

THE PROMISE OF MUNICIPALITIES

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CARTOON: SADAT

However, district level towns, governed by municipalities are largely overlooked in the government's urban development plans. There are 328 municipalities in Bangladesh which in total comprise more than 60 percent of the country's total urban area. Over 50 million people of the country are currently living in these areas. And due to continuous rural-urban push and increasing economic activities, these towns are expanding in every way—area, population density and per capita income. Despite their expansions, the government has no proper intervention plan to ensure sustainable

and planned development of these developing urban areas. Shortage of budget, skilled manpower and dilapidated city infrastructures have crippled this important part of the local government. According to Alhaji Md Abdul Baten, President, Municipal Association of Bangladesh and Mayor of Bera Municipality, "At present the government allocates only BDT 100 million for the non-development budget funds of all 328 municipalities. So, each municipality receives around BDT 12,000 from the government to pay the salaries of all our staffs and all other utility bills. It has become impossible for us to

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manage our huge expenses. "Many of our staffs don't get salaries in time and we have to deprive many more of their pensions and gratuity due to the fund crisis. If it goes on like this, one day we might have to flee from our offices," adds Baten. Md Nazrul Islam, Mayor of Chapai Nawabganj municipality reveals further, "When I became Mayor, I found that Chapai Nawabganj municipality could not pay BDT 120 million in electricity bills due to a shortage of funds. By collecting taxes, I managed to pay BDT 60 million but the bill is skyrocketing exponentially due to the increasing population. We also have to pay around BDT 12 million for the water supply bill every month, which is very difficult to earn only by collecting taxes," says Nazrul. For more than a decade, the municipal mayors have been demanding more allocation in the non-development budget.

However, amidst this crisis, there are several examples of positive practices of governance. For instance, despite the rising population density, Nilphamari municipal authority has managed to keep the town clean and free of litter. Every street corner in the city has been fitted with dustbins and the municipal authority has trained its citizens to use these properly. Dewan Kamal Ahmed says, "At first we set unused drums in the street corners and encouraged our citizens to use those as dustbins. We launched a wide range of awareness raising campaigns to train our citizens about how to keep their city clean. They soon realised the usefulness of these and are now using them regularly.

To promote planned urbanisation and this type of good practices in municipal areas, The World Bank in partnership with Municipality Association of Bangladesh, Institute of Architects Bangladesh, Bangladesh Institute of Planners and Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh organised a two-day-long conference titled "Cities Forum: Building Knowledge Networks and Partnerships for Sustainable Urban Development in Bangladesh" on October 28 and 29, 2017 where municipal mayors discussed their problems and demands with government officials and international experts. At the end of the conference, the organisers also awarded four municipal mayors for best practices in four categories. Nilphamari, Chapai Nawabganj, Gopalganj and Fulpur municipalities were awarded with "Champion Pourashava 2017 Awards" for best practices in citizen engagement, good governance, capital investment planning and public finance management categories respectively.

It is heartening that despite the looming threat of massive resource crises and over-population, several municipalities of Bangladesh are practicing exemplary practices. And, for the first time in Bangladesh, these municipal authorities were recognised for their good works. The government must solve the existing crises in the municipalities and build their capacities so that they may be economically self-sufficient and undergo sustainable urban development.

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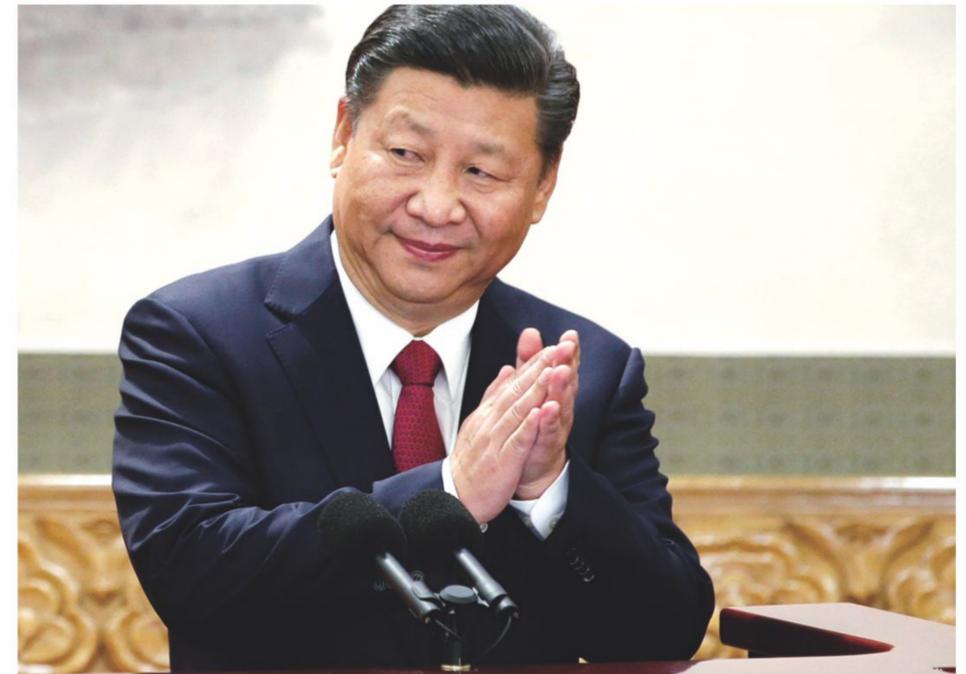
OPINION

Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, has recently been bandied about by serial exaggerators like *The Economist*, *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy* as the most powerful man in the world. They're probably not wrong, but it also doesn't hurt to have a headline like that. As a student of Political Science, I greatly enjoy the House of Cards-esque readings of international politics where power is something tangible within big cults of personalities and heads of states are like gods—if only in that gods do not have bureaucratic red tape to deal with. The Cold War was really the heyday of the field, when it could look at a world defined by great powers and larger-than-life figures—the Kennedys, Khrushchevs, Reagans, Gorbachevs, Castros and the like. I often wonder whether like with 80s music, we only remember the cherry-picked highlights. Surely it couldn't have been that exciting day-to-day. If it was, the world would be full of jittery paranoiacs and the nerdiest brand of adrenaline junkies—oh wait, it is.

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If we believe *The Economist* and *Foreign Affairs* magazine, we are seeing a return to those big-figure manifestations of heads of states, shadily jostling for power in the underbelly of international politics. Vladimir Putin was just declared a new Tsar in this month's *Economist* following their proclamation of Xi as the most powerful man on earth. Donald Trump is a great, big man-child, but great and big nonetheless, much like the nuclear threat and waist size of Kim Jong-un. We're seeing a typically 2017 version of a Cold War power struggle unfold in the international arena, one in which decisions can be made in 140 characters or less and the masses engage in political mobilisation not through protest but through the post-modernist masochism of their memes. It is thus only fitting that at the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) last week, Xi Jinping etched his name into history among the greatest of Chinese leaders by boring the largesse of the CCP into submission through a speech that lasted a record breaking 19 days. That's two weeks longer than the actual congress!

No, I'm joking. It was actually the size of the last Lord of the Rings movie, so pretty close to 19 days. His



Xi Jinping

PHOTO: REUTERS

XI JINPING BORES PARTY INTO SUBMISSION, TAKES OVER WORLD

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speech was extensive. He covered every topic he possibly could—culture economics, environment, the new My Little Pony movie, cheese, and whether parts of Queens, New York are actually gateways to some sort of desolate, filthy hell, which even the devil has abandoned. He probably talked about more, but no one could keep up with a speech close to four hours. In fact, had that speech been in a public setting, Amnesty International would have been bemoaning it as the latest infringement in their less-than-perfect human rights record. Some would call his speech a manifesto. He has managed to instill his ideology, the boringly named "Xi Jinping Thought" into the party constitution, effectively placing him on a pedestal of importance close to Mao himself, although he hasn't yet printed it out onto books and forced everyone to carry it out. Under Mao, the punishment for failure to carry *The Little Red Book* was execution and labelling as petty bourgeois elite, even if one were a homeless illiterate. That being said, however, this week Xi is meeting with Apple and Facebook CEOs Tim Cook and Mark Zuckerberg so that the Chinese may yet find copies of the "Xi Jinping Thought" popping into their phones forcibly, just like that U2 album a couple of years ago. It was as if Bono himself had broken into my home and relieved himself into my ear while I slept.

The actual idea—"Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era"—is not new and the new era described has been around for a few eras. Deng Xiaoping said similar things when he began market reforms to stave off the implosion of the Cultural Revolution. But the difference is that China is now on



the verge of becoming THE superpower. Economically they are surging, militarily they are exerting power in key areas, and politically they have positioned themselves as a reliable and "impartial" partner to countries that can no longer rely on a volatile United States. There was also a creepy propaganda video where students sing an ode to "Xi Dada" or "Uncle Xi". This all adds up to what Xi calls the "Chinese Dream" and one assumes it is a little better than the previous Chinese dream, which was to run a filthy takeout joint in some small town in Rhode Island and bastardise their food and the good name of General Tso. The Chinese Dream is imperative, not only for Xi, but also for the sake of *The Economist*.

Bareesh Hasan Chowdhury is a recent Political Science graduate.