Why we need self-reliant local governments

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Every year, hundreds of municipalities across Bangladesh wait for approval from Dhaka before they can repair roads, install streetlights, or expand markets. These local government bodies remain caught in a cycle of dependency on central budget and oversight. Without a proper resource mobilisation strategy to generate and manage their own revenue, they are often unable to plan or deliver according to local priorities.

At present, holding tax and trade licence fees constitute the major sources of own revenue for most municipalities. While there are a few other local sources of revenue depending on individual municipalities, their overall income still depends heavily on central government grants and development allocations. Most of these, however, often remain underutilised because of poor assessment and collection, limited staff capacity, and weak systems for digital record-keeping. In many places, there is no reliable data on the number of houses or businesses in operation, which makes revenue collection uncertain and prone to leakage.

Enhancing local revenue generation is not merely about money; it is about proper governance and accountability. When citizens see their taxes and fees being used for visible improvements—better roads, clean drainage, functioning streetlights, etc—they are more likely to continue to pay. This trust creates a virtuous cycle: locally sourced revenue finances better services, which in turn increase compliance and participation. Strengthened local revenue also reduces the political vulnerability of municipalities that often depend on central allocations influenced by political alignment rather than need.

Equally, when local businesses see fair taxation and transparent use of funds, they are more inclined to formalise operations and invest locally. Strengthening municipal finances can improve fiscal autonomy and build transparency by linking taxes to service delivery. It can also ensure that local taxation data is immutably documented through digital systems, preventing manipulation and preserving the integrity of public records.

Simple but systematically employed tools can make a difference in this regard. For instance, municipalities can conduct periodic household surveys to identify unregistered holdings and assess the actual tax base within their jurisdictions. Similarly, economic surveys of local businesses can determine appropriate trade licence fees and reduce the scope for discretionary decision-making. For example, mapping and verifying properties through community engagement and basic digital tools can immediately expand the number of taxpayers. Once the data is updated, municipalities can introduce mobile payment systems such as bKash or Nagad, making it easier for citizens to pay dues without having to physically visit the office. This is not a costly transformation; it requires planning, transparency, and training rather than heavy technology investments.

The "local economic development" model provides a framework for aligning revenue generation with local growth. It encourages local governments, businesses, and communities to work together to stimulate the economy and create jobs suited to local realities. Instead of waiting for centrally financed projects, municipalities can design initiatives around their own comparative advantages. Partnerships with chambers of commerce, traders' associations, and industry bodies can also help update local business registries and improve compliance. Engaging sectoral associations—such as those in footwear, furniture, light engineering, agro-processing, and aquaculture—can ensure that revenue reforms align with actual business dynamics and do not discourage enterprise.

It is, therefore, not an isolated economic agenda; it is a pathway towards decentralisation. When towns and cities

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

mobilise their own resources, they gain the autonomy to plan development according to local needs, not central directives. With accurate data and efficient collection systems, local governments can increase their revenue. By reinvesting these funds into local services such as solid waste management, street repair, and public lighting, municipalities can reduce wasteful spending, encourage innovation, and strengthen accountability to citizens.

Despite the potential, however, entrenched barriers continue to thwart progress. Many municipalities lack trained staff for assessment and collection. Corruption and informal payments remain common in trade licence renewals. There is also limited understanding of how to design fair, transparent, and citizen-friendly systems. These challenges underline the need for collaboration. To address them, the ICT Division and Local Government Division, supported by private technology firms and research partners, can introduce cloud-based revenue management platforms that are easy to use. Capacity-building initiatives for tax assessors and municipal officers, combined with citizen awareness campaigns, can also transform the culture of local revenue management.

Currently, Bangladesh's political culture continues to treat Members of Parliament (MPs) as the main patrons of local development, even though mayors and upazila/union chairmen are the ones directly accountable to citizens. As a result, national elections receive far more attention and resources than local ones. Strengthening the fiscal independence of local government bodies can change this dynamic by giving real power where accountability lies.

Empowered municipalities can play a vital role in addressing issues such as rural-to-urban migration by creating employment opportunities closer to home. While disaster-prone or poorer areas will continue to inspire internal migration, people in general are less likely to migrate when they can earn a living in their own towns. This vision of self-reliant local government also aligns with our broader agenda of decentralisation and inclusive growth. This is not about replacing central support but about using and supporting it strategically to build sustainable return systems. Local governments should be encouraged to innovate, experiment with digital tools, and link taxation with tangible public benefits.

