WHY MAYORS ARE CRUCIAL FOR THE FUTURE

ADNAN MORSHED

THE mayoral elections in Dhaka and Chittagong have generated two types of interest.

First, many consider that the elections, if held under free and fair conditions, will gauge the current popularity of political parties. Given the anxious political conditions Bangladesh is in now, it is not surprising that the public would like to make sense of the ongoing situation through the lens of the mayoral election. These elections are surely about local governments, but they promise to open a window onto national politics.

Second, and more intriguing, there is considerable outpouring of excitement that the elected mayors would heed professional advice in solving many urban problems that hobble the daily life in cities: traffic congestion, illegal occupation of sidewalks, or irregular garbage collection, to name a few. As the media coverage demonstrates, there is optimism that the new mayors would change course and present effective urban planning strategies to make cities more liveable. Professional seminars, consisting of urban planners, transportation engineers, architects, and urban administrators, have been taking place daily to offer long lists of "things-to-do" for elected mayors. It is a good sign that people are interested in what the mayors could do to make their cities better.

This hope is both utopian and romantic, particularly when seen against the context of the mayoral office's long history of chronic failures to address corruption within the City Corporation and myriad urban dysfunctionalities.

However, the new hope invested in the mayoral office this time around is in itself very significant and emblematic of a number of political and social changes, both local and global.

The reason for the global interest in mayoralty is the rise of the city as the centre of economic growth and, in general, modernity. Cities are the chief drivers of GDP and the venue for all kinds of economic entrepreneurship and cultural experiments. More than 50 percent of the world's population or more than 3.5 billion people now live in cities. Urban areas account for approximately 75 percent of the global GDP. If the city functions well, the national economy thrives. There are numerous studies showing that the economic and social significance of cities has multiplied manifold in the last few decades, and mayors are challenged to deal with increasingly complex issues which previously belonged to much higher political and administrative offices.

Bangladesh is no exception. In 1971, the country's urban population was roughly around 7 percent, which has now skyrocketed to over 30 percent. The social fabric of the country is rapidly changing due to urbanisation. Over half a million people migrate to Dhaka each year in search of job opportunities or a better life, a major shift from the historically agrarian persona of the country. Consider this. The contribution of agriculture to GDP plummeted from 30 percent in 1990 to 20 percent in 2010. On the other hand, the combined GDP contribution of such urban centres as Dhaka and Chittagong is 47 percent. The total urban sector contribution to GDP increased from 37 percent in 1990 to approximately 60 percent in 2010. So, how a city is planned and governed will progressively influence the national economy and politics.

This brings us to the second point: the global rise of the mayors. How a mayor manages, plans, or leads the city has robust national or even international policy implications. Once a largely ceremonial position, the mayor has become a potent force in national politics. Until recently, around the world, the mayoral office was considered a hub of local politics. This is not the case anymore. The mayor can influence or even channel the economic and social trajectory of the country by ensuring the sustainable functionality of the city. Innovative solutions to the city's problems can catapult the mayor to the national stage and international fame.

In *If Mayors Ruled the World* (2013), the American political theorist Benjamin Barber argues that mayors have more political leverage to grapple with vexing national issues than most of their higher-ranking counterparts in public office. Mayors are local politicians but they can loom large on the national stage by virtue of their unique position to solve problems that are at the centre of the national agenda.

There are plenty of examples of visionary mayors whose bold local policy ideas took on national and international influence. Bogota's mayor Enrique Peñalosa (1998-2001) spearheaded a low-cost, bus-based mass transit for the Colombian capital that was replicated in many cities around the world as a successful model. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg reformed the city's ailing school curriculum and spurred a wave of new economic growth by adopting many sustainable urban policies.

> *Once a largely ceremonial position, the mayor has become a potent force in national politics. Until recently, around the world, the mayoral office was considered a hub of local politics. This is not the case anymore.*

Desperate to revive his country's moribund economy, Edi Rama, the mayor of Albania's capital Tirana, cleaned up the city's streets and implemented a controversial plan to paint the city buildings in playful colours! The idea was that colour would be a low-cost, nothing-to-lose antidote to the city's collective social lethargy and economic stagnation.

