

AL MPs defy

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Sircar dismissed the demand for resignation of the BNP-led coalition and snap polls and called on the opposition to join parliament to talk about other four issues.

"The demand for midterm elections is illogical," he said.
Sircar cited a provision in the constitution that an elected government will hold power for a five-year term. "Let the government work for five years. If it fails to run the country, people will vote it out in the next elections and the opposition will come to power," he said.

Four other demands are withdrawal of the 14th constitution amendment bill and an end to "one-sided" alterations to the constitution, peaceful rallies and the right to movement, a stop to police repression and release of political prisoners and steps to implement AL's previous 15 point-demand.

"Raise these issues in parliament and I will allow you enough time to speak," Sircar assured the AL legislators.

The memorandum described the proposed 14th amendment as contrary to the spirit of the constitution. Despite strong opposition from the AL and other political parties, the bill will be passed in the current session of the Jatiya Sangsad that resumed yesterday.

Over 30 lawmakers from the AL Parliamentary Party (ALPP) and a group of journalists flocked to the speaker's chamber during the handover of the memorandum.

AL leader Abdus Samad Azad told Sircar at a 30-minute meeting: "We are not satisfied with what you said. We are not here to take your advice but to submit our memorandum." Azad's angry word came after Sircar insisted on opposition delegates joining parliament.

"Be the speaker of people. We will be with you," Azad told Sircar, asking him to take AL demands seriously.

AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil at the meeting condemned the recent attack on AL lawmaker Mirza Azam and police raids on other AL leaders. He also protested the arrests of more than 13,000 people including their workers and high-handed police attacks on peaceful AL programmes.

On the withdrawal of the constitution amendment bill, Sircar said: "It is up to the government and opposition to debate the withdrawal or passage of the bill."

He asked the opposition lawmakers to join parliamentary debates and specify the violations of the right to rallies and free movement.

Deputy Leader of the Opposition Abdul Hamid, AL presidium member Sheikh Selim and Opposition Chief Whip Abdus Shahid accused ruling coalition lawmakers of verbal abuse in parliament.

The ALPP in the memorandum criticised a proposal for extending the retirement age of judges, saying it serves the narrow political interest of assigning an individual as the head of the caretaker government.

BARBED WIRE
Riot police obstructed AL leaders with barbed-wire fences when they gathered on Dhanmondi Road No. 27 to march towards parliament.

In an argument with the police, the ALPP members described the roadblock as a violation of their right to free movement.

Police let the AL leaders out after much insistence and escorted them to the south entry to the parliament complex amid opposition leaders' antigovernment slogans.

NO-CONFIDENCE
On the second day of the "mass no-confidence programme", AL leaders staged sit-ins at Zero Point and on Dhanmondi Road No. 27 ringed by police. The law enforcers did not allow any mid-level party workers to join the programme.

Police cordoned the AL central office on Bangabandhu Avenue. Arsonists with apparent ties to the AL set fire to a Volvo bus in Motijheel, but no passenger was hurt.

The Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) of Hasanul Haq Inu observed the second day of its simultaneous "mass no-confidence programme" with a sit-in at the General Post Office.

The JSD alleged in a press release that police picked up five of their workers.

Both the AL and JSD will simultaneously observe the third and final day of the "mass no-confidence programme" today.

Hasina asks govt

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the ongoing anti-government movement, said the government that could not ensure food and security to people has no right to stay in power.

She also called upon all to forge a united movement to force the government to resign for mid-term elections.
The Awami League President said the people's life has become miserable with the increase of VAT and tax on one hand and falling victims of extortion by the ruling party terrorists on the other hand.

She said that on the plea of price-hike of essentials, the government had raised the salary of the prime minister and the ministers, but soon thereafter the prime minister started saying that prices of essentials did not rise.

Referring to mass arrests, Hasina alleged that the government had turned the entire Dhaka city into a jail and filed false cases against four lakh leaders and workers of Awami League.

