

# Election game: Cities, citizens and coins

MAHFUZ KABIR

THE government is going to hold city corporations elections in less than a month. It is commonly believed that this is going to be a powerful stabiliser of the prolonged political heat, giving citizens a breathing space in the midst of the boiling atmosphere. Therefore, wise men of all fronts thought alike; they decided to join the race.

Were the elections inevitable to escape from the ongoing deadlock? It can be conceived as a thoughtful strategy of a pure two-person game. True, these elections were long due in Dhaka as per the City Corporation Act 2009 Article 34, which has the provision of holding elections within 180 days of ending of the term of the earlier corporation. As Dhaka city was bifurcated through the City Corporation (amendment) Act 2011, the overdue elections have successfully been applied as the second-best strategy in the game to cool the environment for a while.

Who wins in this decision? An estimated fifteen million residents of Dhaka are paying tax but are being deprived of services by their chosen representatives for three years. Elections appeared as a means of fulfilling the constitutional as well as legal entitlement of the citizens. Thus, the citizens should celebrate.

Who paid the price for having non-elected persons run Dhaka City Corporation for more than three years? Indeed, the citizens! The government-appointed 'executives' are neither sup-

posed to respond to people's demand nor be made accountable to citizens for their activities which go against the civic interest. Certainly, the executives did nothing significant for the two very important city corporations for the last three years, other than weakening the resource base and eroding citizens' confidence in the democratic local government institutions. It also gives rise to a ray of hope that had faded because the government committed in FY2013-14 to increase aggregate city corporation budget by 233 per cent in FY2014-15. In reality, it witnessed a 33 per cent decline in the revised budget. Resource flow from the national government was slashed the most, because of unelected administrators.

Statistics prove this statement. The government budget for Dhaka South in FY2011-12 was Tk.325.7 crore while it was Tk.51.5 crore for the North. Surprisingly, the figure was altered in the following fiscal year with Tk.155.5 crore and Tk.384.8 crore for South and North, respectively, even though the number of administrative wards is higher in the South. The revised budget of FY2013-14 was up for South but significantly down for North (Tk.200.5 crore and Tk.224 crore, respectively). However, the allocation has gone down significantly for both: Tk.60 crore and Tk.74 crore for the South and North in the current fiscal year. Together, the budget is going to be Tk.156 crore in FY2016-17 according to Medium-Term Budget Framework (MTBF) projection (FY2014-15 to 2016-

17), which is equal to the government spending for the South only in FY2012-13. Conversely, total government budget for the other city corporations for the entire period is generally growing. It means Dhaka city corporations are regressing in terms of inter-governmental transfer while the others are progressing.

It is often argued that there is a strong political bias in public financing to local government bodies. Is it true for city corporations where the mayors are from the opposition? Not at all! The revised budget for Chittagong City Corporation was Tk.72.8 crore in FY2013-14, which was nearly double than the actual spending of FY2012-13. The budget continued to increase for MTBF years. The revised budget for Rajshahi grew by more than 50 per cent in FY2013-14, while the MTBF projection did not fall below this budget. For Khulna, the budget witnessed a decline. However, the most recent budget documents of Khulna City Corporation reveal that it has been enjoying a huge revenue surplus that discourages funding from national level, again not purely because of a mayor from the opposition. The actual budget of Sylhet as well as MTBF projection shows sharp rise since FY2012-13. The budget also shows generally growing trend for Barisal as well. Ironically enough, most of these city corporations have higher budget for the MTBF period than either of the Dhaka city corporations that are located at the economic centre of gravity of the country. Thus, one can easily apply 'conspiracy theory'

to prove that the fiscal deprivation of the citizens in Dhaka is due to absence of elected representatives.

Will the election bring government spending in the cities through Local Government Division? By no means! The lion's share of the public money being spent in the cities is through non-transferred departments like Water Supply & Sewerage Authority (WASA), Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE), and Local Government Engineering Department (LGED). Their functions and finances have neither been transferred to the city corporations, nor are they accountable to the citizens. Corporations are used to frequent coordination failures as claimed by elected representatives, which cause sufferings for citizens. Elected representatives often fail to mitigate the outcomes going against public interest, and tend to think unwise to raise conflict with these departments, especially when they are from the opposition. Thus, fulfilling legitimate demands and aspirations of the citizens remain a far cry due to apparently 'peaceful coexistence' of two governments.

Citizens remain as coins in the last resort. They are tossed after intervals. Nevertheless, they hold the 'magic,' which is popularly known as 'majority.' Influential quarters are always scared of this toss.

