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**Sustaining Democracy in Bangladesh:  
Learning from Global Experience**

Publisher

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The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), established in 1993, is a civil society initiative to promote an ongoing dialogue between the principal partners in the decision-making and implementing process. The dialogues are designed to address important policy issues and to seek constructive solutions to these problems. The Centre has already organised a series of such dialogues at local, regional and national levels. The CPD has also organised a number of South Asian bilateral and regional dialogues as well as some international dialogues. These dialogues have brought together ministers, opposition frontbenchers, MPs, business leaders, NGOs, donors, professionals and other functional group in civil society within a non-confrontational environment to promote focused discussions. The CPD seeks to create a national policy consciousness where members of civil society will be made aware of critical policy issues affecting their lives and will come together in support of particular policy agendas which they feel are conducive to the well being of the country.

In support of the dialogue process the Centre is engaged in research programmes which are both serviced by and are intended to serve as inputs for particular dialogues organised by the Centre throughout the year. Some of the major research programmes of the CPD include **The Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development (IRBD), Trade Related Research and Policy Development (TRRPD), Governance and Policy Reforms, Regional Cooperation and Integration, Investment Promotion and Enterprise Development, Agriculture and Rural Development, Ecosystems, Environmental Studies and Social Sectors.** The CPD also conducts periodic public perception surveys on policy issues and issues of developmental concerns. With a view to promote vision and policy awareness amongst the young people of the country, CPD is implementing a **Youth Leadership Programme.**

Dissemination of information and knowledge on critical developmental issues continues to remain an important component of CPD's activities. Pursuant to this CPD maintains an active publication programme, both in Bangla and in English. As part of its dissemination programme, CPD has decided to bring out CPD Occasional Paper Series on a regular basis. Dialogue background papers, investigative reports and results of perception surveys which relate to issues of high public interest will be published under its cover. The Occasional Paper Series will also include draft research papers and reports, which may be subsequently published by the CPD.

As part of CPD's publication activities, a CPD Dialogue Report series is brought out in order to widely disseminate the summary of the discussions organised by the Centre. The present report contains the highlights of the dialogue on ***Sustaining Democracy in Bangladesh: Learning from Global Experience*** held on 26 December 2006 at the Flambé Restaurant, Dhaka. The dialogue was organised under CPD's TRRPD Programme.

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*Dialogue on*  
**Sustaining Democracy in Bangladesh:  
Learning from Global Experience**

**The Dialogue**

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) organised a dialogue on *Sustaining Democracy in Bangladesh: Learning from Global Experience* on 26 December 2006 at Flambé Restaurant, Dhaka. George Soros, Chairman of the Open Society Institute in the USA and also a renowned financier and philanthropist, was the Guest Speaker and Rehman Sobhan, Chairman of the CPD presided over the discussion. The dialogue was designed to be participated by a younger generation of politicians, lawyers, academics, journalists, businessmen and NGO representatives of the country. However a few senior scholars have also joined the programme. (List of participants attached)

**Introductory Statement by Professor Rehman Sobhan**

In his introductory statement, Rehman Sobhan introduced George Soros to young professionals terming him as a person with an exceptionally creative mind who constantly desires to keep engaged with the next generation and discuss contemporary issues with a future looking attitude'. Soros and his Open Society Institute has been continuously engaged in bringing the issue of democracy and human rights into the international domain and playing a very active role in promoting the advancement of these causes. He has employed a fair amount of his resources in the fight against anti-democratic processes at the national and global level. More recently, he made a sizable investment in the campaign against President George W. Bush during the US Election of 2004, though it did not give him a good return. However, in the subsequent congressional election he reaped a better return. At present George Soros is actively engaged in the democratic renewal process in Eastern Europe where the new process of democratic transition has not been particularly satisfactory. In Bangladesh people think that they are also moving through the process of democratic renewal after the democratic renaissance in 1990. Because of this shared experience with democratic renewal in Bangladesh with the experience in Eastern Europe and other countries we have much to learn from a dialogue with George Soros. Sobhan indicated that the dialogue will provide an opportunity for young participants to enrich their understanding about democratic processes and its practices in different parts of the world and to thereby share their engagement and concerns on the democratic process of Bangladesh with George Soros.

According to Rehman Sobhan, the practice of democracy that has been observed in South Asia raises serious questions about the way it is actually functioning. The democratic

practices in neighboring countries have been malfunctioning not only in Bangladesh but in Pakistan with its militarized form of democracy, in Nepal with its exposure to a unique Maoist insurgency, in Sri Lanka which is in the middle of a major ethnic conflict threatening the integrity of the nation-state, and even in India, where primordial influences of caste and communal identity continue to influence electoral behavior across the country. The problems of democracy at the operational level in different countries need to be diagnosed properly in order for Bangladesh to take lessons while trying to put its democratic system in order.

