

Let Chittagong be Chittagong



RAJANIKAT/DRINK NEWS

As Chittagonians we want this city to be a model city for others in the region, even surpassing Singapore within the shortest possible time. What Chittagong possess, Singapore does not. It has its own heart, spirit and soul.

ABDUL MANNAN

THE immediate past Mayor of the Chittagong City Corporation (CCC), Al-Haj A.B.M. Mohiuddin Chowdhury is one of the most dynamic and performing mayor the city ever had, with the exception the of legendary late Nur Ahmed Chairman (He was Chairman of Chittagong Municipality for 33 years till he took voluntary retirement.) Mohiuddin has innovative ideas that he tries to put into action, but sometimes goes overboard and gives birth to unnecessary controversies. Mohiuddin was the first elected mayor of CCC, preceded by two appointed mayors -- Mahmudul Islam Chowdhury of Jatiyo Party and Mir Mohammed Nasiruddin of BNP. In 1994, Nasiruddin contested the election with the full support of BNP, the party in power, but lost by about sixteen thousand votes. The second election was held in January of 2000, which was boycotted by BNP on the usual pretext that the election would not be free and fair. Mohiuddin was given a walk over.

The third one, held in May 2005, was a sort of block buster in the election history of Chittagong, as the entire government, led by the then Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, threw all its might behind Nasiruddin, with Tarique Zia establishing a base camp in Chittagong for about a week. Mir Nasir lost the election by 91,000 votes. The fourth mayoral election is scheduled for June 17. After the successful holding of the national election in December 2008, and a few by-elections, holding of the CCC election should not be too challenging. To begin with, the CCC election rules have been made more stringent and binding on the candidates, and so far there has not been any major allegation about the candidates bending those rules. The signs are good so far, and the five million residents of the port city hope that the atmosphere will not worsen. A.B.M. Mohiuddin Chowdhury of Nagorik Committee is the incumbent president of Mohanagar (Metropolitan) Awami League and the party has announced its all out support for

him. BNP failed to field its own candidate and has decided to back Monzur ul Alam Monzu of Nagarik Andolon, an outfit primarily consisting of Jamaat intellectuals. Afsaruddin Ahmed, the lone Jamaat candidate, has withdrawn from the race in favour of Monzur ul Alam Monzu, known to be a soft-spoken, decent and philanthropic person who was an ardent follower of Mohiuddin Chowdhury before the army-backed caretaker government took over in 2006. When Mohiuddin Chowdhury was arrested on March 7, 2007, Monzu was appointed the caretaker mayor. Since then, the relationship soured between the two and BNP took advantage of the situation and roped in Monzu on their side. The failure of BNP to field their own candidate was not unexpected because of the legendary inner feuding of BNP leaders in Chittagong. This was always a strength of their arch rival Awami League in Chittagong, who took the opportunity to capitalise on it. According to political analysts the failure of BNP to field its own candidate in this election was a proof of its political bankruptcy. As of now, none of the candidates has presented a manifesto for the voters. In 2005, Mohiuddin Chowdhury declared a forty point manifesto, containing a few which did not fall within the purview of the CCC (like extending the rail link from Dohazari to Cox's Bazar). Insiders say that this time they will be more

careful and stick to only those that are achievable and which will benefit the city dwellers. However, Mohiuddin has reiterated that he will transform Chittagong into Singapore. This is meaningless to one who was born and brought up in Chittagong and has seen it being systematically destroyed since the fifties in the name of urbanisation and industrialisation. No other city anywhere has industrial zones all around the, and nowhere were city developers so heartless and ruthless in destroying the natural and scenic beauty of this enchanting city. Chittagong's location is no less strategic than Singapore's, but national policy makers never realised it and failed to make any use of this. Ironically, there has been too much of politicking with the port, the lifeline of the country. Yes, everyone wants Chittagong to be economically developed with all necessary infrastructures in place, civic amenities ensured, water bodies preserved, canals excavated, and the ever disappearing hills and greenery protected. The establishing of a children's park in front of the majestic Circuit House in the city centre was the most villainous act in recent times. Who needs a swimming pool by bifurcating the historic Laldighi is still a mystery. The government has declared that Chittagong port will be a transit hub of the region; a gateway serving Eastern India, Bhutan, Nepal and Southern China. It is a landmark decision of the government, though it has been made into an election issue by the BNP while trying to promote its backed mayoral candidate Monzu with the archaic slogan that once the port facilities are given to others (read India) we will lose our sovereignty. Not discounting Monzur ul Alam Monzu's capability in giving a good fight in the coming election, Mohiuddin Chowdhury is standing on the threshold of being elected the mayor of Chittagong for the fourth consecutive term. If this happens it will be unparallel, though he still needs to beat the record of the legendary Nur Ahmed Chairman. Whoever wins this election Chittagong should remain as Chittagong with all its unique features with the planned development of the city undertaken. As Chittagonians we want this city to be a model city for others in the region, even surpassing Singapore within the shortest possible time. What Chittagong possess, Singapore does not. It has its own heart, spirit and soul. Let us not forget, Singapore is city of migrants. Huan Tsang, poet and traveller, described Chittagong as "a sleeping beauty emerging from mist and water." We may not have that Chittagong back but let us save what is left. Let Chittagong be Chittagong. Long Live Chittagong.