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## BNP in the city polls

Create level playing field for a free election

BY all indications, it appears that the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has decided to participate in the Dhaka (North and South) and Chittagong City Corporations elections. We are heartened at the news. We strongly believe that the polls have opened up a new window of opportunity for the opposition alliance to take the civic issues to the masses and to sway public opinion in its favour. It also constitutes a test of the government's capacity to hold a participatory election. Furthermore, it essentially gives the BNP a genuine chance to come out of the vicious, self-destructive circle that has made the party a prisoner of its own contrivances.

However, for a credible election, a level playing field is a fundamental prerequisite. In this context we refer to a report published in a Bengali newspaper that there are as many as 950 cases pending against the 118 BNP-backed candidates, most of whom have gone into hiding since the party's January 5 movement had started. There is little doubt in public mind that many of these cases are politically motivated with the apprehension that unnecessary legal fetters may be placed on opponent candidates. This is indeed an important element to the issue of offering a level playing field to all the political actors involved.

There is a high stake in ensuring credibility of the elections, not only because of the importance of the representational character of the major elected bodies but also to bring the opponent on to the path of constitutional politics.

## Probe eviction of 14 Hindu families

Are we failing to protect minority communities?

AT least 14 Hindu families have been evicted by land grabbers, allegedly at the behest of a local Jubo League leader, in Taltaliupazila of Barguna district. According to the victims, the first three of these 14 families left their homes following threats and intimidation from powerful quarters in 2013, and the next two families in 2014. On March 12 this year, the rest of the families were also driven off their homestead land.

As per a report by ProthomAlo, the day after the nine families left, their homes were destroyed and their property looted by 40-50 goons, led by Jubo League leader ZakirHossain and his brother Abdus Salam. Locals claim that the grabbers, having failed to persuade the Hindu families to sell off their lands at low prices, were harassing, even assaulting them, eventually forcing them to move out; they are now leading a life of insecurity and instability.

We are appalled that the families were threatened and evicted over a protracted period, without any action taken against the perpetrators. It is inexplicable that even under the leadership of Awami League, which claims to be secular and pro-minority, such incidents are occurring, even, at times, at the bidding of party activists, who use their political clout to carry out such attacks with impunity.

The government must take a strong stance against powerful land grabbers, including party members, who take advantage of the vulnerability minority communities and use intimidation tactics to drive them off their land. It is the obligation of a state, more so, of a secular state, to ensure the safety and security of our minority communities.

MOHAMMAD ABDUL QUYYUM

THE discourse on disaster management has undergone significant changes in recent decades and the effects have been profoundly felt in the developing world, particularly in terms of reduction in the loss of human lives. The practices in dealing with disaster events in the 1970-80s were fundamentally response oriented, which didn't involve the use of scientific data and information. The prediction of disaster was fundamentally based on reading changes in natural phenomena, which were not very effective in projecting the extent of devastation a disaster could bring.

The traditional approach to disaster management has been in the aftermath of the events. Relief and response drove the earlier phase of disaster management.

The concept of disaster management has undergone significant changes, partly as a result of scientific study. The common view of disasters as simply hazards or events is now challenged by the view that disaster risk is the outcome of both natural and human influenced factors, with risk expressed in terms of potential losses of life, livelihoods and property. This has shaped up new approaches to science and practice in reducing the risks of disaster, being more resilient and more adaptable to climate change.

Bangladesh, being one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, has made remarkable progresses in reducing disaster-related deaths, thanks to the introduction of modern science and technologies. The progress has been achieved in the face of considerable vulnerability and exposure to natural and human-induced hazards. Between 1990 and 2008 Bangladesh incurred an average annual loss equal to 1.8% of the GDP due to disasters which threatened the hard earned development. Damage and loss due to disasters is still on the rise.

The key to reduction of disaster is adoption of both natural and social science, be it in the form of strengthening technologies and capacities for an effective early warning system, or dissemination of the warning to the last mile. But there are miles to go before we take a breath of satisfaction.

The rapid development of science and technology and its application over the last decade has shaped the conceptual basis for the paradigm shift of disaster management in Bangladesh. For example, the country's high growth mobile phone sector is buying into disaster risk reduction, as the government and other agencies teamed up with mobile phone operators to provide early warnings for cyclones and floods.

