

CROSS TALK

Holding polls for divided DCC

Reconstitution of EC is the prime task

The Election Commission (EC) has expressed its inability to hold the polls for the deconstructed Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) on the ground that its tenure in office will come to an end in the second half of February 2012.

Since the elections have to be held within 90 days of the enactment of the law to divide DCC, the incumbent EC holds the view that it will be hard pressed for time to do the job.

The EC's position on starting the preparatory work for holding the DCC elections arises from the precipitation of the present situation over the splitting of the DCC. And the EC's reservations about taking up the job within the time it has at its disposal is a point that merits consideration.

Given the scenario, the task of holding elections for the divided DCC, or any election for that matter, will practically devolve on the new EC to be reconstituted in February, 2012.

In the circumstances, reconstitution of the new EC becomes the pressing task before the incumbent Awami League (AL)-led government. Though there is very little time in hand, the government has not taken any visible step to form the new EC.

The issue has taken an added importance, especially after scrapping of the caretaker system of government (CTG) in June 2011. Now the onus of creating the congenial condition for holding a fair and credible election for the upcoming 10th Jatiya Sangsad (JS) lies on a reconstituted, fully independent EC. All the political parties have a common stake in getting an appropriately constituted EC in place.

The prime task before the incumbent government will therefore be to start the process of forming the next EC taking all the parties including the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) into confidence. Actually, how the EC is formed and with what degree of independence is an acid test for the government in terms of its sincerity and seriousness about holding a credible election.

HC rule welcome on unauthorized advertising

Bring illegal housing projects to end

The High Court's recent ban on advertisement of unauthorized housing projects in print and electronic media is a move in the right direction. Slick advertisements in media have been a way with the real estate companies for courting clients regardless of the questionable nature of their land acquisition.

In an earlier rule in June 2011, the High Court declared illegal as many as 77 private housing projects and directed the government to bring down all under-construction buildings, and stop all earth-filling and plot-selling activities undertaken by real estate companies. The government, all too predictably, did nothing to address this.

Housing projects, needless to say, are of vital public concern what with the shrinking accommodation facilities in urban areas compounded with over-population. The growing demand for housing is being cashed in on by unscrupulous real estate companies who commit the even grosser crime of raising building on grabbed land, most of it being public land.

It is worthwhile to note that legal housing projects are outstripped three times the number of those of the illegal ones. Many fraudulent housing projects are alleged to have made their clients into paupers. As they operate outside the ambit of legal framework, their failure to comply with the BNBC, Dhaka Mahanagar Building Rule' 2008 and Real Estate Management and Development Act 2010, among others, is not accounted for.

In order to protect public interest and ensure business ethics in a vital sector, the government must act promptly to bring illegal housing projects to heel in line with the HC

The tale of a splitting city



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

AT Yahweh's command Moses held his staff out over the water and throughout the night a strong east wind divided the

Red Sea so that the Israelites could flee from the pursuing Egyptians. Something like that also happened last week when a strong political wind swept over this country and parted its capital into two separate municipalities. Lucky you and me! Born in one, we are going to die in two cities!

Once again, our divided nation is divided over yet another division. The prime minister understands it. She told us that she didn't divide the city but only its administration. In good humour she also asked if the city were divided how come nobody showed her the crack yet. Her opponents have their own take on it. They claim she has done it on purpose so that her party could keep one of the two mayoral seats, if not both.

Two different city corporations are eventually going to create two different cities, because partition is an idea that goes to its logical conclusion. It starts with having separate cooking arrangements in the same kitchen, and then gradually ends up splitting a family. That is how uncles have separated from our fathers. That is how we have separated from our brothers.

But is that an issue? Nothing is wrong if two smaller cities can work better than one monolith. The LRGD minister has already explained the benefit of this bifurcation. He said the reason why DCC was being divided is to bring the services to the doorsteps of its people. No need to go to the government; it will come to you.

The problem is that it doesn't sound very convincing to us. Remember erstwhile East Pakistan, when this country was divided into 16



JOHN COLETTI

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districts? After independence, we have divided those sixteen into sixty-four districts. We have also divided police precincts to set up more police stations. Is the country more efficient now? Has the law and order situation improved? Hand on heart, who can claim that our country is performing better than before?

When the nucleus of an atom splits into smaller parts, it releases a tremendous amount of energy. Perhaps it is a similar idea that also propels the imagination of our political minds. Perhaps they believe splitting of a territory will release sufficient energy so that each part will be better man-

aged than the whole. What they don't know is that while every sphere of control has its optimum level, slicing up the sphere doesn't necessarily get the optimum level of control.

We all know Dhaka is still going to be one undivided landmass like this country has been since it was cut up into so many districts. So, we are still going to live in one seamless city, its pollution, traffic congestion, heat and dust remaining pretty much the same as before. The garbage will still pile up in front of our homes. The streets will still be potholed, and hawkers will encroach on sidewalks.

