

Local government: Way forward

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BANGLADESH has a reasonably workable administrative and political system backed by deep-rooted culture of democratic practices. Our local governance structure, though not perfect, has a hundred year's tradition. It is much older than our constitution. The local government institutions (LGI) have not been created by the constitution afresh, rather the framers of our constitution adopted and accommodated the historic continuity and tradition of local government (LG) in the new constitution with due emphasis. LG, in spite of many of its limitations, contributes to upholding social cohesion and stability, and sustains the base and common platform for social and economic development and growth. This nation cannot afford destabilisation of its base and the grassroots. The central political elites of all hues should attach due importance to the stability of the societal base at any cost. Destabilisation at the base for short-term gain is not a safe game for any regime.

Political understanding at the base level has reached a new level and height that many of our central political elites are not aware of. Elections in the unions, pourashavas and city corporations have been held regularly for long, with few exceptions. The upazila parishads had elections for two consecutive terms. A new set of formal leadership at the ground level started to emerge as an autonomous factor in our body politic. They started to exert their limited executive authority and political power, which is not at all a healthy sign. Sixty four zila parishads, 11 city corporations, 487 upazila parishads, 319 pourashavas, and 4,557 union parishads together have about 85,000 elected leaders, one-third of whom are women. They deserve to be counted in the power equations at all levels -- the centre and the peripheries. They have to have proper share and role in the national politico-administrative system from the ground and base levels. Only centralist parties and hierarchical bureaucracy are not sufficient to keep the ground stable. On the same ground, their wild political ambitions also need to be contained.

In spite of many hurdles, majority of the union parishads have acquired the skill and efficiency to

formulate their budgets. Almost 70 upazila parishads had five year's planning exercises during their last term, and all 487 of them are preparing their own development plans and budgets, obviously with a lot of limitations. It is expected that the newly elected chairmen and members of the 487 upazila parishads will be able to follow suit from the current financial year after their foundation training currently undertaken by the government in collaboration with UNDP. The city corporations and pourashavas are also doing the same exercises with relatively better skills and strength. The 64 zila parishads, including three hill district councils and two city corporations of Dhaka, are still in uncertain terrain. This needs to be rectified as soon as possible for greater stability of the system.

Unfortunately, our policy makers at the top are not aware of all the field level innovations so far made by different projects and experiments at that level. Many of the innovations need proper recognition while policies and strategies are formulated at national level on short-medium and longer term planning, taxation policy and national budget. The contributions of 5,438 LG units in GDP and in all other governance improvement indicators are not properly recognised. The national level politicians and central bureaucracy at different levels do not feel obligated to comply with the LG laws passed by the Jatiya Sangsads. Local level plans are not recognised by the national planning system as no reflection of the contributions of the LGs is featured in the GDP.

The National Taxation Policy does not calculate how much tax revenue the LG system generates and proportional services they provide as local service providers. In the national budget we see that LG sectoral allocations always go to the local government division. There is no reflection of the local level revenues mobilised, and budgets prepared and implemented at the base by 5,438 LG units. Moreover, national budget creates misconception about the national government's LG financing. The allocation for LG institutions is termed "anudan" (grant) in the national budget document, which is an insult to the LGs and violation of the spirit of the constitution. The term 'grant' should be replaced by an internationally accepted term 'inter-governmental transfer.' The LGs have all the rights

to the national government's revenue for public services to be offered at local level.

The allocation for LGs in the last five years was disproportionate to the size of the total budget of the national government. In absolute and relative counts, the allocation to the LGs decreased. It is decreased further if adjusted with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) to ascertain the 'real' value of the allocation. One of Professor M.M. Akash's recent calculations shows that the share came down to 0.77% of the total national budget during the last budget of the Grand Alliance government in 2013-2014.

Bangladesh is relatively a new state with a very old nationhood. State building and nation building hardly can progress without institution building. Under unitary form of government, as there are no states or provinces, LGs as viable governing institutions can share a large part of governance load which national government can hardly handle. Only a single chamber parliament and a cabinet are not at all sufficient to bear the load of 160 million people. LGs should never be taken as competitors, but as a complementary force for efficient and stable governance. The vision for long-term good governance is missing among our central governing elites, which is manifested in the continuous neglect of local governance system in the forty years of our independence.