The Bangladesh government has adopted a national ICT Policy in 2009 which includes the following actions to address disaster management:

- Protect citizens from natural disasters through ICT-based disaster warning and management technologies;
- Utilise remote sensing technologies for disaster management and mitigation;
- Web-based environmental clearance certification system;

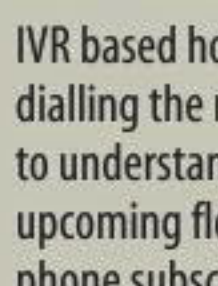
## NATIONAL DISASTER PREPAREDNESS DAY 2015

# Managing disasters scientifically

Some other remarkable achievements of using science and technology based disaster management initiatives in Bangladesh are:



Satellite tracking services of cyclone and its landfall predictions up to an hour interval to connect and facilitate disaster responders including Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP) to mobilize most at risk communities and to evacuate to safe shelter;



IVR based hotline accessible from any cell phone by dialling the number "10941" that provides critical, easy to understand weather information and warning for upcoming flood and cyclone to over 110 million mobile phone subscribers;



Extension of flood forecasting lead time from 3 to 5 days by adoption of flood forecast modelling, which can save lives, livelihoods and assets of 88 million people living in four river basin areas, this has the potential to save more than 70% of movable resources/capital goods from flood; It connects flood volunteers of Bangladesh Ansar and VDP to prepare and mobilise communities at risk in Gaibandah and Sirajgonj districts.



Development of saline, drought and flood tolerant rice varieties to secure food production in the face of climate changing scenario



E-library (www.dmic.org.bd/e-library) on disaster management to enable easy access to knowledge and resources



Risk integrated land use planning as well as detailed physical city planning for different urban areas; microzonation maps for Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet maps the vulnerability of infrastructures in these cities;



Various research and studies focused on solutions to the challenges faced now and in the future like climate change, seismic hazard, emerging hazards etc.

## COMMENTS

"Blockade forgotten" (March 29, 2015)

Akm Fazlul Bari

I do not understand why the media is giving so much priority to the blockade which is a total flop.

"There is no justification for not participating in the election. They [BNP] should run even if they lose. Because election is like an ornament in the democratic system."

--Prof Emajuddin Ahmed convener of pro-BNP intellectual platform "Shoto Nagorik"

Zubair Ahmed

No doubt! But when there is no democracy, the ornament becomes a burden!

Shamim Abedin

Many BNP leaders are missing. What a mockery of democratic system!