## **Presentation of George Soros**

### ***Closed Society vs. Open Society***

George Soros started by saying that in the earlier phase of his development of a conceptual framework, he was greatly influenced by Karl Popper and his famous book on “Open Society and Its Enemies”. The book basically pointed out the threat of Fascism and Communism each of which believes that they are in the possession of the ultimate truth. Since nobody is in possession of ultimate truth, their ideology could only be imposed by repressive measures.

Under Popper's influence Soros constructed models of open and closed societies where the former organisations have some deficiency which would actually be corrected by looking at alternative options. The weakness of an open society is uncertainty which originates in imperfect knowledge. He added that in an open society though one does not know the answers, one needs to make decisions. So living with the uncertainty of not knowing and the danger of doing your own thing is the real challenge. It is quite interesting that the two dominant ideologies of the 20th century were secular. It is an exception because throughout the history it is religion that provided the certainty which has returned again in the 21st century with the rise of fundamentalism both in Islam and in Christianity particularly in the form of the American fundamentalist political direction. It was at this period that Soros engaged himself in promoting democracy and the values of an open society. When the Soviet system collapsed, he was also involved in helping the countries of the Soviet Empire make the transition from a closed society to an open society. Soros was mainly guided by the recognition that open societies are more sophisticated forms of social organisations. In a closed society there is a certain order that is imposed on people whereas in an open society everyone has to make and form his own business plan. So it requires a more sophisticated form of institution that allows people with different views to live together and to seek help while making the transition.

### ***Soros's engagement in democratic movements in different countries***

In his open society venture in various parts of the world George Soros invested a substantial amount of his financial and intellectual resources in countries such as South Africa, Hungary, China, Poland and Soviet Union. He first started with South Africa, as they were already familiar with the institutions of the first world but the majority of the society was closed because of racism. He had set up an open society foundation there but abandoned his plan later, which according to him, if continued would have been useful. Soros was successful in setting up his foundation in Hungary during the communist period where he supported non party state initiatives. His success in Hungary encouraged him to extend his support to other countries such as China, Poland and Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Soros extended his operations to the former Soviet states which yielded mixed results.

### ***Collapse of closed society does not automatically lead to open society***

Referring to the collapse of the Soviet Union, George Soros mentioned that from his experience there he realized that the “collapse of a closed society does not automatically lead to an open society. After the collapse of the closed society, it may be replaced by an authoritarian form of state which is the enemy of the open society”. Feeling disturbed by the developments in Eastern Europe Soros then decided to work there. He first thought that if those countries joined the European Union, this will facilitate the building of an open society. But now it seems things are not that good. For example, in Hungary what was apparently facing an economic crisis has turned into a political crisis. In Poland, economic progress has been disturbed by the rise of fundamentalism and nationalism. In Latin America, the transition to changing democratic regimes was unable to ensure the expected economic development. Even in Indonesia, a functioning democracy has been unable to ensure expected material benefit for the majority because of the fragile democratic system. A variety of crises have emerged because of the unresolved agency problem in many countries undergoing transition.

### ***Role of civil society in democratic transition***

In the democratic transition of a country, civil society can play an effective role. However, the role of civil society in different transitional economies needs close scrutiny. Under communist rule the civil society was very strong and Soros's foundation supported them both financially and intellectually. But when the regimes changed, in many countries rulers have handed over their power to a new group of people who were close to civil society as it happened in Czechoslovakia. The change of the regime did not last long and people's sacrifice for bringing change in the society proved futile. In their place a group of people took over power who in fact had sacrificed very little for the democratic movement, but were found very competent in running the government. They are not the

idealists of the society. Consequently, the idealists left the government and joined in a democratic movement or engaged in business and other activities. Thus, a strong presence of civil society is required not only in the democratic transition of a country, but even after the establishment of a democratic system.

Before opening the discussion to floor, Rehman Sobhan noted that sometimes the democratic process may appear to have been successful but it may not prove sustainable and may have generated problems in the second and even in the third generation, as in the United States.

## **Floor Discussion**

### ***Revolutions do not establish democracy***

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed, Department of International Relations, Dhaka University noted that in ancient times in South Asia there was ‘open society’ where people of different castes, religions and their descendents maintained a very high level of tolerance. The society played a wider role at that time taking various community-based programmes, which were gradually squeezed out because of the strong role of the state and also of the political parties. State and its functionaries always attempted to change the open form of the society into a closed one and for this, they imposed various rules and regulations. However, in Bangladesh the anti-democratic initiatives of the state have always been challenged by the people (in 1952, 1966, 1971, and 1990) and in extreme situations, people came out in the street in protest to these initiatives and forced the state to make necessary changes. So in that sense, the street has become a part of our democracy, he added. Ahmed then discussed a report conducted on the definition of democracy. The result showed that 54+ % people think democracy is about having food, clothing and shelter, less than 9% said it was about elections and some 11% said it meant something other than elections.

