

# Aides to Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui of Cambridge allege toxic workplace behavior

By [Diti Kohli](#) and [Emma Platoff](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 16, 2023, 12:36 p.m.



Cambridge City Hall from an ariel view. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF/DAVID L RYAN, GLOBE STAFF

Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui of Cambridge made history in 2020 when she became the first Muslim elected to lead a major Massachusetts city. A Pakistani immigrant raised in public housing, Siddiqui pushed through adversity to reach elite schools and electoral success. And in office, she positioned herself as a progressive champion, promising to lift the city's lowest.

But eight women who have worked for Siddiqui since 2017 allege the mayor created a toxic work environment at odds with her public image.

In interviews over the last six months, they said Siddiqui undermined their self-esteem and jeopardized their future job prospects, behavior they say prompted people to leave her employment under difficult

circumstances. The aides — half of whom are women of color, and most of whom are no longer directly involved in Cambridge politics — described experiences including the mayor berating them for small mistakes such as typos, commenting on their bodies, and denigrating them to other colleagues. Four of the employees also alleged Siddiqui retaliated against them when they accepted new jobs or sought to leave her office.

Six of the eight employees asked to speak anonymously for fear the mayor would hinder their careers or credibility.

“You can break barriers and also cause a lot of harm in the process,” said Theo Skeadas, who managed Siddiqui’s first council campaign in 2017 and later ran for office herself.

The allegations create a complicated picture of the woman at the helm of the liberal city. In City Hall, Siddiqui has vowed to tackle affordable housing and climate resiliency, and launched a lauded guaranteed income program for poor families. To help advance her agenda, Siddiqui has largely hired young women of color, portraying herself as a mentor figure to those rarely represented in the halls of power.



Eight women who have worked for Siddiqui since 2017 allege that the mayor created a toxic work environment at odds with her public image. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Now Siddiqui is seeking reelection, competing with more than 20 candidates on the Nov. 7 ballot. Cambridge uses an unusual ranked-choice voting system in which voters elect nine city councilors who serve the city at large; the councilors themselves then elect the mayor from their own ranks. Siddiqui served one term as a councilor and is finishing her second two-year term as mayor. The role comes with somewhat limited power in Cambridge, where an appointed city manager is in charge of day-to-day operations and finances.

Siddiqui declined an interview request for this story, but responded to detailed questions in an emailed statement, saying allegations of workplace mistreatment “are [either] simply not true or mischaracterizations.”

“While I acknowledge that I have high standards for my staff, I am continually open to learning how to be a better supervisor. I hold the ideals of respect and equity high,” Siddiqui said.

“This work can be demanding and requires flexibility,” she acknowledged, but said she always strives “to treat everyone with respect.”

Some who have worked with Siddiqui over the years had only positive things to say about the mayor. They praised her as a barrier breaker and role model for young women of color.

Ammarah Rehman, Siddiqui’s director of policy and education, said she admires the mayor and values working for her. She acknowledged that the fast-paced work environment could be difficult, but characterized Siddiqui as an accommodating boss open to hearing feedback.

“It’s a challenging position, but the challenges aren’t created by her,” said Rehman, who has worked for Siddiqui since March 2022.

Councilor Quinton Zondervan, who said he did not have insight into Siddiqui’s relationship with her staff, said “I hope that if there are issues with her management style then those can be addressed and that she can continue to be a great leader, because we need people like her to be in leadership positions.”

Noting the timing of the upcoming city election, and the fact that some of the mayor’s critics have been or are political opponents, Siddiqui and allies also suggested the accusations may be motivated by politics.

But the women who spoke to The Boston Globe denied that their motivations were political.

Skeadas alleged that during Siddiqui’s 2017 campaign, long before Skeadas was on the ballot herself, the candidate needled her with negative feedback and chastised her for refusing to work around the clock.

In a journal entry from 2017 that Skeadas shared with the Globe, she wrote Siddiqui kept characterizing “my involvement as a ‘cost’ not a benefit,” leading her to feel like she “weighs [Siddiqui] down.”

Since that campaign, Skeadas said she has over many years heard from numerous community members that Siddiqui badmouthed her, remarks she blames in part for her own electoral loss when running for City Council in 2021. During that campaign, Skeadas recalled, Siddiqui told her not to list her position on Siddiqui’s 2017 campaign on her resume.

Three other former employees of the mayor also said Siddiqui has long disparaged Skeadas to her staff and others involved in Cambridge politics, calling her disloyal and untrustworthy for at least three years.

Siddiqui said in her statement to the Globe that she has “not disparaged [Skeadas] to professional colleagues.”

Adrienne Klein, then the mayor’s director of constituent services, felt some trepidation earlier this year as she considered how to tell the mayor she intended to run for City Council herself, meaning she would be competing against her boss in the at-large race.

Klein told the Globe she had watched a number of colleagues leave under strained circumstances, their relationships with Siddiqui seeming to rupture when they sought new jobs. So more than a week before she told the mayor she planned to run, Klein told the city’s human resources department she feared retaliation for entering the at-large election.

Just weeks after Klein told the mayor about her candidacy, the city [enacted a new policy](#) forcing council employees to either resign or go on unpaid leave while seeking elected city office — a rule Klein believes targets her and undermines her candidacy. City Manager Yi-An Huang told the Globe in July he created the policy after Siddiqui asked “that we look into this.”

Siddiqui in her response called Klein a “talented public servant” and denied involvement in crafting the policy. Cambridge officials [say the new policy](#) guards against potential conflicts.

The conversations Klein had with human resources and Siddiqui are described in a letter Klein’s attorney sent the city in July, which also states Klein is “prepared to litigate if necessary.” She remains on unpaid leave.



Siddiqui is seeking reelection this fall, competing with more than 20 candidates on the Nov. 7 ballot. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Another former employee of Siddiqui said that in 2021 the mayor cried and stormed out of the office after she gave her one-month's notice. Siddiqui said that the decision would hurt the employee's career, the aide recalled. Then Siddiqui sent an angry email to the state legislator who had hired the aide, calling the hiring decision "deeply disrespectful."

"Your complete disregard for me and the ease in which you dismissed my request for allowing [the aide] to stay on with me allowing me to find a replacement says more about you than I would want to know," Siddiqui wrote in the email, which was obtained by the Globe. The staffer interpreted the message as an effort to prevent her from beginning the new position.

Siddiqui told the Globe she has "never retaliated against an employee for leaving my office," but once asked that a staffer's new role not start until after an election.

During Siddiqui's tenure, at least two employees said they contacted human resources regarding concerns about the mayor. Siddiqui said in a statement she had "never been made aware of these allegations" before the Globe inquiry.

Many former staffers recalled Siddiqui subjecting them to disrespectful remarks during the workday.

A former aide said the mayor repeatedly brought desserts for her to the office, insisting she “fatten up” — incidents that embarrassed her and that she felt put an unfair focus on her physical appearance.

Another employee, who worked for the mayor for less than a year, said she did not hear from Siddiqui after submitting her resignation — not even as much as a “parting ‘I wish you the best’” during her final few days.

Once, during a different employee’s scheduled vacation, Siddiqui repeatedly texted and called her about office business, at one point writing, “we shouldn’t reach out to you during the days your away but the reality is, you caused it!!!,” according to a copy of the message obtained by the Globe.

The employee quit shortly after.

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