

Choose with care

It is clear from the forgoing that many controversial individuals are running for the upcoming parliamentary elections. There are convicted criminals as well as alleged criminals among them. If these individuals are elected, it is feared that a criminal empire may be established in the country rather than a democratic one.

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

THE nation is seeking a democratic transition through the ninth parliamentary elections. Such a transition will obviously largely depend on the candidates who are nominated, especially by the major parties, and their backgrounds. However, it is hard to be optimistic from the information we have about the candidates.

As of December 26, there were 1555 candidates are contesting for 299 seats. Of these, the Awami League-led grand alliance has 318 candidates and the BNP-led four party alliance has 305. Among the grand alliance candidates, 270 are using the boat as symbols and 48 are using the plough. Of the four-party alliance candidates, 266 are using the sheaf of paddy and 39 are using the scales as their symbols. Thus, there are duplicate candidates in a number of seats. Interestingly, this year we have 373 fewer candidates for the 299 constituencies compared to the 2001 elections.

Of the 1555 candidates, 192 were members of the last Parliament, among whom 41 are running as Awami League candidates, 109 as BNP candidates, 10 as Jatiya Party candidates and 12 as Jamaat candidates.

It is disappointing to note that only 58 women are contesting for 59 seats. Among these, former prime ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, are running in three seats each and Begum Rowshan Ershad in two seats. There are also four seats -- Sirajganj-2, Dhaka-7, Dhaka-9 and Rangamati -- where two women are contesting. The proportion of women candidates of the two major parties is less than 5 percent. Even in this small number, there are some who were nominated as proxy candidates for their near ones who are accused or convicted of serious crimes and could not run.

One important attribute of the contesting candidates is that the vast majority of them are educated. For example, of the Awami League and the BNP candi-



Do not let the corrupt into the Parliament.

dates about 80 percent have at least a Bachelor's degree. Less than 2 percent have educational qualification of less than SSC.

With respect to profession, the majority of the candidates declared themselves as businessmen. About half of the Awami League and 62 percent of the BNP candidates' profession is business. In the last Parliament, about two-thirds of the members were businessmen, and this time also it is certain that the majority of the MPs will be businessmen, which will be contrary to the idea of a representative democracy because the

Parliament should have representatives from all segments of the society.

It is disconcerting to note that there are cases of corruption against at least 48 candidates and charge sheets have been filed against some of them. Of them, 27 belong to BNP, and 17 to Awami League.

The information provided in the affidavits shows that in the past there were criminal cases against a fourth of the Awami League candidates and currently criminal cases are pending against 38 percent of them. Among the BNP candidates, 49 percent had criminal

cases against them while 35 percent are at present facing criminal charges. At least 100 candidates are facing murder charges, among whom a fourth belong to the Awami League and a third to BNP.

However, it must be emphasised that mere allegations, and even the filing of charge sheets, does not represent proof of crime. Cases are sometimes filed for political considerations. Those accused are also often found innocent or cases against them withdrawn, again under political influence. Because of political considerations legal proceedings are sometimes not instituted against real criminals.

There are allegations that many candidates hid information about their criminal past in their affidavits, thus the number of alleged criminals is understated. Therefore, it is impossible to determine the extent of criminal elements, although the information contained in the affidavits provides an indication.

With respect to criminal activities, there is some really outrageous information. There are at least two candidates who were sentenced to life imprisonment for murder and were freed under presidential clemency. Several convicted individuals were also allowed in the contest under Court directives. Former president Ershad is contesting in three seats after the lapse of five years following his incarceration for more than two years.

There are at least 21 candidates against whom there are allegations of

war crimes, and also a significant number of loan defaulters who are contesting under Court intervention. Many contestants have business relationship with the government, which makes them ineligible under the existing law. Many former MPs running for re-election are accused of misusing their privileges for importing tax-free cars and indulging in "car trade." According to NBR, at least 439 candidates do not have TIN numbers and, thus, are not tax payers.

It is clear from the forgoing that many controversial individuals are running for the upcoming parliamentary elections. There are convicted criminals as well as alleged criminals among them. If these individuals are elected, it is feared that a criminal empire may be established in the country rather than a democratic one.

