

The hope is not there

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It feels wrong in myriad ways to say that hope isn't there when an autocrat fell, and that too by the efforts of not just the common people, but the student population as well. One may not expect tiredness in such a situation, but about half a year from the uprising, it seems to be the common feeling in many as the increased disruptions in normal life is wearing them out. This should be a new year, but in many ways it isn't.

For many, the lurch back to normalcy has been jarring. It's unusual after all, to be on the street and hear gunshots, and return to the classroom within the next few days. In classrooms, even as I've had students discuss the July uprising in essays or elsewhere, the mood seems—at least in my experience—to have shifted to the old ways of doing things. It's the same pushing and pulling to ensure that the students don't slack off after over a decade in an education system that likely beat out any interest in academics, or in fact any intellectual interests that may have come about on its own. It is the same in so many areas of our lives.

This, again, is understandable. If you think about it, Bangladesh is and remains surreal. Incidents that might have spawned books, series and podcasts in another country get a single column in page three of the dailies here. Perhaps the normal was to see an MP get cut up in a foreign country for reasons we don't fully know. Ultimately, in the blink-and-miss news cycle of Bangladesh, exhaustion is an understandable route.

Perhaps what has further dampened the happiness of ousting a 15-year dynastic autocrat has been the persistence of societal values that choke and snuff out any form of progress. From moral policing in Halloween to wasteful extravagance at weddings that do not need to be on this scale, in many ways it feels like the same old Bangladesh, over and

over again.

This is not to say that I expected an instant change—far from it. I joined groups and discussions and watched more Bangladeshi content on social media than I had ever done before in the hopes that an initiative or movement existed that could render me useful outside my jobs. I had the vigour to imagine permanent communities formed out of common areas of concern. The volunteering initiatives and the attempts to help the injured and the families of the martyred were encouraging.

Yet, violence remains an unerasable part of the city, and my imaginations for improvement have come to a halt. For some reason, months after the ouster of what seemed like an indomitable force, nothing shocks anymore.

One of the words still confined to academia but much needed for describing Bangladesh is "stuplifity." I found the most applicable form of the word in a text analysing Vikram Chadda's *Sacred Games*. It talked not only about spectacular acts of violence, but the routinised forms of it, or as the text put it, "quotidian violence." It's what comes to mind when I think of the Jahangirnagar University student brought to her death after being slammed by a battery-powered rickshaw and hitting a tree.

That this argument over this specific mode of transport existed even during the 15-year regime of the Awami League government is an indication of the stagnancy post-July. It is in line with the many protests, frustrating moments, and acts of atrocities that occurred after August 5, whether the horrific acts of violence against minorities, the unleashing of sealed misogyny and its terrifying outcomes, moral policing, property destruction, and the continued self-censoring practised by groups and individuals who ought to have experienced fully fledged freedom of speech in the absence of authoritarianism. Adding to these is the helplessness felt by those witnessing the sudden robustness with which another dynastic politician is seeking to make a comeback, and the associated political party acting as if it would be the default winner of the national election when it is held. Within



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHON

the two parties that have continually vied for power, neither inspires confidence among people who know of or remember each regime's misrule.

This is complicated by the feelings different groups have towards the interim government's performance. Some remain defensive, the horrors of the former regime telling them to accept anything else besides the former party; some supporters of the former regime attempt, tacitly or openly, to undermine what progress has been made to implant the idea that the past was better; and some remain lost on the path forward, almost

rendered hopeless by the mammoth task of progress.

But to return to the point in the title, when I say the hope is not there, I do not mean that an attempt should not be made to find hope. As roughly explained by a friend who overcame hurdles far greater than mine to access the education that was simply expected for me to have, hopelessness is not only bourgeoisie, it's bougie. To lie down, to give up, to contemplate and complain, and not attempt improvement is often the go-to of one who did not need to fight for the bare necessities required for even a semi-decent

life. The fact of the matter is that one person's giving up is often not only an action affecting the individual, but others who may have benefited from their attempts.

Tasks remain ahead of us. Whether it is preventing the biased revision of recent events, the opportunistic grabbing of authority in a power vacuum, or attempts to destabilise a nation from outside, the roles we have to play, no matter how insignificant they may seem to us now, will need to be fulfilled. It is easy to fall into despair when one imagines what will come after the election. However, the alternative is to suffer in silence.

A long-term vision for our local government



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The interim government formed a Local Government Commission on November 18, 2024, to recommend reform measures to strengthen local government institutions and good governance at the sub-national level. A long term vision for local government reform is needed to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Despite commitments made in the successive five-year plans of the country, adequate measures have not been taken to strengthen the local government bodies and thereby lessen the burden of development efforts on the central government.

