

The great partition of Dhaka city

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THE great divide of our historic Dhaka city into two parts is finally happening; the legislature has approved the ordinance for the division. Barring any miraculous court orders nullifying the legislation, for which the courts have been moved, soon there will be two cities although we do not know what they will be called. People like us who had spent their childhood and youth in good old Dhaka will not know what new name our part of the old city will bear. Will they be simply called South and North, or will they be christened with some names?

Do we care what the names will be? All we know is that the Dhaka that we knew and grew up with, the city that the world was familiar with, will no longer be the same with any other name. I know any comments on this division are post facto, crying in the wilderness, or more proverbially crying over spilled milk. Nonetheless, I would like to cry. I would like to register my protest as an ex-citizen of Dhaka, albeit from thousands of miles away.

We have been told that the division of Dhaka was mandated by poor services to the citizens. We have been further told that this was necessary to make city life better with improved sanitation, water supply, road conditions, transportation, and what have you. A divided Dhaka will make the average citizen's life much superior with enhanced and faster services -- the services that they do not have now. Let us pause for a second to reflect

on the promises in these hypotheses.

Dhaka City Corporation has been in existence for over three decades now, turning from a Municipality that was created hundred and fifty years ago. From a small urban centre of a few square kilometers in 1900 with about a hundred thousand people, the city is nearly 1,530 sq. km in size now, with an estimated population of about 12 million. As one of the top 11 megacities, Dhaka is probably the fastest growing in the world. It is projected that by 2025 eight of the ten megacities will be in Asia with Dhaka ranked fourth, following closely on the heels of Tokyo, Bombay and Delhi.

How do you manage urban services for this burgeoning population without first tackling and planning to accommodate this growth? Is it by splitting the city into two halves, or by augmenting resources



WAHID ADNAN/ DRIKNEWS

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of the people who manage the services, and handing them the authority to do so?

The key challenges that Dhaka faces are not posed by incorporation of the city as a single entity. The other ten megacities of the world, including those in our neighboring country (such as

Kolkata and Mumbai), continue to remain a single corporation and they continue to provide urban services to their citizenry as one city corporation. However, the challenges that Dhaka faces, unlike other cities, come from other sources. These are the city's unfortunate location -- being virtually surrounded by rivers that limit expansion -- its population density, and impossible traffic.

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While defending the decision to split

Dhaka our prime minister reportedly made comments that such divisions "to improve urban services" had taken place in other major cities of the world such as London, Melbourne, Sidney, Manila, etc. To put things in the correct perspective we should point out that London City was not divided by any legislation. London has two parts; City of London, and Greater London. The City of London is a small area (2.9 km) within Greater London, England. It is the historic core of London around which the modern London grew, and it has held city status since time immemorial. The City's boundaries have remained almost unchanged since the Middle Ages, and it is now only a tiny part of the metropolis of London, though it remains a notable part of central London. Greater London is the top-level administrative subdivision covering London. Melbourne and Sidney to my knowledge do not have divided city corporations; both cities are run by elected city corporations headed by mayors (called Lord Mayors).

We should not be looking at these cities for comparison in any case; they are far above our league. We should look at the nearest cities that have problems comparable to our own -- such as Kolkata and Mumbai -- and see how the corporations in these cities provide services to their citizens. The problems Dhaka's citizens face are not likely to be resolved by this Great Divide. We will probably render them twice in magnitude.

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America's blunders with the forces of change

RUBY AMATULLA

THE excitement that came with the fall of Mubarak on February 11 has been extinguished, with the Egyptian army's continuously regressive activities in the recent months. Some 12,000 civilians have been summarily tried in military courts. The presence of the international community has been curtailed, while human rights and democracy activists have been harassed, jailed, and tortured. A 22-point set of supra-constitutional terms has been introduced in order to control the election and the entire transitional process, dictating constitutional terms.

On top of this, ruthless crackdowns on peaceful protesters and now holding an election that is seriously flawed -- Egypt's National Council for Human Rights says it has received 391 reports of "voting irregularities" -- all these serious failures reminiscent of the Mubarak regime should remind American policymakers that the system it helped to sustain for over 30 years is simply wrong and unsustainable.

America has invested heavily in elites and militaries of a region that has repressed its people for decades. It is long overdue that America attend to its fiduciary responsibility to help the region gain freedom. Only then can America reclaim its leadership.

Egypt is the leader and trailblazer of the region. Whatever happens now will reverberate throughout the Middle East and North Africa. If a constructive and peaceful transition does not occur in Egypt, the ensuing volatility will affect the entire global economy and create a deep quagmire for America and its relations with Muslim-majority societies.

In the new environment of the Middle East and North Africa, rapid economic development and social progress are a must. Long-repressed societies governed by autocratic rule have led to widespread despair. A vast and fast-growing young generation -- with 65% 30 years old or younger -- remains frustrated with the way their societies have been mismanaged. Rapid economic development is critical in order for the region to find a way out from this dangerous volatility.

A legitimate due process and the impartial rule of law of a democratic system help to integrate diverse societies, even if they are divided or prone to conflict. This is a

precondition for rapid economic development.

To establish such a well-balanced democratic system, the constitution is a critical root. This function should not be left only to newly elected representatives, who are often inexperienced and driven by political power struggles. America certainly blundered in Iraq in 2005 when it left the drafting process of the constitution exclusively to newly elected representatives, stoking a high dose of sectarian conflicts of interest, and thus producing a constitution that is a recipe for disintegration of the nation.

