

Let the DAP be implemented in full

No compromise on its essential details, please!

THE good news is that we now have before us a gazette notification approving the detailed area plan (DAP) for the nation's capital. We are convinced that if and when the plan is implemented, citizens will derive unadulterated advantage from it. This we say with a caveat, though. The minister of state for housing and public works, who was vocal about dealing harshly with land grabbers only the other day, now appears to have taken a step backward. The government, he now says, will adopt a soft stance regarding DAP in certain instances. He also informs us that the authorities might have to accept violations of land-related laws where necessary. Such statements on the part of a functionary of the state cannot but cause grave worries, especially when we are all faced with the reality of how Dhaka has been losing its appeal and indeed its character over the years because of the exploitative way in which it has been 'developed'.

There is little question that the capital, which is engaged in an observance of its 400th anniversary, is in need of breathing space. We as citizens of Dhaka and with us everyone else in regions outside Dhaka have long felt that in order to be made habitable and modern, the city is in need of strategic planning on the part of the authorities. To our mind, a move toward such action has now been manifested in the DAP. The steps proposed in it by the group of experts assigned to formulate the plan are surely a reflection of citizens' concerns about the welfare of the city. A relocation of toxic and heavy industries away from Dhaka, together with a restoration of flood flow zones through reclaiming them from housing projects as well as other rehabilitation-oriented steps are praiseworthy. We believe that such a plan will be instrumental in neutralizing the entrenched problems Dhaka has for decades suffered from. The solution to these problems, be it noted, must come from within. They will not come from an unbridled expansion of the city outward.

Which is why it is critically important that the DAP be implemented in full. It is our considered opinion, one we share with the larger body of citizens, that giving any kind of space to those who have contributed to the deterioration of the physical features of the city will most surely defeat the purpose of the DAP. A softly-softly approach may in effect lay the entire exercise waste. Such a position, if not discarded right now, can only be seen as compromising before those who have illegally grabbed land in and around the city and who, in these past few weeks, have been intimidating the government on the issue. The point is simple, clear and without ambiguity: reclaiming Dhaka from the robber barons who have long feasted on it is a job the authorities must not shy away from.

We strongly urge the government to put in place the machinery responsible for a judicious and swift implementation of the DAP. The machinery must include the relevant agencies as well as the experts who have formulated the DAP for it is the latter who can constantly monitor the working out of the plan. Let there be a time frame within which the recommendations of the DAP will be fulfilled.

In recent times, environmentalists, the judiciary and broad civil society have all been vocal about a need to preserve the landscape in Dhaka and elsewhere. Let that concern not be marred by any lenient approach toward any quarter whatsoever.

BCL excesses take an unbearable turn

How such offences can go unpunished?

ADMISSION trade by Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) activists has gone to such an extent that now different factions of this student wing are at each other's throat in claiming their stakes from the college administration in different districts. They have roughed up college principals in Pabna and Bogra and pressured the college administration at the Hatia Government College Noakhali to have students of their choice admitted into those colleges flouting all laws and rules. In consequence, the process of admission in those colleges has been put on hold to the utter dismay of the admission-seekers. And the outraged teachers in one of those colleges have gone on an indefinite strike protesting the assault on the principal of that institution.

But what is the government or the ruling party doing to stop such heinous activities committed by the different factions of BCL? Earlier, the prime minister herself assured us that law would not spare anybody irrespective of their political identities. But all we have seen is in the face of hooliganism, rent-seeking, tender business, interference in the employment process, violent feuding among student factions, the Awami League leaders from time to time ostensibly distanced themselves from such student factions. And it was also said that in the spirit of the amendment to the Representation of People's Order (RPO), the Awami League would not have any link with its student front.

Such stand on the part of Awami League was appreciable. But being the ruling party are they not also obliged to rein the in the student bodies that are claiming their allegiance to it (the ruling party)? But so far, no serious effort to that end could be noticed.

And when it comes to government's intervention to discipline rowdy student factions, it is also not enough to tell the police to work without fear or favour. They must also ensure that the police act in a free and fair manner.

