

# Welcome, New Stewards of Dhaka

*Wishing the capital's mayors every success*



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

As citizens of Dhaka vote for Dhaka's twin city corporation elections today, this is a good time to take stock of their significance. We underestimate the importance of these elections at our peril. It may well be true that city corporation elections aren't exciting. Garbage collection, traffic jams and power outages aren't the stuff of breathtaking news. But civic elections are vital for a nation's democratic sustenance.

They may lack the soaring rhetoric of lofty national aspirations, the broad historical sweep often found in the stump pitches of national candidates. Pundits, brows furrowed, don't pontificate upon the great significance of the lurch of the voting public this way or the other in city polls.

Yet city corporation elections are important for a simple reason: this is where the rubber hits the ground.

The very reasons that make these elections so boring are the ones that underlie its significance. City corporation elections, after all, are about governance in its purest form. Voters don't give a toss about bitter

polemical debates. What they care about is getting things done: they want pothole-free paved roads, uninterrupted power supply, regular garbage collection and public safety. None of this, thank goodness, lends itself to partisan demagoguery.

This is the reason a vibrant, democratically elected city government (or two—since Dhaka is split into two) has the potential to be the perfect incubator of a political process paving the way to pragmatic governance. Successful city politicians are by necessity pragmatic problem solvers.

Then there is the lopsided significance of Dhaka. Everything of political significance in Bangladesh happens in Dhaka, the city which is the political, cultural, intellectual and financial heart of the nation. A successful mayor, backed by a solid track record, not only has an excellent launching pad for a bigger, national career. He has the potential to provide the nation something in extraordinarily short supply: a politician who can get things done.

Ensuring services is only part of the story. The real secret of effective civic governance is the management of expectations. This has to be done while balancing the needs and demands of a wide variety of constituencies, sometimes at odds with each other.

Some of the greatest leaders in the history of the Bengalis honed their political skills

in city government. Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy and Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das—all served stints as mayor of Kolkata.

It is no accident that during the convulsive years of pre-Partition subcontinental politics, these were among the very few leaders best equipped to tackle the explosive Hindu-Muslim tensions that tore the subcontinent apart. They did not ultimately succeed; but most historians concede that these were the leaders most capable of reconciling the political differences between the two communities.

That's one of the most valuable lessons of city government. Getting elected is just the beginning. You want to get elected to a new term? You better perform.

City politicians tend to be a result-oriented lot. They cut deals, cajole, convince and reconcile recalcitrant interest groups, solve problems, manage crises.

One of the most unfortunate facts for Bangladesh is that for long periods of its history, the region has been deprived of the benefits of a democratically functioning city government. Although the Dhaka Municipality was established in 1864, the first elected mayor by popular vote, Mohammad Hanif, took office in 1994. Until then, all mayors were appointed by the

government.

The city administration became Dhaka Municipality Corporation in 1976. In 1990, it became Dhaka City Corporation. In 2011, the Awami League government dissolved the Dhaka City Corporation and split it into two corporations, North and South, with the southern wing holding more territory than the north.

Annisul Huq, who was elected mayor of the Dhaka North City Corporation in 2015, gave Bangladeshis a brilliant glimpse of the wondrous possibilities of a city government that works. Before his unexpected and heartbreaking demise, his dynamic leadership led to clearing of illegally occupied parking lots near bus stops in Mohammadpur, Kalyanpur and Mohakhali, cleared a decades-long illegal truck stop infested by drug peddlers. (Credit is definitely due to the national government, which gave Annisul *carte blanche*.)

Where would have Annisul gone in the future? We have no way of knowing now, but if history is any guide, he could well have followed the steps of illustrious Bengali leaders like Fazlul Huq, Suhrawardy or Bose.

What is indubitable is that dynamic, can-do leaders provide vital new energy into national politics with their first-hand skills of efficient governance. That, in a nutshell, is the promise of the elections that will bring

us two mayors of the city we so dearly love.

