

FOUR YEARS OF THE DHAKA MAYORS

The two mayors of Dhaka—Atiqul Islam of Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) and Barrister Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC)—have completed four years of their five-year tenure. DNCC Mayor Atiqul took office on May 13, 2020, while DSCC Mayor Taposh assumed office three days later. In exclusive interviews with Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee and Dipan Nandy of The Daily Star, the two mayors talk about their achievements as well as failures, the challenges they faced, and their visions for the future.

‘People will judge if I have succeeded or failed’

Your first promise to your constituents was to continue the mosquito eradication programme by using Integrated Vector Management (IVM). But last year we saw the highest numbers of infection and death by dengue in the country. Do you think you were successful in controlling mosquitoes?

Whether I have succeeded or failed, people will ultimately judge. During Covid, no one dared to leave their home, but I personally worked in 54 wards to raise awareness about dengue. The Aedes mosquito breeds in clean water, not in sewage or canals. So, public awareness is very important in controlling Aedes breeding. We have brought every rooftop garden (in DNCC) under the database and under the geographic information system (GIS) map. Global warming and climate change

from waste.

You did some good work regarding waste collection and waste management, especially sacrificial waste collection during Eid-ul-Azha. What is your future plan about waste management?

I have organised a competition among the councillors to remove sacrificial waste. When I took charge four years ago, the sacrificial wastes were removed within 48 hours, but I brought it down to 24 hours and 12 hours in the following years. Last year, we removed all the sacrificial waste within eight hours. We succeeded because the people and the councillors joined the efforts. When the people take part in our work, it becomes easy for us.

I am against having sewage lines being directly connected to different city canals. For example,

was used for parking at least 1,700 trucks. We demolished several illegal establishments in Basila and constructed a park there. We also demolished a 10-storey building, and now people are moving away from the occupied place on their own.

We recovered the Shutibhola and Paris canals and constructed walkways there. When we start any eviction drive, we face cases and resistance, but we are working to recover all the grabbed land.

I have reclaimed land of 24 playgrounds and parks and modernised them. For my activities, I won the C40 Cities Bloomberg Philanthropies Awards 2022.

We are reconstructing Balur Math in Kalshi to turn it into a playground. The DNCC and Bangladesh Army (24 Engineer Construction Brigade) implemented the project at a cost of around Tk



Atiqul Islam, mayor of Dhaka North City Corporation.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

are also responsible for the increase in Aedes mosquito population. But we are continuing our efforts from our position.

Our dengue death toll (last year) was higher than other countries, but I don't want to point fingers at anybody for that. We will continue our efforts, and the health ministry should perform their duties. Last year, we conducted a mobile court to check breeding grounds and fined Tk 3.85 crore for violations of rules. We found Aedes mosquito larvae even at government offices and under-construction buildings. We all must keep our own places clean ourselves.

We cannot control the Aedes mosquito population without raising awareness. This year, we are providing Tk 50,000 to every councillor monthly for conducting a mosquito control drive. Besides, DNCC is buying discarded polythene, packets of chips, green coconut shells, unused tyres and commodes, etc [garbage in which water can gather, in which Aedes mosquitoes can breed] to curb Aedes breeding.

Last year, a substandard stock of BTI pesticide was imported to destroy mosquito larvae. Later, we blacklisted Marshal Agrovet Chemical Industries Ltd, the importer, for anomalies in the import of the pesticide. This year, the DNCC itself will import BTI directly from the mother company.

One of your major promises was to reduce air pollution in the city. But Dhaka is one of the worst air-polluted cities in the world. Do you think your initiatives bore any fruit?

We have started installation of our own real-time air quality monitoring network to facilitate policymaking and evidence-based decision-making. Ten high-quality sensors were installed to find out the sources responsible for pollution. For one, Aminbazar landfill was found to be a major source of methane gas emission. We have started constructing a power plant in Aminbazar to generate electricity

there is no sewage line in Baridhara-Uttara, for which they are dumping their sewage directly into lakes and canals. In Baridhara, 95 percent of the houses do not have sewage lines. It is not possible to clean up 50 years' garbage within a year or two.