Reforms in the LG sector (local government and local administration) are overdue. Much of the misgovernance we encounter today in our national system of governance can sustainably be tackled with a functional and empowered local governance structure. The corruption-crime nexus in politics in general could effectively be addressed through functional LG system. A sound LG system can improve 'fragility index' of the state significantly. An efficient LG system can promote institutionalisation of democratic practices along with efficient and economic service delivery. Change of outlook and reorientation of the centralist parties and 'jack of all trade' bureaucracy, and partnership with enlightened civil society, can bring the nation back on track in reorganising local governance.

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When war is 'business,' 'peace' is a far cry

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ACCORDING to a report just released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), world military expenditures in 2012 totaled \$1.75 trillion. It also revealed that, as in all recent decades, the world's biggest military spender by far was the US government, whose expenditures for war and preparations for war amounted to \$682 billion -- 39% of the global total. In 2011, the 100 largest contractors sold \$410 billion in arms and military services. Just 10 of those companies sold over \$208 billion. Based on a list of the top 100 arms-producing and military services companies in 2011 SIPRI reviewed the 10 companies with the most military sales worldwide. These companies have benefited tremendously from the growth in military spending by the US, which by far has the largest military budget in the world. In 2000, the US defense budget was approximately \$312 billion. By 2011, the figure had grown to \$712 billion. Arms sales grew alongside general defense spending growth. SIPRI noted that between 2002 and 2011, arms sales among the top 100 companies grew by 51%. So if business of these companies is to continue to grow and thrive, 'war' must go on.

It is distressing and frustrating for many seeing that some of the human tragedies in the crisis ridden countries of the world no longer attract global attention. The decades old Israel-Palestine conflict is unfortunately one of them. Though both Jews and Arab Muslims date their claims to the land back a couple thousand years, the current political conflict began in the early 20th century. Jews fleeing persecution in Europe wanted to establish a national homeland in what was then an Arab and Muslim-majority territory in the British Empire. In 1948, United Nations created the state of Israel in Palestine primarily with the economic and political help of Europe and the United States. It's not as if this piece of land was lying vacant and waiting for Jews to migrate from Europe and other parts of the world to establish permanent settlements. In fact, the land was literally stolen from some 750,000 Arabs who were forced out of their homes. Out of the ashes of 1948 came names such as West Bank and Gaza

strip, and these are the Arab enclaves being fought over today.

As of August 3, more than 1,700 Palestinians have been killed, of whom three quarters were civilians including small children. The aggression of Israel is nothing but genocide, but the western countries and their so-called human rights organisations are turning a blind eye to the Israeli act of crimes against humanity. Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton repeatedly stressed that Israel was "provoked" by Hamas and their mainstream media has portrayed the Israel-Palestine conflict as a conflict revolving around security and terrorism, with Israel being the victim. So for many people, the conflict is about land and borders between two peoples who have equal claims, not a conflict between an oppressed and oppressor and colonised and coloniser.

While most of the non-Western world is stunned by the indiscriminate viciousness of the Israeli attack, headlines in Western media outlets proclaim "Hamas lays siege on Israel" and "Hamas terrorises Israel" -- as though the over seventeen hundred lives of murdered Palestinians are completely irrelevant and devoid of value. The hypocrisy of Western media cannot hide the fact that they are involved in propaganda, labeling a Palestinian boy as 'terrorist' and an Israeli tank aiming at him as an innocent 'victim.' The Israelis are assumed to be civilised and peaceful, while Palestinians are portrayed as violent barbarians.