Unfortunately, the parties failed to show a sense of responsibility. They should have prevented the tainted individuals from contesting. Clearly, the parties have failed to provide moral leadership -- it goes without saying that morality and leadership must go hand in hand. Most parties even failed to adhere to the legal provisions in nominating candidates based on the recommendations of their grassroots members. Even Awami League, which tried to follow the law, failed to fully respect the recommendations of their grassroots committees.

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For the first-time voters

Active participation of the youth in politics is important for another reason: to uphold our identity, and to prevent our country from being gobbled up by religious extremists. The culture and identity of Bangladeshis have increasingly come under threat by such groups. The first-time voters should take an assertive step to define what kind of a Bangladesh they want to live in, and casting a vote is as effective a way as any to voice that opinion.

MRIDUL CHOWDHURY

A documentary film recently produced by Jagoree, a non-partisan political youth group, summed up many of the frustrations of today's youth -- many feeling that they are too insignificant a factor for change. In a *Prothom Alo* organised discussion with the first-time voters in Chittagong, the biggest frustration that came out of the 50 discussants was the fact that they felt that this election presented no substantial difference in the quality of candidates.

A very similar frustration was voiced in a Channel I program called "First Voter" -- that ironically, in many cases, their choices are from those who were recently in jail on charges of wide-scale corruption, or alleged war criminals, or leaders

of past autocratic regimes. They felt that this was only an indication that Bangladesh was still in the same "rat-hole" it was in prior to 1/11.

But is this enough reason for us to lose heart? I think not, because:

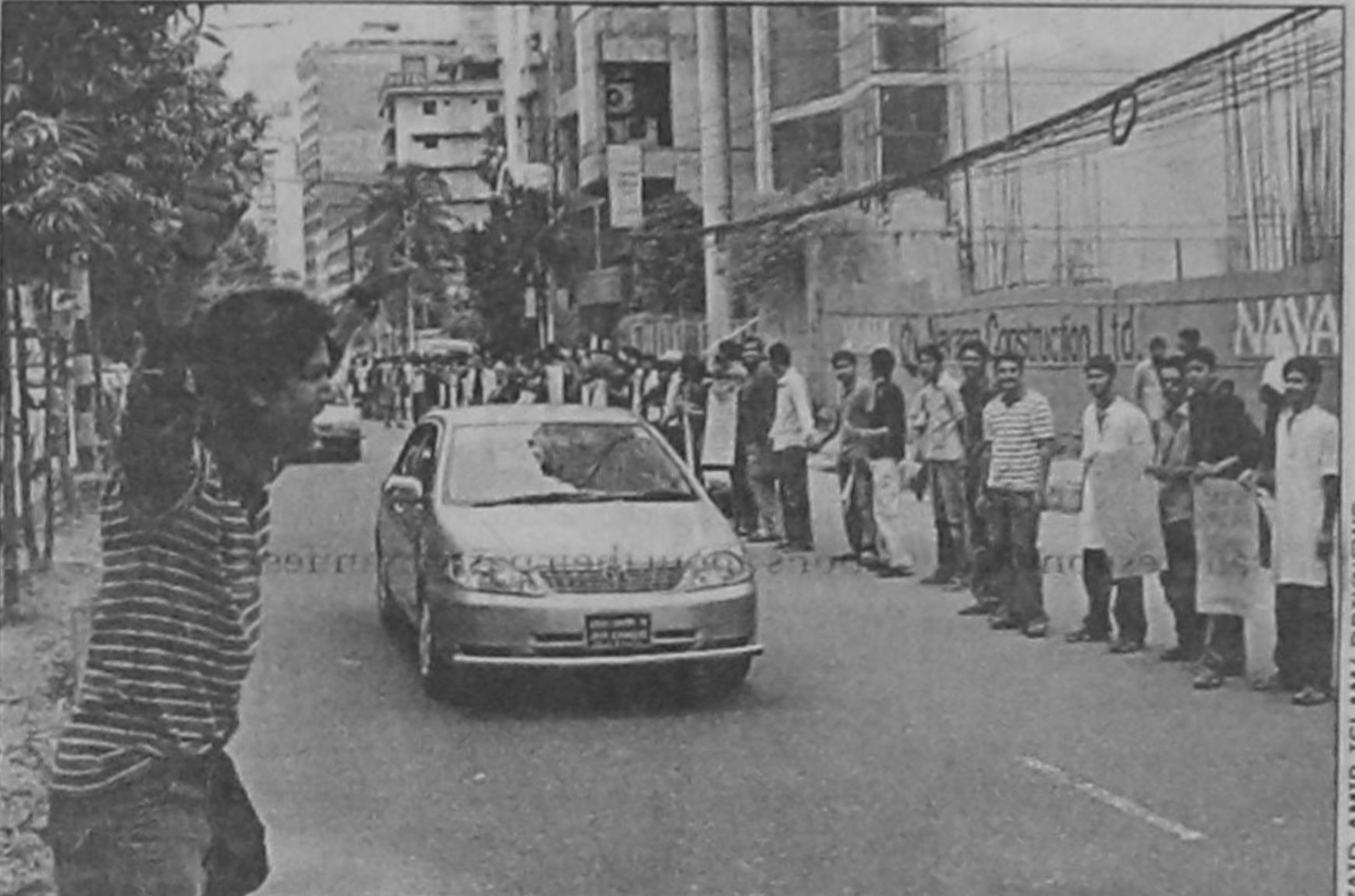
- The political parties are worried because they are not sure how big a political force the youth really are. One major reason for this is that 32% are first-time voters and about 52% are young. The parties are in a competition to lure the youth with promises of everything under the sun, starting from guaranteed employment to favourable business loans. This is our chance to put their trepidations to rest once and for all, and send out a clear message that we are a force to be reckoned with. And we can only do that if we vote in large enough numbers.

