustainable governance and development in Bangladesh. But Bangladesh is far from viable national consensus on account of its acute fissiparous nature of conflicts on national fundamental issues. Instead of imme-

27. *Daily News*, Colombo (Sri Lanka), 5 April 1997.

diately addressing these issues, it has been suggested for an alternative national consensus building. It could be made through consensus on immediately required governance-related issues which have bridgeable differences. At the deepest level, it has been argued to reorient elitist consensus through learning by national debates based on some governance-related issues.

As a matter of fact, the political elites have consensus on all above-mentioned domestic issues. Conflicts on these issues emanate from threat perception of capturing state power by the parties due to competition. It threatens narrow individual and partisan interests. To put it simply, it is the insecurity of political interests that stimulates the ruling party to be non-accomodative with the opposition, and the opposition to be non-cooperative with the party in power. As a result, rhetorical differences continue to vitiate the building of national consensus.

On Indo-centric issues, conflict remains at the stage of rhetoric. On assuming power, nobody clashes with India. While out of power, the anti-Indian propaganda serves the political purposes of the main opposition and rightist political forces in Bangladesh. It is again the self-conflicting purposes that keep the politics of all out anti-Indianism at the centre of political capital at the cost of national interest.

The issue analysis indicates that rhetorical differences could be bridged. It may be done through national debates and making consensus from the minimum areas as it has been shown earlier. To keep the outcome on a more sustainable basis from the debates, it may be proposed to make them binding on the politicians through national contracts.

Finally, consensus on above issues is likely to generate confidence in the mindset of political elites. Thereby, it is expected to improve the capacity of political elites to deal with more serious conflicts. As a spin-off, it is likely to contribute to

the political stability of the country, leading to the improvement of the quality of governance. On the whole, national consensus is a fundamental requirement for the government to respond and act in time with the changing needs of the common people .