

# Urban Chaos

If we are serious about managing our cities and towns better, perhaps we should start by bestowing more powers on local governments

**LAST** week, at a conference about urban development hosted by World Bank, almost all the municipality mayors of Bangladesh were present to share their experiences with experts and mayors from different other countries.

Speakers at the plenary sessions included, among others, the former mayors of Salt Lake City, Utah, the USA, and Calbayog, Philippines, as well as distinguished professors.

After the end of each speech, there was a question-answer session for the audience. When the former Calbayog city mayor Mel Senen Sarmiento ended his speech, a Bangladeshi municipality mayor took the microphone. He was supposed to ask a question. Instead, he took the opportunity to complain about the many problems that a typical Bangladeshi mayor generally faces.

While translating his "question" for the speaker, the anchor urged the next questioners to be brief with their question. That did not happen. After Ralph Becker, the former mayor of Salt Lake City, talked about his experience and the challenges that he had to face during his tenure as a Democrat mayor in a Republican-dominated state, a number of Bangladeshi mayors took the microphone to grumble about the low budget and little power they were equipped with.

Selina Hayat Ivy, the mayor of Narayanganj City Corporation, finally intervened to clarify that the foreign speakers wouldn't be able to help them and that they should only ask relevant questions. Even after that, when Ivy's speech came to an end, an unpleasant incident occurred, as a group of mayors started shouting and demanded that their voices be heard. Some disgruntled mayors wondered aloud whether theirs was "a voice crying in the wilderness."

The fact that our municipality mayors have many, many grievances is well known. Their main complaint is that the government doesn't allocate sufficient funds to the municipalities. The government, in



Citywide problems such as traffic congestion and waterlogging have become worse than ever before.

policymakers back from doing what Mayor Mel Senen's country did in the mid-80s: decentralising power by empowering local governments. In the Philippines, 40 percent of the national budget is allocated to the local government. In Bangladesh, the government spends most of its resources through the ministries, technocratic divisions, etc. Despite being elected officials, the mayors are so powerless that a mid-level technocrat at the LGRD ministry can fire them citing vague reasons.

In big cities like Dhaka and Chittagong, there are multiple parallel authorities doing the same thing without coordinating with each other. The city corporations do not have the ability or authority to carry out long-term projects.

In the absence of coordination among the related institutions, the cities are plunged into chaos. As a result, problems such as traffic congestion and waterlogging persist. There are, then, the powerful non-state actors who are actively participating in ruining the cities.

A report prepared by Dhaka district administration shows that powerful individuals, organisations and companies have occupied a number of canals of the city, making it impossible for water to flow when it rains.

The Daily Star reported on November 4 that a labour union was occupying a canal in Basila. Two days earlier, the paper reported that during a public consultation on the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) of the capital, a high-ranking police officer, representing a police housing project, said that the city doesn't need wetlands, because they "breed mosquitoes!" According to the daily New Age, a police housing project has also nearly occupied a canal at Khilkhet.

Dhaka is perhaps the best example of what happens when people with vested interests dictate the terms of city planning. Part of the solution lies in giving more powers and resources to the local government authorities so that they can work independently. The mayors—as Mel Senen Sarmiento has said, citing an example from his country—can do in three years what the central government can in decades, if provided with the necessary resources and authority.

Such conceptual difference is holding our

response, insists they have to finance their projects themselves by raising taxes from the residents and businesses. However, the reality is that there are not many areas where mayors are authorised to impose a tax, and in areas where they are, often the choice is between doing nothing and making unpopular choices—and the outcome is obvious.

However, Saiful Karim Mintu, the mayor of Jhenaidah municipality and one of the featured speakers at the two-day event, disagrees. He says if a mayor can give the voters a sense that their money is well-spent, there is nothing to worry about while raising the taxes.

Ralph Becker, the former Salt Lake City mayor, echoed the same sentiment in an

interview with *The Daily Star*. If the local government is sensible about using the tax money and can make a strong case for what can be achieved with the money, the public will definitely help, he said.

The fact is, our mayors badly need funds, because they have promises to keep. They are more interested in short-term measures rather than long-term projects because, firstly, they lack the necessary technical knowhow. Unable to determine what is best for the entire town or city, to prepare a concrete plan and translate that plan into reality, they simply seek money from aid agencies and the government for a variety of projects. Secondly, there is no guarantee that the next mayor would follow the path set by them in implementing a master plan.

The meddling of the MPs in local affairs is another problem. In Bangladesh, the very concept of power is different from the West or even the Philippines in Asia. A Western politician may believe that genuine power lies in the ability to formulate an impactful legislation. To a typical Bangladeshi politician, on the other hand, with the exception of a few, power means the ability to control the police force for their own political interests, and collect funds for development (infrastructural, mainly) projects.

Therefore, despite being a legislator, MPs are more interested in having a control over the local infrastructure projects that should be conducted by a local government authority.

Such conceptual difference is holding our

## Conflict of interest, for example...

**CHINITTO SINCE 1995**

**NIZAMUDDIN AHMED**



**O**FTEN times, at greater intensity than the minister himself or the MP herself, the corporation chairperson, the district commissioner or the police officer in-charge—in happenings that hurt the government, the administration and the party in power—it is the spouse, the children, the nephews and the nieces, the uncles and the aunts, the PS, the APS, the PS to the APS and the driver, who in varying styles execute such clout (read "power") that it is not clear whether it is in the know of the actual authority whose name is being sold. Psst! One has to be acquainted with Bangalee culture to appreciate the connotation and context of "sold".