The mayoral candidates in Bangladesh's elections may want to have a deeper understanding of the enlarged scope of mayorality in the life and future of the city and, conse-quently, the country and beyond. The traditional view that they are only capable of doing what their political bosses wanted them to do is changing. This transformation will occur in Bangladesh too. An improved traffic management in Dhaka would not only be welcomed by Dhakaites, but also be discussed with much interest in global corporate boardrooms because what the 4 million workers in this city's manufacturing sector produce feed the global supply chain of goods. A liveable Dhaka city is a global investment attraction.

Thus, the conventional wisdom that mayors are merely local politicians no longer holds true. In fact, in Bangladesh, they now have the historic opportunity to lead a bottom-up transformation of national politics and governance. After all, they are at the helm of the country's economic and political nerve centres.

The writer is an associate professor of Architecture and Planning in Washington, DC, and author of Oculus: A Decade of Insights into Bangladesh Affairs (2012).

Cities of Hope, Cities of Despair

M. SHAHIDUL ISLAM

THE pace of urbanisation has gained a new momentum in the past few decades with many developing countries, led by their cities, growing rapidly. The existing pace of urban growth is likely to persist in the next few decades.

The economic and political implications of cities are enormous. Cities occupy less space but account for larger share of the GDP. Higher productivity of cities is reflected by the fact that only 600 urban centres generate about 60 percent of the global GDP. There are geo-political implications of cities as well. It is argued that the 21st century will not be ruled by superpower America or emerging power like China, but by the city. The trend is already visible in Asia where small city states such as Singapore and Hong Kong have emerged as influential financial, technological and innovation powerhouses.

Bangladesh has also undergone marked urbanisation with about 30 percent of its population currently living in cities. While Dhaka, being the country's prime city, accounts for about 28 percent of Bangladesh's urban population, Chittagong's urbanisation is relatively more balanced. Almost all the districts of Chittagong have either relatively higher urbanisation rate or are densely populated.

Apart from Dhaka, Chittagong, Narayanganj, Gazipur and Rajshahi (the Big 5), there are a number of large, mid-tier and smaller cities that show urban promise. A PPRC (Power and Participation Research Centre) study indicates that between 2001 and 2011, led by Bogra, Sylhet, Noakhali, Mymensingh, Cox's Bazar, Barisal and Comilla, inter alia, there has been sharp rise in urban population in a number of cities. The urban population of about 20 promising cities and district headquarters, other than the Big 5, is around one crore.

However, the performance of Bangladeshi cities is far from their potential. A World Bank study observed that while the population density in Bangladeshi cities is very high, the economic density is relatively low from an international perspective. This underlies that urban concentration has resulted in sub-optimal outcome for the country. Poor infrastructure and inadequate service delivery, among others, are blamed for this.

It is the economic density that drives city growth. Density is the economic mass or output generated on a unit of land. The theoretical explanation is that density brings people and firms closer together which makes it easier to share and exchange information, invent new technologies and launch new firms. Residents, workers, and firms are typically concentrated—or agglomerated—in urban areas. According to the Growth Commission, "cities thrive because of what economists call 'agglomeration economies' – when activities are clustered closely together, they can reap economies of scale and scope."

Nevertheless, there is a cost of higher density.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Rapid migration of people from rural to urban areas, owing to push and pull factors, produces a host of problems such as congestion, pollution and crime in cities. The BRAC institute of Governance and Development's (BIGD) flagship reports on the state of cities suggest that Bangladeshi cities, notably Dhaka, Chittagong and Narayanganj have largely failed to address the problems generated by density.

The service delivery model of Bangladeshi cities is characterised, among others, by inadequacy of various services such as water, sanitation, gas and electricity. There is a dualism in service delivery given the existence of a large number of slums that are virtually excluded from the governance apparatus. A large portion of waste in cities is uncollected and an insignificant amount is recycled. Public transport is meagre compared to its need. There are no or little attempts to address the housing needs of the low income people. Violation of land use plan is rampant. Air, water and sound pollution have reached, in many instances, intolerable levels and the rivers that are the lifeline of most cities, are dangerously polluted.

The BIGD reports blamed poor urban governance for the country's chaotic urban transition. In essence, governance is one of the important pillars of a city's urban operating model, in addition to planning, funding, sectoral policies and shape of cities.

