

City government need of the day

MESBAH-US-SALEHEEN

CORPORATIONS or municipalities consist of a group of people living in a defined urban area. In our country, corporations and municipalities of various sizes are defined under country law, and have specific rights and responsibilities. Recently the demand for city government has come to the national picture again. During and after the mayoral election of Chittagong, this concept of local government surfaced again. Mr. ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury, the Mayor of Chittagong, has been trying to convince the people and the government of this concept. During the last Awami League government, the party he belongs, he tried to convince his party and the then government about this idea but failed. This was probably one of the plus points for Mr. Mohiuddin in the last mayoral election of Chittagong. People from all walks of life considered him as the leader of Chittagong and felt that he put the development of Chittagong above his party. After taking oath as mayor for the third term, Mr. Mohiuddin in a press conference reiterated his intention to submit his plan of city government within two months. To justify his proposal he said that it is very difficult to coordinate the seventeen odd departments which deal with the city problems like water supply, law and order, electricity, transport, housing, telephone, sewerage, road construction, education, environmental pollution, keeping official records, such as birth and death and public health, that are at present lie beyond the jurisdiction of the corporation. In the same press conference he said that his plan of city government would be implemented in phases. On May 1 in a seminar on "What types of towns do we want?" organized by Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA), the participants suggested formation of metropolitan government for ideal urbanisation. The keynote paper presented by Professor Nazrul Islam of Centre for Urban Studies rightly pointed out that the present Dhaka City Corporation has very little power

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regarding the major urban issues. The participants also suggested having a metropolitan government for effective running of our urban areas. City government or metropolitan government connotes a particular type of local government system that is being practiced in many cities in developed countries. To achieve an overall sustainable development, the idea of city government is logical, considering the size and population growth rates of cities like Dhaka and Chittagong, and their economic, social, and political bases. To be more specific, the reason why cities should have city governments is to learn from other cities facing relatively similar problems under similar socio-economic conditions. They have mostly the same type of problems or

constraints e.g., lack of resources, minimum wages, limited capacity of staff, high-handedness, and corruption, which hinder city authorities from optimally managing their cities. The evolution of city size distributions in our country has also played a part and thus attracted the interest of researchers over a long period of time on this problem. The existence of very large cities like Dhaka, the wide dispersion in its size also becomes a problem to ponder for policy planners and its administrators. We notice some of the city-states like Singapore and Vatican City, with their effective urban system. In the US, municipalities are the levels of local government below that of a county. City governments are usually administratively divided into several departments, depending on

the size of the city. Though cities differ in the division of responsibility, the typical arrangement is to have the following departments handle the following roles. Most US corporations and municipalities are governed either by Council-Manager government or by Mayor-Council government. In the council-manager form of government, an elected city council is responsible for making policy, passing ordinances, voting appropriations, and having overall supervisory authority in the city government. In such a government, the mayor (or equivalent executive) will perform strictly ceremonial duties or will act as a member and presiding officer of the council. The council will hire an administrator who will be responsible for supervising government operations and implementing the policies

adopted by the council. The administrator serves the council, usually with a contract that specifies duties and responsibilities. Mayor-Council government is the most commonly used. In the Mayor-Council form, the mayor plays the chief administrative duties with the officials depending upon the elected city council. The council may appoint officials and must approve of mayoral nominations. The council also exercises primary control over the municipal budget. A third form, the City Commission government, which was once common, is not being practiced now. Most cities formerly governed by commission having switched to the Council-Manager form. Some consider the City Commission as a predecessor of the Council-Manager form. The government must also think



Dhaka City Corporation: Edifice of a city government?

and evaluate the current situation of city administration in our country and take steps to reform their responsibilities by forming city government in a stepwise manner with appropriate rules and regulations that will ensure success. It is also very important and essential that the capacity building for city government should take place side by side, otherwise the whole concept will not materialize. City governance is not about creating governance within a government. Simply creating a new powerful institution, it is to develop the effectiveness, coherence and legitimacy of the present one. To make more effective it should be law-based and rule-based. City government should be multi-level governance, implicating all levels of authorities. City governance will require reforms to be undertaken and efforts made both at national and international levels. In order to be legitimate, the city government has to be democratic and participatory in nature. It allows different stakeholders to play effective roles in different aspects of city developments. Looking at cities as its natural and built environments, it is essential to have a rational management system for sustainable growth and living. Effective management and appropriate use of it for cities can be systematized, and a range of approaches and tools can be used to assist cities adopt such sustainable practices through city government. The present government can look into it positively and can form a task force to materialize the concept of city government and how to implement it in future. One of the guiding principles to change urban systems should be the realistic need of the people living there that go with the fiscal reform and good planning.