When a mayor can finance a community centre or market renovation through locally collected revenue, it is not just administrative efficiency; it is democracy in action. Strengthening municipal revenue generation is therefore not only a financial necessity but also a political reform. It restores balance between the centre and the local, between authority and accountability, and ultimately between promise and performance in Bangladesh's development journey.

Gaza ceasefire: The politics behind a fragile truce

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When Donald Trump unveiled his latest peace proposal, arriving in Sharm el-Sheikh to mark the ceasefire between the Hamas and Israel, he declared it to be "the first real peace in the Middle East in 3,000 years," even hinting that a Nobel Peace Prize might be in the offing. Yet, the ground reality emerging just days into the truce suggests that this moment of hope may already be slipping into the realm of illusion.

The ceasefire formally took effect on October 10 this year, following two years since the deadly October 7 attack in 2023. Israel committed to a phased withdrawal, while Hamas agreed to release hostages in exchange for thousands of Palestinian prisoners.

Yet, within days, the truce came under strain. Israel resumed air strikes and halted humanitarian aid convoys, citing alleged violations by Hamas. According to Al Jazeera, Israeli attacks in Gaza since the ceasefire, killing at least 236 Palestinians and wounding over 600, suggest that Israel is pursuing a policy of "Lebanonising" Gaza—officially ending the war but maintaining the right to conduct attacks whenever it chooses,

indefinitely. This uneasy calm now unfolds against the backdrop of a new proposal from Washington.

Donald Trump announced that a US-coordinated international stabilisation force would be deployed in Gaza "very soon," amidst a fragile truce and a worsening humanitarian crisis caused by continued Israeli bombardment. His declaration coincides with UN Security Council plans to establish a stabilisation force of 20,000 troops in Gaza, with participation from several Arab countries—Egypt, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Turkiye—authorising them to "use all necessary measures" to implement the mandate. This force, according to the draft plan, would be tasked with protecting civilians, securing border areas, and training Palestinian police. As reported by Al Jazeera, UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasised that any stabilisation force must have "full international legitimacy."

However, significant challenges remain for this mission to be effective. Hamas has yet to declare whether it will disarm—a central clause of Trump's 20-point plan—and Israel appears to have its own narrative. Tel Aviv remains adamant about excluding Turkiye from the force and insists on retaining full control of Gaza's security apparatus.

During a joint press conference with Trump in September 2025, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told reporters, "Israel will retain security responsibility, including a security perimeter, for the foreseeable future" in Gaza. Washington has clarified that it will not deploy US troops, while Guterres reiterated that any deployment must possess international legitimacy and be genuinely aimed at supporting Palestinians in Gaza.

The notion of a "stabilisation force," while promising on paper, risks becoming another layer of geopolitical management—neither true peacekeeping nor state-building, but rather a mechanism for perpetuating external control under the veneer of international cooperation.

Politics disguised as peace

Behind the signing photo-op lies a stark truth: this deal appears tailored more for political expediency than for genuine reconciliation. Netanyahu, historically sceptical of Palestinian statehood, accepted the agreement under heavy US pressure and growing domestic disquiet. The structure of the deal reflects his priorities: retain control, delay statehood, placate hostages' families, and stall elections.

Meanwhile, Palestinians once again find themselves offered promises of "future sovereignty" without any immediate path to real political power. The terms favour

Israel's strategic interests—continued settler expansion in the West Bank, maintenance of military dominance, and the relegation of Gaza to a subordinate status.

At the heart of the conflict—the two-state solution—remains entirely sidestepped. Netanyahu has publicly opposed Palestinian statehood, while Israeli settlers continue expanding their presence in the West Bank under army protection. These realities speak louder than any diplomatic rhetoric.

In Gaza, the practical outcome is a territory still dependent, fractured, and dominated by external forces rather than governed by its own people. As Israel presses ahead with its military-first doctrine, it is losing legitimacy abroad and among younger US demographics. Polls show weakening US support for Israel, especially among Generation Z, progressives, and even some evangelical voters. According to scholar Shibley Telhami, "For Israel, the war for American public opinion is existential." The battlefield may yield tactical victories, but the global narrative is steadily slipping away.

Gaza today lies in ruins—a humanitarian catastrophe of staggering proportions. Over 92 percent of buildings are damaged, and more than 60 million tonnes of debris await clearance. A joint assessment by the World Bank, United Nations, and the European Union estimates reconstruction needs at $53.2 billion over the next decade.

Yet under the terms of the ceasefire, Israel has restricted aid flows and refused to reopen the key Rafah crossing until hostages' remains are handed over—a stalling tactic with severe humanitarian consequences. Meanwhile, Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia

remain willing to fund reconstruction but with political strings attached. International efforts to rebuild Gaza without genuine Palestinian governance risk becoming yet another mechanism of external control.