For the past several years, rich Western nations have been preaching 'world peace,' but do they really practice what they preach? The statistics show that, by the end of 2008, the US had spent approximately \$900 billion in direct costs on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As of June 2011, the total cost of the wars was approximately \$3.7 trillion. The combined military expenditure of the 27 EU member states is •194 billion. During a visit to Cairo on July 25 about a ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian, US Secretary of State John Kerry may have appeared to be a genuine peacemaker, but behind his measured diplomatic language lies a truth that his country is very much involved in fighting this dirty war on Gaza.

Along with US, European governments indulge in hypocrisy as they continue to indulge in doublespeak in their approach to Middle East con-

flicts, and the situation in Palestine in particular. Western double standard in Israel and Palestine is an urgent issue that demands immediate attention. These western countries and their HR defenders become very critical of every trifling issue in the third world countries. They do not hesitate to put economic sanctions or other punishments on nations they think are guilty, but where does the conscience of those countries stand today? Why are they silent despite Israeli attacks on the defenseless Palestinians in the Gaza Strip?

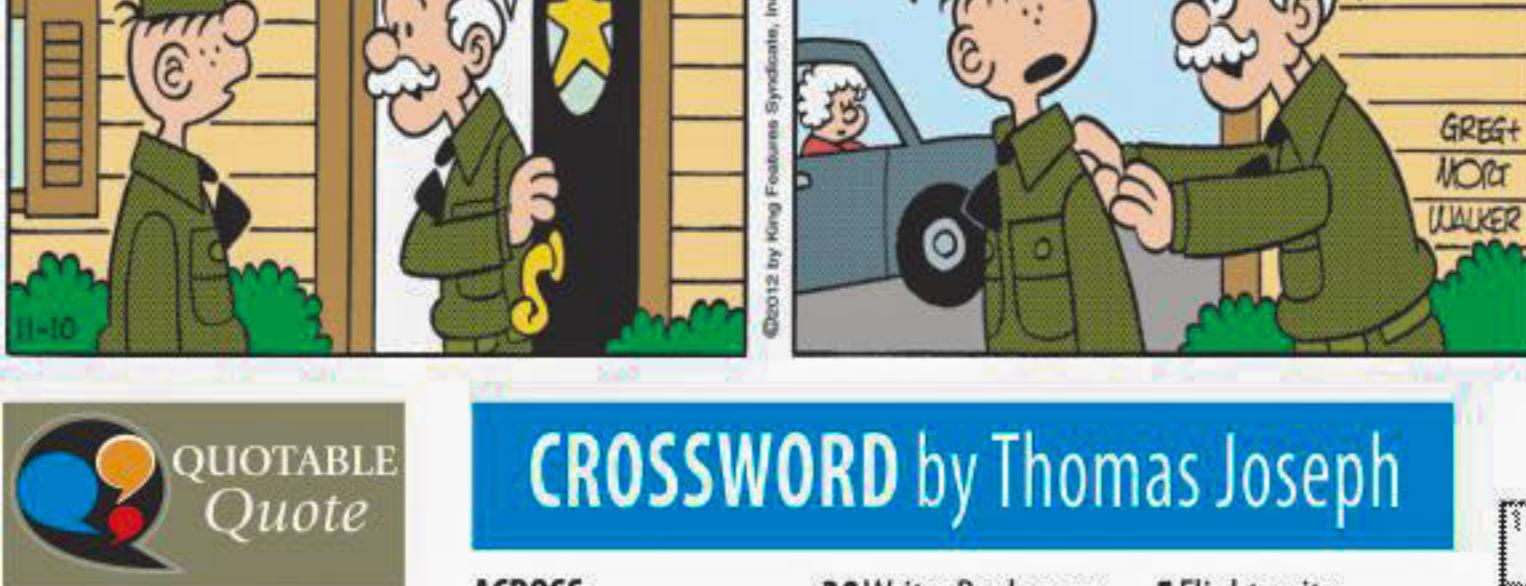
Israel has been destroying houses, mosques, schools and hospitals in Gaza. Amid this carnage, we find the US president justifying Israel's crimes against civilians. He considers it to be Israel's right to defend itself. Over the years, Palestinians have seen how they can be murdered in the hundreds and thousands with impunity and in the full glare of the mass media. The whole world knows that Israel is an occupying force that has broken every UN resolution but still has gotten away with breaking every international law and covenant in its treatment of Palestinians. Indeed, the strongest country in the world not only won't punish Israel for its near half-century of tyranny over the Palestinians, it keeps giving it arms while shielding it in the UN.