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All health information to keep you up to date

ABC of arsenic: Facts and figures

BELIEVE it or not, Bangladesh may be experiencing the largest mass poisoning of a population in history! The scale of this environmental disaster is greater than any seen before. It is beyond the accidents at Bhopal, in 1984, and Chernobyl in 1986. The ground water, the main source of drinking water in Bangladesh at present, is contaminated by naturally occurring arsenic in 59 out of Bangladesh's 64 districts. In the past, arsenic was used as a suicidal and homicidal agent. Many historians today believe that the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was poisoned to death like 'Vawal Raja' of Bangladesh with arsenic ('Senko Bish' in Bangla). History of discovery in Bangladesh: Problem of high levels of arsenic was first detected in 1993, in Chapainawabganj district following reports of contamination in the adjacent districts of West Bengal, India. In West Bengal, India, first reports were published in 1983, and by 1998 massive contamination was confirmed. Arsenic around the world: There are examples of geologic arsenic contamination in other parts of the world, Argentina, Chile, China, India, Mexico, Thailand, the USA, but they are relatively site-specific and affect a limited number of people. Character of arsenic and arsenicosis: Arsenic is a metalloid chemical having both metallic and non-metallic(semi-metallic) characteristics. Manifestations range from skin lesions to cancers. To date in Bangladesh, the emphasis has been on skin manifestations; however, there is emerging literature to suggest that other systems are being affected. There is no well-defined and unanimously accepted precise clinical criterion for diagnosing arsenicosis in Bangladesh. Recently, implications of health effects and impacts of arsenic and management of arsenicosis were presented and discussed by concerned authorities. Practiced at this moment in most places: 1.Arsenic free drinking water 2.Nutritious food, fresh vegetables, fresh fruits 3.Anit-oxidant vitamins 4.Salicyclic ointment as a keratolytic agent A public health problem: The magnitude of the arsenic related health problem is not yet determined in a systematic manner. But according to field studies carried out by different agencies the estimated prevalence of people currently drinking arsenic contaminated water may vary from 30-40 million. Arsenic is a known carcinogen. Chronic exposure to arsenic gives rise to several health problems. Withdrawal and elimination can reverse the disease status if intervened in the preliminary stage. Finale: Though the Bangladesh government and overseas aid agencies have shown strong commitment to arsenic mitigation in Bangladesh, still, there is much confusion as to the extent of the problem, and there is no well-coordinated public health approach to managing the large-scale exposure to a potential health hazard.

Sorting out the bad apples

A.N.M.NURUL HAQUE

THE High Court in a milestone judgement passed on May 24, has directed the government, the Election Commission (EC), and the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) to make it mandatory for the candidates seeking election to Parliament to submit eight pieces of information with the nomination form to the Election Commission. The eight pieces of information to be furnished by a parliamentary candidate are i) academic qualification with certificates, ii) whether the candidate is accused in any criminal case, iii) whether there was any past record of criminal case and the result, iv) profession, v) source or sources of income, vi) previous record as MP, vii) statement of assets and liabilities and dependants of the candidate, and viii) particulars of loan taken from banks or financial institutions personally, jointly or by dependants or by business firms in which the candidate is involved. The High Court bench passed the order after hearing the rule of public interest litigation (PIL) writ petition filed by three senior lawyers of the Supreme Court on April 23. The lawyers filed the writ petition seeking direction to the Election Commission (EC) asking that essential information from the parliamentary candidates should be made mandatory. The High Court, taking into cognizance the writ petition filed as a public interest litigation, issued a rule on the government and the Election Commission asking them to show cause, why they should not be directed to compel the candidates seeking election to parliament to provide a set of vital information. Neither the government nor the Election Commission who were the respondents to the rule contested, apparently showing tacit approval of the demands raised by the petitioners. Declaring the rule absolute the High Court bench observed: "Every voter has got the right to know the antecedents of the candidate so that they vote for a man of honesty, integrity and capable of meeting their hopes and aspirations." Some of the jurists opined that the verdict of the High Court resulted in "automatic reforms in procedures of election to parliament meeting the long cherished desire of the electorates. Defaulters, men with criminal records and black money holders are debarred from seeking election." There had been a long legal battle in India for making it mandatory for the candidates seeking election to Parliament to provide a set of vital information. Delhi High Court after hearing of a petition filed on public interest litigation in 1999, directed the Election Commission to make it

