

Pratibha Patil to face big challenge

FROM PAGE 16
conceded defeat in the vote Thursday for the largely ceremonial post of head of state.

The voting followed a savage debate over the past month about her fitness for the job. Analysts have described the presidential campaign as the most vitriolic in India's 60 years of independence.

Patil, a native of the western state of Maharashtra, was championed by ruling Congress party president Sonia Gandhi, who said her election would help the cause of gender equality.

But Indian politics is rarely without controversy. Patil has been buffeted by accusations that she protected her brother in a murder probe and shielded her husband in a suicide scandal.

There have also been charges of nepotism and involvement in a slew of financial scams.

The opposition also issued a booklet entitled: "Does This Tainted Person Deserve to Become the

President of India?"

Patil, who has denied all allegations of wrongdoing, also has a tough act to follow in outgoing president Abdul Kalam, whose bid for a second term was rebuffed by Congress.

The silver-haired, shaggy-locked missile scientist was dubbed the "People's President" for his populist style and large following.

Patil, a lawyer who dresses conservatively in a sari pulled over her hair, has been mocked for revealing to a television audience that a dead spiritual guru gave her a "divine premonition of greater responsibility."

"The future president of India speaks to dead people," wrote Tavleen Singh, in a column for the Indian Express newspaper. "This is almost worse than her shady past."

Alongside opposition attacks, the media has been busy digging up skeletons from the bespectacled Patil's past.

One paper unearthed a speech she made in 1975 to the Maharashtra state legislature in which she said the government was considering "compulsory sterilisation" to check a burgeoning birth rate.

India's top news magazine, India Today, put her on its front cover with the headline "Embarrassing Choice." Its editor-in-chief Aron Purie said the question was not "Pratibha who?" but "Pratibha why?"

"If the courts move against her close relatives in ongoing cases, her position will become untenable," wrote TN Ninan, the publisher of the leading financial daily Business Standard.

In India, presidential candidates and their families are traditionally expected to be free from any scandal.

Even though she has spent nearly a half century in politics, the Rajasthan governor was an obscure figure nationally until

Gandhi's nod for her nomination vaulted her to the front-pages.

"This is a very sad thing, a nondescript person with all kinds of strange allegations against her and no attempt to get a person of eminence — one more institution of democracy gone down the drain," said veteran columnist Prem Shankar Jha.

A long-time supporter of the late prime minister Indira Gandhi and a staunch Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty loyalist, Patil is on friendly terms with Indira's daughter-in-law, Sonia.

"She is basically a hardcore Congress party loyalist, that's why she got the nod," said political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan.

The key question going forward, said analysts, was whether she would be able to resist the pressures of the ruling coalition and act independently.

Under the constitution, the prime minister wields most of the executive power but the president plays a role in forming government at the state and federal levels, which makes the job hotly contested.

"We have to wait and watch but there is very little in her past to inspire confidence," said Rangarajan.



PHOTO: STAR

An approach road to the bridge at Kamrangir Char is getting narrower due to soil erosion, making it difficult for vehicles to pass. The authorities have tried to prevent soil erosion with sacks of sand, but to no avail.

The scourge puts victims at fatal risk

FROM PAGE 1
spread rapidly in the capital and elsewhere in the last few years, but the law enforcers woke up to the reality of the scourge of this specific crime, only recently. About 200 victims of such criminal gangs were treated in Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) every month over the last four months, and during the same period at least four victims died.

Staff of the emergency department of DMCH said only 5 to 10 such victims a month used to get admitted to the hospital five years ago.

"If strong narcotics are used on an individual, that person might get killed or his or her memory might get damaged," Prof Dr AH Mohammad Firoz, director of the National Institute of Mental Health, told The Daily Star. He said large doses of sedatives or narcotics might even cause permanent mental disorder in a victim.

He said people of over 40 and below 15 years of age are at high risk of brain damage if drugged with large doses of strong sedatives.

Dr AKM Azad Hossain, registrar of the DMCH medicine ward, said aggyan party members use large doses of different types of sedatives to make their victims unconscious as quickly as possible.

A victim with a longstanding illness might even die if the dose of sedative is large and if the victim does not get

proper medical attention immediately after the attack.

