







From ringing temple bells and glowing lamps to incense-filled prayers and colourful celebrations, devotees immerse themselves in the sights, sounds and fragrances of Durga Puja at mandaps in Old Dhaka, creating moments of devotion, joy and togetherness. The photos were taken recently.

PHOTO: **ABRAR FAIYAZ NILOY**

Sights, sounds and scents of Durga Puja

SABRIN ZAWAD RITU

Colourful lights hanging above narrow lanes, the beat of dhak filling the air and the familiar smell of dhoop drifting out of crowded mandaps -- in Dhaka, Durga Puja arrives through the senses. In places such as Shankhari Bazar, where buildings stand close together and streets are always busy, makeshift mandaps turn the celebration into an intimate affair.

"My friends and I wait for this time of the year," said Arnob Sarker, a resident of Siddheshwari who was visiting a pandal in Old Dhaka.

For them, the lights, the flames of diyas and the fragrance of dhoop are the main attractions of Puja. Sarker said, "Light is linked to hope, knowledge and victory of good over evil. During worship, flame of a diya or the lamp used in arati holds a special place as an offering to the goddess."

Once the lights draw visitors towards the mandaps, there is plenty more to see. Garlands, colourful fabrics, intricate patterns and carefully arranged ornaments create a setting for Goddess Durga.

The smell of dhoop drifts through the mandap as devotees gather for prayers. Thin trails of smoke rise into the light, while bells ring and the dhak beats louder during arati. The priest moves a lamp before the goddess, and for a moment, the sounds, sights and smells come together in a divine setting. In Hindu worship, incense is offered as a mark of respect and devotion. Sometimes, a smell can bring back a memory.

Abinash Kundi, who usually spends Puja in Dhaka, said, "Sometimes, the smell of dhoop takes me back to my childhood. It still signals the arrival of the festive season for me."

Not everyone visits a Durga Puja pandal for the same reason. Some come to pray, others to meet friends or admire the decorations, while many simply enjoy walking through the illuminated streets.

Unapologetic, Ishraque quits

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announcement: an official decision was supposed to be communicated through the prescribed process, but one of his colleagues disclosed the matter ahead of schedule.

Until the prime minister's instructions were formally announced, the matter should be treated as a rumour or untrue, he said, adding that he received the formal decision on yesterday morning.

"Whether it happened yesterday or today, what difference does it make? It happened."

Ishraque defended Saturday's anti-drug operation, saying it had been coordinated with local law enforcement agencies and aimed at dismantling drug distribution networks.

He expressed disappointment that public discussion had focused on the firearm rather than the campaign.

Ghuntighar and Munshitek had become hubs for drug distribution, and the operation targeted drug dens, he said, adding that six people were handed over to police with evidence.

The local officers-in-charge and Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) deputy commissioners overseeing his constituency were aware of and involved in the operation, he said, describing it as part of efforts coordinated through the Dhaka-6 law and order committee.

The DMP, however, ordered an investigation into the incident, assigning the Wari division to look into it.

Ishraque said he had two firearms registered in his name and that one had been carried briefly for his protection.

The Firearms Policy 2025 allows licensed firearms for self-defence but bars their display in ways that may cause fear or annoyance.

He maintained that he had acted properly and wanted to ensure that no one was harmed.

"I believe I did the right thing in the proper way. I went there, risking my life. People may say that, though I do not care. If someone fires from a rooftop, we do not know whose head the bullet will hit."

Locals had applauded the drive, he said, adding that he would continue working to meet their expectations.

He went on to urge the media and the public to focus on identifying the main suppliers behind drug distribution rather than concentrating only on street-level dealers.

Asked whether he was considering contesting the Dhaka mayoral election, the 39-year-old said the decision rested entirely with his party and its chairman.

He contested the 2020 mayoral election and had since worked on the capital's problems under the party's guidance.

"I am 100 percent prepared if the party decides to nominate me for the election," he said, adding that he would make every effort to ensure the victory of whoever the party nominated.

Controversy his middle name

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to protest a move to revoke the gallantry award conferred on BNP founder Ziaur Rahman.

During the rally, police were about to detain a BNP activist injured in a baton charge when Ishraque intervened, jostling with officers and pulling the activist away. He was also injured in the scuffle.

Ishraque later shared a video of the incident on Facebook, which went viral. He declared that neither baton charges nor cannon fire would stop him from protecting a party worker as long as he was alive.

The incident propelled him into the spotlight and earned him immense popularity among BNP activists.

A PRESSER WITH 'BIDEN'S ADVISER'

On October 28, 2023, following clashes surrounding BNP's grand rally, a man named Zahidul Islam, alias Mia Arefi, appeared at the party's Naya Paltan office, claiming to be an adviser to then US president Joe Biden.

He spoke to journalists while seated beside Ishraque and retired lieutenant general Chowdhury Hasan Sarwardy. The next day, police detained Arefi at the airport, and all three were named in a case filed with Paltan Police Station.

Ishraque and Sarwardy were accused of helping Arefi address journalists under a false identity.

