

## Agreeing to sit for talks shows political wisdom

*Use the opportunity to resolve the thorny issues*

IT is a demonstration of political farsightedness on the part of the Prime Minister to have accepted the proposal of the Oikyafront for a dialogue. Coming against the background of statements from some party high-ups discounting any possibility of talks between the AL and the opposition, it is a very encouraging development. This a good start and we hope the opportunity will be seized upon to iron out and resolve certain thorny issues surrounding holding of the parliamentary elections. We have high expectations and would hope that both the parties would focus on the main point at issue, i.e. how to hold elections that are acceptable to all the political parties, as well as the general people.

To ensure that this meeting does not turn into a futile exercise, both the parties should display a flexible position in the discussions. There are some genuine concerns of both the opposition and the voters about the elections being free and fair. And the ruling party should allay those. The opposition too must not be rigid in their demands. Also, public perception regarding the role of the EC, and its ability to perform its tasks without let or hindrance have been much talked about, and should be addressed by the ruling party.

We understand that these issues cannot all be resolved during a one-off meeting. But dialogue cannot go on ad infinitum. Thus, we hope that both the parties would utilise the opportunity on November 1 to decide to create a mechanism of time-bound dialogue that would create a way to accommodate all the reasonable demands of the political parties contesting the upcoming elections, which can help ensure that the elections remain free, fair and credible.

## Road sinks into the river

### Consequence of unplanned river excavation

IN what can only be described as a complete lack of coordination between different departments, 150 metres of a 2.5km concrete road have sunk into the Kumar River in Kazi Kandia area of Nagarkanda Upazila. This has happened because of unplanned excavation of the Kumar River, rendering the road completely unusable and leaving thousands of residents of the area in a fix. What we would like to know is why the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) did not bother to coordinate this activity with the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) before embarking on the project.

This is but one example of many projects that suffer due to lack of proper inter-agency coordination. This is typical of some government departments which seldom bother to attend coordination meetings, and this lack of cooperation and coordination shows up in such ridiculous situations. Now that the road has collapsed, we are informed that the BWDB intends to dump geo-textile bags to protect the road. This is like prescribing paracetamol to treat cancer. We do not hear anything about holding anyone accountable for this blunder. By the looks of it, there won't even be a departmental enquiry because this is a road situated far away from the media spotlight. The sad fact of the matter is that such unplanned activity is costing the people a lot of hassle in terms of transportation, and the state the money. Shouldn't those responsible be held to account and made examples of?

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Don't let petty politics hurt Indo-Bangla relations

During the British regime, thousands of Muslims settled in what now is known as Assam from the then-Bengal province. They made the area habitable, bringing prosperity to Assam, now an Indian state after partition in 1947, by their hard work and labour.

During the Liberation War in 1971, many Bengalis crossed the border to Assam to seek refuge. They may not be migrants, but they fled to save their lives from the brutality of the Pakistani Army. Therefore, they were listed as refugees. After Bangladesh became an independent state, the refugees returned to their homeland.

The four million mostly Muslims, indentified wrongly as intruders by the Assam government, are apparently heirs of those who had migrated to Assam during the British regime. The idea that they are Bangladeshi intruders is not only disturbing but also ridiculous. They are, in fact, subjected to hate politics by some politicians who want to exploit the majority's fear for their petty political gain.

Excellent bilateral relations exist between the governments of Bangladesh and India. Fear-mongering politicians must not be allowed to harm the ties.

Md Nasirullah Khan, Fakirapool, Dhaka

# Is Bangladesh ready for its urban future?

*October 31 is 'World Cities Day'—a global call to promote sustainable urban development by partnering to take on the challenges and opportunities that urbanisation presents*

ASHEKUR RAHMAN

TODAY, at least one in four people in Bangladesh lives in urban areas. And in 30 years, at least half of the country's population will be living in cities. Dhaka is already the world's most crowded city and its population size will double by 2030. Chattogram will emerge as a megacity with 5-10 million people. Narayanganj, Sylhet, Gazipur and Rajshahi will experience a similar growth. Over time, the country will see its 4,500 Union Parishads convert into small towns.

These predictions are in line with 2018 UN estimates that more than half of the world's population will be living in urban areas by 2050. Globally, cities are emerging as platforms for production, innovation and trade. And more people are moving to tap into these opportunities.

But rapid urbanisation is also resulting in unbalanced growth. Targeting and reducing urban poverty, delivering public services and providing decent work for all, to name just a few key issues, are becoming more challenging. Climate risks are further compounding the problems. Cities are being forced to reconsider how to handle the effects of both slow and rapid-onset disasters such as droughts, floods and river erosion. What will these mean for governance, finance or inequality in urban areas? How can cities become more resilient and sustainable?