In this context Soros provided examples of the democratic movement in European countries such as England, France and especially Soviet Union and on the different forms of revolution that had taken place for establishing democracy in these countries. The collapse of the Soviet regime, according to Soros, did not establish an effective democracy in all the component states of the USSR except in the Balkan region. The transition to democracy was weak in a number of states such as Georgia and Ukraine, because of allegations of corruption against leaders who assumed power immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Soros “revolutions do not establish democracy, they occur when there is a deficit of democracy and they sweep away the bad agents in power and create opportunities to establish democratic institutions”.

***From the principle of secularism towards religion-dominated politics***

Professor Asif Nazrul, Department of Law, Dhaka University observed that democratic practice in Bangladesh is reflected only at the time of elections. Even in these elections, people have very limited options to choose a suitable candidate as most of the candidates of the major parties are by and large corrupt people. Thus majority of people do not find any platform to speak out about their suffering. Nazrul therefore wondered whether this form of democratic practice would bring any noticeable change in the life of the majority of the people. According to him, the western form of democracy, as practiced in European countries is working effectively because of having strong democratic institutions and also due to their practicing a democratic culture within the political parties. Since the current democratic system in Bangladesh would not ensure the basic needs of the people Nazrul raised a question as to whether we should rethink about the model of democracy.

Referring to the historical evidences of 1966 to 1971, Dr Abdun Noor Tushar, Managing Director, Gati Media Ltd. Pointed out that the emergence of Bangladesh was the outcome of confrontation between people wanting an open society with those imposing a closed society and therefore, the Liberation War of Bangladesh was directed by two basic principles-democracy and secularism. However, people's movement against the state's moves to close the economy did not end after the war and it was continued during the time of Ershad's autocratic regime, which ended with Ershad's resignation after a people's movement in 1990. Even then the situation did not improve and people protested in the last 15 years against undemocratic practices of the political parties, although these parties were also actively engaged in the movements of 1971 and 1990. Two main parties, Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), compromised the principle of secularism, by aligning with religion-based political parties only for the sake of ensuring a majority in the parliament. These activities of the major political parties were contrary to the underlying principles of the Liberation War. Besides, over the last 15 years bringing in family members in the political parties has resulted in widespread corruption and nepotism.

***Younger generation lacks interest in politics***

In view of the dismal state of democratic practice in the society, Syed S Kaiser Kabir, Managing Director, Renata Limited, suggested the need for greater civil society activism in the country. Although the largest portion of the electorate actually are young people, they are not part of the civil society movement. As a result their voices are not reflected adequately in the political discourse. Nazim Farhan Chowdhury, Deputy Managing Director, Adcomm Ltd., shared the views of Kabir that 70 per cent of the 114 million

electorate are below the age of 40 years and they have not significantly contributed to the development of the country in the last twenty years. However, the younger generation is reluctant to be engaged in politics because of its dismal state. A network is thus urgently needed to connect younger people to articulate their voices and concerns and to prepare them to take over the reins of power.

Zafar Sobhan, Assistant Editor, The Daily Star thought that not only the younger generation but also a large section of the general public in Bangladesh are reluctant to be engaged in politics because of its dirty and corrupt nature. Since any change in the society should come through the political process, according to Sobhan, there are only two options. First, to work through either one of the existing political parties and make necessary reforms and if this does not work, the second option is to go for reforms with a new set of people, i.e. civil society activists. However, civil society's effective role to bring changes in the society largely depends on the level of response of various external and internal forces involved in national politics.

Tasneem Khalil, Editorial Assistant, The Daily Star, pointed to the struggle for democracy in neighboring countries, especially in Myanmar. Myanmar is considered to be a relatively closed society. People, especially young Rohingas are joining in a Jihad movement in order to establish democracy in Myanmar. Khalil enquired if the Bangladeshi human rights community can help the struggle for democracy in Myanmar.

In response Soros pointed out that fighting for freedom is not good enough. One has to have a forward looking agenda. It is not enough to be a democrat. You have to be a social democrat or a Christian democrat or an Islamic democrat. The nature of the fighting in Myanmar is for an open democratic society. It is necessary but not sufficient.

