

BARISAL CITY CORPORATION ELECTION

Barisal set on a collision course as old meets new



A three-wheeler designed to look like a boat (Awami League's election symbol) roams the streets ahead of the mayoral election in Barisal City Corporation.

PHOTO: STAR



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

As we cruised into the Kirtankhola River near Barisal, the sun had just begun to rise. A faint outline of a long line of trees and structures appeared on the horizon. It was a welcome sight after a night in what seemed like the middle of nowhere, sailing through mile after mile of unknown waters. Barisal, with its canals, legends and poetry, is a fitting tribute to a journey that takes you through a crisscross of rivers which serve as a testament to the rich riverine ecosystem of Bangladesh.

Any visitor to the city these days will be astonished by the transformation that it has gone through, from being a quaint neighbourhood struggling to shed its small-town aura just a few weeks ago into a vibrant melting pot of ideas, events and gatherings, drawing journalists, activists, politicians and psephologists from places as far-flung as the capital and further beyond—all gathering to be a part of the mayoral election.

Barisal City Corporation (BCC) goes to the polls on July 30, along with Sylhet and Rajshahi. This being an election year, any poll has the added significance of being seen as laying the groundwork for the national election which is due later in the year. In the days since the announcement of its election schedule, BCC has witnessed an influx of political tourists. Roads and signposts have been plastered with banners and leaflets. If you walk through the streets, you can learn a thing or two about the art of persuasion from the recorded messages being delivered from campaign vehicles circling around the city.

Given its track record of relative pre-poll peace so far, Barisal can claim a certain degree of authenticity unlike those two other cities, which have been marked by chaos and unrest, but it's not immune to the influences of power politics. You have candidates building their campaigns around maudlin sentimentality and unreconstructed populism. There is the usual mix of accusations and recriminations slung by the competing parties, as well as whispers about various machinations behind the scenes. A gripping sense of anticipation exists side-by-side with that rare empowering moment for the public that comes only before an election.

Yet, like the water that keeps its shores clean and its grounds fertile, Barisal offers a spectacle that's quite refreshing.

Not long after we reached the gate of the city's River Port, on a stage set on the ground floor of a building in downtown Barisal, a compère shrieked into the microphone to announce the arrival of

Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah, the ruling party candidate. Amid cheers and chants from his supporters, Sadiq rose to speak. As he tried to charm his way into the hearts of the crowd with the promise of development, he dedicated a significant amount of his time talking about his main rival, the BNP mayoral candidate Majibor Rahman Sarwar, whom he referred to as "Sarwar Kaku" out of reverence.

That same day, not far from the site of the Awami League meeting, I met with Sarwar at the local BNP office. Asked about his reaction on Sadiq's allegation that the BNP campaign was centred around alleged threats on the party chairperson and "national" issues rather than the "interests" of the local populace, he gently sought to explain his position, never raising his voice for once, or making any disparaging comment against his younger opponent. This line of reasoning marks a welcome departure from a tradition in which politicians thrive on bellicose rhetoric and unsavoury exchanges. Through the restraint shown on the part of its candidates, Barisal offers a healthy alternative, a campaign strategy not directed at persons but at principles.

But politics is as much about what you appear to be as what you do to live up to that appearance. Awami League, riding on the much-vaunted success of its development activities, will try to recreate its Khulna-Gazipur magic while BNP, which won the last mayoral election, will try to minimise the damage wrought by a forgettable term in office. In BCC, never has a party won two successive terms. It was BNP which won the first election in 2003. The second and third, held in 2008 and 2013, were won by Awami League and BNP respectively. Even the highly popular Shawkat Hossain Hiron couldn't break this jinx when he sought re-election in 2013. The question is, with such a proven record of anti-incumbency bias trailing it, does BNP stand a chance?