Our national parliament could not be made functional due to the poor performance of our lawmakers. Quorum crisis is the most crucial issue in our parliament. The lawmakers of both the ruling BNP and opposition Awami League agreed to increase their privileges through enacting a law. It reveals that the MPs on the treasury bench and in opposition agree in their own interest only, but never in the interest of the people and the country.

mandatory for the candidates of parliamentary election to submit information relating to his past criminal records, academic qualification and statement of assets and liabilities. Both the government and the then main opposition Congress, appealed to the Supreme Court against the verdict of Delhi High Court. But the Supreme Court of India agreed with the verdict of Delhi High Court on the issue. Later on, the government made amendment to the Section 33 B of the Representation of the People Act to nullify the Supreme Court order. The Supreme Court of India then took a bold step against the government to strike down the Section 33 B of the Representation of the People Act and enforced its judgment. The Supreme Court of India also categorically directed that the non-disclosure of these vital information would be a ground for rejection of nomination submitted by a candidate seeking election to Parliament. Finally the Election Commission of India issued notification in March, 2003 to implement the Supreme Court's verdict. Our national parliament could not be made functional due to the poor performance of our lawmakers. Quorum crisis is the most crucial issue in our parliament. Our

lawmakers, who are mostly businessmen by profession, like to stay away from the House on various excuses. The MPs of the opposition parties have made it their business for continuous boycotting of parliament. On the other hand, the treasury bench members are always found not much interested in discussing the issues of national importance. While discussing the national budget, many of the lawmakers were found to be veered off into unnecessary areas. A particular point of agony for the country has been that in a very large number of instances the Speaker could not start sessions in time due to quorum failure. The reality, as reported in the survey report of the Bangladesh chapter of Transparency International is however sadly different. The report on functioning of our parliament revealed that a total amount of Taka 2.35 crore was wasted in three (4th, 5th, and 6th) sessions of the current 8th Parliament due to quorum crisis. The time lost in quorum failure amounted to 26.15 hours of the total session time of 127.50 hours. Only 22 hours were spent on legislative business. Interestingly, the lawmakers uttered the names of their party leaders at least 493 times during their deliberations. The

report also suggested imposing fines to the MPs for not attending the sessions for a consecutive period of time. The lawmakers of both the ruling and opposition parties have agreed to increase their privileges through enacting a law which will provide them with legal protection. The lawmakers of the ruling BNP and the opposition Awami League at a high-powered parliamentary body meeting held on January 18 reached a consensus that their existing privileges are not adequate and decided to formulate the necessary laws through the Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs to increase their privileges. The lawmakers of the country observed that, though they are provided with the facilities like accommodation, car, and telephone at the expenses from the public coffers, there is no legal protection for them in the existing provisions of the law. The monthly allowances of the MPs have also been increased from July 2003. Naturally the people of the country expected better performances of their representatives in the parliament. But most of the MPs have failed to fulfill the aspiration of the people whom they represent. There are also other charges against our respected legislators



Quorum crisis most crucial in Parliament

and members of parliament, which are no less serious. Many of them do not pay telephone bills though they draw the allocated money for telephone regularly. The fact remains that they did not pay a staggering amount of Tk 8.61 crore over a long period of time, despite the fact that they received a monthly telephone allowance, once revised upward, for payment of their telephone bills. Some of the MPs also demanded a bill-free telephone. A common citizen having a telephone usually could not get away with non-payment of telephone bills for more than three months, as the T&T authority disconnect the line. But the MPs did not face any such action by the T&T authority, though the quantum of their default is much higher. Not all, but a good number of MPs did not care to clear their telephone bills in time. The lawmakers demanded tax-free cars and many of them imported cars of the latest model availing the tax-free privilege. Many of these costly cars were ultimately sold for profit. The lawmakers of both the ruling BNP and opposition Awami League agreed to increase their privileges through enacting a law. It reveals that the MPs on the treasury bench and in opposition agree in their own interest only, but never in the interest of the people and the country. So far as my poor knowledge goes, both the ruling and opposition party MPs earlier agreed for increasing their monthly allowances in June 2003 and later on for having costly duty-free cars. It was not long ago when candidates seeking election to parliament were mainly the political elites, who were popular in the society for their social services and dedication. But now the nouveaux riches who believes that money determines the man's status and that nothing is unfair in the pursuit of wealth have stepped into the political scenario. They have scant respect for the established norms of politics and do not hesitate to resort to unconventional means to achieve their goals. These nouveaux riches have resorted to vote buying, rigging, and costly campaigns, and thus made the democratic system corrupted, which is no doubt a bad omen for the country. The parliament has become less important for them after winning the election, as they are now busy running after the ministers to get funds to meet their election expenses. Such activities of our MPs only reveal their ineligibility to be lawmakers. Making law for the country and people is not a matter of joke. The people of the country wish that the most competent and decent should have the opportunity of doing the job.