"No autocratic government in the past could stay in power by resorting to repression and oppression. This BNP-Jamaat alliance government will also not be able to stay in power by such means," she said.

The former prime minister recalled what she said brutal repression on Awami League leaders and workers and common people by the BNP terrorists in Munshiganj soon after she handed over power to the caretaker government and after assumption of power by the BNP-Jamaat alliance in 2001.

She alleged that in last two and half years, they have looted the wealth of people with the PM's family members alone siphoning out Tk 11,000 crore.

Hasina said,"During its five-year

rule, the Awami League government ensured food, security and peace while the BNP-Jamaat alliance government since coming to power presented only dead bodies."

Mentioning the recent killing of Korean Export Processing Zone (KEPZ) managing director Commodore Golam Rabbani, she alleged that foreign investors felt discouraged to invest in Bangladesh because of terrorism, extortion and corruption.

"Dual rule is also driving out the foreign investors from Bangladesh," Hasina said, pointing her finger to Hawa Bhaban, the political office of BNP Chairperson.

About the April 2 arms haul in Chittagong, she blamed the prime minister, the industries minister, the state minister for home and the prime minister's parliamentary affairs advisor, and wondered where they want to take Bangladesh.

The meeting, presided over by Golam Mohiuddin, was also addressed by Obaidul Kader, Dr Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, Maj Gen (retd) Subed Ali Bhuyian, lawmakers Nure Alam Chowdhury Liton and Sheikh Helal, Fazlittunessa Indira, Shegupta Yasmin Emily and Nazrul Islam Babu.

Earlier, on her way to Munshiganj, the opposition leader addressed three wayside meetings.

As Hasina's motorcade boarded the ferry at Muktarpur Ghat, hundreds of people on boats and launches wearing colorful headbands and carrying banners and portraits of Bangabandhu escorted the ferry to the other side of river Dhaleswari.

caused disease in animals and in humans through contact with infectious animals. It is currently believed that certain species of fruit bats are the natural hosts of it.

Though the exact mode of transmission from animal to animal or from animal to human is uncertain, it appears to require close contact with contaminated tissue or body fluids from infected animals.

Nipah antibodies have been detected in pigs and some other domestic and wild animals. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the role of species other than pigs in transmitting the infection to other animals has not yet been determined.

The incubation period for the virus is between four and 18 days. In many cases, the infection is mild or non-apparent (sub-clinical). In symptomatic cases, the onset usually comes with 'influenza-like' symptoms, with high fever and muscle pains.

The disease may progress to inflammation of the brain (encephalitis), with drowsiness, disorientation, convulsions and coma. Fifty percent of clinically apparent cases of Nipah virus infection die.

Sonargaon UP polls marred by false voting

OUR CORRESPONDENT, N'ganj

Election of Sadipur Union Parishad under Sonargaon upazila yesterday came to a halt as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) activists working for the chairman candidate Abu Taher allegedly stormed into the vote centre and cast false votes, witnesses said.

The men of Abu Taher, who being a brother-in-law of Mosaddek Ali, the political secretary of prime minister, holds sway over the area, drove off the polling agents of Awami League candidate Abdur Rashid Molla and occupied the Vargaon primary school voting center for the next half an hour, witnesses said.

Police deployed there however put up an abortive resistance against the group led by Abu Jafar, the president of upazila BNP, Azharul Islam the general secretary and Mossharaf Hossain, the president of Jubo Dal.

The polling resumed when troops of Bangladesh Rifles went there and regained the control of the situation.

Abdur Rahsid Mollah meanwhile alleged "the BNP goons" did the same thing in Baragaoon and Gazaria voting centres like they did in the Vargaon primary school voting centre.

Strike at 8 state-owned jute mills observed

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Production was suspended at eight state-owned jute mills in Khulna-Jessore industrial belt yesterday as workers went on a 24-hour strike to press home an 11-point demand.

The demands include 10 percent dearness allowance, re-opening of the closed mills and factories, payment of arrears of the retrenched workers and of insurance claims.