The incident caused major embarrassment for the BNP, which issued a statement distancing itself from Arefi's activities. Ishraque later expressed regret on Facebook.

SEIGE OF CITY HALL

After the July uprising toppled the Awami League government and the courts ruled in favour of Ishraque's claim to the mayoral post, his battle for office took a new turn.

On March 27, 2025, Md Nurul Islam, a judge of the First Joint District Judge Court and Election Tribunal in Dhaka, annulled the results of the 2020 Dhaka South City Corporation election and declared Ishraque Hossain the mayor.

Following the verdict, the previous gazette declaring Awami League candidate Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh the winner was cancelled. Subsequently, on April 27, 2025, the Election Commission published a revised gazette declaring Ishraque the mayor.

In May that year, he and his supporters laid siege to city hall after the interim government declined to administer his oath of office. Essential services were disrupted, causing public sufferings.

Ishraque even threatened to swear himself into office. While his loyalists saw the protests as a show of strength, the disruption and mounting public sufferings drew flak.

Eventually, Ishraque backed down without ever assuming office as mayor.

THE ELBOW

Ishraque went viral again on December 22, 2025, but this time for elbowing his own party men to make his way to the front of a crowd.

He had visited the grave of BNP founder Ziaur Rahman to pay respects with the newly formed Bangladesh Jatiyotabadi Muktijoddha Projonmo.

He later expressed regret on Facebook but, as he would do repeatedly, offered an explanation that only deepened his embarrassment. He said he was being "firm" in "setting the lines right".

LATE FOR HIS MP OATH

Ishraque made headlines again during the swearing-in of newly elected members of parliament on February 17, 2026. Arriving late, he missed the oath-taking ceremony with his party colleagues and had to join the opposition and independent MPs instead.

Although Ishraque abstained from taking the oath as a member of the Constitution Reform Council, in line with his party's decision, he appeared unsure what to do next.

Then he spotted independent MP Rumeen Farhana hurriedly gathering her belongings and leaving the hall after taking the parliamentary oath. Ishraque promptly followed her out, seemingly relieved to have found a cue.

SALUTING WITH SERVICE CHIEFS

Last July, after Speaker Hafiz Uddin Ahmad took over as president, he visited the National Memorial in Savar to pay tribute to the martyrs.

Ishraque, then state minister for Liberation War affairs, was among those present, alongside the chiefs of the three defence services.

When the three chiefs lined up and saluted the martyrs, Ishraque, standing alongside them, raised his hand in salute too. It was another viral moment, sparking a flood of memes.

Ishraque's explanation on Facebook only added to the embarrassment. He said his hand rose in salute almost on its "own volition" whenever "freedom fighters" were mentioned, and that he would continue saluting them whenever and wherever he could.

THE SPEECH MARKING JULY

Ishraque's ministry organised a reception for martyrs' families and July fighters at the capital to mark the second anniversary of the July uprising.

Leaders of the National Citizen Party alleged that a documentary screened at the event failed to accurately portray the movement, leading to heated exchanges.

Instead of defusing the tension, Ishraque took the podium and began shouting, further angering the protesters. Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed also failed to calm the situation, and the protesters eventually walked out of the venue.

DRUG BUST GONE BUST

On October 17, 2026, Ishraque jumped out of a car, pistol in hand.

He ran towards men attempting to flee, followed by his team of activists, who manhandled and kicked those they suspected of being drug peddlers. At least one of his associates was also seen brandishing a firearm.

Ishraque pointed his pistol at the suspects, while someone off-camera threatened to shoot.

The close-up video clips suggested that the MP even had his PR team on hand to film his exploits. That such vigilantism could go horribly wrong with the slightest misstep, and that it was entirely beyond his authority, appeared to have escaped the Dhaka-6 MP.

His subsequent statements suggested that he had confused lawmaking with policing. As for his explanation, Ishraque claimed he had drawn the pistol in "self-defence".

Strong message on accountability; it's too harsh

Mixed reaction in BNP after Ishraque quits

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Ishraque Hossain's resignation from the council of ministers has drawn mixed reactions within the ruling BNP, with some hailing it as a strong message on accountability and discipline, while others call it "too harsh".

Supporters say the move made it clear that no one is above accountability, regardless of political position or personal ties. Critics, however, fear the decision could make ministers and MPs reluctant to take initiatives or make independent decisions.

These views emerged from conversations with seven ministers, eight MPs and 12 BNP leaders, who wished to remain anonymous.

Both sides support Ishraque's anti-drug stance but differ over his decision to take part in an operation personally while openly carrying a firearm. Some say he should have stayed within his official remit, while others believe he should have been given a chance to correct his mistake.

The controversy began on Saturday when Ishraque, son of prominent BNP leader and late freedom fighter Sadeque Hossain Khoka, was seen displaying a pistol during an anti-drug operation in the capital's Gendaria area. Videos of the incident went viral on social media, prompting questions about his conduct and the legality of carrying a firearm in such circumstances.

On Sunday night, government sources said the prime minister had instructed Ishraque to resign as state minister for liberation war affairs. Although Ishraque initially denied the reports, he announced his resignation at a press conference at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday.