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The almighty dollar is back

When historians look back on this period they may well give more weight to the power that a one-currency world conferred on the United States than to that granted by our men and women in uniform, serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. But whether Washington will recognise the responsibility that comes with this power -- well, that will be the big question.

JEFFREY GARTEN



UNTIL a few weeks ago, the dollar bull was a rare animal. Most currency watchers thought the dollar was in long-term decline, due to rising U.S. trade and budget deficits. The only question the majority seriously entertained was whether the decline could become a crash, if foreign financiers began to tire of supporting U.S. borrowing, and did so in a stampede. Yet since January the dollar has risen 12 percent against the euro, and 7 percent against the yen. A growing number of dollar bears are turning bullish, and I'm one of them. This may be the start of something big. For three reasons, we may be seeing a fundamental shift with enormous implications for the United States and the world. First, for global investors looking for long-term value and security, there is now no real alternative to the dollar. The euro used to be the key option, but after the recent French and Dutch vetoes of the proposed constitution for the European Union, there is talk among financial officials that the agreements that underlie the euro itself may be shaky. Neither the Japanese yen nor the Chinese renminbi is even close to being a major alternative to the dollar. The truth about these Asian giants is that their stock and bond markets are too weak to attract major funds from around the world. Second, France, Germany and Italy have been stuck for years with anemic growth and double-digit unemployment. They have demonstrated no political will to restructure their economies for global competition, and there is a good chance that the European Central Bank will be strong-armed into lowering interest rates. This could occur at the same time as the U.S. Fed continues to increase American rates. The differential will make America much more attractive to foreign lenders. Third, Asian governments are unlikely to give up their mercantilist policies, which rely on cheap currencies to stimulate exports. Asians use their enormous savings, denominated in their own currencies, to buy dollars. This drives down the value of the yen and the won, and holds up the

greenback. They accumulate billions of dollars, which they then lend to the United States so Americans can buy Asian exports. It's increasingly clear that Asian lenders -- particularly central banks that now account for about 70 percent of foreign loans to the United States -- don't seem to mind holding U.S. debt as long as the American economy is expanding, which seems likely for the foreseeable future. An ever stronger dollar would delay the arrival of a global monetary system with two or three major currencies at its centre. This has been the prediction of most international economists ever since the post World War II recovery of Japan and Germany. Now there is likely to be a totally different model -- a world dominated by the dollar in ways not seen since the early 1950s. At first, with confidence in the dollar mounting, more foreigners would invest in U.S. bonds and stocks, pushing the greenback even higher. It would keep interest rates low, possibly encouraging another long business boom. American firms would be on the prowl for acquisitions abroad, because they would be cheap. But a strong dollar would also undercut U.S. exports, increase U.S. imports and therefore widen the trade deficit -- now approaching \$700 billion a year -- and run up the foreign debt, already close to \$3 trillion. U.S. firms could well accelerate the outsourcing of jobs abroad, where costs would be falling in dollar terms. The increase in purchasing

power would make America a richer and more powerful nation. Because the U.S. would be borrowing in dollars, and repaying those debts in dollars, it would incur no currency risk, as every other country does. This privileged position means that America could become an even more undisciplined debtor -- a scary thought. In a world where the dollar is supreme, Uncle Sam should be more responsible for international financial stability, not less. There would be an increasingly compelling argument that the Federal Reserve should see itself as a global central bank, and the Congress and White House should see U.S. trade and financial policy as keys to global stability, not tools to further U.S. interests. On a recent visit to Yale, the mayor of Beijing said -- only half jokingly -- that it would make sense if the whole world had a vote in American elections, because U.S. decisions have so large an impact worldwide. When historians look back on this period they may well give more weight to the power that a one-currency world conferred on the United States than to that granted by our men and women in uniform, serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. But whether Washington will recognise the responsibility that comes with this power -- well, that will be the big question.

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