

After metro rail, Dhaka's buses should be the next megaproject



Azmin Azran is a journalist at The Daily Star.

AZMIN AZRAN

The Dhaka metro rail is still an ongoing project, with the first line—MRT-6—almost complete and several others under construction. Yet, few would shy away from calling it a tremendous success already. It works, people love it, and all that's required now is to maintain the quality of service and keep up with demand.

Unless, of course, as citizens of one of the most densely populated metropolises in the world, we aspire to a better quality of life.

The metro rail network, which authorities say will be complete by 2030, will span the entire city of Dhaka. With 103 stations, the expectation is that a complete network will make the metro rail service accessible to everyone. While 103 is quite a large number, Dhaka is an incredibly populated city, and getting one to two crore—depending

most liveable places in the world—the government and city authorities need to look at the complete picture and work on efficient ways for people to commute. Metro rail is only one part of the puzzle; rationalising bus lines and making bus services passenger-friendly has to be the next step.

Since the metro rail has been operating full time, there have been reports that bus operators are starting to lose passengers. But that doesn't necessarily have to be the case. In Dhaka, one look at the roads tells us that not enough people use public transport, as roads are inundated with a sea of private vehicles, mainly cars.

Within a functional public transport system, buses can exist parallelly with metro lines, operating cheaper, slower services with more stops. This serves the dual purpose



Using the experience of the metro rail, the city authorities in Dhaka can bring improvement and discipline to the public bus sector.

FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

the Dhaka South mayor, who is also the convener of the Bus Route Rationalisation Committee, blamed blockades enacted by the opposition from October until the recently held national election for the lack of activity by the authorities concerned with Dhaka Nagar Paribahan. But a report by *The Financial Express* in October 2023 said that the committee hadn't met since May, five months before the blockades started.

The failure of Dhaka Nagar Paribahan and the apparent success of the metro rail tells the story that in Bangladesh, public transportation is being held hostage by the private sector. State-owned services like Bangladesh Railway leave a lot to be desired as well, but nowhere is the rot of bad service and bad faith worse than in the bus sector.

The benefits that have been brought about by the metro rail is proof enough, in case we needed it, that public transportation is a utility, not a consumer product. Allowing private bus owners to run riot with this crucial service has been one of the monumental long-term failures of Dhaka's city administration in its various forms over the decades. The idea of Dhaka Nagar Paribahan, which looked to include private players in the sector in a government endorsed reorganisation of the industry, was a good idea, but it has not worked, and much of that responsibility falls on the shoulders of private bus companies and owners.

It is now the perfect time for the government to treat this utility like a utility, and focus its attention on this sector. Using the experience it will gain from the metro rail, it needs to create city services of such quality that it drives the fleet of unfit buses off of Dhaka roads. If the government can bring discipline, affordability and, most important of all, reliability to bus services, the public will be with them. The metro rail proves that.

If Dhaka is to become a city with reliable public transport—and it must if it wants to stop being one of the least liveable places in the world—the government and city authorities need to look at the complete picture and work on efficient ways for people to commute. Metro rail is only one part of the puzzle; rationalising bus lines and making bus services passenger-friendly has to be the next step.

on where you draw the city boundaries—Dhakaites from their homes to these stations and back will remain a challenge.

If Dhaka is to become a city with reliable public transport—and it must if it wants to stop being one of the

of offering alternative modes of transportation between two destinations, as well as becoming a medium of last mile delivery for passengers, doing the job of collecting commuters from near their homes and commercial destinations and

putting them on a metro rail.

By reaching into parts of the cities that the metro rail can't get to, and connecting these areas to metro stations, buses can truly democratise public transportation in this city. Implemented correctly and supplemented with human-scale pedestrian and bicycle facilities, a mass transit ecosystem that consists of buses and metro rail working in tandem could finally make private cars unnecessary in our city, reducing their numbers on the road, and eventually lead to a city that isn't famous for its traffic congestion.