Nothing seems to be going in BNP's favour at the moment. The party has been left ploughing a difficult furrow with both its chairperson and senior vice-chairman either in jail or on the run, which has all but incapacitated it for the foreseeable future. Many senior leaders have also been kept on a tight leash. As if to lend validation to its claims of a witch-hunt and existential threats facing the party, a frequent suspect in BNP's failures to win any of the two mayoral races this year has been what the political commentator Badiul Alam Majumdar called "the Khulna model of controlled election," orchestrated by the ruling Awami League.

Alam lists five features of this election model: 1) keeping the leaders and workers of the party on the run; 2) preventing its polling agents from

performing their duties; 3) using force on the Election Day; 4) inaction of the EC; and 5) making mayors from the opposition party powerless. This model, as I have explained in another column, "seeks to prevent elections from getting messy through a shift towards more subtle and non-violent tactics fashioned to weaken the opposition from within, and eliminate competition well in advance of an election."

No wonder Sarwar, also the first mayor of BCC, is focused more on the negative coverage of these trends which may serve as collateral in case things do not turn out as expected.

For Awami League, the calculation is rather simple. It wants victory and sees no reason why the voters shouldn't want it too. Sadiq, who comes from a privileged political background, commands support from the young voters and also holds sway over a sizeable number of senior voters mostly because of his enterprising and easy-to-approach image. Of the 242,166 voters in BCC, 30,909 will vote for the first time. Word in the city is that these new voters may tilt the balance in Sadiq's favour.

There is a conflicting theory as well. With the centralisation of local politics, the line between local and national issues is getting increasingly blurred, which means the anti-incumbency factor may cut both ways. If BNP won the last BCC election, Awami League has been at the Centre for the last two terms. Awami League will, therefore, have to persuade the voters to not fall for the negative spillover effects of national issues, such as the quota protests, and instead look at the reality closer at home. It has Hiron's enviable legacy to look up to but the truth is, Barisal has been notoriously resistant to past influences.

Two other candidates are also creating ripples on BCC's electoral landscape—BSD's Dr Manisha Chakraborty and Islami Andolon Bangladesh's Mawlana Obaidur Rahman Mahbub—but whether they will outlive their ripples to have any meaningful impact on the election remains to be seen.

If the election is allowed to take its own course without any interference from outside forces, a victory for any of the candidates is far from assured. That's a BIG "if" considering the controversy that surrounds the Khulna-Gazipur elections and the role of the Election Commission. Will authenticity triumph over compliance? Or will Barisal also succumb to the "Khulna model"? As things stand now, the city remains a battleground for contrasting ideologies, expectations and policy objectives.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The End of NATO?



CARL BILD

WHAT is left of NATO and the transatlantic order after US President Donald Trump's tumultuous week in Brussels, the United Kingdom, and Helsinki, where he defended Russian President Vladimir Putin against accusations of cyber warfare by America's own intelligence agencies? Watching events unfold through rose-tinted glasses, one might think that the West's most important strategic alliance is more or less okay, or even growing stronger. In fact, NATO is in peril, and its fate now lies in Trump's contemptuous hands.

Prior to and during the NATO summit, there was much hand-wringing over member states' military spending as a share of GDP. Each member is expected to increase its spending to 2 percent of GDP by 2024, but Trump seems to think that this already should have been done. And at the recent summit, he suddenly called for a new target of 4 percent of GDP—which is more than even the United States spends.

To be sure, over the past few decades, NATO's primary focus was on peacekeeping operations in distant places, rather than on its core function of territorial defence. For most European member states, the peace dividend from the alliance's operations justified cuts in domestic military spending.

But this attitude changed in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and launched secretive military incursions into Eastern Ukraine. Since then, NATO member states' defence budgets have increased by around 4 percent per year on average, making the 2024 target eminently achievable.