However, there are a few conditions to be fulfilled before that promise becomes a reality.

Elections have to be genuinely free, fair and robustly contested. Institutions have to be clean and empowered to do their job without political let or hindrance. The greater powers that be—including the national government—need to be willing to get out of the way when city governments take stern measures to fix the city ills—it will invariably have to step on some pretty influential toes.

Will these conditions be fulfilled?

Given our recent history, it's not very easy to be confident. One of the unfortunate facts of postcolonial nations all over the world is that while the outward appearances of democratic institutions have survived, in many cases they have become hollow shells which have succumbed more and more to autocratic tendencies.

Time will tell as the newly elected mayors take office. They face an exciting future as they realise that getting elected mayor is not an end in itself, but the beginning of a challenging political journey.

Here's to wishing them success!

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## The People's Manifesto

*As citizens of Dhaka North and Dhaka South go to the polls today to elect their mayors for the next five years, all eyes are on how judiciously they exercise their franchise. Apart from their political leanings, one thing that is likely to impact their decision is what they make of the pledges by the mayoral hopefuls, which will potentially direct their action if or when they get elected. After the release of manifestos by the four frontrunners in DNCC and DSCC, backed respectively by the ruling Awami League and the opposition BNP, we asked our readers to make their own manifesto, highlighting how they envision this city and what changes they look forward to seeing in it. Many have sent their comments. Below is a compilation of some of the comments.*

### The perfect manifesto for Dhaka: Population control!

To me, this old, historic city is dying. The only thing that is developing in Dhaka is its population. The ideal manifesto for this city—and the only way to make it liveable again—involves decentralisation. If decentralisation is complex to implement in the short term, at least stop new activities like the development of new industries, educational institutions and public amenities that would draw people from other districts. If we can limit the number of people in this city, we can at least work towards creating some semblance of peace here.

- Obydur Rahman Shazol

### Four steps to a liveable and lovable Dhaka

I have a four-point demand for the Dhaka I want to see:

First, minimise its traffic problem as soon as possible because it is getting out of hand. Strict steps should be taken against those who violate the traffic rules.

Second, take pragmatic steps to prevent waterlogging caused by rain and other reasons. It has to be solved on a priority basis as it is a common

foremost, a major initiative to educate its residents about how to behave and live in a city in order to make it liveable, decent and smart. Citizens have to conform to an acceptable and respectable standard of behaviour that matches with the higher level of economic growth.

The City Corporations should come up with a major education programme to teach people about the fundamental social skills and norms: not to spit, stare at women, talk loudly in public places, or blow horn unnecessarily, to respect employees, traffic rules for the traffic police, how to use a public toilet and keep it clean, among various other issues. These public educating programmes should be the first entry point for making Dhaka liveable. Look at the footpaths: their condition was better during Mayor Annisul's time, but they're all in terrible condition now, even in Banani-Gulshan area.

- Chanchal Khan

### Solve traffic problem

Tackle the traffic congestion in the city, please! Dhaka is a mega city and has many problems, but I think if congestion on the roads can be alleviated, we will see a positive change in all aspects of our lives. Experts say

utilised to their full extent, we may see an immediate increase in their capacity for vehicular movement and that should help ease the congestion right away.

Second, get rid of the unfit vehicles. There are thousands of vehicles in Dhaka that are not fit to be on the roads. They contribute to the congestion not only by their sheer number, but also by breaking down in the middle of the roads in busy traffic. And these unfit vehicles also contribute to the increasing environmental pollution.

Third, bar the unauthorised drivers. We should not allow illegal and unauthorised drivers to operate vehicles on our roads. There are apparently close to a million illegal drivers in the country and a good chunk of them are likely plying the roads in Dhaka. They contribute to the road accidents and create havoc by not complying with the traffic regulations. Removing these drivers from the roads will certainly help ease the congestion.