Thousands of workers brought out a procession in Khalishpur in support of the strike that began at 6:00 in the morning. Police were deployed at all the mills.

Huda

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scam', saying the vehicles were sold at very high prices.

"Each CNG-run auto-rickshaw was sold at Tk 3.50 lakh against the real price of Tk 1.5 lakh. People appreciated the step to free Dhaka City from air pollution, but the scam tarnished the government's image," he said.

The communications minister then tried to defend his position, saying when the vehicles were imported he was not at home.

The state minister for communications oversaw the process, he added.

At this moment, the young lawmakers interrupted Huda, creating noise, meeting sources said.

The parliamentary standing committee on the communications ministry had earlier raised allegations of corruption against the minister in the import and distribution of the auto-rickshaw.

The committee said the minister gave permission to only one company to import the vehicles and formed a sub-committee to probe the allegations.

The sub-committee is investigating the allegations.

SB directs

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others, with sections for the total number of arrests.

The circular instructed police to report to the SB Control Room in every 12 hours at 7:00 in the morning and evening, mentioning the people arrested or temporarily detained and the number of arrests made at bus and train stations.

The same instructions had earlier been given over telephone, police sources said.

Siamese twins

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Maria's circulation became very weak and she remains connected to a ventilator," said Dr Amin who also performed a similar operation in June last year.

Maria has a 50 percent chance of survival while doctors are very hopeful about Halima who continues to do well without any life support.

Father of the babies, Shahed Ali, was present outside the operating theatre yesterday while the mother, Papiya Khatun Shefali, is at her village home of Pabna's Bolorampur.

The first such separation was performed in 2001 at Dhaka Shishu Hospital by Prof AFM Masud, but the twins, both males, died 17 hours after separation.

Dr Ruhul Amin performed the second operation on a pair of male twins in June last year and one of them survived.

Our Pabna correspondent reports thousands of people in Bolorampur yesterday organised a special prayer (Doa Mahfil) at local mosques prior to the operation on the Siamese twins and people rejoiced after hearing about the successful operation.

Run by the Islamic Bank Foundation, the IBH bore all costs of the operation including pre- and postoperative expenses of up to Tk 10 lakh.

Other members of the team of surgeons were Dr Shahadat Hossain, Dr Didarul Islam, Dr Mostaq Ahmed, Dr Zahid Hossain and Dr MPH Siddique.

Final probe

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report stated.
The DG, when contacted last night, declined to comment on the report.

He was accused of three corruption charges and found guilty on two counts. He however was cleared of another charge for causing a loss of Tk 16.73 lakh to the national exchequer through tender manipulation and irregularities in the purchase of film raw materials as the charge was not proved beyond doubt.

Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture Mohammad Abdul Aziz conducted the final investigation on the basis of another inquiry committee report and evidences of the witnesses.

Earlier, the information ministry formed a four-member inquiry committee headed by a joint secretary, which proved massive corruption and gross irregularities against the DG.

The previous inquiry committee found the DG had drawn over Tk 18 lakh in bills against four documentaries and three video films without making those, purchased raw materials at a cost of Tk 16.73 lakh through tender manipulation and made documentaries and video films without the ministry's permission.

After approval of the prime minister and the president, the information ministry asked the establishment ministry to appoint an inquiry officer above the status of a

joint secretary for the final inquiry into the charges against the DG.

The establishment ministry then appointed the additional secretary of the agriculture ministry as the inquiry officer, who completed probe on April 15.

According to the final report, the DFP DG made six documentaries and one video film in 2001-2002 and five documentaries and as many video films without obtaining permission from the ministry.

The report also found the DG misappropriated Tk 18,09,500 through submitting fake bills without making four documentaries and three video films. It found that four documentaries, Jibon Jemon Jebhabey, Tourism, Gonotntrer Uttaran and Festival of Bangladesh, and three video films -- Esho Sundorer Pathay, Shishu Apaharan Rodh and Tomar Moto Bondhu Ke Achhey, were not made at all.