More fundamentally, Trump's complaint that the US is shouldering an unfair share of the burden for NATO's collective defence is dubious. While the US military budget equals roughly 72 percent of combined defence spending by all NATO member states, roughly three-quarters of US military spending is directed toward regions other than Europe. Around half of the US defence budget is spent on maintaining a presence in the Pacific, and another quarter is spent on operations in the Middle East, strategic nuclear command and control, and other areas.

Moreover, although the US has increased its defence outlays in Europe substantially over the past few years, it is worth remembering that most US forces and facilities there are actually focused on the geostrategic arc from India to South Africa. With facilities such as Ramstein, Fairford, Rota, Vicenza, and Sigonella, the US has long used Europe as a staging ground for deploying forces elsewhere. And the early-warning and surveillance facilities

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that the US maintains in the United Kingdom and Norway are there to defend the continental US, not Europe.

The fact is that total European defence spending is around twice what the US spends on European security, and also roughly twice what Russia spends on defence, according to estimates produced at the US National Defense University.

The critical importance of US command, control, and intelligence forces in Europe should not be minimised, but it should at least be put into perspective. Although the US Army recently rotated heavy brigades through Europe for military exercises, its permanently stationed troops are equipped only for limited interventions.

This is why NATO must continue to improve its defence capacity in Europe. At a minimum, Europe needs more military forces, and those forces need to be equipped for rapid deployment to critical areas. The new mobility command that is being established in Germany is a promising first step.

And yet, Russia's advantages over NATO have less to do with resources than with command and control. As a single country, Russia's military forces are more integrated, and can be deployed more quickly in pursuit of strategic directives from the Kremlin. Such nimbleness was amply demonstrated in Crimea in 2014 and in Syria the following year.

For its part, NATO does have a deeply integrated command structure for the forces that are assigned to it. But that hardly matters if political decisions to deploy forces or launch operations are not taken in time. In any military confrontation, unity of will and the speed of high-level decision-making determine the outcome.

The problem is that while NATO's military capacity is actually improving, its political decision-making capacity is deteriorating. Imagine what would happen if a NATO member state sounded the alarm about Russia launching a secretive Crimea-style military operation within its borders. Then, imagine that US intelligence agencies confirmed that an act of aggression was indeed underway, despite Putin's denials.

Finally, imagine how Trump might respond. Would he call Putin to ask what's going on? And would Putin make another "incredible offer" to help US investigators get to the bottom of things? Even more to the point: Would Trump quickly invoke the principle of collective defence under Article 5 of the NATO treaty? Or would he hesitate, question the intelligence, belittle US allies, and validate Putin's denials?

These are truly disturbing questions to have to ask of an American president. They will now hang over Europe's head indefinitely.

Carl Bildt is a former prime minister and foreign minister of Sweden.

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THOMAS JEFFERSON
(1743-1826)

American Founding Father, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and the third president of the United States

In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Wound remnant

5 Strikes

10 Less confined

12 Like dunce caps

13 Flee to marry

14 Saxon precursor

15 Broadcast

16 Cithrus hybrid

18 Lively dances

20 Napkin site

21 Bothers

23 Taxing org.

24 Foolish

26 Rudiments

28 Copy tapes

29 Umpire's call

31 Hurler's stat

32 Snarl

36 Moroccan port

39 Indulgent

40 Closed

41 Seething

43 Peach center

44 More certain

45 Campout sights

46 Printed matter

DOWN

1 Worry excessively

2 Eyelashes

3 Decorate

4 Gym unit

5 Read a UPC

6 Extended

7 Perfectly behaved

8 Portico features

9 Reporting coups

11 Snappy replies

17 Demand

19 Web picture format

22 Game quests

24 "Inka Dinka Doo" singer

25 Strand

27 "Willard" sequel

28 Hate

30 Had a snack

33 Angry look

34 Rubber source

35 Put forth

37 Nice fellow

38 Midmonth day

42 Furrow

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

M	O	T	T	O	S	S	P	A	M
O	R	I	E	N	T	S	P	A	C
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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT