

BNP fears govt may influence city polls

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP yesterday alleged that the government made all preparations for influencing the Dhaka city polls to ensure victories for the Awami League candidates.

“The government’s intention is not to let the voters go to the polling centres [on the polling day]. To make it happen, they have taken various steps,” said BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir.

Speaking to journalists at the BNP chairperson’s Gulshan office in the capital, he complained that the government’s aim was to influence the entire election process and all the people involved in it.

The BNP leader said the AL already violated the electoral code of conduct. The ruling party held a rally in the capital on Thursday flouting the electoral code, he added.

“We informed the Election Commission about the incident, but they didn’t take any step. They just said the rally was organised without permission and this cannot happen.”

Fakhru said his party wanted a free and fair election, and the EC make sure that all the voters would be able to cast their votes.

He expressed optimism that both the BNP mayor candidates would secure big wins if the voters could exercise their franchise.

BNP mayor candidate for Dhaka North City Corporation, Tabitha Awal, said voters should go to the polling centres on the election day to exercise their voting rights.

Asked about their fear of occupation of polling centres by the ruling party men, Tabitha told reporters that there was no confusion over the matter anymore. “They [Awami League] have announced that they will guard and occupy the centres. They have made this intension clear.”

The mayoral hopeful said the BNP had nothing to protest about or resist. The party’s main target was to protect the country’s democracy and the people’s voting rights, he added.

“So, at any cost we will try to encourage and help the voters go to the polling centres and cast their votes.”

Meanwhile, BNP mayor candidate for Dhaka South City Corporation, Ishraque Hossain, said they, along with the people, would resist any attempt to capture polling centres.

He was talking to journalists at his home in the city’s Gopibagh.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

A man drives a modified motorbike with three children, none of them with helmets on, in the capital’s Sonargaon intersection area yesterday. Such gross disregard for safety and traffic rules often leads to accidents.

AL, BNP face

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The EC has engaged some 49,000 law enforcers. Besides, 172 executive magistrates and 64 judicial magistrates will be deployed to punish violence and code of conduct breaches.

EC sources said 65 platoons of BGB will be deployed and an additional 10 platoons of BGB will be kept as backup.

Additional law enforcers will be present at the “important” centres. A 16-member team of law enforcers will be deployed at each polling centre. In “important” ones, there will be 18.

During the three-week campaign, the two returning officers received a total of 133 complaints.

Most of the complaints were filed by the BNP mayor runners and councillor contenders, officials said, adding that the BNP men accused their AL counterparts of breaching the code of conduct.

The returning officers claimed almost all the complaints had been settled.

The general public, election observers and the international community will watch the five-member EC hold the first major polls using the electronic voting machines (EVMs) exclusively.

The EVMs will be used at the 2,468 polling centres despite concerns expressed by opposition parties of vote rigging. Besides, many voters say they don’t know how to use the machines.

The BNP and Communist Party of Bangladesh said that the EVMs were susceptible to manipulation and that elections could be rigged by manipulating them.

Several BNP leaders termed the EVMs “the tool to rob the vote”.

Many experts also said they

were concerned over the room for irregularities created by the use of EVMs.

Two mayors, 127 ward councillors, and 41 quota-allocated women councillors will be elected in Dhaka north and south city corporations. Four AL-backed councillors -- two general ward councillors and two quota-allocated women councillors -- were elected unopposed in DSCC.

People will cast their vote from 8:00am-4:00pm. There are 54.64 lakh voters.

However, the city corporations formed after the polls will not be able to solve many of the age-old problems plaguing the residents because many other institutions are also responsible for addressing the issues.

The ruling AL wants to prove its popularity in the polls, especially since it came to power through an election preceded by an almost one-sided campaign.

Victory for the BNP, on the other hand, means that the party would be energised after being cornered since the defeat in the general election.

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda yesterday told reporters: “Elections will be free and fair. We need cooperation from all.”

The first election of the undivided Dhaka City Corporation was held in 1994 and the second one in 2002. The government in 2011 split the DCC into two but there was no election.