Reflecting on the incident, one minister said, "In Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's administration, no one will be given special treatment because of personal relationships."

Describing the resignation as a warning to other government officials, the minister said, "The prime minister will not tolerate anything that could damage the government's image or give the opposition a chance to raise questions."

A standing committee member said Ishraque's public display of a firearm was inconsistent with the standards of conduct expected of a state minister.

"His intention may have been good, and we support his stand against drugs. But after taking the oath as a state minister, it was not right for him to display a firearm in this way."

The committee member welcomed the decision, saying an individual minister's actions could tarnish the image of the entire administration.

Mahdi Amin, the prime minister's adviser and spokesperson for the Prime Minister's Office, said there could be "questions and differences of opinion" over Ishraque's recent methods, but there should be no doubt about the rationale behind the decision.

"The message from the government is quite clear. Even if questions arise over the implementation of a bold and people-friendly initiative by a dedicated and popular young leader who enjoys the confidence of Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, accountability is being ensured.

"We believe accountability will continue to be upheld at every level of government as we move forward on the path of nation-building," he said.

However, several MPs and BNP leaders said Ishraque might have acted emotionally while addressing drug-related problems in his constituency. They argued that his intentions should have been considered before such a strong decision was taken, particularly given his role in sustaining party morale during the Awami League's rule.

One MP said, "To me, this feels like the harshest possible punishment. Although it sends a strong message to ministers and MPs, it may also have negative effects. Many may now hesitate to make independent decisions."

Some lawmakers also argued that the incident should not have been treated like allegations of corruption, extortion or land grabbing, as Ishraque's stated objective was to tackle drug-related crime, a BNP priority.

A female BNP MP said, "A person's entire political career or years of contribution should not be ignored because of one mistake. Instead, they should be given a chance to correct that mistake."

Several leaders expressed sympathy for Ishraque, citing his involvement in BNP's political movements and his ties with grassroots activists.

A central BNP leader said, "Ishraque has been active in grassroots politics for a long time. He has played a role in political movements and struggles. That is why party leaders and activists have a certain level of sympathy for him."

However, some leaders believe the incident could serve as a lesson for Ishraque and make him more cautious in his future political activities.

Ishraque's resignation adds to a series of high-level departures and changes in the government and ruling party over the past eight months.

Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs Minister Dipen Dewan resigned on June 1, citing health problems. Information Minister Zahir Uddin Swapon left his ministerial post in August during a cabinet reshuffle and was appointed political adviser to the prime minister with the rank of minister.

Separately, BNP reserved-seat MP Ferdousy Ahmed Misty resigned from parliament on October 1 following allegations linking her to people involved in an attack on a healthcare centre in Mirpur.

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Curfews in cities

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demonstrations, rocking France six months ahead of its next presidential election and highlighting pressures from a weak economy and surging debt.

Cost-of-living issues also drove weekend protests in other European countries, including Italy, Belgium and Albania.

The start of school holidays yesterday may provide relief, but students were staging more gatherings and blockades in some places, including the Louvre gallery and Sciences Po university in central Paris.

Lecornu blamed far-left groups for some of France's worst unrest in years. "There is, after all, a far-left movement that wants to cause — we can't put it any more strongly — profound unrest in the country in the run-up to the presidential election," he said.

Hard-left presidential candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon urged him to provide evidence. "Otherwise, he should apologise, keep quiet and stop fanning the flames of unrest," he said on X.

The Federation of Trade and Retail said almost 3,000 shops had been affected over the weekend.

"Behind every ransacked shop are business owners, employees and families who have seen years of work and effort wiped out in a matter of hours," it added, calling for social security and tax relief for affected businesses.

Lecornu said the government would provide furlough measures from yesterday.

Standing before a boarded-up shopfront, Gerard Nouchi, manager of two clothing stores in Marseille, said there weren't enough police to stop the looters.

"They trashed everything, broke things, insulted us," Nouchi said. "It was like a real tornado."

The government ordered platforms selling looted goods to take down announcements and collaborate to prosecute resellers, Junior Digital Minister Anne Le Hénanff wrote on X.

Some 2,400 people were arrested, and one protester died from a cardiac arrest on Saturday while nearly 1,000 officers were injured, according to the Interior Ministry.

French assets were underperforming broader European markets yesterday, though moves were more contained than at some other moments of recent political friction.

Tensions in President Emmanuel Macron's fragile government over apparent security shortcomings -- coming as the government needs to pass a budget bill to rein in its finances -- could further unsettle investors.

Macron's office yesterday said he had turned down his Interior Minister Laurent Nunez's offer to resign, telling him instead to put an end to barricades and looting and be transparent over what Macron called "intelligence and foresight failings".

The mayors of Paris, Marseille and Lyon said in a joint op-ed in the newspaper Liberation that they were used to demonstrations and protests.



Protesters and students from arts and cultural schools block the entrance to the Louvre Museum during a demonstration in support of a high school student movement demanding better school conditions and government action in Paris, France, yesterday.

PHOTO: **REUTERS**