Bangladesh is also facing these tough questions while experiencing the fallouts of unsustainable urban development. Bangladesh is among the world's most climate vulnerable countries. Two hundred thousand coastal residents will be forced to migrate with the continual rise in the sea level, according to recent studies. The majority will likely head to Dhaka or to neighbouring districts in the coastal region. Already, inequality is rising partly because there are not



PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

enough formal jobs to absorb growing urban populations. Dhaka and Chattogram are under pressure as secondary cities are not growing as fast as the big ones. Affordable housing is another giant challenge as urban areas have a fragmented housing delivery system; this is resulting in a rapid growth of slums and informal settlements without any tenure security. Inadequate urban policies and lack of implementation are making the situation worse.

Despite the increasing significance of Bangladesh's cities, the role that urban areas will play is neither widely understood nor fully recognised in the public debate in the country. Municipal budgets tend to be strained and can depend heavily on government support. And even while more urban stakeholders are stepping in to tackle the challenges, work tends to be either siloed or uncoordinated.

Even then, Bangladesh can showcase

good examples of urban development: in 2016, Rajshahi became a global model for tackling ambient air pollution in cities. Its efforts to clean up brick kilns and make the city greener were lauded and has had far-reaching impacts on public health.

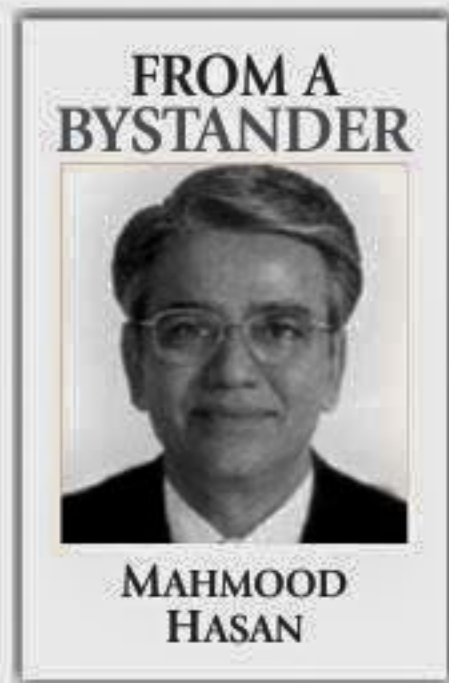
Narayanganj has demonstrated how to become financially solvent. And, Jhenaidah municipality is determined to provide quality public healthcare and affordable housing to support low-income communities and help reduce urban poverty. Success stories such as these can inspire action for building resilience for more sustainable cities in Bangladesh. Next steps now should focus on replicating these home-grown solutions to the country's urban challenges.

Bangladesh's action on building sustainable and resilient cities will also have big implications for how well it meets its international commitments: the country is a signatory to the New Urban

Agenda and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Discussions on these agendas emphasise on creating safe and inclusive cities so that no one is left behind. As a promising start, in line with the SDGs, the government of Bangladesh has already noted specific strategies and priorities for promoting sustainable urbanisation in its 7th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020). Now, the step forward should be to translate those commitments into action. To do so, Bangladesh needs its urban stakeholders—the government, communities, NGOs, urban activists and anyone with a stake in the country's cities—to partner. October 31, the World Cities Day, 2018 presents an excellent opportunity for doing so to help build sustainable and resilient cities in Bangladesh.

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# A constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka



**FROM A BYSTANDER**

**MAHMOOD HASAN**

PRESIDENT Maithripala Sirisena of Sri Lanka, in a sudden unconstitutional move, dismissed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and appointed his nemesis and former president Mahinda Rajapaksa as the new prime minister on October 26. The coup has left the three-year-old fragile national unity government (UNP and UPFA) in tatters.

The 225-seat 15th Sri Lankan parliament was constituted during the election on August 17, 2015. Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party won 106 seats—seven seats short of simple majority. Earlier in November 2014, Maithripala Sirisena, who was Minister of Health in President Mahinda Rajapaksa's cabinet, rebelled and defected from the United People's Freedom Alliance and contested the presidential election in January 2015, defeating Rajapaksa. It was actually Ranil Wickremesinghe who instigated Sirisena to rebel against Rajapaksa and eventually helped him win the presidency.

But in the parliamentary election in 2015, Sirisena's faction of UPFA managed to get only 33 seats. After the lone MP of Sri Lankan Muslim Congress and the 33 UPFA MPs joined UNP, Wickremesinghe secured a clean majority of 140 seats in the parliament. An indebted Sirisena thus invited Wickremesinghe to form the United National Front for Good Governance. Rajapaksa's faction of UPFA got 62 seats and sat on opposition benches.

