

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

What's in a name, if the voice is fresh?

AT the outset, I am tempted to recall a Swami Vivekananda anecdote as follows: A brick was seen on a road and as walkers passed it by, none cared to even look at it, let alone remove it for pedestrian convenience. But when a man stumbled over it hurting

himself, people took notice of the incident bending over him in sympathy. The obstacle was removed by a collective decision underlining the virtue of organisation in human affairs. That is the essence of the story; in detail though, I may stand corrected.

An organisation styled Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Human Rights (CMDHR) has been floated since last Monday. It has a 22-member convening committee with Barrister Rafique-ul Huq as convenor, and former organising secretary, Awami League, Mahmudur Rahman Manna, as its member-secretary.

Its name speaks for its aims in broad strokes; it's wedded to establishing and protecting democracy and human rights. Introducing itself as neutral and non-partisan, the body will point out faults of the government and political parties and protest injustice, irregularity and corruption, shoulder-to-shoulder with civil society leaders. At the same time, it will exert organised pressure on and provide informed directional advice to political parties, both ruling and opposition. To this end, they will organise research, seminars, rallies, and if necessary, public hearing.

Interestingly but prematurely, the organisation is being claimed as political platform, even as a political organisation. At this embryonic stage, it sounds more like a citizens' body, or a citizens' platform, of course, with a political temper.

We have a broad spectrum civil society but a divided and politicised one. We have professionally brilliant and apolitical segment of intelligentsia and a crop of eminent citizens without political bias. They are only biased against leadership that provides bad governance and confrontation leading the nation to an uncertain and unstable future. So, there is potential for a powerful citizens' platform to emerge.

If the Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Human Rights can be the nucleus of a broader platform then the purpose with which it has modestly begun will have been served. But we have a history of failed national citizens' committees or platforms. These, because of their inherently

assorted composition with disparate elements having no glue to hold them together, fizzled out before making the impact they had envisioned.

So, that is the stake the new platform begins with, except for the fact that the political brinkmanship of two of our top leaders has never been as much of a cliffhanger as anytime before.

Democracy, equitable and self-owned economic dispensation are all about multiple voices coming into play as a coherent body of policies grounded in patriotism and self-belief in our future. So the emergence of a new voice is always welcome.

Conventional politics being party and leader centered,

diversity of opinion finds little scope for utterance and ventilation. Fresh and constructive voices finding resonance with the youth are muffled in old fashioned politics.

There is a duality in our public psyche. On the one hand, we clamour for a change in tone, temper and

texture of politics; on the other, we have a way relapsing into the old mould as if hypnotised by the tune of the Pied Piper of Hameline.

We hardly join a new initiative, and in the process, what happens is the old order gets reinforced, revitalised and restrengthened as though with a new lease of life.

Driven by clarity of purpose and aims, intelligible vision for future, and the right conglomeration of people, the CMDHR can make a difference. People will have to feel drawn to its philosophy, which must be transparent and constructive.

To be a moral force to reckon with, it must act as conscientious objector, rather as the mirror-image of public conscience, in its thoughts and deeds. This may be a tall order, given our profiling and branding traits, but not unachievable if they are a determined, gritty lot.

While welcoming the new body, may we suggest that it better not view its role or potential as being confined to rallying public opinion behind a certain set of causes or reeling criticism of the government and the opposition. Or indeed, articulate an alternative voice.

Even though these are important objectives in themselves, the new platform can play a mediator's role between the government and the opposition giving them dispassionate and objective feedbacks as to where they stand and how they could communicate for a better tomorrow.

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CHAD J. SHAFFER

Power of cities and division of Dhaka

M. SHAHIDUL ISLAM
\$10,000 (in purchasing power parity terms) before half of the population lives in the cities, as highlighted in the Growth Commission Report 2010.

Against this backdrop it is quite disheartening to see the division of Dhaka. The prime minister defended the split saying that "the move will help serve the people better." According to the government "Dhaka city has expanded greatly. Population of the city is increasing every day. But people are not getting proper services." Is this really a convincing argument to divide Dhaka?

Is higher population density a bar to governing cities or offering basic services to

poor governance and institutional weakness. A recent roundtable organised by *The Daily Star* observed that the uncertainty in implementing the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) is pushing Dhaka city towards a disaster.

The successive governments have failed to provide even basic infrastructure to the citizens. Bangladesh, that now has an economy worth of over \$100 billion in real exchange rate terms (over quarter \$1 trillion in purchasing power parity term), has one of Asia's worst infrastructures.

So, the problem of Dhaka (or other key cities) is not high population density. It is the sheer failure of governance. Instead of focusing on supply-side constraints, the division of Dhaka city is something like cutting off the head as a cure for headache!