- The parties are also worried that they can't predict the behaviour of this vast youth group. We, the youth, generally tend to have relatively less "blind" party loyalty compared to our parents' generation, because they have had strong emotional attachment to either Sheikh Mujib or Ziaur Rahman. We are able to question the candidates more objectively and less emotionally. We can more easily rise above political bickering than our parents' generation could. These are not traits that the parties are fond of -- but again, the only way that we can make it count is if we vote in large enough numbers.
- We also rule by sheer numbers. In Bangladesh, citizens under the age of 40 are about three times more than those over 40, and only 3% are above 60. But the sad reality is that our politics is almost completely dominated by this "minority group." However, that is soon to change. In the next 1 or 2 elections, many of the old political guardians will inevitably have to make way for younger blood -- a trend that has already started in this election, with many new faces contesting. In constituencies where we have fresh young candidates as choices, this is our chance to get to know more about them and give them a thumbs-up if we feel they are worthy.

Active youth participation in this election has far-reaching consequences for the future of politics in this country. Even if, at a constituency level, it does not have too much of an effect in this election, the longer-term impact of the youth voting en masse can be significant for subsequent elections and policy formulation. Democracy does not come in a day and it definitely does not come through military-coordinated interventions. The last two years have raised our hopes too high, but the failures of the caretaker government should not take away our hope that we, as young citizens, can make a difference.

Active participation of the youth in politics is important for another reason: to uphold our identity, and to prevent our country from being gobbled up by religious extremists. The culture and identity of Bangladeshis have increasingly come under threat by such groups. The first-time voters should take an assertive step to define what kind of a Bangladesh they want to live in, and casting a vote is as effective a way as any to voice that opinion.

Significant political changes happen only a very few times in a lifetime, and they often happen unexpectedly. Obama's rise to power is the most cited example of the difference that youth activism can make. But look at a country



First-time voters: Decisive factor?

closer to ours, and more like ours in terms of vulnerability to corrupt politicians and military interventions -- Thailand. No one could have imagined even a few weeks ago that Thaksin loyalists could be ousted. But the general citizens, a majority of them in their 20s and 30s, achieved the unthinkable by holding up Thai airports for days, that eventually led to the installation of a 44-year old prime minister with a clean record.

In 1971, the Bangladeshi youth were called upon to take arms. Today, we are

being called upon again -- for a much easier task: to cast a vote. Our respected freedom fighters left us a nation "free" from external enemies; now we have to continue the fight to free the country from its internal ones. As a Jagoree member put it: "In this fight, there is no room for apathy -- cast your vote as the first step to becoming a citizen who counts."