If a UN-endorsed international team of experts had worked with representatives to set terms such that all three major unequal ethnic groups were made indispensable in Iraqi governance, and if it had established a delicate balance between provincial and national governments via an accountable bicameral legislature, Iraq would have been

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integrated and the world perhaps would have witnessed a democratic power in the region. This blunder should not be repeated in Egypt.

Whenever America pursues quick fixes -- pursuing undue advantages and sacrificing long-term solutions -- it pays for the ensuing wrongs. Countless lives are lost, and hundreds of billions if not trillions of dollars are drained from the American treasury. The only winner is the military-industrial complex, and the losers are the people on all sides.

If America had not ousted democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953 and put the Shah in power, perhaps the entire region could have become democratic, stable, and progressive. Oppressive "theocracy" could never have come to Iran -- a nation that had been struggling for democracy since 1906 -- if self-rule had been firmly estab-

lished in 1953. By destroying a burgeoning democracy in a critical region, America created a vacuum of legitimacy conveniently replaced by counterproductive factors and forces. As another example, terrorism and extremism could never have found safe haven in Afghanistan if a legitimate and accountable government had been established after the Soviets were driven out in 1989.

Vested interests too often manufacture a sense of extreme insecurity and vulnerability in order to instill public fear. This enables them to extract huge amounts of taxpayer money to conduct counterproductive affairs, and allows them to block any reasonable diplomatic resolution. As a result, most of the money lands in the pockets of vested interests on all sides.

Similar rhetoric of vulnerability and fear is currently being spouted by elite and military governments throughout the Middle East and North Africa, including Egypt. Due to fears about religious extremists that endanger petrodollars, these regimes are pursuing Western governments to allow them to maintain their "secure" grip on power. The reality, however, is far from rhetoric or fear. The bedrock of the Arab Spring involves essential democratic ideals such as liberty and pluralism.

History is testament to the fact that even extremists and rebels become polished politicians and bureaucrats under pressures of democratic systems that demand performance, transparency, and accountability. In the long run, American investment in a genuinely impartial rule of law can compel these extreme elements towards moderation.

This is a rare historic opportunity for America to regain its leadership in the world. If America could help the region to transform and to become successful, it could set a new paradigm of constructive engagements with the Muslim world. One-fifth of humanity -- expected to be one-third by the year 2100 -- consists of majorities in more than 50 different countries that control 76% of the oil reserves of the world. The world will be enormously better off if these two indispensable camps of humanity engage constructively, with trust and with goodwill. Wisdom should prevail on America to turn around.

The writer is Executive Director, US-based Muslims for Peace, Justice and Progress.

10 bizarre news alerts



YOU can't imagine the kind of stuff we are given to work with Aiyeeah. It's tough being a reporter in Asia. No one tells you anything. Usually. But police officers in Hong Kong, after being criticised, have suddenly gone to the opposite extreme, I hear from a reporter friend named

Samantha. "We're being inundated," she said.

1) "Insect found" was one of the first alerts to the city's media after the new policy was introduced. Samantha said: "We neglected to follow up exactly what kind of insect would warrant a report to police and it's bugged me ever since."

2) "Child birth," said a bulletin soon afterwards. Samantha said: "Er, doesn't this happen every day?"

3) "Insane person found," said a third one. (No, it wasn't me.)

4) Samantha and her colleagues noticed one particular news alert popping up regularly from the bar districts in the middle of the night: "Drunk person." Given the time and place, "is this really a surprise?" she asked.

To the staff at the Police Public Relations Bureau in Hong Kong: er, thanks. We appreciate the thought.

This new policy has made Hong Kong official news the opposite of the system in mainland China, where the biggest stories are often missed.

During the violent break-up of student protests around Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 4th, 1989, I looked up the Chinese government's news-wire service. "Flower Show Opens" was the top story.

Negative news from China used to often be astonishingly late. I once got an alert saying something like this: "Breaking news: Panic was seen as a massive earthquake hit the northwestern region of Songpan two months ago, or perhaps late the year before."

These days, China news announcements are no longer months or years late, but often leave questions unanswered. Like the recent one about a corrupt official caught stealing "2.1 billion yuan in cash." How could he carry so much money? He would have needed a sack the size of a bus. Was that how he was caught? "Excuse me, sir, what's in that huge sack you're blocking the street with?" "Just a few personal effects, officer."

In South Asia, crime reports have a calm tone, however bizarre their contents. Typical police media alerts are like this:

2035 hrs: Petty thief steals bicycle.

2140 hrs: Four million people come to the village to worship a cow allegedly producing divine dung which cures deadly diseases.

2200 hrs: Quiet night, nothing unusual, so police closed station early.

At least Asian news is entertaining, unlike Western news. Here are two real police alerts from the US earlier this year.

The Star Tribune of Minnesota published this: "Police report. Medina. Suspicious activity. A resident of 2400 block of Holy Name Drive called police to report that somebody rang the doorbell, however, no one was there."

And here's one from the Stowe Reporter of Vermont: "At 7:46 pm, a woman on Valemont Road reported some inappropriate behaviour on her Facebook page."

No wonder Americans watch movies so much. Real life must be so dull.

Samantha and I were discussing press announcements via email when a fresh Hong Kong police news alert popped up on her screen. It said: "Overcooking" Pok Hong Estate, Tin Sun, 1540 hrs."

Amazing. If this is now a crime, surely all British people should be immediately rounded up and jailed?

"Police better not come to my house then: my cooking's terrible," she admitted.

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