Despite the destruction and betrayal, the human spirit in Gaza endures. Displaced families return to charred homes; children go back to shattered schools; and amidst the rubble, life continues. They have lost almost everything—yet their will to begin again remains. This resilience is not merely admirable—it is a statement of defiance: a refusal to accept defeat or submit to permanent subjugation.

Today, the ceasefire is both a lifeline and a trap. Israel holds the arrangement hostage to its political agenda; Palestinians cling to the fading promise of self-determination. Recent reports indicate that Israeli forces now control more than half of Gaza under the so-called "yellow line," shrinking the territory into enclaves and cutting off exits to the outside world.

Seen in this light, the truce resembles less a genuine pathway to peace and more a strategic pause—a breathing space for Israel to reconfigure control and for Palestinians to await a salvation that may never come.

Now the question arises: will the international community insist on accountability, inclusive governance, and a genuine political horizon? Or will the theatrics of peace continue to mask the permanence of occupation?
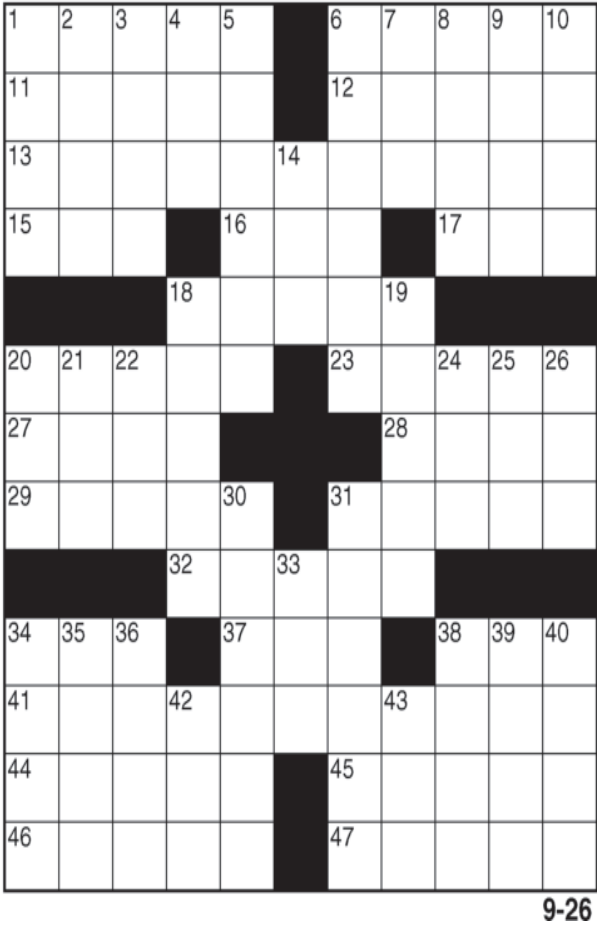
The question is no longer whether peace is possible, but whether we still believe it is worth pursuing.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Crosses the stream
6 Canadian native
11 Not obtuse
12 Nebraska city
13 American grassland
15 Twisty fish
16 Total
17 Cry from Homer
18 Dice, essentially
20 Fable fellow
23 Weigh-in need
27 Secluded valley
28 Yoked animals
29 Last Greek letter
31 Avarice
32 Inert gas
34 Golfer's need
37 Talker's gift
38 Relaxing resort
41 Skims over water
44 Spring sign
45 Singer Piaf
46 Like untended gardens
47 "Uncle Tom's Cabin" girl

DOWN
1 Salary
2 Land unit
3 "Hamilton" event
4 Schedule abbr.
5 Establishes
6 Watson helps him
7 Thurman of film
8 Foray
9 "Dear me!"
10 Poet Ogden
14 Place for a pint
18 Dance in a line
19 Derision
20 In the past
21 Avenue tree
22 Notice
24 Lumberjack's tool
25 Director Spike
26 Halt
30 Merchant ship
31 Wineglass
33 Opening
34 Turn to slush
35 Jane of fiction
36 Falco of "The Sopranos"
38 Salon sound
39 Cats and dogs
40 Pallid
42 Spectrum color
43 Uproar

9-26

SATURDAY'S ANSWERS

G	A	L	A		P	A	S	T	
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O	T	S		S	P	O	K	E	N	
			P	E	K	O	E			
	T	R	U	A	N	T		L	A	P
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S	N	E	E	R		A	R	M	E	D
	D	R	A	G		R	E	E	D	