Mamunur Rashid Chowdhury, joint secretary (Development) of the information ministry, placed the case during the final inquiry while Deputy Secretary of the ministry Tajul Islam and Film Librarian of DFP Reenat Sultana were the witnesses in the case.

The DG did not appear before the inquiry officer despite being served with two separate notices, prompting the completion of the inquiry on the basis of evidences and statements of the witnesses.

Cloud overshadows

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In an oblique reference to strikes in western countries, he said political parties never enforce general strike and it does not affect general people too.

In those countries, there are incidences of strikes that they solve through discussion among employees and employers, the envoy said, apparently indicating the difference between the hartal here and the strike over there.

"It's the business community to change the decision," Michel told a questioner, who asked the envoy if they could use their offices to change the tradition of the political programme like hartal.

Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Ficci) President Mahbub Jamil said trade-body members indeed made appeals to the two leaders (Khaleda and Hasina) several times but only in vain.

"We cannot enforce hartal against hartal," he said, with a tinge of frustration.

Michel said only a few big companies came here with investment while others shied away simply because of the country's 'image crisis' abroad. He suggested improving the image through projecting the success cases.

On anti-investment factors like poor law and order and corruption, the

French diplomat, emerging out of the meeting, told newsmen, "I don't think these are major problems. Image is the concern."

He was also concerned at the country's dependence on a single export item, apparel. He called for diversification of the export products as a preparation for facing quota-free trade regime from next year.

He, however, sang praises of the manufacturers who displayed diversified products at the Bangladesh trade fair in Paris recently where half the 29 participants had showcased products other than RMG.

The FICCI president said Bangladesh enjoys a good trade surplus as Dhaka exports goods worth \$400 million against its \$125 million imports.

Exports include readymade garments, frozen shrimps and ceramic tableware. And exports from France are restricted to a few items like wheat, gas turbines, telecom equipment and chemicals.

French investment in Bangladesh would be around \$250 million, of which around \$240 million could be attributed to a single venture, Lafarge Cement.

"There is scope for further French investment in this country and expansion of bilateral trade and product diversification at both ends," said the Ficci president.

Mass arrests needed

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the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

"The government has taken the measure on the basis of specific information and documents that a conspiracy is going on against the government," Khaleda, also leader of the parliamentary party, said.

"Nobody has been mindlessly harassed," meeting sources quoted her as saying.

She warned the 'troublemakers', saying: "Nobody, including the activists of the ruling and opposition parties, will be spared for maintaining the constitutional process."

Police have arrested over 10,000 people, including activists of the main opposition Awami League (AL) and innocent people, since April 19 in an apparent attempt to foil the oust-government agitation.

Different human rights groups have termed the government action as violation of human rights and unconstitutional.

Khaleda assured her party lawmakers that a process was initiated to release the innocent people arrested in the police drive so far.

At the meeting BNP lawmakers demanded improvement in law and order, an end to price hike of essentials and downsizing the cabinet, but appeared divided on the reserved seats for women in parliament.

Briefing reporters, Chief Whip Khandakar Delwar Hossain said 19 lawmakers spoke and 152 attended the meeting that was indefinitely adjourned again.

Law Minister Moudud Ahmed explained different provisions of the proposed bill for amendment to the constitution. He also hinted at the passage of the bill in the current session of parliament.

Ctg AL

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City Awami League has formed 50 teams to collect signatures from 41 wards.

Awami League sources said police arrested 20 BCL leaders and workers while collecting signature. Besides, 500 people, mostly young, were taken into custody from different places of the city.

Speaker's ruling

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opposition leader Sheikh Hasina for alleging that 75 percent of the BNP lawmakers are 'thieves and dacoits' and asked her to resign from parliament before demanding the government's quit.

Next, an opposition lawmaker from the Jatiya Party (JP), Moshir Rahman Ranga, whose son was kidnapped and a private aide murdered by unknown criminals a couple of days back, took the floor.

He described the trauma he suffered because of the incident and expressed anger at the government's failure to nab the criminals. He said police could not even trace his car.

