

Make Dhaka liveable again

The case for a city government system



Mexico City, Shanghai, Beijing and New York City. But Dhaka is not exactly what you'd call a "pretty" city by any means. With more than 44,500 people sharing each square kilometre of space, it's chaotic, it's dirty, and it lacks good infrastructure. The overburdened roads are jammed most of the day. Then there is the problem of clogged drains while the low-lying city is filled with water like a bathtub during monsoon. No wonder the Global Liveability Index 2019 has ranked Dhaka as the third least liveable city in the world, just after the war-torn Syrian capital Damascus and Lagos.

To ensure better services with improved civic amenities for its 20 million residents and reduce their sufferings, on November 29, 2011, the then Dhaka City Corporation was divided into two parts: Dhaka North (DNCC) and Dhaka South (DSCC). The government's goal for doing so was good but it remains elusive to this day. Now, the elections to the capital's two city corporations are set to be held on February 1. Some 5.4 million voters are set to seal the fate of about 758 candidates who are contesting for the posts of mayors, general ward councillors and councillors of wards reserved for women. More than a dozen candidates are vying for the mayoral posts in DNCC and DSCC, but the main contestants are four: two each from the ruling Awami League and opposition BNP. Awami League's Atiqul Islam is contesting for DNCC and Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh for DSCC,

while BNP's Tabith Awal is contesting for DNCC and Ishraque Hossain for DSCC.

According to affidavits submitted to the Election Commission, of the four front-runners, Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh completed his education in law from the UK between 1996 and 1997. He is currently a lawyer in the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. Atiqul Islam, a businessman and former mayor who is seeking re-election, is a B.Com graduate. On the other hand, BNP's Tabith Awal is a graduate from George Washington University in Washington DC, USA. He also obtained a combined degree in MSc in Information Systems Technology and a BBA in Management Information Systems and is currently involved in a family business. Ishraque Hossain, on the other hand, completed his Bachelors and Master's degrees in mechanical engineering from the University of Hertfordshire in the UK, and is involved in a family business too. All of them are, clearly, well-educated and highly qualified.

As the polls of the two corporations near, the cacophony of candidates coming up with farfetched plans to solve all of the city's problems is growing louder, in an attempt to woo voters. Many have pledged to turn Dhaka into a highly developed city. Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh has said that he would work to craft a "new city" if he is elected, and also pledged to ensure all civic amenities for city-dwellers and turn the corporation into a service-oriented organisation for businessmen. His opponent, Ishraque Hossain, said that if elected, he would free the corporation from corruption, and take short, mid and long-term projects to solve the city-dwellers' problems. He also said that the city authorities over the last 12 years have turned Dhaka into a dirty city, and that he would strive to restore democracy and turn the city into a clean and developed one.

BNP's DNCC mayoral candidate Tabith said, if elected, his priorities will include a pollution-free environment; safe and open footpaths and public spaces; freeing Dhaka from water logging; and proper road management for controlling traffic congestion. He further said he wants to introduce three separate zoning systems—commercial, residential and mixed—in the areas under DNCC's jurisdiction. His rival Atiqul Islam said, if re-elected as mayor, he would work to build a modern, planned, smart city and take the initiative to free Dhaka from traffic

their promises or are those just rhetoric? Experts, however, said under the current framework, the city corporations do not have the legal or financial mandate to work in a number of areas which involve city planning, traffic management, security, utility services, waterways, and the environment. There are different implementing agencies of the government responsible for each of these areas of work. For instance, the city corporations cannot make a master plan or take any drastic measure to address the waterlogging problem because at least seven other agencies—including

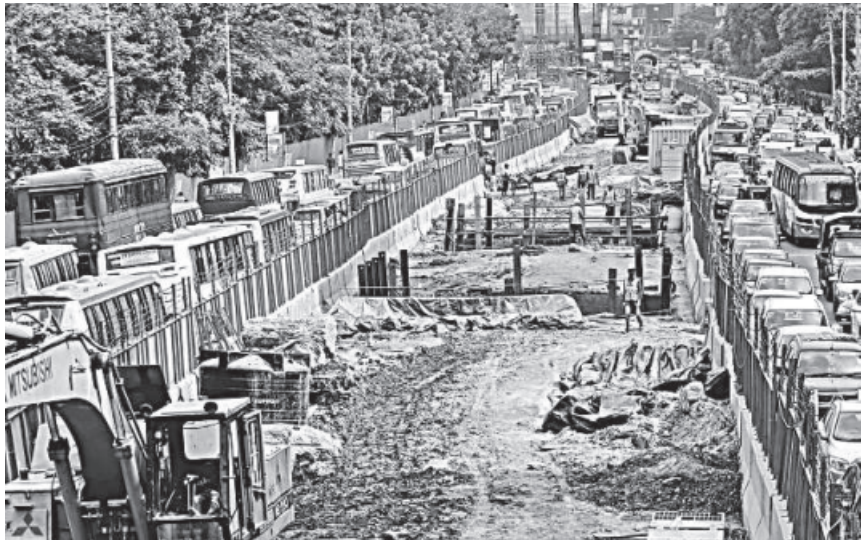
keeps the development and maintenance of the city in a chaotic situation.