The main challenge for us is to get land to set up Secondary Transfer Stations (STS) as land is very expensive in Dhaka. With more purchasing capacity, people are producing more waste. Earlier, the amount of daily waste produced per person was 0.3 kg on average, but it has increased to 0.65 kg now. Now, we have taken initiatives to generate electricity from that waste.

I am against having sewage lines being directly connected to different city canals. For example, there is no sewage line in Baridhara-Uttara, for which they are dumping their sewage directly into lakes and canals. In Baridhara, 95 percent of the houses do not have sewage lines. It is not possible to clean up 50 years' garbage within a year or two.

Electricity generation from garbage is set to begin within the next 24 months.

Another commitment of yours was to reclaim all the water bodies in the city and to develop parks and playgrounds. How much have you been able to fulfil your promise?

We have evicted illegal occupants of the Lautala canal in Mohammadpur's Basila area that

1,012 crore. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gave 16 bighas of land to DNCC for the playground; recently, we named the ground after the Qatar emir.

The 70-katha open space at Paris ground in Mirpur, where the National Housing Authority allotted the land for 32 residential plots, is now being used as a playground. A playground has also been constructed beside Lautala canal.

You have completed four years of your five-year tenure—80 percent of your term. How would you evaluate your performance as a mayor?

It is the people who only can judge me and my works. But I have shown zero tolerance in reclaiming canals. I want people to start believing that Dhaka is their own town; then much of the work will become easier for the city corporation.

What is your immediate priority?

Now I am prioritising the newly included 18 wards. Those wards were neglected before; their residents have been suffering for decades. I talked about the issue with the prime minister. We will submit a master plan after consulting with the city planners and will submit a development project proposal (DPP).

Do you have any regrets from these past four years?

I have many regrets. I made a commitment to set up an animal welfare hospital. I recovered land in Mirpur for that, but I have not been able to begin the work yet. Hopefully, I can start it soon.

How do you want the city corporation to function in the future?

I want to see Dhaka North as a digital and paperless city corporation. We have introduced digital services for collecting holding tax and issuing/renewing trade licences. I want a city corporation where people don't need to go to the city corporation to avail services; they can do so online. I dream of a smart Dhaka North City Corporation.



Barrister Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, mayor of Dhaka South City Corporation.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

‘DSCC is the most corruption-free govt org’

You have completed four years of mayorship—80 percent of your tenure. Could you talk about your achievements and failures in these four years?

Let the people be the judge of my success and failure after my tenure is complete. I will not claim to have fulfilled 80 percent of the promises that I made in my election manifesto during these four years. But I must say, I have been able to do many things that I did not think I could. Discipline has been brought everywhere. The first thing I focused on was ensuring good governance at the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), and I did it.

Irregularities became normal at the DSCC—the obligation to follow due process, laws and rules was absent here. Many were not discharging their responsibilities. I made changes to improve the situation. Now, I can claim that DSCC is the most corruption-free organisation among all the government institutions and organisations. We see the reflection of it in our revenue collection drive.

After assuming office on May 16, 2020, I started my journey from May 17. In that fiscal year, we collected a revenue of Tk 512 crore. In the following three fiscal years, we collected Tk 720 crore, Tk 879 crore, and Tk 1,031 crore of revenue, respectively. We generated this revenue without increasing the holding tax. The DSCC that once had to struggle to pay salaries of its employees has now become self-dependent.

Many of our resources were grabbed by various quarters; we were able to recover those resources after establishing good governance. We have freed 54 acres of land worth Tk 4,800 crore. DSCC was being deprived of its own resources due to long-standing corruption and negligence. DSCC's wealth belongs to its residents.

After carrying out many administrative reforms, the enthusiasm for work is back in the DSCC now. Before, there was no framework of waste management or any scheduled working hours for cleaners. Those who neglected their work were fired and replaced. When I took charge, there were 24 secondary transfer stations (STS) in 22 wards; now there are STS in 65 wards.

One of your achievements was reclaiming the old channel of Buriganga. What is your plan in this regard?

After taking charge, we started reclaiming the old Buriganga channel, which had been filled with waste and encroached for the last 50 years. We spent Tk 50 crore to restore the channel. Now the original Buriganga river basin is back, and the river has widened.