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Hartal and economic unfreedom

If we want the development of our society, under no circumstances should freedom be hampered. Let this idea of development and freedom dawn on us, especially on the politicians whom we send to the parliament to enhance, not restrict, the frontier of freedom.

ABDUL BAYES

MY first article on the adverse impacts of hartal appeared in this newspaper back in 1993. It would perhaps not be an exaggeration to say that the attempt was the first of its kind to calculate the economic costs of hartal. Later on, different agencies also followed the suit. My estimates showed that an 8-hour hartal, under some crude assumptions, cost about Tk.200 crores at the prevailing prices of that period (obviously it would be more now). To use the jargon of economics, the opportunity cost of a day's hartal was worth a Meghna bridge in 1993. This is just the tip of an iceberg -- only the loss of tangible output in money terms. If we think of human casualties and property damages during hartal, imputed value of the loss of students in academic institutions, the fear and mental agony among citizens etc., then the figure would surely shoot up very high. Of course, the proponents of hartal would argue that such economic loss could also arise even if there was no hartal -- from corruption, pollution of environment etc. The more hartals the better it is from that point of view. There is an overtly immature and childish "love and hate" game hovering around hartal in Bangladesh. Those in power hate it, knowing fully well that they used to love it once. They say that hartal harms the economy; that parliament, not the streets, is the best place for resolving differences. Those in opposition tend to love hartal, knowing fully well that they used to hate it while in power. In this case also the reasons are simple: it paves ways for bagging popular support against government; that their voices are not heard in the parliament; that people's socio-economic hardships add to the urgency of hartal. Then there is a group that "discovers" hartal as a constitutional right of citizens to ventilate their grievances. Pardon my ignorance, I am not aware of such provisions. All that I know is freedom of speech and action for every citizen

is enshrined in the constitution. Hartal is imposed to restrict people's movement, hence it cannot be construed as a constitutional right. Yes, it becomes a right only when people are free to accept or reject the call for hartal. I personally continue to hate hartal as I feel that it is a kind of economic unfreedom imposed upon the people by the so-called freedom loving politicians. To add meat to the argument, let me relate an episode of economic unfreedom cited by Amartya Sen in his seminal book: *Development as Freedom*. When the Nobel laureate was around ten and playing in the garden of their home incalled Dhaka, a man named Kader Mia came through the gate screaming pitifully and bleeding profusely; he had been knifed in the back by some communal thugs in largely Hindu area while he was coming to work. Kader Mia was rushed to the hospital by Sen's father and, on the way to hospital, said that his family had nothing to eat and he had to come out despite serious protest by his wife. The penalty of his economic unfreedom turned out to be death, which occurred later in the hospital. According to Amartya Sen, economic unfreedom in the form of extreme poverty can make a person a helpless prey in the violation of other forms of freedom. Had his family been able to survive without this little income, Kader Mia need not have to come to a hostile area. Economic unfreedom can breed social unfreedom, just as social or political unfreedom can also foster economic freedom. In fact, the freedom of economic transaction tends to be a great engine of growth. Kader Mia was killed by communal thugs. But we see that people are burnt in buses when the bus operates during hartal; office-goers are harassed on the way to work; poor rickshaw-pullers are beaten up and their rickshaw destroyed; shops are pelted to cause damage. Maybe there are many Kader Mias who come to work and, while returning home, lose their lives. A denial of opportunities of transaction,



Hartal: A right or a blight?