United States has funneled more than \$100 billion in aid to Israel since its formation in 1948, and consistently provides its chief Middle-East ally with up-to-the-minute weaponry. Indeed, not only are western governments providing Israel with arms, funds and political cover to sustain its occupation and war, but they are also contributing thousands of military experts and boots on the ground in order to fight a war in Gaza where war crimes and crimes against humanity are being committed on an hourly basis. The world has to change first for Israel to change the way it responds. As long as Zionist lobbies remain so powerful and unchallenged and world leaders remain complicit and unprincipled, Israel will be able to ignore international law and human rights, and the plight of Gaza and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will continue.

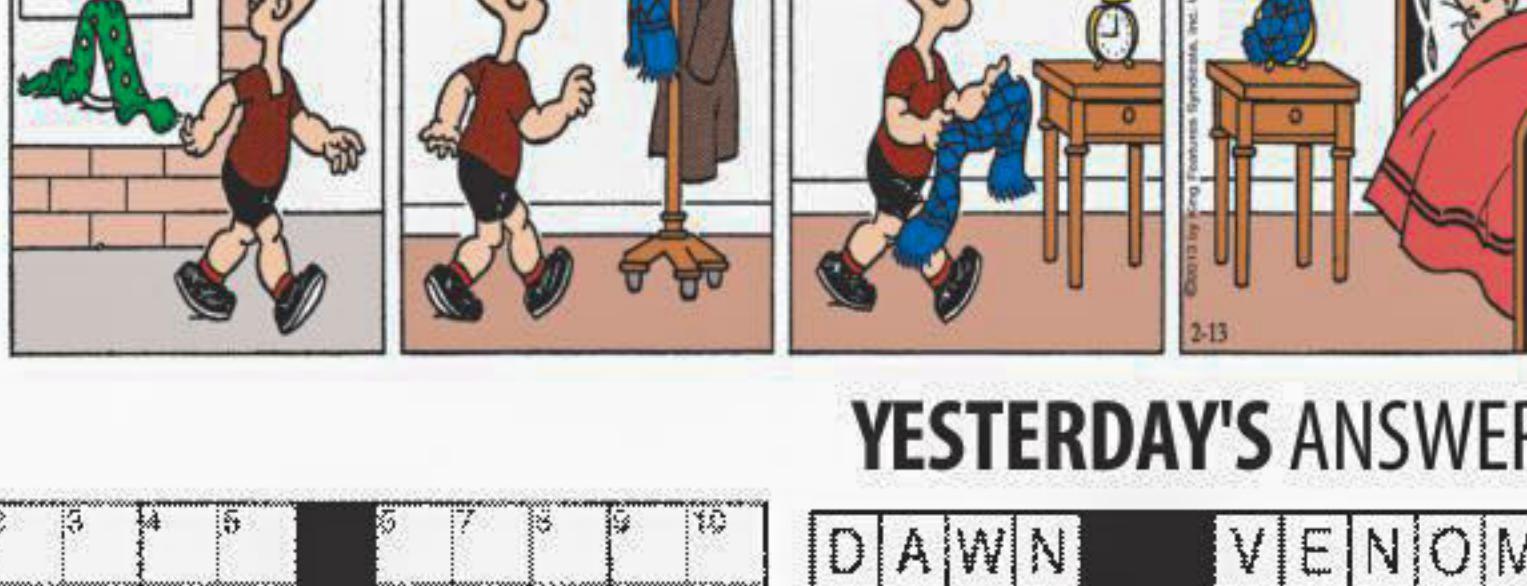
The writer is a businessman.

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



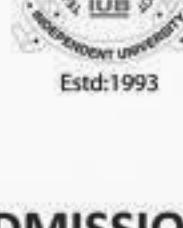
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