The last city elections were held in 2015 in which the AL-backed candidates won and the BNP-backed ones boycotted the polls, making allegations of irregularities.

But this time, the BNP nominees said they would not leave the field until the votes were counted.

Bangladeshi staffers can work

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foreign missions and international organisations will be considered as local observers in the city polls.

“We have informed the foreign missions in Dhaka in this regard,” he added.

The EC on Thursday approved the names of 74 officials -- 46 foreign nationals and 28 Bangladeshi citizens -- from 10 foreign missions in Dhaka for inclusion in teams of foreign observers.

The officials are from diplomatic missions of the US, the UK, the European Union, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Japan, Denmark, Norway and Canada.

The same day, the foreign ministry wrote to all diplomatic missions in Dhaka, saying it would be highly appreciated if they don’t include their local employees, who are Bangladeshi citizens, in teams of foreign observers.

“In this connection, the ministry would like to point out that according to the Guidelines for Foreign Election Observer 2018, no local employee of a foreign mission having Bangladeshi nationality is eligible to observe the elections as an international observer,” it said.

Talking to journalists yesterday, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said, “I don’t know how the EC approved it. I think the missions know their code of conduct.”

“Foreigners, not Bangladeshi citizens, should be in the teams of international observers.”

Unfortunately, various diplomatic missions have included in such teams their local employees who are Bangladeshi citizens, he mentioned.

“This is a violation of the electoral code of conduct,” Momen told reporters at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

Meanwhile, political counsellors of

the US Embassy in Dhaka yesterday held a meeting with two mayor aspirants -- AL candidate for Dhaka south Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh and BNP candidate for Dhaka south Ishraque Hossain -- at a hotel in the capital’s Gulshan.

Following the 90-minute meeting that ended at 1:35pm, Ishraque told reporters that he told the counsellors about the violence that took place during his election campaign in Old Dhaka last week.

Ishraque’s supporters and followers of Awami League-backed councillor candidate Rokon Uddin clashed during campaigning in the capital’s Wari on January 26. At least 15 people, including two journalists, were injured.

“I also told them about the electronic voting machines (EVM) and that there are moves to occupy the polling centres,” mentioned Ishraque.

He also voiced fear that the city polls would be rigged through EVMs.

In the meantime, Information Minister Hasan Mahmud said it was not right for a foreign diplomat to visit a candidate’s house.

“It is not a diplomat’s task to visit a candidate’s house and express sympathy. This is not diplomacy... I think it violates diplomatic decency,” he told reporters after attending a function in Chittagong’s Hathazari area.

Earlier on January 26, British High Commissioner to Bangladesh Robert Chatterton Dickson paid a courtesy call on Ishraque at the latter’s Gopibagh house and discussed issues relating to Dhaka city polls.

Hasan mentioned that foreign diplomats don’t do such things during election campaigns in neighbouring India or other countries.

The minister further said it was unclear why and how the EC issued observer cards to Bangladeshi staffers at foreign missions in Dhaka.

Don’t leave your voting centres

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last-minute preparations for the Dhaka city polls today.

Huda said if the polling agents faced any problems, they would take assistance from the returning officers, and assistant returning officers of their respective polling centres.

“If their [polling agents] complaints are not addressed by the presiding officers and other polling officials concerned, they will immediately inform the returning officer about it.”

He said although there was no chance of any such incident happening, the agents could also take assistance

from the magistrates and members of the law enforcement agencies, if they were forced to leave the polling booths.

The CEC said there was no chance for anyone to force any polling agent out of a polling booth.

Huda said during a recent meeting with the law enforcement agencies, he asked them to “give shelter” to the polling agents. “It is our duty to look after them [polling agents] once they enter the polling centres to carry out their responsibilities.”

Sometimes polling agents leave voting centres without informing the polling officials concerned and later claim that they were forced to leave, the

CEC said.

Asked about BNP’s allegation that there was no level playing field for all candidates, Huda said the allegation was not true.

“They [BNP] carried out campaigns on the streets, went door-to-door and there was no obstacle. Where and how did you [journalists] see that there is no level playing field?”

The CEC called upon the voters to go to the polling centres and cast their votes without fear.