Let us remind ourselves, late mayor Annisul Huq, who was desperate to do something good for the city but the system governing the utility organisations came up as a major obstacle to his efforts, expressed his frustration and helplessness on a number of occasions. In many public gatherings, he mentioned that the mayor's office does not have any say in the functions of Wasa and Rajuk—two organisations responsible for the city's sewerage system and urban development respectively. The city corporation does not have the jurisdiction over all of the drains in the capital. "The Dhaka WASA (Water Supply and Sewerage Authority) maintains 600 kilometres of drainage network and the district administration owns the lakes where the city corporation has nothing to do," the late mayor had said.

While it's understandable that our mayoral candidates are making pledges ad nauseam only for political mileage, like politicians do before any election, it also shows that there is a real urgency to make this city liveable again. While I do believe that an empowered mayor is an important part of solving Dhaka's innumerable problems, but to better serve the city-dwellers, the time has come to develop the city corporations as part of an independent city or metropolitan government, which will bring all public service providers under one umbrella so that those service facilities could be run and managed in a coordinated way. And to improve the services, it will be best if there is a legal framework to guide the task of coordination. Otherwise, Dhaka's residents will continue to live in the dreadful condition that they are presently living in.

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Dhaka's mayors have little control over the many government organisations that serve the residents.

PHOTO: STAR

congestion and air pollution. He said he would like to launch a mobile app—*Sabar Dhaka*, or Dhaka for All (in English)—a platform where citizens could ask for their required services.

While all the top four mayoral candidates have been going door-to-door seeking vote and distributing leaflets, besides making pledges profusely, one may ask, do they have the required power and jurisdiction to implement

Wasa—are tasked with maintaining the drainage system. Currently, the city is serviced by over four dozen government organisations. Mayors have no control over organisations like Wasa, Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company, the Dhaka Power Distribution Company, the Dhaka Electric Supply Company, and the Department of Environment. Moreover, a lack of coordination among these organisations

The shift of 'soft power'



chore. No, I am not writing my memoirs—I have been virtually glued to the TV watching a Turkish odyssey on Netflix: "Resurrection: Ertugrul". The epic traces the arduous and adventurous life of a tribal chief, Ertugrul, father of Osman, the founder of the Ottoman Empire. Based on historical facts, the series focuses not just on Ertugrul, but several traditional beliefs and customs in the backdrop of 13th-century Turkey. My interest in the drama was sparked by a friend's comment that it touched upon the life of the famous Sufi, Ibn al Arabi. Of late, I have developed an interest in Sufism and I started watching Ertugrul hoping that it would provide some historical facts about the Sufi saint. The series does depict various facets of Arabi's life and teachings. As a matter of fact, according to the drama, Arabi plays an important role in shaping Ertugrul's character by guiding him through difficult times.

What started as an interest in Sufism turned into an obsession about the warrior hero. I was fascinated by Ertugrul's courage, prowess and ability to overthrow his many enemies: the crusading Knights Templar, the marauding Mongols, and the treacherous Seljuk viceroys, not to

mention the many conspirators in his own camp. In addition, the show highlights his spiritual evolution from a tribal chieftain to the ruler of the village of Sogut.

I have been wondering why the epic crept into my consciousness and held me captive through more than 400 episodes. As a liberal Muslim pained by the ad hominem attacks on my religion, I have been groping for role models from Islam's past. Hence, watching a well-crafted, beautifully scored, aesthetically pleasing drama (except for the fighting scenes which I fast forwarded) that centres on a Muslim hero served as a catharsis. Although I do not personally believe in the concept of the unity of the *ummah* (global Muslim community), Ertugrul helped me understand why the narrative has captured the imagination of so many Muslims. And

not just Muslims, an estimated 500 million people across the globe have watched Ertugrul and the number keeps increasing each day. I believe that a primary reason for its popularity is that it highlights universal humane traits—treating friend and foe with honour and chivalry, humility and modesty in the face of glittering wealth and power, respect for family, fighting for justice. For example, in one moving scene, the hero, after an important conquest, kneels in front of the throne and reminds himself that the victory belongs to "Allah" and man is only a conduit through which He spreads equity and justice. This total "surrender to the divine will" is a theme that recurs each time Ertugrul is faced with a crisis or achieves a victory against an enemy.

