

Political situation hurting economy, governance

Politicians, economists, analysts for dialogue to end deadlock

FE Report

The prevailing 'unusual' political situation is hurting country's economy and affecting the quality of governance, politicians, economists and experts said Saturday.

They called upon the major political parties to engage in an immediate dialogue for, what they said, restoring democracy for the sake of clearing the way for economic growth.

Their observations came at the launch of a research report styled 'The State of Governance in Bangladesh 2013: Democracy and Party Politics' at the Brac Centre Inn in the capital.

The BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) of BRAC University prepared and revealed the report based on their findings.

Eminent jurist Dr Kamal Hossain was present as the chief guest while Members of Awami League (AL) Advisory Council Suranjit Sengupta and Advocate Yusuf Hossain Humayun and Adviser to the BNP chairperson Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury took part in discussion. Executive Director of BIGD Dr Sultan Hafeez Rahman presided.

Terming the country's present political and economic situation 'abnormal', Dr Kamal Hossain also termed the state of governance and economy, too, 'abnormal'.

Dr Kamal, also president of political outfit Gono Forum, called for a constructive national dialogue to overcome the condition.

"We should think about returning to the normal situation from abnormal ones," he said.

"We all want to see an effective, vibrant democracy in the country. We want to see a governing system that reflects people's aspiration for their welfare."

He suggested installation of a competent Election Commission (EC) for conducting a free, fair and transparent election with all-party participation.

Dr Hossain pointed out that 60 per cent of the country's population was around aged 25 and that the report revealed many things that are very much pertinent to the present context of the country.

"To institutionalise democracy, we need better education and the environment of the educational institutions...It is very much absent there," he told the meet.

He deplored that no elections were held to the student unions of the universities. Regular elections in the universities and good environment for education provide formation for the future leaders to be democratic, he observed.

"The democratic institutions are weak. We have been repeatedly failing to strengthen them," said the constitutional expert.

To overcome these shortcomings in the political and governance arenas, he suggested a "constructive national dialogue" involving the political parties, civil society, NGOs, human rights organisations and students.

"We need to have a consensus on certain fundamental issues," he said, suggesting merit-based recruitment, banning religion-based politics and improved environment in the educational institutions.

BNP leader Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury said due to absence of elected government there is no progress in the democratic system in the country rather than its regression.

"If we don't have a democratic government, there will be no scope to ensure good governance, human rights and the rule of law as well as faster economic growth," he added.

He noted that due to absence of democracy from the county the country's growth is hovering around six per cent.

"If a democratic government is elected through a participatory and inclusive election, then the country's growth will be around 10 per cent," said the former commerce minister.

When the political institutions become non-inclusive, he observed, the financial institutions also become non-inclusive.

He said the sequencing of democracy could only be possible through holding a free, fair and transparent and credible election.

The BNP leader thinks democratic values and norms ought to be exercised inside the party and also among political parties.

Due to the absence of democracy, he told the audience, most of the institutions, including the banks and financial institutions, are allowing the ruling circles to "plunder public money" and thus hamper a rapid growth.

He said that the volume of investment is not satisfactory and the businesses are not doing well due to 'politicisation of all sectors by the ruling class'.

Advisory Council member of Bangladesh Awami League Advocate Yusuf Hossain Humayun said though the country is moving fast in terms of economic progress, it was still lagging behind in the case of political development.

Regarding the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its alliance's demand for dialogue for holding a fair, inclusive and transparent election he said, "We are not against dialogue. We call upon the BNP not to give any precondition for holding a dialogue." He called upon them (BNP) to avoid Jamaat and the war criminals and exercise democratic norms.

The other member of the ruling Awami League Advisory Council, Suranjit Sengupta, said dialogue could only be possible if BNP left Jamaat and kept belief in the country's independence, war of liberation and constitutionality.

Research Director of BIDS Binayak Sen noted that the relationship between economic growth and political development has emerged in recent years as front-ranking research issue in the field of development economics.

He said the State of Governance Bangladesh 2013 focuses on some of the major issues of political developments such as politicisation of state agencies, weak inner-party democracy, growing political violence and questionable practices of party finance to explore the nature of elite control through extraction of party-political allegiance.

Professor of Dhaka University Imtiaz Ahmed said the report will certainly remain a valuable contribution in this endeavour.

Meanwhile, the report revealed that the norms and practices of the two dominant political parties have severely constrained the establishment of a modern, constitutional democracy and further that their political conduct poses major risks to reversal of the gains achieved through the democratic process so far.

The report also laid emphasis on consolidating democracy for the sake of fostering the country's economic growth.

It also identified the culture of politicization, absence of democratic practices from the party, influence of businessmen and contractors in the party politics, lack of adequate transparency in financial transactions and violent practices and intra-party vendetta as major problems for the political parties.

Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) Professor Rounaq Jahan, former adviser of the caretaker government Dr Akbar Ali Khan, Professor of Illinois State University of the United States of America (USA) Ali Riaz, Professor of Dhaka University Ataur Rahman, Presidium Member of the Communist Party of Bangladesh Haidar Akbar Khan Rono, Convener of Shushasoner Jonno Nagorik (Sujan) Dr Badiul Alam Majumber, former election commissioner Brigadier-General (Retd) Sakhawat Hossain and Convener of Nagorik Andolon Bangladesh Mahmudur Rahman Manna, General Secretary of Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal Kalequzzaman, Advocate of Bangladesh Supreme Court Muhammad Amirul Haq, Chief Executive Officer of BROTEE Bangladesh Sharmeen Murshid and First Vice- President

of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) Mohammad Hatem, among others, were interviewed by the research team of BIGD.