It is against the background of such half-hearted approach to contain student excesses that new manifestations of student tyranny are now coming to light further damaging the credibility of the government. The upshot of such undue pressure on the college administrations is that the normal process of admission is being stymied. The ultimate victims of such interference in the day-to-administration of the educational institutions are the students. Another casualty is academic merit. One wonders where such mess-ups in the educational administration would finally end up!

The ruling party or the government for that matter should put its foot down in the matter and ensure that the rowdy BCL elements vitiating educational atmosphere are arrested and awarded exemplary punishment so that such incidents may not be repeated elsewhere. And neither the authority of the government, nor that of the educational administrations can be allowed in this manner to be diluted by the nefarious activities of a bunch of hooligans passing for student activists.



BNP fortunes turning around?

Wake up call

Most crucially, what is apparent is that while the voters may have rejected BNP in 2008, this does not mean that the party is permanently discredited to the point where people won't vote for it again.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

WELL, well, well. For the past six months all I have heard from AL-ers is that things are not as bad as the media is making it seem, and that, what's more, the people remain happy with the AL government.

They would point to poll results from last December which showed that, a year into its tenure, the government did indeed remain quite popular with the general public, and hint at internal polls which supposedly suggested that the support level had remained high since then.

To the outside observer, this always seemed unlikely. The state of the nation has deteriorated markedly in the past six months, with, among many other failings, the power and water crises becoming more acute, and with no evidence that any real relief is in sight.

But what did the voters think? Were they comforted that things were on the right track, and confident that, given the time, the government would rise to the challenge?

Or were they fed up with a year and a half of inaction, and concerned that the government did not seem to be taking the steps necessary to improve things in future?

The Chittagong mayoral election has thus provided us with a sneak peek at voter satisfaction -- at least in the country's second largest city -- and the results could not have been encouraging for the government.

AL-backed mayor, A.B.M. Mohiuddin Chowdhury, who had been in power for 17 years, including being elected and re-elected with BNP at the helm of the national government, was unceremoniously dumped from office by a margin of over 95,000 or over 10% of the total.

It was a shock result. Most on-lookers, myself included, thought that Mohiuddin was untouchable. If he could win re-election when BNP was in power, how could he lose under an AL government?

Now, of course, the AL spin-doctors are already suggesting that Mohiuddin's loss had nothing to do with the popularity of the party at the national level.

Mohiuddin had been in office for 17

years. He had become arrogant and out of touch. He had alienated too many of his core constituencies. He was unpopular within the Chittagong AL. The people of Chittagong wanted a change. Et cetera.

There is no doubt that there is some small measure of truth to all this. But it would be profound folly on the part of the AL to think that the Chittagong results are not in any way a reflection of public opinion on the government's performance.

To be sure, the BNP's vice chairman has written that the election result is a ringing endorsement of the BNP's conduct as a political party over the last 18 months, showing that delusion is alive and well on both sides of the political aisle.

But the lesson for the AL is clear. Those within the party who think that all is well and that the party has everything under control need to put down the crack-pipe and take serious stock of the situation.

Most crucially, what is apparent is that while the voters may have rejected BNP in 2008, this does not mean that the party is permanently discredited to the point where people won't vote for it again.

As unpopular as BNP was in 2008 after five shambolic years in office, if AL does not deliver, it will be voted out of office in 2013 and BNP will be returned to power, regardless of how compromised the party may seem today.

AL now has 3 1/2 years to sort things out. It now knows what the price of continued

inaction or under-performance will be.

And, might I point out that in light of the fact that the party may well be tossed out of office at the next elections, all of its targeting of opponents and other petty power plays look even more foolish.

It is bad enough to crack down on your opponents like that when you think you will rule forever, but it is sheer idiocy to do so when it looks like you might get the bum's rush in a few years time.

But if the voters were sick of AL in 2001 and sick of BNP in 2008, and starting to get sick of AL again, then the more interesting point is that they might be more willing then ever before to countenance something new.

It is clear that neither of the two parties really speaks to the aspirations of the people. They are willing to vote for the party that they dislike less, and are mature enough that they will and do vote for the lesser of two evils, whoever they deem that to be at any given moment in time (usually the party out of power).