As Ranga demanded a statement of the minister concerned, State Minister for Home Lutfozzaman Babar took the floor to assure the JP lawmaker that the criminals would be tracked down and given exemplary punishment. Babar informed the House that Fatullah police arrested two suspects while he was speaking in the House and that a wireless message had been sent out across the country to trace the car of the MP.

Another ruling party lawmaker, Karim Abbasi, also demanded that Hasina has to withdraw her statement against the BNP lawmakers and seek apology.

Earlier, Kader Siddiqui blamed the government for nabbing hundreds of innocents, who came to the capital from villages, in the name of tackling the opposition's threat to dislodge the government by April 30.

Siddiqui equally blamed the Awami League for what he termed was its undemocratic movement. He dubbed AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil an 'astrologer-like leader'.

No bails

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number was 4413.

"The arrests were made upon intelligence reports that some people might try to sneak into the capital to carry out subversive activities," said Golam Rasul, deputy commissioner (North), during a press conference at police HQ yesterday.

A police HQ spokesman said there were no specific charges against the arrestees, but they were apprehended for failing to give satisfactory answers about their reasons for coming to Dhaka or where they were going.

Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police (Administration) Abdul Mannan, DIG (Dhaka Range) Khoda Box Chowdhury and DIGs of Special Branch and Criminal Investigation Department were present during the press briefing.

There have been widespread allegations of police taking bribes for the release of detainees, thousands of whom have been picked up indiscriminately over the past week or so.

Some of the victims also alleged of being robbed by police after arrest.

Meanwhile, business is dull in the transport sector and Dhaka's hotels and restaurants as the number of visitors to the capital fell sharply in the wake of the mindless arrests.

"Our income has fallen drastically after the police crackdown began last week," said Abdur Rashid, a hotelier of Old Dhaka.

Our staff correspondent from Khulna reports: Leaders of the AL and its front organisations went into hiding following arrests of some district and upazila unit leaders of Jubo League and Bangladesh Chhatra League on Saturday.

Kidnapping

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Birinkya village under Kumarkhali upazila, on January 4; Osman Gani alias Roni, 19, of Chapara under Kumarkhali upazila, on January 25; and Sabbir Hossain, 12, of Sheikhpara High School, on January 31.

All the five were freed in exchange of ransoms, which for Bipul was Tk 1.5 lakh and for Sabita, Shumista and Roni Tk 50,000 each. The ransom demanded for Sabbir was Tk 2 lakh, but the actual amount paid to the abductors is not known.

Outlaws abducted another boy, Jahidul Islam, 18, of Udiabari in suburban Kushtia on March 17 and demanded Tk 2 lakh as ransom. The family reportedly paid Tk 50,000 to the kidnappers, after which police found the boy unconscious in a playground.

Criminals were quick to follow the suit of the outlawed extremists. They kidnapped four students in March and three in April.

Criminals kidnapped Mahmuda Khatun Mukta 16, of Sonaulah Para under Bheramara upazila on March 1; Sayeed, 11, of Alichara village under Sadar upazila on March 8; Mir Al Fahad, 17, of Kushtia Islamia College on March 20; and Sabina Yasmin, 12, of Lalon Nagar village under Daulatpur upazila on March 25.

Of them, Sayeed and Sabina were killed as their families failed to meet ransom demands of Tk 1 lakh and Tk 50,000. Police found their dead bodies on March 28 and March 27.

Police, however, could rescue two -- Mukta from Gabtoli bus terminus in Dhaka and Fahad through a gunfight from Goria river. One kidnapper of Mukta and three of Fahad were arrested.

Those who were kidnapped in April are: Rozina Akther 14, of Digrichar village under Daulatpur upazila on April 17; Miraj, a school-boy of Mongolbaria village, on April 20; and Roshni Akter, 12, of Kushtia town on April 22.

Police rescued Miraj and nabbed five of the abductors on April 23. But, the two girls are still missing.