Granted, taking up these challenges would not be easy. However, we should do all we can, be it commissioning special task forces, utilising the elite law enforcement force or asking for help from other agencies to tackle these

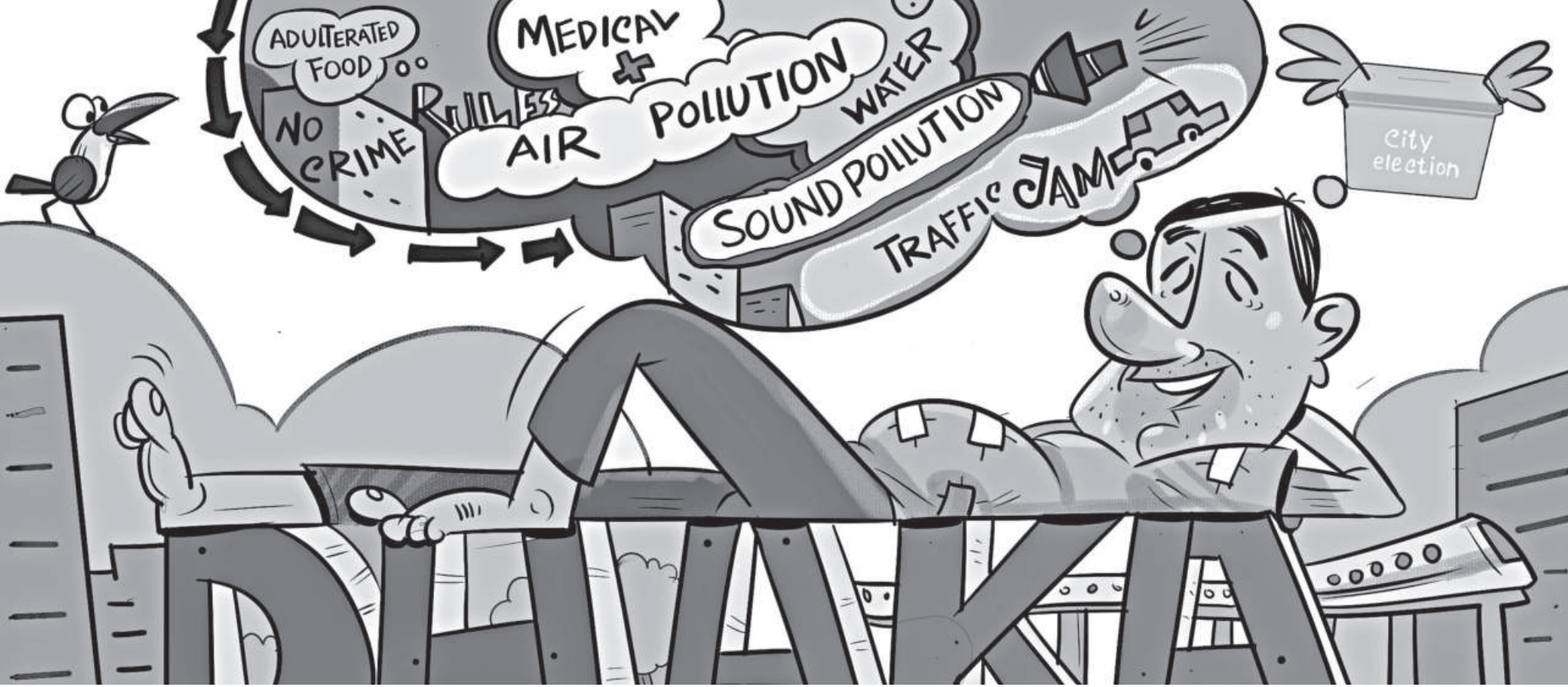
number in the workforce decreasing despite their advancements in various fields? One former Minister of State for Women and Children Affairs in Bangladesh said that many educated and capable women are unable to stay employed because they don't know where their children can stay safely when they are at work.