Bangladesh has a fairly long history of both rural and urban local government institutions. But their performance has not been satisfactory. So local government reform must continue, keeping future demand for services in view. Future demographic and physical development trends should determine the allocation decisions of both national and local public expenditures in the coming decades. It is worth noting that the demand for infrastructure and services in the urban areas is constantly rising. About 40 percent of the country's population is already living in urban areas and the rate of urbanisation will remain high in the foreseeable future. Rural-urban migration will continue unabated since the rural areas cannot create adequate employment opportunities for a growing population. Within the next two decades, the urban population is expected to be 65 percent of the total population. If we cannot plan our urban areas now, and develop necessary roads, drains, schools, hospitals and other infrastructure and services, then many secondary cities and towns in the country will become congested. People will experience urban distress, similar to that faced by the residents of metropolitan Dhaka and Chattogram.

The Rajshahi City Corporation is a good example for successfully developing its infrastructure and maintaining decent urban services. The Local Government Commission should learn from the experience gained by Rajshahi City Corporation over the last three decades, and suggest reforms in urban local bodies in light of this experience. Furthermore, the local governments in urban areas must lead the planning and development control. Necessary coordination roles of city corporations and municipalities must also be ensured so that urban areas, where most of the country's population will eventually live, can enjoy a healthy life. As the demand for urban land, houses and other services rises, there should be a mechanism enabling urban local bodies to manage development around their official boundaries, ensuring that future physical growth is not hindered.

There should be some kind of collaboration between the urban and rural local bodies so that unplanned development does not take place in the peri-urban areas.

There is a rising demand for local services, in both urban and rural areas, due to population growth and increase in income. Failing to meet the local demand will lead to disastrous consequences for the country's future development. Urbanisation is happening haphazardly; there is no proper land-use

gap between responsibilities and available resources, causing frustration among the elected representatives and dissatisfaction among the residents; iii) discrimination in allocation of public funds to local bodies; iv) shortage of manpower, non-recruitment in vacant positions and low skills of staff; v) low compliance on the required stakeholder participation, which results in misplaced prioritisation of projects; vi) challenges in producing accurate budget and accounts, and management of asset; vii) lack of emphasis on environment and climate change issues, and lack of inclusivity in the local bodies; viii) poorly managed local information base, which is inaccessible to the public; and ix) use of archaic auditing method for finance and projects.

Taking examples of local government reforms in different countries, Bangladesh should have the following essential elements:

i) an electoral process by which the best quality of leadership in the local bodies can be

activities so that everyone in the community is benefited; vii) sincere willingness, interest, and proactiveness in planned development of the area and preparation of proposals and plans to that effect in a transparent and participatory manner; viii) securing funding and implementing projects while maintaining strict construction standards and social norms; ix) regular conduct of performance audit, asset valuation, and use of monitoring and evaluation; and x) strict imposition of laws, rules and administrative orders regarding functioning of local bodies, and adherence to national policies/laws related to environmental safeguards, climate change, urban planning, gender equality, child health, community health, persons with disability, industrial development, poverty alleviation, drug abuse and alcohol use, and preservation of historical buildings and structures, within respective legal jurisdictions.

A very important aspect of local government reform should be the

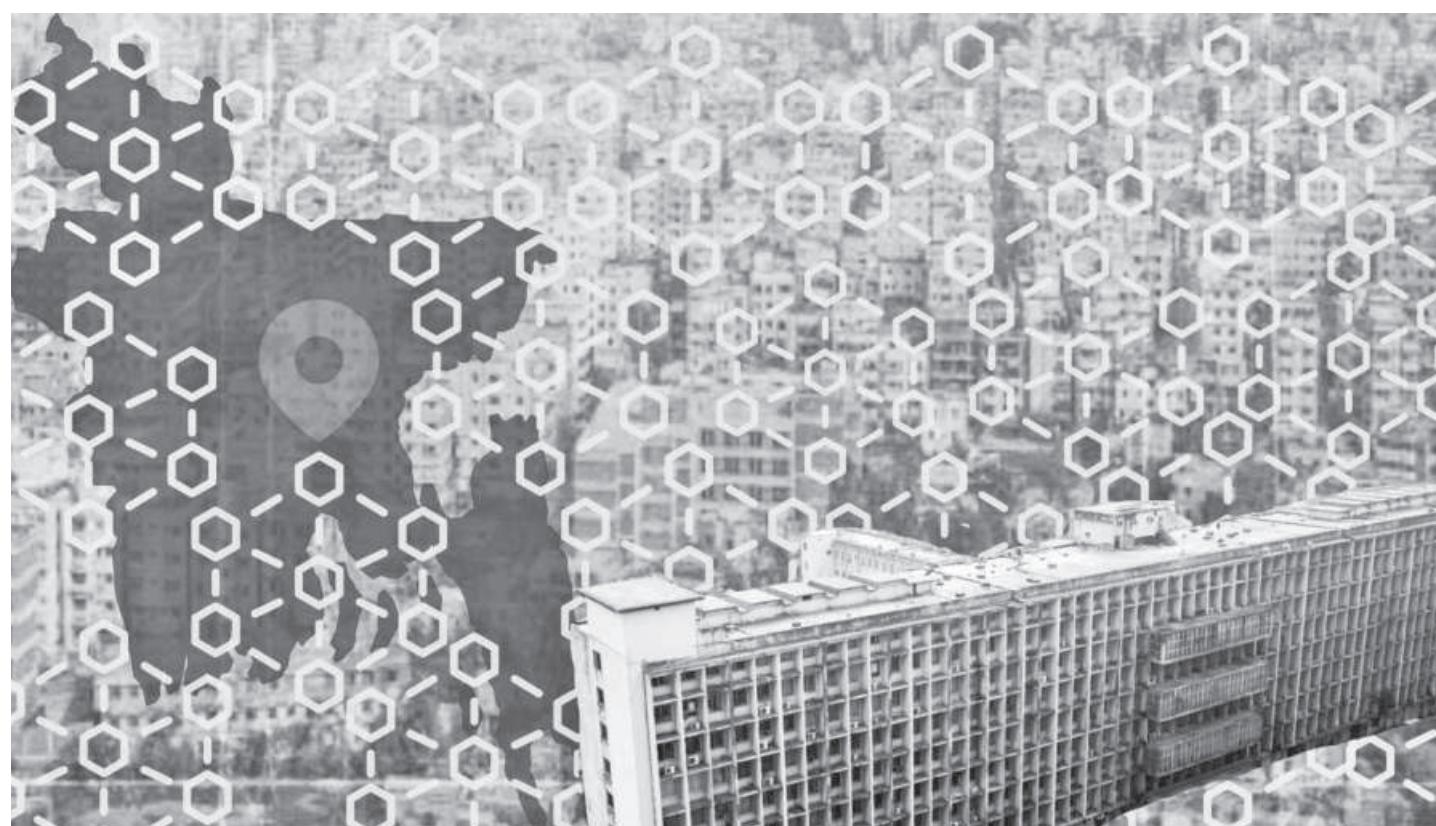
national policy formulation, annual budget-making process and policy implementation. This indicates that local government is not taken seriously in national development efforts. They are seen as local players engaged in small matters. Consequently, environmental, climate change, and economic policies are seldom internalised at the local level. The policies remain only as the central government's tools and thus are poorly implemented on the ground.