We have now taken up a megaplan to create a healthy and aesthetic environment on both sides of the channel so that tourists can visit and enjoy their time there. We hope to start some of the project work this year. We need the government's assistance to implement this plan.

You wanted to establish a central commercial zone in Kamrangirchar, but many residents of the area said they would become landless if it was done. What do you think?

Kamrangirchar was once the most neglected neighbourhood of Dhaka. But geographically it is a very important part of the city. We want to rebuild Kamrangirchar, and thus we have taken up the goal of upgrading the communication system in the area. An eight-lane elevated expressway is being constructed to make the area a central business district. A vested group has misled residents of the area and spread false propaganda among them about the project. I sat with those who protested against the

Many of our resources were grabbed by various quarters; we were able to recover those resources after establishing good governance. We have freed 54 acres of land worth Tk 4,800 crore. DSCC was being deprived of its own resources due to long-standing corruption and negligence.

project on behalf of Kamrangirchar residents. Now they are convinced. I can claim that the people of this city will see a drastic change in 30 years.

In your election manifesto, mosquito control was one of your top priorities. But last year, we saw new records of dengue infections and deaths. Can you evaluate your achievement in controlling mosquitoes?

If we analyse the data, it shows our success. Controlling mosquitoes is always an ongoing process. In 2019, a total of 155,000 people were infected with dengue in Dhaka, and fewer than 200 died. After taking charge in 2020, I found that the mosquito control programme was not enough. Drives to control mosquito breeding were conducted when it increased. But the countries where there is a higher quantity of mosquitoes conduct drives round the year. After taking charge, I took steps to control mosquitoes round the year and engaged more manpower and purchased high-quality pesticides and equipment to curb the mosquito menace. In 2023, even though the death toll was over 900, the number of infections was brought down to 113,000. Our main target is prevention. Ensuring medical care is the health ministry's responsibility. We were successful in controlling mosquitoes, but the expected medical care was not ensured.

Curbing noise and air pollution was also in your election pledge. But as we have seen, Dhaka has become one of the top cities with the worst air quality across the globe. What initiatives have you taken to fulfil your promise?

I can admit that we have not yet taken any such initiatives to curb noise pollution as the traffic system is yet to be updated. That is why we have concentrated on upgrading the traffic signal management. We have appointed consultants to this end. Traffic management should be upgraded keeping 64 intersections in my area and movement of motorised and non-motorised vehicles in mind.

This issue was ignored before. You cannot compare Dhaka with other cities. Here, motorised vehicles ply the roads along with non-motorised vehicles. We are hoping to submit the project proposal by the end of this year and start work for implementation. This can help with curbing noise pollution, because most of the noise pollution is caused by vehicles. If we bring in proper management, noise pollution can be significantly reduced.

As for air pollution, 80 percent of it is caused by unrefined and contaminated fossil fuels. We wrote to the environment and energy ministries to look into the issue seriously. Brick kilns and construction work are also responsible for air pollution. We have asked contractors to look into the issues during construction work. We are trying to keep pollution at a tolerable level.

Do you think you have been successful in resolving the persistent waterlogging crisis?

Seventy percent of Dhaka roads used to get flooded even if there was a little rain when I took office in 2020. Then we identified 136 points including Dhanmondi Road 27, the road stretching from Azimpur to Palashi, Fakirapool, the Notre Dame College area, Motijheel, and Jatrabari. We spent Tk 103 crore of our own financing to renovate these 136 points. Where we conducted renovation work, there are no waterlogging problems. Since Dhaka has been developed in an unplanned manner, new points of such waterlogging have been created. Last year, we saw waterlogging in the New Market area, and later we found that drains were blocked inside Pilkhana that resulted in the New Market waterlogging. Some new buildings were also built over the drains inside Pilkhana, thus it took time to drain away the water. Waterlogging is a never-ending problem for Dhaka city, but we have managed to reduce waterlogging to 20 percent.

As the mayor of DSCC and a resident of Dhaka, how do you want the city to be in the future?

I don't want to see Dhaka as only a commercial city and a concrete jungle. Dhaka has its own characteristics and heritage. I want to see Dhaka with heritage, and I am working to make that happen.