EU to step up net safety for kids

REUTERS, Dundalk

European Union communications ministers have unveiled a 50 million euro (34 million pound) plan to make the Internet safer for children.

The four-year programme, announced at an informal meeting of EU ministers in Ireland, the current holder of the EU presidency, aims to increase the use of filtering technology and public hotlines to combat illegal Internet content.

Irish Communications Minister Dermot Ahern, hosting the EU conference on broadband, said that while Internet technology was bringing huge benefits to the public and businesses, it was up to legislators to protect the vulnerable from its dangers.

"As ministers we intend tackling these issues and the Commission's safety blueprint provides us with a raft of new measures," he said in a statement on Thursday.

The plan, due to begin next year, was announced as an EU survey showed that nearly half of all young people in northern Europe have been approached to meet in person after making initial contact with a stranger online.

The survey, by EU Safety, Awareness, Facts and Tools, a cross-European project to promote the safe use of the Internet, found 46 percent of children in northern Europe who chat on the

Internet say someone has asked to meet them and that 14 percent had actually done so.

A Eurobarometer survey published in March has found half of parents in Europe do not think their children would know what to do if a situation on the Internet made them uncomfortable.

The ten countries due to join the 15-member bloc in May will participate in the plan, which Ahern said would include public safety campaigns and expansion of telephone hotlines for reporting dangerous Internet sites.

Constitution

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The bill was withdrawn to facilitate addition of three new amendment proposals. After getting approval of the cabinet, a fresh amendment bill will be placed before the House on April 27 for consideration.

The three new amendment proposals are raising retirement age of the Supreme Court judges from 65 to 67 years, increasing retirement age of the comptroller and auditor general, chairman and members of the public service commission from 62 to 65 years or giving appointment for a five-year tenure.

The withdrawal proposal on the bill was later sent to the parliamentary standing committee on the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs for scrutiny.

Indian polls

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deserted with businesses closing early in anticipation of trouble during voting, which is being boycotted by separatists.

Amid shoot-at-sight orders for booth-grabbers and sealing off of Indo-Nepal border adjoining Bihar, the stage is set for elections to 17 Lok Sabha constituencies in the State.

Four persons were killed and many injured in a violence-marred poll for 11 Lok Sabha constituencies in the state on April 20.

Ethnic separatists shot dead two people linked to India's ruling Hindu nationalists in the north-eastern state of Manipur which votes in national elections today, AFP reports.

Former state police chief L. Jogeshwar, whose son is married to the daughter of a candidate from Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was gunned down outside his home late Saturday, police said.

"Jogeshwar was talking to someone outside his house when two militants just walked up to him and fired with automatic weapons from a very close range," an officer said by telephone from the state capital Imphal.

Police said rebels also abducted a BJP political worker Saturday evening in the outskirts of Imphal and shot him dead.

Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup, an armed group fighting for an independent homeland for Manipur's majority Metei community, claimed responsibility for the killings in telephone calls to the media.

The outfit has threatened to kill anyone who campaigns for the BJP, which it says is working against the interests of the state

bordering Myanmar.

Our Correspondent Pallab Bhattacharya reports from New Delhi: More than 100,000 paramilitary personnel will be deployed across the constituencies and about 28,000 of them in Srinagar constituency from where former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and National Conference chief Omar Abdullah joined the fray.

Given the spate of violence in the first phase of polling on April 20, security has been beefed up in 17 constituencies of Bihar, 21 in Andhra Pradesh and eight in Jharkhand in the wake of naxalites' boycott threat and separatists' call to disrupt the poll. Most of the 20 killings that took place in the first phase were in these states.

An estimated 55 percent of the 177 million voters cast votes in the first phase in which polling was held for 140 constituencies.

Polling in remaining constituencies in the elections to 543-member Lok Sabha will be held on May 5 and 10. Counting is slated for May 13 and all results are expected to be out the same day.

Vajpayee has admitted his Hindu nationalist-led coalition is facing a tougher challenge than expected in staggered Indian elections, Reuters reports.