It is, therefore, critical to ensure synchronisation of national and local efforts to achieve optimum results. Therefore, the responsibilities of local bodies should be increased with regard to poverty alleviation programmes, inclusive growth, climate action, environmental management, low-income housing, education, health service delivery, child care centre and orphanage management, and meeting the needs of persons with disability. Local government reform efforts will not succeed if the image of local bodies is not improved by giving them additional, important responsibilities and allocating national budgetary resources to carry out these duties.

We should change our mindset about these local government bodies and be prepared to share more national resources with them so that they can undertake functions important to local people. While the efficiency of local tax collection is important, giving more developmental responsibility to local governments will require allocating funds from the national budget, because most revenue mobilisation tools lie with the central government.

In many countries, central governments are responsible mainly for national policymaking, formulation of laws, defence, construction and maintenance of nationally significant infrastructure such as national highways, and basic education and health. Local governments shoulder greater responsibilities and spend significantly higher amounts of money in comparison to their counterparts in Bangladesh. Local government expenditure as a percentage of GDP in Bangladesh is only one percent, which is very low. The proportion is significantly high in China (11 percent), Brazil (seven percent), South Korea (23 percent), South Africa (10 percent), and Indonesia (six percent), for example. Expenditure made by the local governments in the entire European Union is 10.6 percent of GDP; in the US, it is 12 percent. Therefore, Bangladesh has a long way to go in terms of catching up with other countries.

For Bangladesh to devolve a number of functions to the local level, a huge transformation at both national and local levels will be required. This calls for cross-party commitment to the reform measures, which should be taken forward sustainably over the next several years. The Local Government Commission must work with the Public Administration Reform Commission to reach a consensus about which functions should be devolved at what level of local government, and its implication on funding and staffing.



VISUAL: MONOROM POLOK

control and people are living under serious urban stress. The unplanned development in both cities and towns must be arrested, otherwise the whole country will become an urban slum. There is no alternative to the planned development of the urban areas. Therefore, local government reform must see urban centres as the country's future and accordingly strengthen the functional capacity of urban local governments, equipping them with required manpower, more responsibilities, and additional budget allocation.

The most important issues around local government are: i) controversy over party-based election to local bodies; ii) huge

attracted; ii) a code of conduct for chairman/mayoral position that ensures equal treatment of the entire council without discrimination and observation of highest level of ethical and moral standards; iii) technically well-trained and skilled local government staff who are motivated; iv) fair imposition of taxes and collection of revenue without bias and favour to anyone; v) willingness of the local government councils to improve their capacity through training and learning to enhance their ability for strategic long-term planning; vi) ensuring inclusivity to include the poor, women, persons with disability, children, senior citizens, ethnic minorities, etc in different development projects and

empowerment of women in local government bodies. Currently, there are reserved seats for women in each local government stratum. To ensure genuine representation of women in local bodies, all local council women member posts should be filled through direct election, rather than selection or indirect election. Also, a respectful central-local partnership should be established to ensure collaboration. While the central government should provide grants-in-aid to local government bodies based on an equity-based formula, it should ensure that national policies are understood well at the local level to support their implementation at the sub-national level. There is very little local participation in