Dhaka today is at a crossroad for various reasons. It is growing fast but breeding chaos and crime. The focus should be on transforming Dhaka into a modern city, not on splitting the existing one. It is not about the size of the administration to govern the city, it's all about effective governance.

Given the long-term economic decline of Pakistan, only Dhaka has the potential to become an influential city in South Asia, along with major cities of India. The division will lessen its importance as far as the region's geo-politics is concerned.

The history of Dhaka dates back to the 7th century. Since then, Dhaka has played a key role in formation of today's Bangladesh. Dhaka's division, undermining its

immense economic



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citizens, or scarcity of land a barrier to growth? Not really. The economic merits of density are profound. According to the World Development Report 2009, "half the world's production fits onto less than 5% of its land, an area smaller than Algeria. Tokyo, the world's largest city, is home to a quarter of Japan's population, but stands on just 4% of its land. Cairo produces more than half of Egypt's GDP, using just 0.5 percent of its area."

I have not seen a single ranking that shows Dhaka as one of the top ten or even twenty densely populated cities in the world. However, there are rankings that show that Dhaka is the second or third least liveable city in the world. This is largely due to

potential, without any convincing reason is a setback for its 15 million inhabitants as well as for the nation. Given the consistent poor record of governance it is very unlikely that the divide will offer any tangible economic benefits, including better service delivery. The decision should be reversed before it creates much chaos and prevents Dhaka from being an influential city that will not only cater to the economic and other needs of the nation but will also stand tall, wielding its geo-political importance in the region.

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How many more lives will stalking cost?

MAMUNUR RASHID

FREEDOM fighter Zinnat Ali could never have thought of such a tragic end to his life. He was a senior school teacher and a modest person according to the people who knew him at Barisal. Most notably, he was a freedom fighter who fought bravely for the liberation of the country. But that reputation did not help him from not being murdered. What was his fault? He stood against and protested the stalking of his teenage daughter. But stalker Rupam Dey Anik and his friends did not like this act of bravery and stabbed him to death. He even phoned Zinnat Ali's daughter to be sure whether her father had died or not after the incident.

What the hell is happening around us? Is anybody listening? Is there nobody to protect innocent lives? Are members of the police sleeping? The most unwanted or saddest part of the incident is the failure of the law-enforcing agency to save his life. Rupam had been stalking the girl for the last few months, against which Zinnat Ali warned him several times. In response the stalker threatened to kill him. To take the shelter of law, Zinnat Ali made a General Diary (GD) to the Kaunia Thana. But the responsible officers of that thana did not respond to the GD. Had the police acted in time, his life could have been saved.

The whole world, including Bangladesh, is now observing the sixteen days of activism campaign to protest violence against women. It started from the International Day to End Violence against Women on November 25 and will continue up to December 10. Various activities are arranged to draw attention to the need for continuing action to eliminate violence against women, including sexual harassment.

The idea is to sensitise common people to protest and take initiatives against violence against women. The campaign started with a grand launching, but one might wonder whether it can bring about any change at all. Is there anyone really paying attention or rising to the occasion? Media is giving coverage to the events; NGOs are spending money to organise various programmes, but what is the ultimate result?

In the first 10 months of this year, more than thirty girls committed suicide after being harassed and five were killed. Twelve men were killed and one hundred and sixty injured, and 33 women suffered injuries by the stalkers as a result of protesting against stalking during the same period. However, the government still has not made a separate law against sexual harassment. Even though the government has empowered mobile courts to prosecute stalkers and the High Court has given directives to protect women and girls from sexual harassment, violent sexual harassment of women and girls remain at a high level.

We do not know for how long such incidents will take place. Sexual harassment of women and girls is an age-old phenomenon and conscious effort and movement against it started only a few years ago. Today, many individuals and organisations are coming forward to protest, though the impact is not always positive. Many of the protesters have had to sacrifice their valuable lives. On the contrary, the offenders move freely because they often get support from political forces or local musclemen.

The state sometimes acts positively and takes scattered initiatives when the incidents rise dramatically or come into the limelight. However, in normal times, what we see is mere silence and ineffectiveness of the state machinery. As a result, such incidents continue to happen again and again.

The only alternative left is to build a united social movement and protest. When the whole society (the progressive part of course!) joins the movement to create social protection net, that will make the stalkers afraid. Social initiatives are a must as we need to hit the root cause -- the perception and attitude of the people to consider women as second to men. We need to stop considering girls as sex objects. So let us rise to the cause! Let no more lives suffer such a tragic end.

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