The history of conflict between UNP and SLFP never allowed Sirisena and Wickremesinghe to be at ease with each other. There are apparently two burning issues for this.

Firstly, ideological differences between the two leaders kept them apart. While Sirisena remained essentially an UPFA man, Wickremesinghe could not compromise on UNP ideology. Sirisena's economic policy was based on the Sri Lanka Freedom Party's (origin of UPFA) ideology of agriculture-oriented import substitution strategy. Wickremesinghe's centre-right neoliberal economic strategy, on the other hand, was devoted to an open economy, foreign investment and tourism. Sirisena once complained

that the country was being mortgaged to international capitalists and imperialists. He also accused Wickremesinghe's step-motherly financial treatment of SLFP ministers and MPs.

Secondly, although he held the post thrice as prime minister, an ambitious and desperate Wickremesinghe always had presidential ambitions. His subtle strategy was to keep the SLFP divided so that he can win the next election in 2020. Not surprisingly, Sirisena suspected Wickremesinghe's clever policy to undermine the political influence of UPFA. Sirisena was actually at a loss on how to continue with the alliance with UNP led by an arrogant Wickremesinghe. Sirisena knew that unless Wickremesinghe is stopped, he would most likely become the next

renaissance against the government. In the background of all these developments, the Rajapaksa camp won a landslide victory in the provincial elections last year. That immensely strengthened his political position nationally.

Sri Lankan media reported that an exasperated Sirisena on October 3 met Rajapaksa and his brothers for a political tête-à-tête. Sirisena discussed realigning politically with the Rajapaksas, removing Wickremesinghe as prime minister and setting up a new coalition government under a new prime minister. The discussion ended on an optimistic note but without any decision. Since then, the two met several times at social events and had positive chats.



**Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena (left) appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa (right) as the new prime minister by sacking Ranil Wickremesinghe—threatening to delve the Indian Ocean nation into political chaos.**

president. It was probably these frustrations that pushed Sirisena to engineer a no-confidence motion against Wickremesinghe in April 2018. However, Wickremesinghe survived the motion comfortably getting support from 122 legislators.

While Sirisena was becoming increasingly insecure about his political career and life, opposition leader Mahinda Rajapaksa also joined the band of Wickremesinghe critics. Rajapaksa criticised Wickremesinghe's handling of the government saying that everything was going from bad to worse. He pointed that the investigations and cases being conducted by Wickremesinghe's government against the Rajapaksa family were a means to waste time in order to prevent the Rajapaksas from spearheading a movement of political

Ranil Wickremesinghe's fall did not come suddenly. It came after several long discussions between Sirisena and Rajapaksa family members. Rajapaksa laid down clear conditions to Sirisena that he shall have to cut off all coalition ties with UNP before he would allow Sirisena back into the fold. If Sirisena did that, only then would Rajapaksa be able to get the full support and cooperation of his party members for Sirisena.

Then came the incredible story that two months ago there was a conspiracy to assassinate Sirisena. The news went viral pointing fingers at India's RAW. This was revealed by Rajapaksa's brother Gotabaya, the ex-defence secretary. The accusation was that Wickremesinghe's government did not take any constructive action.

The Rajapaksa faction of UPFA had always considered Sirisena as a traitor,

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who backstabbed Rajapaksa and joined UNP to bring him down. Party members gave Rajapaksa full powers to decide on Sirisena rejoining UPFA—on the condition that Sirisena's leadership in any form would not be accepted. Sirisena must have considered all these pros and cons before deciding to ally with Rajapaksa with the assurance of his party faction that they will protect his life and political career under the powerful Rajapaksa family.

President Sirisena prorogued the parliament until November 16, 2018 after dismissing Wickremesinghe. That has effectively denied Wickremesinghe any chance to prove his majority in the parliament. Meanwhile, to complicate matters further, the Speaker of the Parliament Karu Jayasuriya wrote a letter to the president and requested him to reconvene parliament so that Wickremesinghe could prove his majority. He also said that he recognised Wickremesinghe as the prime minister. Wickremesinghe stated at a press conference that he had majority in parliament and was still the prime minister. As of October 29, Rajapaksa attended office for the first time after being sworn in as the new prime minister.

It is possible that Beijing will be happy with Rajapaksa becoming prime minister, while Delhi, which is alleged by some to have played a role in ousting Rajapaksa in January 2015, may have to reconsider its policy towards Sri Lanka. The political chaos that President Sirisena initiated will be difficult to be resolved constitutionally. There are more surprises to come.

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