For example, if an MP is chairing a school/college board and the *mononiyo's* daughter or a distant relative is a student therein, it is possible that some *telua* headmaster/principal will orchestrate academic and extra-academic advantages for the child. These may include, but is not restricted to, awarding extra marks in examinations, being selected to present a wreath to the chief guest (daughter garlanding *pita*), undesired inclusion in the institution's cultural programme, and no queries about absenteeism without rhyme or reason.

For example, a government corporation has called a tender for supply of thousands of dozens of eggs to celebrate *Dim Dibosh*. Now that's another day added to our annual calendar, with Beef Day, Hilsa Day and *Bhat* Day under active consideration of concerned

ministries. However, there is a genuine egg supplier with chicken backup as well as experience (ouch!), but if the party happens to be related by blood or otherwise to the chairperson or the chief engineer or the CEO, there will be murmurs about "fowl" play. The whispers usually find voice after the "boss" has been transferred or has fallen in the esteem of the government.

For example, an architect has designed a building. According to the morals of architectural practice, the construction of the building should be carried out by some other entity, known as a contractor. This division of work protects the architect from being

suspected by the building owner of gleaning surplus financial benefits when the architect proposes changes, additions and deletions to the design after he assumes the auxiliary role of constructing the building or that of supplying building materials. Engineers could be entangled in similar conflicts. On that count, developer firms owned by or employing architects/engineers harbour conflict of interest if design and construction of a building is accomplished in-house under a single decision-maker.

For example, a university professor was tickled to bits conducting a lecture as sitting before him was his beloved daughter among

other students. Some people fancy the prohibited, and so the same teacher was also taking his daughter's practical course. He may have adopted the fairest of evaluation and had closed his eyes while putting down the marks. His daughter may indeed have been the best student in the class. But, even if she did well by her own standards, the grades will be considered a 50/50 collusion by daughter and father. And yes, they lived in the same house. Such an arrangement is unthinkable even at kindergarten level—a mother as class teacher of her own child, simply because the other children do not have their mom anywhere near them.

For example, imagine an interview board. The father-in-law of a candidate is on the board. Why? He was nominated by the candidate's father, the chairman of the institution. The boy was among the top of his class. Perhaps he would have got the job without the need of his *abba hujur* sitting across the interview table. But, soon after his appointment, tongues began to wag that the selection was a crude specimen of nepotism, and a result of complicity by the in-laws.

For example, a man has been charged with whatever, and lands in a court. Is it possible that the judge would be his father or uncle or grandfather or a distant relative? If it does by sheer coincidence, that is when conscientious judges use the armour "feeling embarrassed" and opt out of that court, or the case is transferred to a different and neutral court of law.

For example, a journalist has unearthed a factory of spurious drugs, and finds that his own uncle is involved in the unscrupulous production. What does he do? If he shelves the scoop, he would be guilty of letting his uncle off the hook, and doing disservice to the nation. If he breaks the story, even if he

covers all the details, the sceptic would pounce back that he has been easy on his uncle. The only noble option for him is to pass on the story to a colleague and move on.

For example, a government officer was elected president of an association of professionals. That's great and well-deserved! The conflict emerged when as a public servant he was party to implementing a national project—cutting down dozens of ageing trees. Many members of his association and others objected to the degradation of the environment, but the president could not express due solidarity. Nor could he join the rally at the grounds where the trees were being felled. The president too felled his association because of a conflict of interest.

For example, a cricketer cannot expect his father to be one of the umpires, or even the third. "Howzzzat, Baba?" does sound weird.

For example, lottery organisers bar employees of the organisation and their families from participating. (Cough, cough) "Ahem! And the raffle winner of a Thanda Brand refrigerator is the CEO of the Thanda Refrigerator Manufacturing Company!" Hardly credible.

For example, a TV channel owner decides to sing songs on his channel when many believe he does not need to.

For example, during the liberation war in 1971, some freedom fighters did not spare their fathers and uncles who were on the other side. That is the supreme example of overcoming conflict of interest. As always, a salute, comrade!

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**A WORD** **A DAY**

**TINTINNABULATION**  
NOUN

A ringing or tinkling sound

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Melt base
- 5 Does a checkout chore
- 9 Edible mushroom
- 10 Choose
- 12 Chance to swing
- 13 Caesar's land
- 14 Caesar's land
- 14 Shipping stop
- 16 Buddy
- 17 Wine cask
- 18 Seattle player
- 20 Derided, in a way
- 22 Mere
- 23 Some doors
- 25 Poker cost
- 28 Showed generosity, in a way

**DOWN**

- 1 Add
- 2 Illinois city
- 3 Tide type
- 4 Art Pepper played it
- 5 Siamese fighting fish
- 6 Pub pint
- 7 Berlin speech
- 8 Sloppy writing
- 9 Ship staffs
- 11 In poor taste
- 15 Give a new name to
- 19 Party leader
- 21 Course needs
- 24 Fairy queen
- 25 Invited
- 26 Not optional
- 27 Enmesh
- 29 Saluted
- 30 Hams it up
- 31 Has a banquet
- 33 Blockheads
- 37 New Jersey town
- 39 First woman

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

F	A	C	T	P	A	C	E		
A	P	O	R	T	I	D	O	L	S
R	O	M	E	O	T	E	M	P	I
E	L	M	M	Y	A	N	M	A	R
S	L	U	I	C	E	S	E		
O	N	T	A	P	E	C	M	O	N
I	S	T	R	O	O				
R	A	C	Y	V	E	E	R	S	
E	R	A	I	R	D	A	T	E	
N	A	T	A	L	I	E	T	A	X
A	G	I	L	E	A	L	I	V	E
L	O	V	E	R	D	O	V	E	R
N	E	S	T						

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**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

SQUIRT! AAAGH!

YOU'RE JUST A COUPLE OF MEANIES!

HEY! CALL ME WHAT YOU WANT, BUT DON'T CRITICIZE MY FAN BASE!