In truth, none of these are novel findings, and in the past, there have been efforts to achieve progress with

bus services in Dhaka. The late Dhaka North Mayor Annisul Haq envisioned a bus ecosystem where a single company would operate buses, with hundreds of active routes rationalised into just 42, organised in a handful of clusters. The initiative stymied with his death, but was revived once more under the current Dhaka South Mayor Sheikh Fazle Nur Taposh.

Trial runs were started in late 2021 under the company Dhaka Nagar Paribahan in three routes in the green cluster, all originating in Ghatarchar. The trials faced difficulties from the start, as the authorities expected private companies and entrepreneurs to join this initiative, but had to rely on the state-owned Bangladesh Road

Transport Corporation (BRTC) at the last minute to provide a large portion of buses for the initial trial.

Over the next two years, however, instead of increasing service areas and implementing the plan citywide, the initiative has suffered from non-compliance by private bus owners who were partnered with the government authorities. A report published in *Prothom Alo* this week paints a picture of disarray for Dhaka Nagar Paribahan—with a lack of sufficient buses, a tendency of buses in service to revert to old practices of dropping off and picking up passengers wherever they want, and an overall lack of cooperation by private companies. In the report,

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Will 2024 Be the New 1933?



Mark Jones, assistant professor of history at University College Dublin, is the author of '1933: The Forgotten Crisis in the Year of Hitler's Coup.'

MARK JONES

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed the chancellor of Germany. To his supporters, it was a day of "national revolution" and rebirth. Germany, they believed, needed the restorative force of an authoritarian strongman after 14 years of the liberal-democratic Weimar "system." That night, Hitler's torch-bearing brownshirts marched through central Berlin to mark the dawn of a new era.

It was also a triumphant moment in the history of popular deception. Since the Weimar Republic's early days, its politics had been defined by disinformation campaigns, including the lie that Weimar democracy was the work of a cabal of Jews and socialists who had "stabbed Germany in the back" to ensure its defeat in World War I.

Today, few people dispute that Hitler's arrival was a turning point in world history, the start of a political process that would lead to World War



Just imagine the world a year from now, with disinformation having taken down democratic majorities around the world.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

has shown, the Nazis' ruthless drive for power became all too clear. By the end of the summer of 1933, German society had been brought into line. There were no more independent political parties, trade unions, or cultural organisations. Only Christian churches retained some degree of independence.

A year later, in the summer of 1934, Hitler ordered the murder of his internal party rivals and, following Hindenburg's

long-range missiles. And amid the chaos, China decides to seize Taiwan.

The prospects for 2024 are so bleak that many refuse to contemplate them. Just as liberals in 1933 predicted that Hitler would quickly fail, wishful thinking today is clouding our judgement. We are sleepwalking—to borrow Christopher Clark's apt metaphor for the onset of World War I—into a new international order.

In her masterful two-volume history of the interwar era, Zara Steiner refers to 1929-33 as the "hinge years," when idealism in international relations was replaced by the "Triumph of the Dark." But as late as 1926, liberals had seemed to be winning: French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand and his German counterpart, Gustav Stresemann, shared the Nobel Peace Prize for their work on Franco-German reconciliation, and Germany joined the League of Nations. Extreme nationalism seemed to be isolated in Mussolini's Italy.

Faced with today's global crises, there is no room for optimism. We are potentially in another hinge year. If liberals act now, they can still prevail.

In a promising sign, hundreds of thousands of Germans recently took to the streets to support democracy and diversity, and to denounce the far right. But demonstrations in one country are not enough. German liberals must be joined by others across the continent. A continent-wide demonstration would send a powerful message. The sense of urgency must extend upwards, particularly to business leaders like JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon, who, hedging his bets, has already started cozying up to Trump.

Not so long ago, European leaders came together and did whatever it took to save the euro, because they recognised that the single currency's failure would end the European Union itself. Europeans now must demand the same urgency to meet this year's threats. The EU needs a plan for a world without Nato. It needs new tools to deal with member state leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico, both of whom would rather kiss Putin's ring than defend democracy. It is simply unacceptable that Orban still wields a veto over EU decision-making.