"If a victim has ongoing kidney or liver complications those might get severely aggravated if a large dose of sedative is administered on the person. It might also cause blood pressure to rise," Azad Hossain, who has a long track record of treating such patients, told The Daily Star. If elderly people become victims of such gangs, they also might die from such sedation, he added.

Over dose of such drugs sometimes might damage brain tissues or cells paralysing that particular part of the brain.

HOW AND WHERE THE GANGS OPERATE

The gangs are mainly active in crowded places like bus terminals, railway stations, and launch terminals. They first target a person and then somehow feed the target the sedative mixed with water, biscuits or other foods including coconut water.

After their targets become unconscious they make away with the victims' belongings.

Passengers, taxi-cab and CNG auto-rickshaw drivers, and rickshaw-pullers are usually the prime targets of the gangs.

Nowadays, Zia International Airport (ZIA) has also become a hotspot for the aggyan parties. People of the working class, particularly the

ones returning home from abroad, often become the victims of the gangs.

The sudden rise of such crimes prompted the police authorities to deploy a special team of the Detective Branch (DB) to fight the menace, which has been cracking down on the gangs since the first week of June.

Additional Deputy Commissioner Md Asaduzzaman, who is leading the team, said they arrested at least 50 members of such gangs in the last one month.

He said the gangs mix seven to eight Lorazepam, a very strong sedative tablet imported from Pakistan, in tea, water or coconut water and serve it to their targets.

THE PIONEER IN THE TRADE

DB claims to have arrested the pioneer of 'aggyan party' recently. The man named Pundit ostensibly narrated to the law enforcers how he formed his gang 25 years ago and the way he used to run its activities.

Pundit told the police that he started in 1981-82 with six members. A few years into the inception he got arrested and his followers split into separate gangs. Since then the activities and number of the gangs have been spreading. Now there are such gangs even outside the capital.

Police often find it difficult to catch the members of such gangs with evidence as powdered sedatives, which are their tools of the trade, can

be hidden or thrown away quite easily.

Cases filed in connection with robbing people after sedating them with drugs or poison or other intoxicating chemicals, could not be proved in courts due to negligence of police and lack of witnesses and evidence, commented a lawyer of the Judge Court in Dhaka.

He also said now anyone found guilty of committing such a crime will have to serve 10 years in jail. "The punishment is not enough as a victim might even die or be disabled permanently from such intoxication. So the punishment in such cases should be more rigorous," the lawyer added.

THE ORDEALS

Most of the victims of such attacks undergo serious ordeals as in most cases they are attacked when they are alone.

When a victim is admitted to DMCH, where the most of such victims in the city are usually admitted, he or she quite often does not get proper treatment as none of their relatives could accompany them there to buy medicines or to take care of them. They are usually kept abandoned on the veranda of DMCH. The process of stomach wash administered on the victims by doctors, is also very disconcerting and often painful.



PHOTO: STAR

Awami League leader Abdul Matin Khasru talks to reporters after meeting party chief Sheikh Hasina at sub-jail in Parliament Building Complex in the city yesterday.

Taiwan launches fresh UN membership bid

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan has launched a fresh bid for membership of the United Nations, a presidential aide said yesterday, but the move met with an immediate riposte from China.

Deputy presidential secretary general Chen Chi-mai said the bid would use the name "Taiwan" rather than the official title the "Republic of China."

He also warned China not to

sabotage the move, saying that Taiwan is a sovereign country and not part of China.

Beijing has shot down Taiwan's repeated efforts to join the UN over the past 14 years under the name "Republic of China," claiming the island is part of its territory awaiting reunification.

"The (Taipei) government will do all it can to defend our sovereignty, dignity and safety in the face of China's boycott and suppression," Chen told a press conference at

the presidential office here.

"Since 1993 our allies had proposed to solve the membership issue (in the UN's General Assembly)... but our modest and rational approach has been rejected. Therefore we are presenting the (different) membership case this year," he said.

But China's foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao said it was a "separatist action by Taiwan independence forces aimed at splitting Taiwan from China.



Standard Chartered, Transaction Banking, has signed a MoU with the British Council in the city recently. Under the MoU, Standard Chartered will collect all examination fees on behalf of the British Council. The photo shows Mirza Aminur Rahman, director & head of Transaction Banking, and Richard Sunderland, acting director of British Council, signing the MoU.