But the real lesson in these swings is that they are clearly unsatisfied with the choices on offer. Either of the main parties could and should try to address this need.

If they do not, the ground for a new party or candidate to try and harness this discontent with politics as usual has clearly been laid. Is there anybody out there?

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2014

First, there could be a move towards economic protectionism and political nationalism, sharpening the events between 2014 and 2018 towards a confrontation between the US and China. Second, it could move towards international cooperation.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

FOR those who believe that history repeats itself, here comes a scholarly work that adds prognosis to prediction. Cambridge professor Nicholas Boyle writes in his book 2014 - How to survive the next world crisis that the year 2014 is going to set the tone for rest of this century. Nation states will cede place to global governance, and what will make or break the future of the world is going to depend on how American leaders react to the emerging crisis.

The trouble, professor Boyle warns, will start with financial turmoil. Then one thing leading to another, it will turn into a fullblown crisis that can be resolved either way. If mishandled, it could throw the world into chaos. If wisely managed, the rest of the century could see prosperity and growth.

So, the future of the world hangs in the balance, depending on the events of the next four years. Professor Boyle gives an account of the preceding five centuries to make his point. For example, in 1517

Martin Luther nailed his thesis to the door of Wittenburg church, sparking the Reformation and the rise of Protestantism. A century later, 1618 marked the start of the 30 Years War and decades of religious conflict in Western Europe, which ended with the establishment of the Hanoverians in 1715.

It was in 1815 that the enlightened Congress of Vienna took place following Napoleon's defeat, bringing a century of relative calm and stability across Europe. Who does not know that the First World War broke out in 1914, a catastrophic conflict that claimed millions of lives and ignited the fire of international discords that burned throughout the 20th century!

Then the Cambridge professor gives the punchline of his philosophy of history; the world's understanding of America and America's understanding of itself will be the crux of the century. The recent economic collapse is unlikely to heal. Instead, it could lead to wider breakdown in international relations. What is true for a home is also true for rest of the world. Good leadership will keep both out of danger.

More than sixty years ago, George Orwell had stunned the world with his dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four. It was a futuristic work that saw the world in the grip of a totalitarian regime where life would be dominated by perpetual war, pervasive government surveillance, public mind control, and the voiding of citizens' rights. It was an ideological interpretation of history, its course paved by the burgeoning force of human conviction.

But Boyle's work sits on the fence, leaving the outcome in history's hand. Whether it will be a dystopian or utopian world largely hinges on the choice of the American leaders. His best bet is that history repeats itself. What happened for the last five centuries is going to happen again. "If a century is going to have a character it is going to become apparent by the time it is approaching 20 years old, the same is true of human beings," he writes.

In the five centuries of his illustration, the crucial years are 18, 17, 15 and 14, and that he arrived at the 14th year of the 21st century as the turning point is more inference than calculation. He draws parallels between Germany's rise circa 1910 and China, which is similarly squaring up to the modern era's leading superpower, the USA. America will have to come to terms with the rising powers of Asia as they approach parity by 2014.

At this point Boyle claims there could be one of the two likely scenarios. First, there

could be a move towards economic protectionism and political nationalism, sharpening the events between 2014 and 2018 towards a confrontation between the US and China. Second, it could move towards international cooperation.

It may sound iconoclastic when the professor tells us that the world needs a system of "imperial global regulation, if the 21st century is to be one of relative peace." The idea of sovereign nation states, which is an American invention, will have to be replaced with global governance. He does not mince words when he says in whose hands the rein of that governance should be.

The fear is that the effects of a prolonged economic downturn could restore an aggressive, Bush-like figure to the US presidency. Hence, the United States will have to learn how to share with others the world's resources and its own standards of living, which Britain had failed to do in 1914. Boyle's prescription is as pronounced as his prediction. "The only conceivably peaceful route to that goal is through a continuation of the pax Americana," he argues.

History repeats itself, which means what has happened will happen again. But it also means what goes up comes down, and the American century might begin afresh or come to an end.

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