In the US, political mobilisation is the big variable. Trump's opponents must set aside their differences and unite behind President Joe Biden. We know all too well where disunity and naive optimism can lead.

The prospects for 2024 are so bleak that many refuse to contemplate them. Just as liberals in 1933 predicted that Hitler would quickly fail, wishful thinking today is clouding our judgement. We are sleepwalking—to borrow Christopher Clark's apt metaphor for the onset of World War I—into a new international order.

II and the Holocaust. But Hitler did not "seize power," as the Nazis later claimed. Instead, as his biographer Ian Kershaw has explained, he was "levered into power" by a small group of influential men.

One of those men was Franz von Papen, who served as chancellor in 1932. He (infamously) thought that Hitler and the Nazi Party—by far the largest party after the Reichstag elections of 1932—could be

used to advance a conservative agenda. Similarly, Germany's president, former Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, wanted to use Hitler to restore the monarchy.

But these conservatives' plans were soon swept away by Hitler's ruthless leadership, Nazi violence, and the German public's rush to join the regime and become a part of the promised national reawakening. The liberals and social democrats who opposed Hitler were either subjected to violence or caught up in their own optimistic escapism. As bad as things got, they assured themselves, Hitler's rule would eventually collapse. Nazi infighting would surely bring an end to the new government.

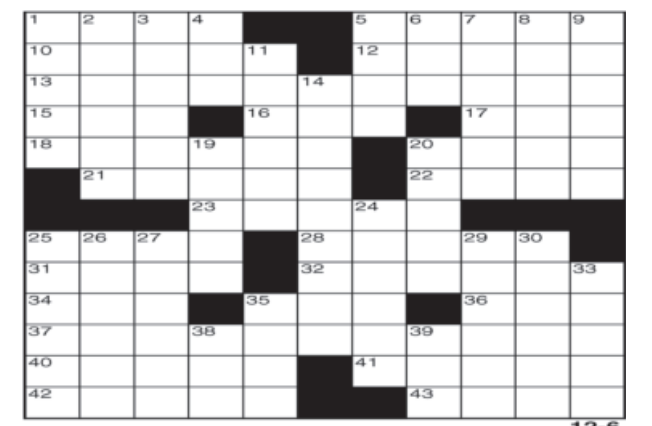
Beyond liberals and socialists, a wider section of German society assumed that Hindenburg, who had promised to be president of all Germans, would keep Hitler on a leash, while others expected the army to do so. All had been fooled by Hitler's ability to look respectable in the final years of the Weimar Republic.

Within 100 days of Hitler becoming chancellor, as historian Peter Fritzsche

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
- 1 Mexican coin
- 5 Castle light
- 10 Sports spot
- 12 Midwest airport
- 13 One slow to develop
- 15 Twisty turn
- 16 Lab animal
- 17 Zodiac animal
- 18 Painter Georges
- 20 Romantic flower
- 21 Black card
- 22 Mid-month day
- 23 Harvest goddess
- 25 Pillage
- 28 Having tattoos
- 31 Important times
- 32 Fashions
- 34 Play division
- 35 Flower visitor
- 36 Angsty rock
- 37 One who was held up
- 40 Not rented out
- 41 Play division
- 42 Spa treatments
- 43 Finishes
- DOWN
- 1 Loses color
- 2 Makes blank
- 3 Establishes
- 4 Count start
- 5 Horn sound
- 6 Cry of surprise
- 7 Strict boss
- 8 Fold
- 9 Messenger god
- 11 Wear down
- 14 One who sleeps in
- 19 Store fixtures
- 20 Frightful with peril
- 24 Comes in
- 25 Close tightly
- 26 Mysterious
- 27 Some stock
- 29 Late hour
- 30 Insist
- 33 Foot parts
- 35 Diamond clubs
- 38 Slippery swimmer
- 39 Road hazard



MONDAY'S ANSWERS

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

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.