

Lessons for Dhaka from Delhi

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Are citizens ready to reward candidates who stand for better governance and effective public services — irrespective of their party affiliation?

As someone who was born and raised in Dhaka, there is no denying that the city has played a special role in shaping our collective identity. Its unique place in our nation's history has always made us proud for what it has endured and how it has defied the odds to be the city that it is.

And yet, it is also true that Dhaka has suffered from extreme demographic and economic changes, and one only needs to take a walk through any neighbourhood to realise how frustrating it is, and how quality of life has taken a nosedive.

This is probably best exemplified by the 2013 Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Global Livability Survey which identified Dhaka as the second least liveable city in the world after Damascus in Syria.

Against that context, the upcoming Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) elections have raised a lot of hope and curiosity within the sociopolitical scene. To me personally, the occasion marks a decisive opportunity to fundamentally address some of the core deficits in the manner how Dhaka is governed.

Moreover, in a recent "policy breakfast" organised by National Democratic Institute (NDI) — civil society members, mayoral aspirants, politicians, business leaders and others, came to discuss in detail the policies and platforms mayoral aspirants need to focus on.

Issues such as traffic management, corruption at City Hall, quality of public service, and accountability and transparency within the operations of DCC were all deliberated.

As one of the keynote speakers, I highlighted the opportunities that the next DCC elections have opened up, and what exact lessons all of us can draw from the recently held Delhi election in India. The focus on the outcomes of the Delhi election is crucial given what happened in Delhi has captured the imaginations of people from all walks of life.

To start with, what happened in the Delhi election dumbfounded political pundits all over India. Not only did the Aam Admi Party (AAP) win more than 90% constituencies within the Delhi Vidhan Sabha, but the party's leader Arvind Kejriwal epitomises how a campaign based on a simple promise that AAP will perform with integrity can trigger such a popular wave which is unprecedented in India's recent history.

The question that of course becomes interesting to comprehend is: Why did such a simple campaign that promised to deliver affordable public services through establishing good governance find such political mileage?

Besides, can such a political tone, which highlights the importance of public servants who will "perform with integrity," work in the upcoming DCC election?

While answering such an essential question in detail is not possible, given the scope of this article, intuitively, the idea is quite straightforward, and is related to the dynamics of middle-class economics.

In other words, insights from political economy analysis pinpoints that people's incomes are directly generated by some political elites — then they are less likely to demand institutional reforms — that generate more accountability and transparency in the system.

Nevertheless, as the size of the middle class grows, a large section of the urban population in most countries free themselves from the direct influence of political elites, as the private sector becomes the key job creator.

Subsequently, the grip of the traditional patron-client political framework weakens, and the

urban population starts caring and advocating for institutional reforms that promote more accountability and transparency in the society.

In essence, a socio-economic transformation that coexists with an emerging middle class creates an inherent demand for public representatives who will not only deliver effective public services, but will perform their duties with utmost integrity.

Of course, the AAP was politically savvy to understand this “new thinking” that prevails within the urban space of India. In particular, they realised that policies that improve the state of accountability and transparency are not just a means to an end for the growing middle class in India — which is expected to hit 250 million by the end of 2015; but they are an end in themselves, and carry a clear electoral payoff.

As a result, the AAP’s manifesto highlighted how it intended to make citizens equal stakeholders in shaping the city’s progress by giving them a voice in their administration.

Thus, this remarkable political development in Delhi brings us to the central question of this article: Can the mayoral aspirants in the upcoming DCC election internalise the possibility — similar to Delhi — that people within Dhaka’s urban space will not only value their performance per se, but they expect their public representatives to perform with integrity?

Can this new type of politics, where greater voice is given to the people through ensuring good governance, find an introduction in our social space? Finally, are the citizens themselves ready to reward candidates who stand for better governance and effective public services — irrespective of their party affiliation?

Accordingly, as a resident of this historic city, I can only hope that mayoral aspirants and voters will collectively create history by internalising this “new thinking” and ensure that electoral politics finds a fresh style and face in the upcoming days.