Replying to a question, Huda said the law enforcement agencies would take action if any voter came under attack on his way home.

Tall promises, small actions

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months. The disease apparently broke out in the capital and then spread to elsewhere in the country.

Ahead of the city polls this time, the manifestos of all the mayor candidates have once again featured the commitment to combat the mosquito menace.

Besides, the candidates have come up with pledges of making Dhaka an “intelligent city”, “a top-class metropolis”, and “a tourist hub”.

Talking to The Daily Star, experts and a number of city dwellers, however, said they were not very optimistic about the new mayors being able to keep their words.

The mayoral aspirants were throwing away “fancy words” only to woo voters, several city dwellers said, adding that pledges of curbing mosquito menace, reducing the perennial traffic congestion and waterlogging were something that they had been hearing for decades.

And the lack of optimism stems from the past mayors’ failure to resolve the problems in all those years, they said.

“The promises that we have now come across are the ones that we are all too familiar with,” said Sardar Anwar, a resident of West Rajabazar area.

“For two decades, we have been assured that the waterlogging problem in our area will be solved. But the situation only worsened,” he said.

Mohammad Ismail, who lives in Dhanmondi, said traffic congestion makes him suffer on a daily basis. “The situation is taking a turn for the worse every day.”

Experts said city people have a bagful of promises and commitments made by the candidates, but the candidates neither have the authority nor the capacity to fulfil the promises under the current administrative system.

They pointed out that over four dozen government bodies were involved in development and maintenance works in the city.

Entities like Wasa and Rajuk function under different ministries and the city corporations have no control over them, they said, adding that progress on most of the work suffer a setback due to a lack of coordination between those bodies.

“We are happy that the mayoral candidates have understood the woes of city dwellers and they want to solve the problems. But I doubt how many of them have the realisation that they don’t have that power and jurisdiction to do so,” said noted architect and town planner Mubasshar Hussain.

“They all have to understand that although they will be elected through direct votes of more than 30 lakh people, they are less powerful compared to the mayors of many small cities,” he said.

While explaining this, he said the candidates promised of solving waterlogging. But most of that responsibility falls on the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa), said Mubasshar, also the vice president of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa).

M Hafiz Uddin Khan, a former adviser to a caretaker government, said, “We know their [mayors] limitations and what they can do. Forget about turning Dhaka into a tourist hub, we will be happy if they can properly perform their existing duties, including mosquito control, road and footpath maintenance, and waste management.”

“The candidates have said they would ease the traffic congestion, but do they have the power to so?” he questioned.

“Traffic management is not so easy, and there are so many problems related to this. A city corporation cannot alone

solve this problem,” Hafiz Uddin said.

He went on to explain that several other authorities were involved in overseeing the city’s traffic situation. For example, the traffic division of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police is tasked with checking traffic rules violation, which often leads to traffic congestion.

Many overweight and unfit vehicles break down on the road causing traffic jam. City corporations built roads, but their mayors cannot stop overweight and unfit vehicles from plying the roads.

Hafiz Uddin said the government should empower the city corporations properly to solve such problems.

Echoing similar views, Prof Nizam Uddin Ahmed, a teacher of public administration department at Chittagong University, said neither the city corporations nor the mayors can resolve the traffic issue, which is complex and multifaceted.

“A mayor cannot bring enough changes to impact the traffic congestion -- there needs to be a big structural shift. If mayors are not able to implement changes, it is not because they are not capable of, it’s because the structures around them will not allow them to do so,” he said.

On the mosquito menace, entomologist Prof Kabirul Bashar of zoology department of Jahangirnagar University, said the mayors have limitations in terms of power and therefore they must ensure maximum cooperation between different bodies of the government.

To battle the mosquito menace, priority must be given on waterlogging, an issue which is supposed to be handled by Wasa. So coordination is the key in this regard.

“No change will take place if the candidates make promises only to impress voters,” Kabirul added.

Don’t go to China

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major travel hub.

But a jump in infections in two cities flanking Wuhan was fuelling fear that new hot spots were emerging. And people were leaving and entering Hubei by foot over a bridge spanning the Yangtze river, a Reuters witness said.