According to Syed Nasim Manzur, Managing Director, Apex Footwear Ltd., a major problem of civil society of Bangladesh is that it could not function under the shadow of the major political parties. An exception in this case is CPD's regional dialogues where people could freely voice their opinion as regards politicians, the democratic process and so forth.

Rehman Sobhan emphasised the importance of the participation of younger generations in the democratic process. Because whatever malgovernance prevails in the country today, its going to affect their lives in the days ahead. Younger people should therefore engage themselves in the civil society movement for ensuring a more sustainable democratic process.

***Dream of an open society: Free of corruption, extremism and fundamentalism***

Barrister Sara Hossain, an Advocate of Kamal Hossain and Associates, pointed out the major weaknesses of the democratic system of Bangladesh. Taking note of previous speakers, Sara pointed out several characteristic features of the political parties of Bangladesh, such as corruption, failure of institutions, limited role of civil society and rise of fundamentalism. In this connection she also observed that because of the weakness of the political system in this country, people's fundamental right to get justice in the courts was violated and ensuring their constitutional rights has not been maintained. There is no strong voice from the young or middle aged people and also from the civil society against these practices. Civil society did not take any strong position against the rise of organized and extremist forces in the country who demand that fatwa be legalized.

Barrister Sara pointed out that Bangladesh is undergoing changes in all spheres since its independence, but more substantially during the last 15 years. Above all these changes, since independence our society sustains a dream for establishing an open society, a dream which was created by people such as Rehman Sobhan and a few others. This dream has to be realized through the people's collective strength. Sara asked for some direction as to how to go about fulfilling that dream. She then emphasised the need to establish a network among people within the country as well as abroad.

Soros assured the participants that after listening to them he thinks the situation in Bangladesh is far from helpless because there are people who care about it. The situation may be messy at the moment but Soros hoped that out of this process strong democratic institutions will grow.

**Concluding Remarks**

In his concluding remarks Rehman Sobhan suggested that people of all ages should strengthen their networks and raise their voices on various issues related to the democratic process and practices. Since a weak democratic system and a poor judiciary would ultimately affect the future generation, Sobhan urged the younger generation of the country to take the issue very seriously and constructively engage themselves in the political process thereby working towards ensuring a sustainable democracy in the country.

Finally he thanked everyone present for a lively discussion and their valuable contribution to the dialogue.

**List of Participants**  
(In alphabetical order)

<i>Mr Shameran B Abed</i>	Assistant Editor, The New Age
<i>Professor Imtiaz Ahmed</i>	Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka
<i>Ms Q Pushpita Alam</i>	Manager, Communication, BRAC Public Affairs and Communications
<i>Barrister Tania Amir</i>	Advocate, The Law Associates
<i>Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya</i>	Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)
<i>Mr Nazim Farhan Chowdhury</i>	Deputy Managing Director, Adcomm Ltd.
<i>Mr M Masud Chowdhury</i>	Lecturer, Dept of Media & Communication Independent University Bangladesh
<i>Dr Uttam Kumar Deb</i>	Senior Research Fellow, CPD
<i>Mr Robaet Ferdous</i>	Assistant Professor, Dept of Mass Communication and Journalism University of Dhaka
<i>Mr Gazi M Hassan</i>	Political Specialist, Embassy of Japan
<i>Barrister Sara Hossain</i>	Advocate, Dr Kamal Hossain and Associates
<i>Professor Rounaq Jahan</i>	Senior Research Scholar, Columbia University, USA
<i>Mr Syed S Kaiser Kabir</i>	Managing Director, Renata Limited
<i>Mr Tasneem Khalil</i>	Editorial Assistant, The Daily Star
<i>Mr Zayd Almer Khan</i>	Deputy Editor, The New Age
<i>Mr Syed Nasim Manzur</i>	Managing Director, Apex Footwear Ltd
<i>Dr Khondaker Golam Moazzem</i>	Research Fellow, CPD
<i>Ms Lamia Morshed</i>	Secretary, External Affairs, Grameen Bank Ltd
<i>Dr Asif Nazrul</i>	Professor, Department of Law, Dhaka University
<i>Professor Mustafizur Rahman</i>	Research Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)
<i>Dr Sabina Faij Rashid</i>	Assistant Professor, School of Public Health, BRAC University
<i>Dr Iffath Sharif</i>	Economist, Maxwell Stamp plc
<i>Mr Zafar Sobhan</i>	Assistant Editor, The Daily Star
<i>Mr Babar Sobhan</i>	Senior Advisor, UNDP, Sri Lanka
<i>Professor Rehman Sobhan</i>	Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue
<i>Mr George Soros</i>	Chairman, Open Society Institute
<i>Dr A S M Abdun Noor Tushar</i>	Managing Director, Gati Media Ltd