The BIGD's latest report titled 'State of Cities: Governance for a Liveable Chittagong' has captured at least two critical issues. First, Chittagong city's development is not need-based. Some projects that have been prioritised as early as the 1960s remain unimplemented. However, a number of less important projects are being implemented, bypassing the city's Master Plan. Chittagong does not have a sewerage system. But the Chittagong Development Authority (CDA) has been implementing a number of flyovers, spending millions of taka that have been proven to be of little use. The CDA which is not directly accountable to the city dwellers and maintains a vertical accountability with the line Ministry has been given more priority over the City Corporation in terms of fund allocation.

Experts believe that as the then mayor was backed by BNP, the priority of his office was largely ignored by the centre. The political discrimination of the ruling party and limited autonomy of local government is not limited to Chittagong. Many mayors and councillors, particularly those elected by the opposition supporters, are either in prison or on the run.

Second, urban primacy of Dhaka is costing the development of Chittagong and other promising cities. Over-concentration of political power, bureaucratic and business headquarters in the capital means the periphery depends heavily on the centre for policy decision and fund allocation. The size of annual development budgets of Dhaka (North) and Dhaka (South) City Corporations, for instance, are Tk. 812 crore and Tk. 420 crore, respectively, whereas Chittagong City Corporation spends only Tk. 99 crore. Consequently, Chittagong and other cities are falling behind in terms of capital expenditure.

Moreover, cities have limited financial autonomy to raise their own funds through tax and levies. Cities need to work with banks and capital markets to develop financial products to finance infrastructure projects lessening their reliance on the centre. Tamil Nadu and other Southern Indian cities offer some lessons in this regard. Land monetisation is another popular way to finance cities. Chinese cities use this avenue.

Urban centres in developing countries are thriving by adopting new ideas and technology. China and India are now focussing on smart city development where technology and sustainable development are the forefront of city growth. By adopting technology, Indian cities are overcoming bureaucratic bottlenecks and providing better services.

To sum-up, in line with China and India, cities could change the economic geography of Bangladesh. To make it happen, the centre has to show its commitment to empower elected mayors and councillors irrespective of their party affiliation, allowing them more administrative and financial autonomy. A mayor-led urban governance system ensuring horizontal accountability of various service delivery agencies could help Bangladesh reap greater benefits from its cities.

The writer is an economist, currently based in China. Email: shahid.imon@live.com

> *Over-concentration of political power, bureaucratic and business headquarters in the capital means the periphery depends heavily on the centre for policy decision and fund allocation.*

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS
1 Overly proper
7 Peeved state
11 Baby's toy
12 Cellar supply
13 Needing change
14 Storybook Monster
15 Swiss geometer
16 Hog the mirror
17 Set eyes on
18 Coarse-spun cotton
19 Bloke
21 None too cordial
22 Mysore monarch
25 Shark feature
26 Bart's sister
27 Makes law
29 Church event
33 Road runners
34 Swaggering
35 Organ part
36 Band need
37 Watch reading
38 Statue setting
39 Declares
40 Check recipient

DOWN
1 Is a snoop
2 Incurred
3 Writer Calvino
4 Prison sentence
5 Talk Drunkenly
6 To date
7 Foil, e.g.
8 Neighbor of Benin
9 Close
10 Minute
16 Irene of Film
18 Slugger Roger
20 Ceases
22 Small detail
23 Art school class
24 Caribbean nation
25 Big dinners
28 Makes do
30 Cast member
31 Barber offering
32 More tender
34 Cart puller
36 Talker's gift

Yesterday's answer

H	U	M	O	R		S	E	M	I	S
I	N	A	W	E		A	V	A	N	T
N	S	Y	N	C		W	A	Y	N	E
T	U	B		R	U	T		B	E	E
E	R	E		E	N	O		E	E	L
D	E	T	A	I	L		T	I	D	Y
		O	P	T	I	M	U	M		
G	A	M	E		N	A	G	A	N	O
R	E	O		M	E	L		M	O	P
O	R	R		I	D	A		A	V	E
B	O	R	O	N		R	A	Z	O	R
A	B	O	D	E		I	M	E	T	A
N	E	W	E	R		A	I	D	E	S

5-2

CRYPTOQUOTE　3-20

BHGBYGXMUXY UII LHZM XEHZWEXC ZAHG XEY VHMS UX EUGN. XEY CZG'C MULC NH GHX DZMG ZGXJI DMHZWEX XH U QHBZC. -- UIYPUGNYM W. DYII

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: **LAUGHTER IS THE SUN THAT DRIVES WINTER FROM THE HUMAN FACE.** -- VICTOR HUGO

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW
One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.