Since having a baby, I have been looking at my city through a new lens. Before parenthood, I could move through the city relatively freely on my own schedule. Now, like other working mothers in Dhaka, I have to juggle between work and family on a daily basis.

As a working mother in Dhaka city, ensuring quality time for my children has become one of the most challenging jobs. A few days ago, there was an event at my five-year-old son's school and he just wanted his mother to pick him up from there. Sadly, I couldn't reach on time and had asked someone else to pick up instead. I started from the High Court, 30 minutes before his school ends, but still couldn't make it due to traffic. My disappointed son thinks his mother should buy a helicopter to reach his school from work on time.

After I come back from work, it is

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problem for the people of Dhaka.

Third, put in place a proper waste management system. It is past time that the authorities do something about Dhaka's burgeoning and poorly managed waste, which causes both nuisance for the residents and environmental concerns. Bad odour is everywhere!

Fourth, the feedback of the common people needs to be heard and worked upon for a better Dhaka. Can there be a system to institutionalise this process?

- Shakil Mahamud

### Need for a mass education programme

I think Dhaka needs, first and

we do not have enough road coverage. Some say there are too many cars on the streets. Both may be the case, but we should do the things we can in the short term to address the ever-increasing traffic problem that we have to endure every day.

There can be a three-pronged approach to deal with this:

First, reclaim the roads. Most of the roads in Dhaka are not utilised to their full capacity. In many cases, only the first one or two lanes are used for ongoing traffic. The left lanes are predominantly occupied by street hawkers, illegally parked vehicles, etc. If the majority of the city roads can be

issues soon if we want to restore any sense of sanity for our city dwellers when it comes to dealing with the traffic stress.

- Sajedul Hoq

### Make Dhaka friendly for working mothers

Dhaka is home to millions of mothers who wish to live in a family-friendly city. Today, young mothers are more likely to be in the workforce—putting in more hours outside their homes. Women now make up almost half of the labour force globally. But in Bangladesh, women's participation in the labour market is not satisfactory. The question is, why is women's

almost bed time for my kids; I want to take them out for a walk, but it's never been possible.

So my answer to what will make Dhaka a better place to live in is: make it a more mother and kid friendly city.

- Tasmiyah Nuhya Ahmed

### A foreigner's take on a city of limitless potential

I see Dhaka as a city of limitless potential. As gargantuan towers are erected seemingly daily, it's abundantly clear that Dhaka is an economically valuable city, filled with business people hailing from all walks of life. But for the city to flourish, there's much that needs to be done.

Firstly, one of the most prominent things foreigners notice when coming to Dhaka is the immense poverty. There are desperate people in need of help, people that could contribute to the expansion and betterment of Dhaka, yet they are largely ignored and left to suffer. The city needs to work out a solution.

Secondly, one thing that I have experienced first-hand is how difficult it can be for a woman. I am British and Southeast Asian, so I'm always cautious to dress decently, and ensure my legs and arms are covered, but on numerous occasions, I have been sexually harassed by men who think that they're entitled to touch me inappropriately and question me about incredibly personal matters. I have even had some outright proposition for sex, because in their eyes, I'm a foreign woman on her own, and therefore a prostitute that is undeserving of autonomy and respect. This needs to change.

Thirdly, the immense traffic and awful road conditions need to be addressed. Though the long boulevards of Gulshan are maintained with care, the roads leading out of this area are riddled with massive potholes. In addition to this, the insane driving is a huge hazard. Cars zigzag between lanes with abandon, and the buses suddenly swerve without warning. These buses were the source of much controversy when a number of university students were mercilessly mowed down.

More needs to be done to enforce the rules of the road, and stricter punishments must be implemented to deter drivers from running people over sans consequence. In addition to this, alleged "VIPs" should not be allowed to close the roads for their sake. This entitled mindset highlights the vast divide between the rich and the poor, and the former should not be allowed special privileges that are an inconvenience to the latter just because they perceive themselves to be more important.

- Dizzi