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Home appliance maker Electrolux issued a similar warning. French car maker PSA Peugeot Citroen said its three plants in Wuhan will remain closed until February 14.

“Do not travel to China due to novel coronavirus first identified in Wuhan,” the US State Department said on its website, raising the warning for China to the same level as Afghanistan and Iraq.

China has taken “the most comprehensive and rigorous prevention and control measures”, a foreign ministry spokeswoman said in response to the WHO declaration. Hubei is in virtual lockdown.

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EC looks

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on January 22, Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukdar said voter turnout was low in the December 2018 national election, as many voters were still apprehensive about using the EVMs.

Officials at the EC said voter turnout is a matter of concern as they have witnessed a low number of voters when they used EVMs on previous occasions.

The EVMs were used in six constituencies in the last parliamentary election in December 2018, and in subsequent elections after that.

The average vote casting rate was 51.42 percent in those constituencies, while it was 80.80 percent in the 294 constituencies where ballot paper was used.

On the other hand, voter turnout in the all-EVM Chattogram-8 by-polls was 22.94 percent on January 13 and 34.55 percent votes were cast in the all-EVM Bogura-6 by-polls in June last year.

DSCC returning officers Abdul Baten and Kashem said they took measures to bring voters and make them aware about the new method.

They held EVM exhibitions in all polling centres on January 28, while mock votes were conducted in all voting centres. There was a low presence of voters in the mock vote.

“We are also airing TV commercials, running ads in newspapers and giving ads on billboards in Dhaka to spread awareness among the voters,” said Baten.

Election Commissioner Brig Gen (retd) Shahadat Hossain Chowdhury said the new EVMs would be easy to use for all, especially the youth who are accustomed to gadgets.

Hajj camp

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said Health Minister Zahid Maleque yesterday.

He made the remark following an inter-ministry meeting with Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, and the State Minister for Disaster Management and Relief Dr Md Enamur Rahman at the the VIP lounge of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

Bangladesh Army would supervise the camp during the quarantined period, he said.

Among the returnees, none would be allowed to meet their family members or others during this period for safety reasons. The returnees comprise 19 families including 18 children.

Necessary bedding, equipment and daily foods would be served to the returnees at the camp. Government officials were on rush for finishing these arrangements as of 8:30pm yesterday, said officials.

According to the health minister, a total of 376 Bangladeshis had registered for their return in the beginning, but 15 of them later changed their minds.

Meanwhile, a special flight of Biman Bangladesh Airlines left Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka for Wuhan around 5:30pm yesterday to carry the stranded Bangladeshi citizens back, said sources at the airport.

A team of four doctors, three of Bangladesh Army and another one of the airport health department, were accompanying the cabin crews of the aircraft to ensure a safe return of the Bangladeshis.

According to officials, all the returnees would be screened before they board on the 419-seater aircraft of Biman.

As per the guideline of The World Health Organization, none with symptoms of flu -- cold, cough, fever, throat pain or other -- would be allowed to fly.

Talking to The Daily Star, Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said, none of the Bangladeshis was sick.

“First, they will be screened before boarding the plane and then our health team will screen them again after their landing at Dhaka,” she added.

The aircraft that went to China has been carrying surgical and N95 masks, gloves, disposable gowns, hand sanitizers, caps, shoe covers and other necessary equipment for the evacuees, crew members and health workers.

The number of coronavirus cases worldwide has surpassed that of the Sars epidemic, which spread to more than two dozen countries in 2003, reports BBC.

There were around 8,100 cases of Sars -- severe acute respiratory syndrome -- reported during the eight-month outbreak.

But nearly 10,000 people have been infected with the new coronavirus, mostly in China, since it emerged in December.

More than 100 cases have been reported outside China, in 22 countries.

The number of deaths so far stands at 213 -- all in China. In total, 774 people were killed by Sars.

The World Health Organization on Thursday declared the outbreak a global health emergency, but said it was not recommending any international trade or travel restrictions and urged the numerous countries already taking such measures to reconsider, reports AFP.