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

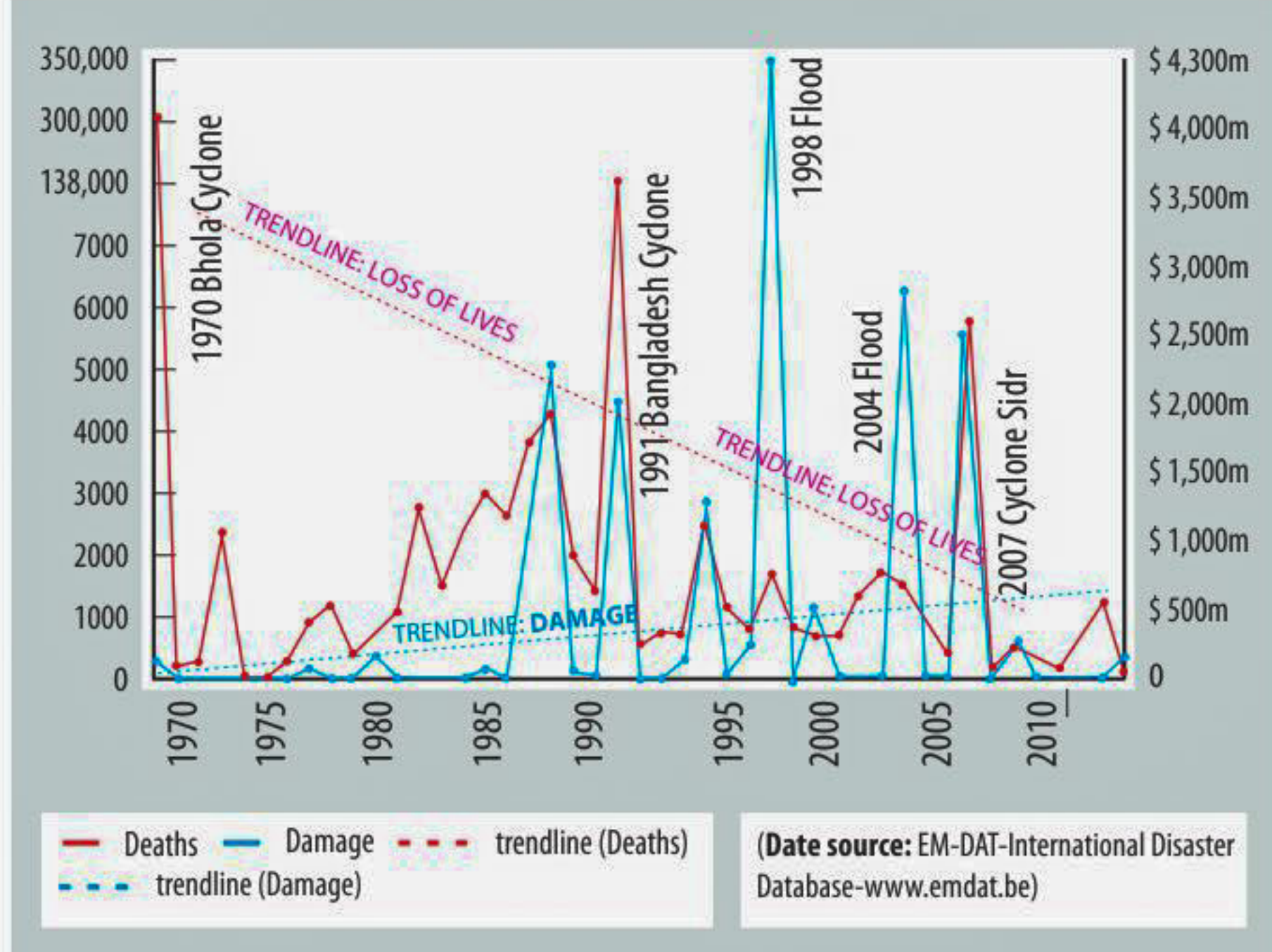
letters@thedailystar.net

### Likud's victory is Israel's defeat

Those of us who regularly observe and try to make sense of the madness sweeping the Middle East often find ourselves, perhaps out of desperation, engaging in wishful thinking; hoping that in the end, reason will prevail over lunacy. I lament the results of the Israeli elections because a relative majority of Israelis choose to continue living in the bubble, fearful of changing the status quo even though it will inevitably burst. The damning consequences Netanyahu's new government will inflict on the country are as certain as night following day. Following the wrath he brought upon his head for his earlier statement that there will be no Palestinian state under his watch, Netanyahu once again changed his mind only two days following the elections, stating in an interview on MSNBC that he wanted "a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution." This reversal of his true position is tactical, designed to play for time and is just another cheap political stunt.

The Europeans, Americans and Palestinians, who have had extensive experience with him throughout the peace process, fully recognise his duplicity. He has lost every grain of credibility and no one will trust that he will negotiate in good faith in the future.

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir  
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- Promote cell phone/SMS-based disaster warning systems targeted to the population likely to be affected;
- Utilise Geographic Information System (GIS)-based systems to monitor flood and cyclone shelters (including equitable distribution in vulnerable areas);
- Promote efficient relief management and post-disaster activities monitoring;
- Utilise GIS-based systems to ensure equitable distribution of relief goods with special focus on the hard-to-reach areas.

The Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP), a flagship collaborative initiative of the Bangladesh Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR) and UNDP, is leading the charge on these initiatives.

Science has played an essential role in uncovering new ways to prevent, prepare for and respond to disasters and determining which technologies to adopt in the country context, but it all will go in vain if targeted users do not use or demand benefit from these applications.

It was seen that when scientific knowledge is blended with localised indigenous knowledge they yield outstanding results in reducing disaster loss.

In August 2014, continuous rainfall in north and north-eastern Bangladesh, together with the onrush of water from upstream, caused flooding in low-lying and densely populated areas in nine districts. Small and medium scale local rural risk reduction interventions such as plinth raising, road cum embankment, construction of flood shelters among other structural interventions have been found to be very effective in reducing loss and sufferings of the people as these were designed considering scenario based flood.

In the next few decades, scientific advancements in understanding of natural hazards are expected to rise. It will further strengthen the approach to risk assessment, risk management, preparing communities, rebuilding and rehabilitating communities. The use of satellite and remote sensing data and information will be more effective, accurate and all-encompassing to allow disaster managers and policy makers to take decisions that are timely and more effective in building resilient communities, cities and nation.

Realising the context, the government has decided to focus on using scientific knowledge in reducing future disasters induced loss and damage hence ready to celebrate the National Disaster Preparedness Day (NDPD) 2015 with the theme "Know the Scientific Facts: Reduce the Disaster Loss" on March 31, 2015. Bangladesh has been observing National Disaster Preparedness Day every year since 1997 to raise awareness of people and motivate them to manage disasters successfully.

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