through arbitrary controls such as hartal, can be a source of unfreedom itself. People are then prevented from doing what can be taken to be - in the absence of compelling reason to the contrary -- something that is within their right to do. There was a time when such political programs paid dividends during our national struggles. But that dates back many years. Meantime, Bangladesh has emerged as an independent state. Over time, various economic reforms helped us gain on socio-economic fronts. The per capita national income is \$700 now. Reforms in the political culture are a long-awaited need. The party in power should always try to strengthen political institutions by injecting a sense of inclusion in the opposition. The opposition parties, on the other hand, should shun the traditional mode of airing their views and avoid the sense of seclusion from the government (shadow government). The responsibility of ensuring freedom for

the people lies squarely on both, as they have vowed to uphold people's freedom. I may agree with many of the arguments of the opposition, as I may also argue that there are many ways of ventilating political grievances besides undertaking programs like hartal. The non-monetary implications of hartal -- restricting others' freedom -- should top the agenda. The socio-political and economic efforts that we make every second of our lives are the means to an end called development. Freedom is a kind of development and, hence, an end in itself. But it can also be a means; fostering freedom implies attaining development on different scores. So if we want the development of our society, under no circumstances should freedom be hampered. Let this idea of development and freedom dawn on us, especially on the politicians whom we send to the parliament to enhance, not restrict, the frontier of freedom.

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Voices must be heard, words must be written

We believe, somewhere deep in our souls, that voices must be heard, words must be written and arguments must be shaped if pluralism is to survive and thrive.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THERE is a desperation which comes into the business of shutting down a newspaper. It is desperation which brings with it clear brush strokes of huge anger and inexplicable arrogance. When a government decides, in its questionable wisdom, that it is all right to dispense with a newspaper, that there are ways of forcing it off the stands, it does not quite convince people that it has learnt from history. In the post-modern society we are part, it is not expected that all of us will subscribe to the views of a newspaper or of a television channel. But all of us agree that there must be a diversity of views for the fundamental reason that we have little wish to see our democracy, or what passes for it, dwindle into illiberality bordering on the authoritarian. Democracies do not close doors. They open new windows and newer vistas. Elected governments do not suffer from a persecution complex. If they do, it is a social order that is threatened with chaos . . . because governments in such a state of mind go into doing all those things that take them farther and farther away from those they purport to govern. Which is why we think it was a bad move closing down Amar Desh. Which is why we do not agree that it was all right to shut down Channel 1. Which is also why we believe it is folly to suggest that television channels not have live talk shows. Which, again, is why we are convinced that putting Facebook out of action was as injudicious as it was precipitate. Yes, there are the many legalities that will be put on a platter by way of an explanation for the shutting down of newspapers and television channels. There will be all the inane points made about who has been a publisher and yet has not wanted to be. The more important point is that citizens do not buy these explanations. Worse is that other reality before us --- that when vindictiveness gets the better of good counsel in a government's handling of a media organization that rattles it night and day, all of us pay a price. What is a newspaper if it does not berate a government over its perceived flaws? A newspaper may not always be right. It may be prejudiced. It may be peddling monumental untruths. But all of that is for citizens to judge. Why must a newspaper get under the skin of a government? A government elected through the unprecedented support of a nation ought to be an entity superior to anything else we might have observed in this country. It must be above the fray. It must reach out to everyone, the objective being the creation of an inclusive society. Banning Amar Desh and proscribing Channel 1 (or outlawing Ekushey Television in BNP times) will not lead to the building of that inclusive society. It can only polarize people and fracture society. Worse, it will likely make a huge dent in the armour of the government. There is the past to fall back on. In the early 1950s, the Pakistani establishment clamped a ban on the Pakistan Observer. In the 1960s, Ayub Khan decreed a ban on the Ittefaq. Those moves did not work. Banning does not work, especially when a nation remains aware of the responsibilities it must perform. In the 1980s, the Ershad regime proffered 'advice' day after day to newspapers because it had little wish to have journalists get the upper hand in the struggle against autocracy. The 'advice' came to naught. In the old Pakistan days, the likes of Ayub Khan were left biting the dust. It was the Observer and Ittefaq that lived to tell the tale. Much haemorrhaging comes into a society when newspapers are put out of circulation. It is a truth the Awami League must know, through remembering the condemnation it earned in early 1975 when the government it presided over shut down all newspapers save four. Thought cannot be muzzled. Speech is never to be threatened with censorship. The principle of diversity of opinion (and there will be opinion that will rile many of us), when it is cast to the winds, can only lead to a stagnation of the imagination. And then things could take on a more sinister hue: they might push a government into the defensive and eventually into a corner. Which is why we are with those who believe in democratic liberalism. We believe, somewhere deep in our souls, that voices must be heard, words must be written and arguments must be shaped if pluralism is to survive and thrive. Let Amar Desh and Channel 1 re-emerge in all their vigour, the better to strengthen our hold on our right to be ourselves.

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