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Manifestos and foreign policy

Just mentioning that Bangladesh's foreign policy goal is one for friendship and against malice, and to use this principle to develop bilateral relations with all countries is not a serious way of handling such an important subject as foreign policy. Both documents have treated foreign policy the same way as they have done in past elections, thus failing to realise that foreign policy today is a matter of survival as well as a great opportunity for development.

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

A study of the election manifestos of the two mainstream parties on foreign policy is not encouraging. Foreign policy figures separately in both documents, but not foreign policy issues. AL's manifesto says that Bangladesh's foreign policy goal is "friendship with all and malice towards none." It also speaks of developing friendly relations with all countries.

The BNP manifesto, too, speaks of developing friendly relations with all countries, but has avoided mentioning India by name. Both documents speak of multilateral diplomacy and economic diplomacy, and their importance to Bangladesh, including the importance of Saarc and Bimstec. Both documents have lauded Bangladesh's peacekeeping role. The AL has carried this subject under Defense Policy; the BNP under Foreign Policy.

The BNP document takes note of the concern of the international community about terrorism and militancy and the

need to contain them, but not in the part on foreign policy. The AL takes care of militancy and terrorism in one line by supporting the formation of a South Asian Task Force in the part that deals with foreign policy. In both manifestos, the need for manpower export, the interests of Bangladeshi expatriates, and enhancing foreign remittance and foreign direct investment have been mentioned. But these issues have been mentioned in an incoherent manner in different sections of the documents and not as part of foreign policy.

By not bringing foreign policy issues under one head, both manifestos have failed to focus on fundamental changes that have occurred in recent times in the way nations conduct relations. Globalisation and the role of non-state actors in international relations have broken down the two key elements of the Westphalian concept of sovereignty that had formed the basis of foreign policy in the past, namely territoriality and exclusion of external actors from domestic authority structures. As a consequence,



Foreign policy ignored.

today, foreign policy formulation and execution have become extremely difficult and more complex.

Issues such as global warming, rise of militancy, terrorism by state and non-state actors, and most recently the economic meltdown in US and its impact worldwide, have brought in additional challenges that are shaping foreign poli-

cies everywhere. These challenges have made it critical for governments to deal with foreign policy with great care, and have also made their foreign ministries the key ministry.

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An election manifesto is really not the right document to reflect on all of the above. In such a document, parties concentrate on those issues that give them the maximum benefit in getting votes. Foreign policy does not normally figure as a major issue in elections in most developing countries, but to suggest that it is not an issue of serious concern to Bangladeshi voters may not be wholly correct.

Bangladeshis take an active interest in what happens abroad. The six million compatriots who live abroad make them take a more than usual interest in foreign policy. For example, the stand the party's take on India is a major concern of voters. It is not by oversight that the BNP did not mention India by name in their manifesto, because it is intended to indicate their attitude towards India to the voters.

Bangladesh's future depends largely on expanding external trade, increasing foreign remittance and foreign direct investment, manpower export, etc. -- all issues of foreign policy although in their election manifestos neither party has acknowledged these as such. Bangladesh could become a successful nation or a failed one, depending on how she handles these crucial foreign policy goals.

The success or failure in attaining these goals depends on the support and under-

standing of the international community, particularly of the development partners, which will depend on how Bangladesh manages her domestic politics and controls Islamic fundamentalism and militancy.

Both manifestos have failed to acknowledge that Bangladesh must re-establish its image as a predominantly Muslim state with liberal traditions, which had taken a serious battering before 1/11 as a result of failure of politics. For some unknown reason, foreign policy in Bangladesh has not been given the importance that it deserves to serve the country's interests better in a complex and increasingly globalised world. The two manifestos treat foreign affairs as a subject peripheral to governance. Even this caretaker government has treated foreign policy in the same fashion.

At a time when the opinions of Great Britain and Belgium will be very crucial in the world's assessment of the elections, this government has recalled our high commissioner/ambassador in these stations as they will be retiring. If the government had viewed foreign policy seriously, it would have given these two career diplomats extension so that they could remain in their important stations to signal that Bangladesh is capable of handling foreign policy professionally.

It may not be unfair to mention that newspaper analysing the two manifestos had no need to comment on what either said on foreign policy, which is indeed a sad commentary on the importance the AL and the BNP have given to it.

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