It is also possible that the two

halves will compete. The north will be encouraged to create a Gulistan in the heart of Gulshan. The south will be hard-pressed to catch up and erect more high-rise buildings so that Babu Bazaar can look like Banani. Then, of course, the government will hire more people to staff two city corporations. They will vie with each other over how best who can emulate whose best practice in corruption.

The LGRD minister, as if to justify DCC partition, has announced that 20 more city corporations would be created in the country soon. The prime minister said if she had the money, she would be inclined to divide DCC into four separate entities. Someone please tell them that the Roman Empire didn't last even after Diocletian divided it into two: East and West.

The reason for that division wasn't only that the original empire had grown too big, but also that two sons of emperor Theodosius were good for nothing. The empire had reached its greatest extent earlier under Emperor Trajan, who controlled approximately 6.5 million kilometers without so much as a twitch.

Thus, while the size of an entity is one side of the problem, the other side is inefficiency. How is it going to work if the size is divided into smaller pieces? These days everything comes in mini-packs, so does Dhaka from December 1. But will that do away with its inefficiencies?

Let's invoke the allegory of the centipede, which tried to hop like a frog. Failing to negotiate countless legs it fell into a ditch. The question is whether by dividing Dhaka, we are going to cut its problems into half or make them twofold more. Those who know the answer are worried the split might fall through its own crack.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Can Russia help US withdraw from Afghanistan?

DOV S. ZAKHEIM and PAUL J. SAUNDERS

AMERICA'S relations with Pakistan have been steadily deteriorating ever since a Navy Seals team killed Osama bin Laden near Islamabad in May. Matters became still worse in September, when Adm. Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, accused Pakistan's intelligence agency of supporting an attack on the American Embassy in Kabul. And on Saturday, the relationship hit a new low when a Nato air strike mistakenly killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers, and Pakistan retaliated by shutting down supply routes to Afghanistan that crossed its territory.

Instead of relying heavily on Pakistan as a supply corridor, the United States should expand its cooperation with Russia, which has been playing an increasingly important role in military transit to and from Afghanistan. This would serve as both a hedge and a warning to the generals who control Pakistan.

True, this proposal might seem ironic, as Afghanistan was the site of a nearly decade-long struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union toward the end of the Cold War. (During that time, America cooperated with Pakistan to support Afghan mujahedeen fighting the Soviets.) But working with Russia today is in fact the key to preventing the United States from becoming a hostage to Pakistan's dysfunctional politics and its ambitions in Central Asia. Expanding transit routes into and

out of Afghanistan is a critical American national interest, and it would improve security for Nato forces while signaling that Washington was not beholden to Islamabad. It might also cause Pakistan to reassess its policy of providing sanctuary and support to terrorist networks operating against American forces.

In the last two years, the Northern Distribution Network through Russia and Central Asia has evolved from a peripheral component of American

and we begin to reduce our military presence there, these routes will become even more significant. Indeed, the United States might be able to draw down its forces from Afghanistan safely, rather than subjecting American convoys to attacks while passing through Pakistan.

Negotiations to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan through Russia will not be easy; thus far, Moscow has allowed only the shipment of non-combat supplies. Nevertheless, Russia agreed earlier

ate the security benefits of the American presence there. Indeed, during a Nov. 11 meeting outside Moscow, Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin of Russia stated clearly that Nato played a "positive" role in Afghanistan and expressed concern about the consequences of a premature withdrawal.

Many Americans forget that Putin was the first world leader to call President George W. Bush after the 9/11 attacks to offer his assistance, and Moscow quickly agreed to permit American bases in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia to support the war effort in Afghanistan. And even before 9/11, during the Clinton administration, Putin proposed United States-Russian cooperation against the Taliban; Washington turned down the offer for political reasons -- a mistake we should not repeat.

Critics may worry that relying on the northern routes to supply our troops in Afghanistan and withdraw them as we reduce our presence there will make the United States overly dependent on Russia. But because of Afghanistan's location, we have no choice but to depend on others for access to its territory.

The choice is between Pakistan on one hand, and Russia and Central Asian nations on the other. And Russia, unlike Pakistan, has not hosted militants who are killing Americans on the battlefield.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 9

730 Battle of Marj Ardabil: the Khazars annihilate an Umayyad army and kill its commander, al-Djarrah ibn Abdullah.

1793 New York City's first daily newspaper, the American Minerva, is established by Noah Webster.

1905 In France, the law separating church and state is passed.

1917 In Palestine, Field Marshal Edmund Allenby captures Jerusalem.

1941 World War II: The Republic of China, Cuba, Guatemala, the Republic of Korea, and the Philippine Commonwealth, declare war on Germany and Japan.

1946 The "Subsequent Nuremberg Trials" begin with the "Doctors' Trial", prosecuting doctors alleged to be involved in human experimentation.

1987 Israeli-Palestinian conflict: The First Intifada begins in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.