My rather expansive preamble about Ertugrul might create the impression

that this piece is only about the Turkish odyssey. But there is a larger issue that I wish to address. In the recent past, there has been a marked shift in global popular culture in which America's soft-power dominance is facing challenges from art forms originating in the east. We find ample evidence of this in the impact of not just Turkish serials but also Bollywood films and Korean pop music. I remember the times of our youthful zeal for Hollywood blockbusters and American television. Elvis Presley and the Beatles were worshipped by the developing world elite that wanted to "modernise". Hence, they reinvented themselves by mimicking the codes and mores of Western society—the ubiquitous blue denim jeans, the "bob" hairstyles, and the American twang in their English accent.

In the last two decades, Hindi movies have tried to promote a surreal and glamorous lifestyle imitating cosmopolitan customs and styles. Thus the net was cast wide to include the affluent South Asian diaspora and Middle Eastern fans. The appeal is partly due to the fact that the heroes and heroines seem more akin to their culture and traditions, not to mention the popular song and dance sequences. For example, Shah Rukh Khan, the most popular Bollywood hero, navigates through roles where he is part of a wealthy diaspora but is spiritually and emotionally guided by traditional Indian values, and is also at ease dancing to a beautifully composed Bollywood number.

Of late, the divisive era of Narendra Modi has somewhat changed the international, cosmopolitan character of Hindi film narratives. Muslims are

now portrayed as kohl-eyed rulers lusting for Hindu women or the mafia don exploiting innocent citizens or the terrorist trying to blow up the masses. Perhaps this is a reason for the allure of Turkish dizis (as the Turks call their TV serials) where the heroes uphold the best of Islamic values and instil a sense of pride among Muslim youth worldwide. Also, the fact that the productions are of such high professional quality has helped them make inroads globally, even in Latin America—a region not known for its Muslim population. Hence, viewers across the world are beginning to understand that at the core all human beings have the same basic aspirations, hopes and fears, irrespective of their nationality, faith and race.

The truth is that America dominated the entertainment industry because it projected a dream of limitless opportunities and freedom. The growing socio-economic inequity has exposed the hollowness of this message. Audiences are groping for authenticity, and the cultural products from the East provide a welcome alternative. However, despite the shift in soft power, we cannot ignore the "hard" kind. We watch Ertugrul and Bollywood movies on Netflix or Amazon or YouTube. These Western corporations still control the choice of content. Until emerging platforms take charge of the channels, part of this hegemony will remain in place. But for now, let us revel in the fact that global audiences are being exposed to some positive aspects of the values and traditions of the East.

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Millia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.



A shift in soft power is underway as global audiences grope for authenticity, and the cultural products from the East provide a welcome alternative. PHOTO: REUTERS

 **QUOTABLE**
Quote



MALCOLM X
(1925-1965)
African American civil rights activist

You're not to be so blind with patriotism that you can't face reality. Wrong is wrong, no matter who does it or says it.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Target at a party
7 Bakery buys
11 Pencil part
12 Aware of
13 House of worship
14 Order to Spot
15 Go by
17 Take turns
20 Entices
23 Sewing aid
24 Roadie's burden
26 Bran bit
27 Floor cover
28 Do the wrong thing
29 Infant outfits
31 Snoop group: Abbr.
32 Physical power

DOWN
1 Sulky state
2 Angry state
3 Saigon setting
4 Rockies resort
5 Spill the beans
6 Vicinity
7 American mar-supial
8 Cross

ACROSS
33 Dance unit
34 Technical talk
37 "Hamilton" event
39 Film set on
Pandora
43 In the past
44 City on the Rio Grande
45 Nursery group
46 Dawn-to-dusk

DOWN
9 Pilot's guess: Abbr.
10 Tofu source
16 Cord ends
17 Parody
18 Organ's cousin
19 Offer, as a comment
21 Like Poe tales
22 Satchel part
24 Less damp
25 Wish undone
30 Libra's symbol
33 Mongrel's warning
35 Fancy do
36 Track shape
37 Morse bit
38 First numero
40 TV's Danson
41 Nabokov novel
42 Singer Orbison

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

